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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, ATHLETE-CENTERED COACHING IN GOALBALL: COACHES' APPROACHES AND YOUTH ATHLETES' PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS, by WELLINGTON DE LUNA VAZQUEZ, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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ATHLETE-CENTERED COACHING IN GOALBALL: COACHES' APPROACHES AND
YOUTH ATHLETES' PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

by

WELLINGTON DE LUNA VAZQUEZ

Under the Direction of Deborah Shapiro

ABSTRACT

Athlete-Centered Coaching (ACC) is designed to empower athletes by supporting their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While ACC is increasingly applied in mainstream sport, its use in disability sport contexts, especially with youth athletes with visual impairments, remains underexplored. Goalball, a Paralympic sport developed for athletes with visual impairments, provides a unique setting to examine how coaches support or constrain youth athletes' psychological needs through ACC strategies and how athletes perceive these experiences in training and competition. This qualitative-descriptive study was guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and involved semi-structured interviews with nine coaches and ten youth athletes (ages 14–17) from across North America. Coaches' data were analyzed thematically using a deductive approach to explore how ACC was understood and how coaching strategies supported or constrained athletes' psychological needs. Athletes' data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns in how they experienced training and competition, and how they

perceived coaches in relation to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Four themes were identified among coaches, including: *Helping Athletes Find Their Voice*, *Learning the Game Without Seeing It*, *Goalball Isn't Just a Sport – It's a Family*, and *Have We Always Been Athlete-Centered*. From the athletes, three main themes emerged: *We Just Want to Scrimmage*, *Managing the Pressure During Competition*, and *My Coach Knows How to Support Me*. While many goalball coaches value athlete growth, well-being and athlete empowerment, most apply athlete-centered principles intuitively rather than intentionally. The concept of ACC was unfamiliar to several participants, suggesting a need for greater awareness and training within disability sport contexts. Athletes consistently expressed a preference for learning through scrimmages and small-sided games rather than repetitive drills, and relied on peer support to manage pressure during training and competition. Practical applications include enhancing coaching education with disability-specific strategies, and workshops co-led by Paralympians. Future research should explore ACC within team-based coach-athlete dyads and examine the impact of ACC-focused interventions across a sport season.

INDEX WORDS: *disability sport, self-determination theory, visual impairment, motivation, autonomy support, qualitative research, youth sports, blind sports*

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Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in

Department of Kinesiology and Health

in

the College of Education & Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2025

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to God, who first gave me the wisdom to undertake this journey. Everything I've accomplished, I owe to Jesus, my greatest inspiration. Though titles and diplomas remain here on earth, I'm grateful to the Holy Spirit for reminding me daily that my true achievements lie in heaven. To the three of you, this is dedicated first and foremost. Isaiah 40.31.

To my wife, Gitsel, sorry for all the nights you went to bed alone while I worked late into the night on this document. Your support, through all the ups and downs, means the world to me. I dedicate this and all future publications to you. To my daughter, Winter Gabriella, you are the reason I get up each day and write. I do it to build a better future for you. To my brother, as I promised myself two years ago, this is for you too. Even though you won't be reading these words, I know you're cheering me on from heaven. You taught me the meaning of discipline and perseverance. To my grandma Mami Gladys, thank you for teaching me to love books. I know you didn't always understand what I was doing, but your dream was always to see me thrive, I hope you can see this from heaven too. To my dad, despite your imperfections, you introduced me to sports and the importance of serving the most underserved. To Janny and your family, thank you for opening your home to me and for adopting me as one of your own when I got to Georgia. My life changed when you helped me, and for that, I dedicate this to you as well. Finally, to one of the most important women in my life, my beautiful mom, I dedicate this to you, knowing I'll never be able to repay the countless hours of work, care, and love you poured into me when I needed it most. You inspired me to achieve more and I am here accomplishing that. To my goalball athletes, to my church, to my friends (BCK Family), to Puerto Rico. Los amo!

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1 ATHLETE-CENTERED COACHING IN DISABILITY SPORTS: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What is athlete-centered coaching?

Over the past two decades, athlete centered coaching (ACC) philosophies have emerged in promoted coaching practices (Cassidy, 2010). Rooted in humanistic psychology, ACC focuses on addressing both the physical and mental needs of athletes (Milbrath, 2017). ACC is an approach grounded in the concept of empowerment (Pill, 2018). This empowerment involves granting athletes appropriate autonomy to make decisions, develop intrinsic motivation, and create goals and solutions to enhance their performance and behavior. In ACC, athletes take the initiative, ownership of, and responsibility for their own direction and actions, all under the guidance of a coach, thereby enhancing personal accountability for performance both on and off the field (Kidman & Penney, 2014; Pill, 2018). Athlete-centered coaches often ask questions, prompting athletes to construct their own knowledge rather than merely replicate the coach's instructions and movements (Harvey, 2017; Jensen, 2019). This approach encourages athletes to engage in decision-making and problem-solving, promoting a shared responsibility for knowledge development and transmission. Being athlete-centered is identified as a core aspect of a high-quality coaching program (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020), yet this approach is not a straightforward choice for coaches. ACC is a complex social process embedded in various power dynamics that must be carefully navigated within the specific coaching context (Pill, 2018). In contrast, a coach-centered or autocratic coaching style is characterized by being directive, commanding, and prescriptive, focusing on conformity and the transmission of information for replication. This approach positions athletes as dependent on the coach for performance facilitation, particularly in

competitive settings, and aims to control players, which can disempower them (Babbitt, 2019). While traditional coaching relied on an authoritative model where coaches controlled every aspect of training and competition, research has since shown that athletes achieve optimal performance when they are actively involved as collaborators in their own development process (Jenny, 2013).

Theoretical Perspectives on Athlete-Centered Coaching

The field of sports coaching is constantly evolving, driven by theories and frameworks that seek to understand and enhance athletes' performance and development. Three prominent theories that have significantly influenced coaching practices are: Humanistic Psychology (Buhler, 1971; Dickinson et al., 2019), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Bartholomew et al., 2009), and Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Gabriel et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2016). These theories provide valuable insights into the motivational, psychological, and social factors that shape athlete behavior and performance. Understanding these theories can help coaches create more effective and ACC environments, ultimately leading to improved athlete outcomes (Vella et al., 2011). In this literature review, we will summarize each of these theories, examining their key concepts and principles, and discuss their implications for ACC practices.

