

Surrey Uni Research Exposes Toll of Controlling Coaching on Athletes' Health

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Controlling coaching tactics shatter athletes' wellbeing, says new study

Controlling coaching styles disrupt athletes leaving them vulnerable to physical and psychological strain, according to a new study from the University of Surrey and the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada.

This exposes a critical flaw in current sporting culture that prioritises results over athlete welfare. The research argues that coaches who micromanage and belittle athletes are fuelling both acute stress and burnout in their teams.

The study, published in *Motivation and Emotion*, tracked 72 student-athletes from Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, using daily diaries to capture their experiences and heart rate variability (HRV) measurements to assess their stress responses. This combination of psychological and physiological data provides a comprehensive picture of how coaching behaviours seep into athletes' daily experiences, affecting their motivation and mental state. Researchers analysed how athletes perceived their coaches' behaviour and then linked these perceptions to both their psychological needs (satisfaction or frustration) and their psychobiological health.

Autonomy-supportive coaches – those encouraging choice and collaboration – boosted athletes' mental resilience. In contrast, controlling tactics like public criticism and arbitrary punishments spiked acute stress and eroded long-term wellbeing.

Dr Sebastiano Massaro, Associate Professor of Organizational Neuroscience and co-author of the study at the University of Surrey said:

"It's heart-breaking to see how these controlling tactics, often masked as 'discipline' or 'tough love', are fundamentally damaging our athletes."

Florence Jauvine, at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, added:

"We're not just talking about hurt feelings; we're seeing measurable increases in stress and burnout that can have long-term consequences for their careers and their lives."

The research highlights a crucial counterpoint: when coaches support athletes' autonomy – giving them choices, acknowledging their perspectives, and encouraging their growth – it fuels their psychological needs, leading to greater engagement and acting as a buffer against burnout. The data shows a powerful connection between autonomy-supportive coaching, need satisfaction, and positive athlete outcomes.

Dr Sebastiano Massaro continued:

"We urge sporting organisations and governing bodies to implement urgent changes. This includes mandatory training for coaches at all levels, focusing on autonomy support and the detrimental effects of controlling behaviours. A shift in emphasis is required, moving away from a win-at-all-costs mentality towards a model that prioritises the holistic well-being of athletes."