Humanistic Psychology

Humanistic psychology is a perspective that emphasizes the importance of individual growth and self-actualization (Joseph, 2021; Rusu, 2019). It suggests that individuals have the capacity to make choices and change their lives in meaningful ways, and that they should be encouraged to do so (Kaufman, 2023). Humanistic psychology, in the context of ACC, offers a framework for understanding how coaches can support athletes' personal development and well-

being. Focusing on the whole person, including their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects, allows coaches to guide athletes toward self-actualization and fulfillment in their sport (Caulfield et al., 2023; Falcão et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2015). One key concept in humanistic psychology is the idea of unconditional positive regard, which involves accepting and supporting individuals without judgment (Patterson & Joseph, 2013). ACC captures this concept by providing athletes with a supportive and nonjudgmental environment in which they can learn, grow, and develop (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Research shows that athletes who experienced negative treatment from their coaches lost trust in them, which hurt their motivation, performance, and caused them to develop feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem (McHenry et al., 2021). Another important concept in humanistic psychology is self-actualization, which refers to the realization of one's full potential (Ball, 2017; Rusu, 2019). ACC aims to help athletes achieve self-actualization by providing them with the tools, resources, and support they need to excel in their sport and in life (Cook, 2020). The humanistic perspective recognizes that every athlete, including youth, has an inherent desire to realize their potential (Falcão et al., 2020). Personal growth occurs when positive interpersonal relationships provide the right conditions, such as consistent treatment, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding (Jenny & Hushman, 2014).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a motivational theory that emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in human motivation and behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980). According to SDT, individuals are inherently motivated to grow, change, and develop in ways that fulfill their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the context of ACC, SDT provides a framework for understanding how

coaches can motivate athletes to achieve their full potential (Federici & Moen, 2014). Autonomy is central to ACC, as it involves empowering athletes to take ownership of their training and performance (Federici & Moen, 2014; Mossman et al., 2024). Giving athletes the freedom to make decisions about their training and set their own goals can enhance their sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Almagro et al., 2020; Banack et al., 2011). Competence is another key aspect of SDT that is relevant to ACC. Coaches can help athletes develop their competence by providing constructive feedback, setting challenging but achievable goals, and creating a supportive learning environment (Federici & Moen, 2014; Moen & Federici, 2017). When athletes feel competent in their abilities, they are more likely to be motivated to improve and excel in their sport (Almagro et al., 2020). Relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others and to belong to a group. ACC emphasizes the importance of building positive relationships between coaches and athletes, as well as among teammates (Federici & Moen, 2014).

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the importance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in human behavior (Nabavi, 2012). According to this theory, individuals learn by observing others and modeling their behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions (Whitham et al., 2013). In the context of coaching, Social Learning Theory provides a framework for understanding how coaches can influence athletes' behavior and performance through modeling and reinforcement (Kabiri et al., 2020). Coaches serve as role models for athletes (Machida-Kosuga & Kohno, 2023), demonstrating the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that lead to success in their sport (Douglas, 2019; McGuckin et al., 2022; Wekesser et al., 2021). One key concept in Social Learning Theory is the idea of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve goals and succeed in specific situations (Feltz &

Weiss, 1982; Hofstetter et al., 1990). ACC can enhance athletes' self-efficacy by providing them with opportunities to observe and model successful behaviors, as well as by providing constructive feedback and encouragement. Another important concept in Social Learning Theory is vicarious reinforcement, which occurs when individuals observe others being rewarded or punished for their behavior (Yılmaz & Yılmaz, 2019). ACC can use vicarious reinforcement to motivate athletes by highlighting and rewarding positive behaviors and outcomes (Connolly, 2017).

Pedagogical Perspectives on Athlete-Centered Coaching

Many scholars and educators view sport as an important educational and transformative process (Bailey et al., 2009; Quennerstedt, 2019). As educators, coaches do more than just teach physical skills; they also guide athletes in developing tactical knowledge and sportsmanship (Jones, 2006; Ramos et al., 2021). To truly succeed, coaches must understand and navigate the relationships and situations that arise both on and off the field, whether with athletes, fellow coaches, or parents (Preston et al., 2020). Coaches adopt a more holistic approach by empowering athletes to take charge of their own learning and experiences (Kidman, 2001; Light et al., 2014). This approach not only helps athletes improve their skills and understanding of the game but also encourages them to make more informed decisions (Abad Robles et al., 2020; Light, 2004). Athlete-centered coaches create an environment where athletes feel accountable for their own growth.

The literature shows that various theories and models underlie athlete-centered coaching, highlighting its benefits and methodologies. Kidman and Lombardo's (2010) work outlines three essential practices for implementing athlete-centered coaching: (a) adopting a games-centered approach such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) (Barba-Martín et al., 2020; Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Kirk & MacPhail, 2002), (b) using questions to enhance thinking and decision-

making, and (c) building a strong team culture. To justify the athlete-centered approach, it is essential to first consider the specific pedagogical principles that have been developed to guide coaches in shifting their leadership style (Kidman, 2010; Pill, 2018).

Pedagogical Principle 1: Coaching as Facilitating

In the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, active learning is key, with the coach acting as a facilitator (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Harvey et al., 2010). This athlete-centered approach shifts responsibility and ownership to the athletes (Küttel, 2022). The coach sets problems, goals, and boundaries, enabling athletes to solve these tasks and become better problem solvers (Jones & Turner, 2006). Coaches facilitate by asking questions and creating structured practice environments, such as using small groups based on positions or mixed roles (Culver et al., 2009; O'Connor et al., 2017). Engaging athletes through high-quality questions enhances their decision-making and understanding, making them active participants in their learning and performance (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010).

Pedagogical Principle 2: Tactical Complexity

Tactical complexity involves understanding and implementing tactical and movement concepts in games (Mandigo et al., 2008; Serra-Olivares et al., 2016). The games classification system organizes this approach, helping athletes transfer concepts and strategies across different game situations (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; O'Connor et al., 2024). Coaches guide athletes to consider actions, conditions, and goals, simplifying or challenging tasks based on their developmental needs (Buekers et al., 2020; Ramos et al., 2021)

Pedagogical Principle 3: Modifications

A game-centered approach advocates for modifications to make games accessible and meaningful for all athletes (Silva et al., 2021). This involves three key strategies: representation, exaggeration, and adaptation (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Griffin & Butler, 2005; Richardson et al., 2012; Serra-Olivares et al., 2016). Representation maintains the game context while slowing down the play to enhance learning (Griffin & Butler, 2005; Holt et al., 2002). Exaggeration over-emphasizes specific aspects of the game to encourage particular tactical or movement experiences (Holt et al., 2002; Mandigo et al., 2008). Adaptation increases the challenge as athletes succeed by modifying game constraints such as space, rules, and player numbers to ensure competitiveness and engagement (Hopper, 2011). These modifications help simplify complex sports, allowing coaches to focus on particular aspects of gameplay and keeping athletes engaged by building their competence (Richardson et al., 2012).

Pedagogical Principle 4: Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Assessment in the act of playing games is the most authentic and meaningful way for athletes to receive formative feedback and develop skillfulness and competence (Corbin, 2002). Ongoing assessment should be integrated into instruction, providing continuous feedback to help athletes reflect and self-manage their learning (Shute et al., 2010). Assessments can be based on performance statistics and goals set by athletes and coaches for individuals, teams, specific games, or entire seasons (Guijarro et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2010; Nathan, 2017). Effective assessment aligns with instructional objectives and involves three interacting components: the coach, the game situation, and the assessment itself (Barquero-Ruiz et al., 2020; Forrest, 2015; Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2021)

Athlete-centered Coaching in Disability Sports

ACC is increasingly highlighted in coaching circles for its potential to improve athlete learning and performance (Denison et al., 2017) and this becomes particularly significant in the context-specific realm of disability sport (Clark & Woodson-Smith, 2018; Pill & Gambles, 2023), where it offers a unique and emerging perspective to support and empower marginalized athletes (Smith et al., 2016). The intersection of disability with coaching and athlete-centered ideologies offers a potential convergence point (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). There is a recognized need for greater conceptual and theoretical clarity to deepen the understanding of ACC (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020). Researchers have proposed integrating critical disability studies and disability models to provide a firm ontological and epistemological foundation for coaching practice and coach education (Townsend & Cushion, 2017).

In disability studies, there are ongoing linguistic debates aiming to highlight authentic interpretations of what disability entails (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). Within the realm of disability coaching, the lack of specific coach education necessitates a critical examination of how disability is defined and perceived in coaching environments (Townsend et al., 2022). Understanding how disability is conceptualized is crucial for anyone working with disabled individuals, as our practical approaches are deeply influenced by these conceptualizations (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). These conceptualizations can be articulated through theoretical models of disability, which should be viewed not as fixed definitions, but as dynamic frameworks shaped by their usage, interconnections, and impacts (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Each model carries its own assumptions regarding constructs like impairment, disability, disablism, and oppression, which are essential for developing an athlete-centered approach in disability sport (Goodwin, 2020;

Townsend & Cushion, 2017). This literature examines four models of disability: the medical model, the social model, social relational model, and the human rights model.

Medical Model

The medical model has traditionally been the prevailing framework for understanding disability and guiding research (Jóhannsdóttir & Haraldsdóttir, 2022). Originating from clinical practice (Humpage, 2007), this model scrutinizes the body intensely, focusing on impairment as the root cause of disability (Forhan, 2009), thus defining the disability sport experience primarily through this lens (Fitzgerald, 2012). It embodies an individualistic viewpoint shaped by dominant medical discourses, which establishes a 'normal/abnormal' dichotomy and neglects the social construction of 'disability' and 'normality' (Fitzgerald, 2012). The medical model reflects a deeply ingrained social attitude that treats individuals with impairments as problems that need to be fixed, viewing them primarily as subjects for intervention (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This model ignores the lived experiences of disability and treats the social and cultural environments as unproblematic, framing individuals as disadvantaged by their own bodies (Owens, 2015). Disability is thus seen as an individual issue, a deviation from cultural norms of bodily and cognitive normality (Goggin et al., 2017), reinforcing ableist ideals and normality (Shyman, 2016).

In disability sport, the medical model remains influential, reflecting broader coaching discourses (Brittain, 2004; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Smith & Bundon, 2018). This approach perpetuates a segregated model of education, suggesting that coaches need 'specialist' knowledge to work with disabled individuals (Bush & Silk, 2012). Coach education often categorizes based on impairment types, focusing on the athlete's impairment as a problem compared to ableist standards of ability (Townsend et al., 2018).

When used appropriately to support aspects of coaching practice, the medical model can be beneficial, especially for addressing individual athletic needs, specialized prostheses, equipment, or classification requirements in competitions (Burkett, 2013). Applying the medical model to coach education can help develop impairment-specific knowledge, which is crucial for coaching success (Tawse et al., 2014; Wareham et al., 2017). It's important not to exclude the body from theoretical considerations (Haegele & Maher, 2023; Paterson & Hughes, 1999), while also acknowledging the broader social environment influencing disability sport (Marks, 1999). The embodied perspective encourages breaking free from traditional mindsets and considering what it would be like to experience the world from another's viewpoint, rather than viewing disabled athletes merely as biological subjects for intervention (Block & Weatherford, 2013).

Therefore, an ACC approach that considers the individual complexities of impairment within the sporting context can be seen as progressive and a well-informed foundation for developing coaching practices (Smith et al., 2016).

Social Model

The social model was formulated by disabled activists from the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), who sought to reclaim the term 'disability' from medical discourse (Berghs et al., 2019). This model separates the concepts of impairment and disability (Haegele & Hodge, 2016), redefining disability as entirely socially constructed (Thomas, 2014). This perspective critically examines society and posits that disability arises from various structural barriers that create disadvantages, exclusions, and restrictions for people with impairments (Thomas, 2014). While the social model, like the medical model, acknowledges impairment as a physical characteristic (Martin, 2012), it reinterprets disability as a socially constructed phenomenon characterized by exclusion and oppression (Galvin, 2003; Pande, 2022). In this perspective,

society is responsible for disabling individuals with physical impairments (Reddy, 2011). Disability is imposed on top of these impairments through unnecessary isolation and exclusion from full participation in societal activities (Berghs et al., 2019). Consequently, disabled individuals are an oppressed group within society (Brinkman et al., 2023; Dunn & Andrews, 2015). This approach highlights those societal barriers, rather than individual impairments, are the primary contributors to the experiences of disability (Hammel et al., 2015; Martin, 2013).

Engaging with the social model necessitates recognizing and scrutinizing the social barriers; both actual and ideological, individual and collective in coaching contexts (Shakespeare, 2006). Research on coaching disabled athletes highlights that coaches often navigate numerous practical and contextual challenges, such as limited financial support (Sobiecka et al., 2019), fewer coaching and support staff (Townsend et al., 2015), inadequate coaching or lack of coaching education (Fairhurst et al., 2017), and a smaller talent pool (Houlihan & Chapman, 2018). Additionally, coaches may need to communicate with athletes' families, support workers, and caregivers, and consider the accessibility of facilities and transportation (Cregan et al., 2007). Combined with these factors, issues such as limited access to facilities, lack of information and high equipment costs can significantly affect the sporting opportunities available to disabled individuals (Bush & Silk, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2019). The social model encourages coaches to reflect on their practices by considering the athlete, their impairment, and the coaching environment in terms of exclusion (Allan et al., 2020; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This approach shifts the focus from the 'problem' of impairment to how coaches and coaching practices can adapt to support individual athletes and foster an ACC environment (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020; Burkett, 2013; Dehghansai et al., 2020; Townsend et al., 2022).

The social model proposes that solutions should focus on societal changes rather than individual adjustments (Burchardt *, 2004). Impairment is viewed as a form of diversity that provides unique perspectives, which should be valued and celebrated (Roush & Sharby, 2011). Many issues associated with disability could be alleviated if societal attitudes towards individuals with impairments changed and public policies were implemented to eliminate environmental barriers (Campbell et al., 2003; DeJong & Lifchez, 1983; Scior, 2011). According to the social model, in some feasible social arrangements, having an impairment would not significantly diminish a person's well-being (Blustein, 2012). Improvements for individuals with impairments necessitate political action and social reform rather than altering their physical bodies (Bingham et al., 2013). Some scholars argue that with appropriate societal responses, the conditions described by the social model as disabilities could effectively cease to exist (LoBianco & Shepard-Jones, 2007). Such social arrangements could be more just, unbiased, and ethically preferable compared to current practices for individuals with impairments (Blustein, 2012). These changes could transform society from one that discriminates against individuals with impairments to one that embraces social inclusion (Palmer & Harley, 2012).

However, using the social model as a reflective tool has its limitations, as it does not adequately address the reality of dysfunction, illness, or bodily pain experienced by many individuals (Martin, 2013). Researchers argue that the social model of disability creates an unsustainable separation between body and culture, and impairment and disability (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Consequently, the social model fails to account for the impact of impairments on individuals' lived experiences (Shakespeare, 2006).

Another critique of the social model is that it overlooks the differences among individuals with disabilities (Taylor, 2005). It has been argued that the social model fails to consider the

intersectionality of various forms of oppression (Sommo & Chaskes, 2013). Intersectionality suggests that ableism does not operate in isolation but intersects with other oppressive systems like racism, sexism, and homonegativism (Grin et al., 2023). This critique implies that the social model cannot fully understand the experiences of individuals with disabilities without considering other aspects of their identities, such as gender, race, or sexual orientation (Artiles, 2016).

Social-Relational Model

A key issue with conceptualizing disability in reductive terms, such as through the medical and social models, is the tendency to create a dichotomy between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ (Riddle, 2013). In response to this, researchers aimed to refine the social model by adopting a more relational perspective, which views disability as a result of social relationships (Smith & Bundon, 2018; Smith & Perrier, 2014). Researchers advanced this social relational understanding by examining the structural causes of disability and how individuals position themselves in relation to disability (Thomas, 2014a). This social-relational model effectively differentiates between personal experiences of social restrictions due to impairments in a social context and the socially imposed restrictions in these settings (Reindal, 2008). A social relational perspective acknowledges the practices within sport that can either enable or disable athletes, both structurally and individually (Haslett et al., 2017). When applied to ACC and coach education, it encourages coaches to consider the interplay of impairment, disablism, and individual experiences in shaping coaching practices (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). This perspective is particularly valuable in understanding disability sport and the lived experiences of athletes, as it highlights how social dynamics and relationships impact their sporting experiences (Allan et al., 2020; Grenier et al., 2023). The social-relational model provides a view of the barriers and facilitators within disability sports by focusing on the interactions between societal structures and

individual impairments (Šašek, 2024). Despite its strengths, the social relational model has its limitations. The model's emphasis on the interplay of various social factors can be challenging for coaches to navigate, particularly those without training in disability content (Allan et al., 2020). Scholars argue that by focusing too heavily on social relationships, the model might underplay the physical and medical aspects of disability that are still relevant and impactful in the context of sport (Yilmaz, 2023). Furthermore, the social relational perspective may not be universally applicable across all sports and cultural contexts (Haslett et al., 2017). Different sports and societies have varying levels of acceptance and support for athletes with disabilities, which can affect the model's effectiveness in promoting inclusive practices.

Human Rights Model

The human rights model, derived from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Degener, 2016), emphasizes the rights of disabled individuals, acknowledging both equality and diversity (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013). This model, influenced by activist ideology, builds on the social model of disability, viewing societal practices as disabling (Harpur, 2012). This model also underscores the necessity for policies and education to support inclusive coaching environments (Cook, 2013; Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Researchers can use the human rights model as a meta-model to frame research in disability sport, addressing and uncovering inequalities (Townsend et al., 2015). Despite sports' potential for inclusivity, it often perpetuates marginalization, especially for disabled athletes (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Hammond et al., 2019). The researchers note that while integration into mainstream sports is possible, exclusion persists through attitudes, practices, and policies favoring able-bodied athletes (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015). Adopting the human rights model in coaching challenges these exclusions, promoting a global ideal of powerful and socially just perspective (Keys,

2019). From a human rights perspective, every child has the right to an environment that promotes their physical, emotional, and social well-being (Blanchard et al., 2009). Negative experiences in sports can infringe on these rights, emphasizing the need for careful attention to how sports programs are designed and implemented (Woods & Butler, 2020).

Challenging Assumptions: The Role of Disability Discourses in Athlete-Centered Coaching

Engaging with disability discourses is critical as it exposes coaches' assumptions about athletes, recognizing the social and cultural influences on practice that shape notions of athlete centered (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). Despite the growing interest in disability sports, research on disability coaching remains limited (Smith et al., 2016), which is a significant oversight. Disability sport has the potential to significantly impact the social understanding of disability, partly due to its disruptive nature, stemming from the visibility of people with disabilities and the perceived tension between cultural perceptions of disability and elite sport practices, where coaching is central (DePauw, 1997; Silva & Howe, 2012). Thus, the disabled athlete plays a central role in the coaching process in disability sport.

Disability coach education tends to be separate from traditional coach education pathways, leading to a lack of structured, disability-specific coach education (McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2014). Despite being identified a decade ago, these findings remain concerning and align with more recent coaching literature. Coaches often rely on knowledge from outside disability sport to apply to specific contexts (MacDonald et al., 2016) which can exceed their existing skills and knowledge (Burkett, 2013). This reliance on external knowledge leaves coaches to ground their understanding in material and experiential conditions through a process of trial and error (Taylor et al., 2014).

In highly stratified social contexts like coaching, socialization strongly influences the knowledge and practices of coaches (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). This can result in the uncritical adoption and reproduction of coaching discourses (Piggott, 2015), often framed as inclusive and athlete-centered (e.g., 'coach the athlete, not the disability'). As a result, there is a prevailing belief that athlete-centered approaches are inherently superior (Cushion et al., 2020), yet without solid theoretical or empirical grounding, this concept remains a collection of meanings and practices, an ideology (Townsend & Cushion, 2017). While it may seem like a tool of established coaching knowledge, to focus on coaching the athlete and ignore the complexities of disability in favor of a more functional and normative coaching framework, it can also become a tool of dominance (Cushion et al., 2020). This is especially true when coaches determine what constitutes athlete-centeredness and how it should manifest. When these messages are applied without critical examination within a powerful framework that normalizes certain behaviors, they can divert attention from the real impact of impairment on the lives of people with disabilities. In fact, imposing such athlete-centered discourses on athletes can be as rigid and oppressive as more authoritarian approaches (Nelson et al., 2014), potentially leading to an ideology of 'person-centeredness' based on coaches' preconceptions and assumptions about disability (Cushion et al., 2020). This diminishes the agency of disabled athletes within an oppressive coaching structure that prioritizes ableist norms and uncritical knowledge about disability.

By rigidly applying judgments about coaching and athletes within the framework of athlete-centeredness, coaches may inadvertently impose an ideology and values onto athletes rather than providing what best meets each athlete's individual needs and learning style (Nelson et al., 2014). This uncritical adoption of an assumed ACC approach can lead coaches to impose a worldview that aligns with their own interests, rather than one that is truly athlete centered. This

results in a broad and arbitrary definition of athlete-centeredness that reflects the coach's cultural background and practices (Cushion & Partington, 2016). Coaches may justify their actions as being in the athletes' best interests, but they are, paradoxically, agents of a selective tradition and cultural assimilation, where normative, ableist practices are legitimized. This focus can obscure the structural and systemic causes of disability and can contribute to an ideological stance where athletes feel pressured to demonstrate 'superhuman' athletic abilities, distancing themselves from devalued, disabled identities (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Bush et al., 2013; Purdue & Howe, 2012).

Negative coaching behaviors can, in part, be attributed to a lack of informed resources to support coach development (Fairhurst et al., 2017; Tawse et al., 2014). However, athlete-centered discourses can be enabling as well as constraining. This is especially the case in coaching, where coaches are positioned as central and defining figures in shaping the sporting experience of people with disabilities (Allan et al., 2020). To do so requires coaches and researchers to engage with critical disability studies. Coaches play a crucial role in shaping the nature and quality of athletes' sport experiences, acting as key influencers in the process. Ensuring that coaches are equipped to create positive, supportive environments is not only important for the athletes' development but also aligns with the broader human rights obligation to protect the dignity and welfare of all (Masdeu Yelamos et al., 2019). Although there is extensive literature on the traits and skills of effective coaches (Lawley & Linder-Pelz, 2016), there has been limited focus on the quality of the experiences that coaches themselves have, and how these experiences contribute to their personal and professional growth (Cushion et al., 2003). Recognizing the rights of coaches to fair and enriching working conditions is essential for fostering a culture of mutual respect and development in sports, which benefits both athletes and coaches alike (Culver et al., 2009).

Research Perspectives on Athlete-Centered Coaching

Team Sports

Previous research on ACC has utilized various designs and methodologies, providing insights into its implementation and effectiveness. A specific example relevant to ACC explored the experiences of footballers transitioning from elite Australian Football League to state-based clubs (Agnew & Marks, 2017). Agnew and Marks (2017) aimed to understand the retirement transitions of ten retired Australian Football League players. Utilizing a phenomenological design, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of these athletes from their own perspective. The interviews covered topics such as the transition process, challenges faced, support needed, and player wellbeing. The interviews revealed that the elite Australian Football League operates with a coach- or club-centered approach to player wellbeing, offering little autonomy to footballers. During the initial stages of transitioning to state-based competitions, footballers require additional support structures to avoid non-health-promoting behaviors. However, long-term sustainability requires a shift towards empowering players to take responsibility for decision-making in football and non-football matters. An athlete-centered approach needs to be adopted by the entire football club, not just the coaches (Agnew & Marks, 2017). Building on the exploration of ACC, Lindgren and Barker-Ruchti (2017) conducted a qualitative study to explore how Swedish women's national football team coaches balance performance-based expectations with a holistic coaching approach (Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Utilizing an interpretive research design, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with five national team coaches and employed an abductive approach to simultaneously process the theoretical framework of Noddings' ethics of care and the empirical data. The findings revealed that the coaches consistently adopted a holistic, athlete-centered approach to coaching despite the

significant pressures to achieve competitive success. This approach included strategies such as educating players and parents about overtraining, maintaining open and democratic dialogue with players, and fostering a positive team environment focused on respect and fair play. The study highlights that even at the highest levels of competitive sport, it is possible to prioritize athlete well-being and ethical coaching practices while still achieving performance outcomes (Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017).

Youth Sports

A study conducted by Romar et al. (2018) that contributes to the understanding of ACC focuses on youth soccer athletes in Finland using the Sport Education model (Romar et al., 2018). The study involved 23 players aged 10-11, along with their coaches and parents. Data was collected over an eight-week period through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Players were assigned roles beyond just playing, such as fitness trainers and referees, which increased their engagement and understanding of the game. The study found that players enjoyed and took their roles seriously, which led to increased engagement and a deeper understanding of the game. The model also fostered a positive team culture and enhanced players' autonomy, which are key components of ACC. The coaches and parents observed that the players matured and became more responsible, leading to a more player-friendly environment (Romar et al., 2018). This approach not only enhanced the players' experience but also highlighted the potential for ACC to develop holistic skills and promote ownership of the sport.

In addition to these perspectives, Moen and Federici (2017) examined the relationship between ACC, need satisfaction, and athlete burnout among Norwegian junior athletes using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the study's theoretical framework (Moen & Federici, 2017). SDT emphasizes the importance of satisfying three basic psychological needs—autonomy,

competence, and relatedness—to foster intrinsic motivation and well-being. ACC, which empowers athletes by involving them in the decision-making process and encouraging ownership of their development, is thought to align closely with these principles. The study involved 382 junior athletes from seven specialized Norwegian high schools for elite sports, who completed an online questionnaire measuring their perceptions of ACC, need satisfaction, and burnout. The researchers developed the Athlete-Centered Scale and used a shortened version of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire to gather data. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships between the variables. The findings revealed that ACC significantly predicted need satisfaction, which in turn negatively predicted athlete burnout. However, the direct impact of ACC on reducing burnout was not significant, suggesting that its benefits might be mediated through the fulfillment of athletes' psychological needs. These results highlight the potential of ACC to enhance athletes' well-being by addressing their intrinsic needs, thereby reducing the risk of burnout through improved psychological resilience (Moen & Federici, 2017).

Another study grounded in Self-Determination Theory conducted by Reynders et al. (2020) explored the complex interplay between need-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors and their impact on team athletes' motivational outcomes. The study differentiated between need supportive behaviors, such as autonomy support and structure, and controlling behaviors, which were further categorized into demanding and domineering approaches. The researchers identified four distinct coaching profiles among 317 youth team athletes from various sports in Flanders, Belgium. The athletes rated their coaches' behaviors using the Situation in Sport Questionnaire, which assessed autonomy-supportive, structuring, demanding, and domineering behaviors. Researchers found that coaches are not strictly need-supportive or controlling but often combine these behaviors in different ways. Four coaching profiles were identified, each with

varying levels of need-support and control. The results indicated that the combination of need-supportive and demanding behaviors yielded more positive motivational outcomes (e.g., higher autonomous motivation and engagement) compared to the combination of need-supportive and domineering behaviors, which were associated with less favorable outcomes. Interestingly, the study's authors reported that the presence of demanding behavior did not necessarily harm athletes' motivation when paired with high need-support, whereas domineering behavior alone did impair athlete motivation (Reynders et al., 2020). These studies highlight the diverse ways in which ACC can be implemented across different sports and age groups, demonstrating its broad applicability and effectiveness in promoting athlete autonomy and holistic development.

A study from Forrest (2017) explored innovative games-based pedagogies in Physical Education and Sport, and examined the implementation of an athlete-centered approach by a volunteer coach who was also a parent (Forrest, 2017). The study involved coaching teams across football, cricket, and Australian Football League, with players aged 5 to 17 years. Despite having limited experience in Australian Football League, and cricket, the coach, leveraging his background as a teacher, researcher, and soccer coach, adopted an athlete-centered approach, focusing on the Game-Centered Approach and questioning techniques. Using an ethnomethodological framework, the study explored how stakeholders, players, parents, and other coaches, understood and applied this approach in practice. Stakeholders responded positively, noting improvements in player engagement, attendance, and retention, which were attributed to the cognitive focus and purposeful games used in Game-centered approach. Lemke's theory of social semiotics was used to analyze the exchanges, revealing that the meaning of an athlete-centered approach is shaped through its practical application rather than theoretical definitions (Forrest, 2017).

Disability Sport

Kimber et al. (2023) aimed to understand how coaches support autistic young people in sports and explored ways to improve practices. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches who had experience working with autistic athletes across various sports. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, resulting in six key themes: the coach-athlete relationship, understanding autistic athletes, coaching strategies, behavior support, the benefits of participation, and coach education (Kimber et al., 2023).

The findings highlighted that coaches rely on environmental, communication, and behavioral strategies to support autistic athletes. A strong coach-athlete relationship, trust, and understanding of the unique needs of each athlete were identified as essential. Coaches often gained their knowledge through informal routes and reported a need for more formal autism-focused coaching education and resources. The study suggested that an athlete-centered approach, built on strong relationships and tailored strategies, is vital for engaging autistic athletes and enhancing their participation in sports (Kimber et al., 2023).

A case study by Mann (2016) explored a week-long internship at the USA Paralympic Volleyball training center in Oklahoma with a group of graduate students from an American university (Mann, 2016). The main objective of this internship was to enhance the students' motivation towards their own coaching careers by encouraging them to reflect on their core coaching values. During the internship, the nine student coaches worked with master coaches from the USA Paralympic Volleyball team, who employed an athlete-centered coaching style that emphasized a strong work ethic, player empowerment, and team cohesion. After the internship, data analysis revealed a significant increase in the student coaches' motivation levels, as measured by the Sport Motivation Scale II, a reliable tool for assessing sport motivation. This boost in motivation was largely attributed to the students' interactions with the master coaches and the USA

Paralympic Volleyball teams (Mann, 2016). Introducing coaching students to an ACC philosophy at a highly competitive level proved to be an eye-opening experience for the graduate students in disability sport coaching. Qualitative reflections gathered from the students highlighted their appreciation for this athlete-centered philosophy. They recognized how these experiences could shape their own goal setting and help them align their coaching practices with their core values. The quantitative data, measured through the Sport Motivation Scale II reinforced the importance of exposing coaching students to programs like the USA Paralympic Volleyball internship. The findings showed that the students' motivation to succeed as coaches increased, particularly in adopting an athlete-centered approach in their own coaching. This experience underscores the value of such internships in fostering the next generation of coaches, helping them prioritize their athletes and adopt strategies that empower their teams (Mann, 2016).

Research on talent transfer in Paralympic sports highlights the importance of an athlete-centered approach to ensuring successful transitions. A study by Dehghansai et al (2023) involving Canadian Paralympic coaches (n=35) and athletes (n=12) explored the transfer process. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Researchers found that talent transfer was often seen as a valuable alternative to retirement, allowing athletes to extend their careers despite challenges such as injury or classification changes. The study revealed that compatibility between the athlete's needs and the new sport, along with transparent communication between coaches and athletes, were key to facilitating effective transfers. This approach, which prioritized athlete well-being and personal development over immediate performance outcomes, underscores the significance of athlete-centered coaching in fostering long-term athletic success (Dehghansai et al., 2023). Participants across different roles, whether coaches, directors, or athletes—consistently emphasized the need for an athlete-centered framework, underscoring its

significance in supporting successful transfers (Dehghansai et al., 2023). Another study conducted by Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers (2011) examined the experiences of female wheelchair basketball athletes in Canadian leagues where able-bodied athletes are included, a practice known as reverse integration, and how it influences athletic identity and team dynamics. Using semi-structured interviews and reflective notes, the researchers explored the perspectives of nine classifiable female wheelchair basketball athletes, employing the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) as a discussion tool. The findings revealed that able-bodied inclusion positively impacted the athletes' self-perceptions by raising the level of competition and enhancing skill development, ultimately strengthening their athletic identities. Athletes expressed that wheelchair basketball was regarded as a legitimate sport, with the wheelchair seen as equipment rather than a marker of disability. However, they also noted that outsiders sometimes misunderstood the presence of able-bodied athletes, perceiving them either as helpers or competitors unfairly leveraging their abilities (Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011). Despite these challenges, reverse integration fostered strong social connections, positive team dynamics, and a better understanding of disability among all participants. The findings support an athlete-centered approach, showing that athletes felt empowered, and their athletic identities strengthened through reverse integration. It also highlighted the importance of understanding the complex and shifting nature of disability and able-bodiedness in sports contexts (Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011).

Future Directions and Recommendations

As research on ACC continues to develop, there are several key areas that warrant further exploration, particularly within the context of disability sports. The literature reviewed provides a strong foundation for understanding ACC's impact on athlete autonomy, well-being, and holistic development, but there are still significant gaps that suggest promising avenues for future

research. While ACC has been studied in various able-bodied sports, there is a pressing need to investigate its application within disability sports. Future research should focus on how ACC principles can be adapted to meet the unique challenges faced by athletes with disabilities. Qualitative studies, in particular, could provide rich, nuanced insights into the lived experiences of disabled athletes and how ACC influences their development, motivation, and overall well-being. Understanding these dynamics will be crucial for creating coaching practices that are both inclusive and effective in disability sports. SDT has been a critical theory in understanding motivation and well-being in sports, but its application in youth, particularly in diverse and underrepresented populations, needs further exploration. Future research should continue to investigate how SDT principles, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, manifest in the experiences of young athletes in disability sports. This line of inquiry could reveal important factors that contribute to sustained motivation and positive development, providing a deeper understanding of how to support young athletes effectively. Qualitative studies have shown that ACC has a profound impact on both athletes and coaches, contributing to their personal and professional growth. Building on this foundation, future research should focus on how these qualitative insights can be translated into practical strategies for coach education. By integrating the findings from qualitative research into coach training programs, educators can better prepare coaches to implement ACC effectively, particularly in the context of youth sports. This approach will ensure that coaches are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to create supportive, empowering environments for all athletes.

2. ATHLETE-CENTERED COACHING IN GOALBALL: COACHES' APPROACHES AND YOUTH ATHLETES' PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

Abstract

Athlete-Centered Coaching (ACC) is designed to empower athletes by supporting their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While ACC is increasingly applied in mainstream sport, its use in disability sport contexts, especially with youth athletes with visual impairments, remains underexplored. The purpose of this study was to examine how coaches support or constrain youth athletes' psychological needs through ACC strategies and how athletes perceive these experiences in training and competition. This qualitative-descriptive study was guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and involved semi-structured interviews with nine coaches and ten youth athletes (ages 14–17) from across North America. Coaches' data were analyzed thematically using a deductive approach to explore how ACC was understood and how coaching strategies supported or constrained athletes' psychological needs. Athletes' data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns in how they experienced training and competition, and how they perceived coaches in relation to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Four themes were identified among coaches, including: *Helping Athletes Find Their Voice*, *Learning the Game Without Seeing It*, *Goalball Isn't Just a Sport – It's a Family*, and *Have We Always Been Athlete-Centered?*. From the athletes, three main themes emerged: *We Just Want to Scrimmage*, *Managing the Pressure During Competition*, and *My Coach Knows How to Support Me*. While many goalball coaches value athlete growth, well-being and athlete empowerment, most apply athlete-centered principles intuitively rather than intentionally. The concept of ACC was unfamiliar to most goalball coaches, suggesting a need for greater awareness and training within disability sport contexts. Youth goalball athletes consistently preferred

learning through scrimmages and small-sided games over repetitive drills and often relied on peer support to cope with pressure during both training and competition. Future research should explore ACC within team-based coach-athlete dyads and examine the impact of ACC-focused interventions across a sport season.

***Keywords:** disability sport, self-determination theory, visual impairment, motivation, autonomy support, qualitative research, youth sports, blind sports*

INTRODUCTION

Participation in team sports has been consistently linked to higher levels of physical activity and improved physical and mental health outcomes for children and adolescents (Eime et al., 2013). Despite these benefits, disparities in sports involvement persist across different groups, including age, sex, race, disability status, and socioeconomic factors (Black et al., 2022). Notably, a smaller percentage of adolescents with disabilities (40.76%) have reported participating in sports teams or lessons compared to their peers without disabilities (59.94%) (Ross et al., 2020). Adolescents with disabilities who engage in sports, however, were significantly more likely to meet physical activity guidelines than those who did not participate (Ross et al., 2020). Research further indicates that both the type of disability and the level of support needed significantly impacts the likelihood of facing barriers, such as community support, access to equipment, transportation, coaching or location challenges, which ultimately affect sports participation (Crawford & Stodolska, 2008; Darcy et al., 2017; Marmeleira et al., 2018). Given the disparities in sports participation, particularly among adolescents with disabilities, the role of the coach becomes even more critical (Darcy et al., 2017). Coaches have the potential to influence not only the physical development of athletes with disabilities but also their access to sports and overall

participation (Grenier et al., 2023). Coaches who take a thoughtful approach and are knowledgeable about their athletes' disabilities are highly valued by athletes with disabilities (Allan et al., 2020). In recent research, goalball athletes perceived a strong sense of connection, engagement and respect by their coaches, especially with younger adults (De Luna-Vazquez et al., 2024). Currently, coaches are often not adequately trained in the specific circumstances of many disability contexts (Bush & Silk, 2012; Tawse et al., 2014). Coaches often rely on knowledge from outside disability sport to apply to specific disability sport contexts (MacDonald et al., 2016) which can exceed the coach's existing skills and knowledge (Burkett, 2013). Inadequate guidance from coaches can limit athletes' ability to fully engage in sports (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). This lack of sport-specific training often leads coaches to be less involved and to accept coaching methods that seem inclusive or athlete-centered (e.g. "coach the athlete, not the disability"), without questioning whether these approaches fully address the real complexities of disability (De Luna-Vazquez et al., 2024; Piggott, 2015). Consequently, athlete-centered approaches are frequently regarded as superior without solid theoretical or empirical grounding, turning the concept into an ideology or a set of practices and beliefs that are imposed rather than critically examined.

Athlete Centered Coaching

Over the past two decades, Athlete-Centered Coaching (ACC) philosophies have emerged in promoted coaching practices (Cassidy, 2010). Rooted in humanistic psychology, ACC focuses on addressing both the physical and mental needs of athletes (Milbrath, 2017). ACC is an approach that emphasizes the empowerment of athletes through shared decision-making and active participation in their own development (Pill, 2018). Rather than controlling every aspect of training and competition, coaches using ACC encourage athletes to take ownership of their learning. This empowerment helps athletes set their own goals, find solutions to challenges,

and stay motivated from within, especially important for youth athletes whose confidence and identity are still forming (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). In disability sport contexts, ACC can also play a key role in challenging traditional power dynamics by promoting athlete voice and agency and creating more inclusive learning environments (Dehghansai et al., 2020).

In ACC, athletes take the initiative, ownership of, and responsibility for their own direction and actions, all under the guidance of a coach, thereby enhancing their accountability for their performance both on and off the field (Kidman & Penney, 2014; Pill, 2018). Athlete-centered coaches often ask questions, prompting athletes to construct their own knowledge rather than merely replicate the coach's instructions and movements (Harvey, 2017; Jensen, 2019). This approach encourages athletes to engage in decision-making and problem-solving, promoting a shared responsibility for knowledge development and transmission. Being athlete-centered is identified as a core aspect of a high-quality coaching program (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020), yet this approach is not a straightforward choice for coaches. ACC is a complex social process embedded in various power dynamics that must be carefully navigated within the specific coaching context (Pill, 2018). In contrast, a coach-centered or autocratic coaching style is characterized by being directive, commanding, and prescriptive, focusing on conformity and the transmission of information for replication. This approach positions athletes as dependent on the coach for performance facilitation, particularly in competitive settings, and aims to control players, which can disempower them (Babbitt, 2019).

Athlete-Centered Coaching and Self-Determination Theory

The principles of ACC in youth sports include: (a) promoting the holistic development of athletes by fostering life skills such as independence, leadership, and decision-making, while viewing sport as part of a larger life experience (Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Vella et al., 2011); (b)

establishing a collaborative relationship between coach and athlete, where athletes are empowered and involved in planning, decision-making, and evaluations (Bloom et al., 2020; Kidman, 2010; Rottensteiner et al., 2015); (c) adopting a guiding approach to teaching, rather than prescriptive, through strategies like teaching games for understanding and using thought-provoking questions (Harvey, 2009; Pill & Gambles, 2023; Vella et al., 2013); (d) creating a positive team culture that encourages athletes to take responsibility for the team's direction (Alder, 2017); and (e) leveraging external resources such as skilled assistant coaches, external support, and effective feedback systems (Bean et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2014; Preston et al., 2016). These principles of ACC are grounded in Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (STD) (Deci & Ryan, 2013), which emphasizes the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for competence refers to the general sense of being effective in one's social and achievement environments, emphasizing the importance of opportunities to fully utilize and showcase one's abilities and strengths (Deci & Ryan, 1980). The need for autonomy relates to an individual's perception of being the originator of their achievement behaviors (Mossman et al., 2024). Autonomy implies that actions are driven by personal interests and values, arising from intrinsic motivation (Bagøien & Halvari, 2005). The need for relatedness focuses on the sense of connection and attachment to others, embodying the idea that individuals both care for others and are cared for in return (Ryan et al., 2009). In essence, when satisfaction needs are satisfied, people are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2012)

Research on SDT has demonstrated that satisfying these needs leads to improved psychological well-being, along with greater persistence and performance in experiential activities (Ryan et al., 2009). However, despite the alignment between SDT and ACC, there is a potential

risk when ACC is not implemented with genuine consideration of athletes' needs. If a coach's approach to being athlete-centered is driven more by their own assumptions than by the actual needs and perspectives of the athletes, this could potentially result in need frustration or thwarting (Bartholomew et al., 2011), undermining the very goals of ACC, turning it into a tool of dominance rather than empowerment.

Need frustration is the experience that occurs when an individual's psychological needs are not just unmet but are actively obstructed or compromised (Bhavsar et al., 2020). This negative experience can arise when the environment or interactions with others prevent the individual from satisfying their basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Adie et al., 2008). Unlike need dissatisfaction, which is simply the absence of need fulfillment, need frustration involves a sense of being blocked or negatively impacted (Bhavsar et al., 2020), leading to emotional distress and potentially negative outcomes such as disengagement, burnout, or decreased well-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011). For example, an athlete might feel isolated due to low need satisfaction, which could happen if they struggle to connect with their teammates. On the other hand, need frustration could occur if the athlete is deliberately excluded by their teammates or coach (Bhavsar et al., 2020).

Recent research highlights the importance of assessing not only the satisfaction of psychological needs but also their need frustration (Bhavsar et al., 2020), as this broader approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the athlete's well-being (Cheon et al., 2019). In the SDT literature, "need dissatisfaction" has predominantly been used to describe the lack of need fulfillment (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Cheon et al., 2019; Costa et al., 2015). Some researchers have also used the term "dissatisfaction" to refer to the experience of need frustration (Neubauer & Voss, 2018; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). For the purposes of our paper, the term

"need frustration" will be adopted to avoid confusion. Understanding how the ACC and SDT frameworks intersect could be crucial for developing coaching practices that enhance the sport experience.

Athlete Centered Coaching in Disability Sport

Although ACC is designed to prioritize the individual needs of athletes (Cassidy et al., 2005), it can become a tool of dominance when coaches, teachers, or parents impose their own definitions of what athlete-centeredness should look like, often based on assumptions that certain athletes, such as those with disabilities, may not be as successful in physical activities as others (Perkins et al., 2013). This creates a dominant approach that may normalize certain behaviors while overlooking the true impact of impairment on athletes' lives (Ballas et al., 2022). When coaches apply athlete-centered discourses uncritically, focusing solely on normative coaching frameworks and ignoring the nuances of disability, they risk imposing a rigid structure that can be just as oppressive as authoritarian approaches (Nelson et al., 2014). The result is a version of person-centeredness that reflects the coach's worldview rather than the athlete's true needs and experiences.

In contrast, informed coaching, where coaches critically engage with their practices and deeply understand the diverse needs of youth athletes with disabilities, creates more empowering environments (Aytur et al., 2018; Moss et al., 2020). In these settings, coaches challenge traditional views of ability and disability (Aytur et al., 2018; Moss et al., 2020), enabling the creation of supportive environments that align with the true intent of ACC. The context-specific nature of coaching, particularly in disability sports, presents an emerging opportunity to explore and expand ACC's application among athletes who are often marginalized (Smith et al., 2016). When ACC is applied thoughtfully and inclusively, it can reshape coaching practices to better serve

youth athletes with disabilities, fostering environments where they can thrive both on and off the field (Grenier et al., 2023).

Athlete-Centered Coaching in Goalball

Goalball is a paralympic sport specifically designed for athletes with visual impairments, offering a unique and critical context to study ACC (Lepore-Stevens & Schugar, 2023; Mannella, 2021). Goalball is a non-territorial invasion game where two teams of three players each attempt to score goals by rolling a ball into an opponents' goal. The ball contains bells allowing players to use hearing to track the ball and tactile floor markings to orient themselves on the court to block the ball using a side-lying position on the floor. Blindfolds are worn to equalize the different levels of visual impairment of athletes. A distinctive aspect of goalball is the restriction on coaches' ability to communicate with players while the ball is in play (IBSA, 2025). This rule limits the cues and instructions coaches can provide during critical moments of decision-making and competition strategy. Another rule in goalball allows players to request timeouts and substitutions during matches (IBSA, 2025). A third unique aspect of goalball is that the presence of a coach is not mandatory for participation in most local and domestic tournaments (Antritsou, 2016). These features of goalball underscore the importance of ACC, as it could prepare athletes to perform effectively even in the absence of direct coaching support.

Goalball coaches, particularly those who are able-bodied may not fully understand the experiences of visually impaired athletes (Wareham et al., 2017). This lack of awareness may contribute to coaches being naïve to how their behaviors shape youth athletes' perceptions and sport experiences, whether positive or negative (Smith et al., 2007). Negative behaviors like criticizing or punishing mistakes can diminish motivation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009), which is

particularly concerning given that youth often play sports because of the positive interactions with their coaches (Hopple, 2018).

Some coaches may experience varying levels of difficulty in relinquishing control and allowing youth athletes to take the lead in decision-making as it requires a shift from traditional coaching methods to a more facilitative role (McMahon & Zehntner, 2014) (Brammall & Lowes, 2021). In some cases, coaches may create only the appearance or “illusion” of autonomy, subtly guiding athletes to align with their own coaching agendas while maintaining underlying control over decisions (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2004). The ACC has the potential to bridge this gap in goalball, specifically the challenge of transitioning from a traditional, coach-centered approach to one that genuinely empowers athletes (McMahon & Zehntner, 2014). Exploring ACC in goalball could also help address misconceptions about disability (MacDonald et al., 2020), enabling able-bodied coaches to structure their practices around athletes' decision-making skills and lived experiences (Preston et al., 2016). Implementation of ACC could result in more targeted and effective coaching strategies that align more closely with the actual needs and experiences of goalball athletes such as independence and control over decision making, task execution, and communication, fostering a more athlete-centered approach to performance training and development (Hanin et al., 2016; Souza & Oslin, 2008).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to explore how goalball coaches apply ACC strategies to support or constrain youth athletes' psychological needs and (2) to explore the experiences of youth goalball athletes during training and competition, particularly how they perceive support or constraints from their coaches in meeting their psychological needs. This study aimed to provide insights into the meanings and dynamics between coaching practices and youth

goalball athletes' experiences during training and competition. This research adopted a qualitative-descriptive methodology, which is particularly suited for studies where the focus is on understanding what is happening, rather than examining why or how it occurs. Additionally, the authors used person-first terminology throughout this paper. The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What coaching strategies are used by goalball coaches to support or constrain youth athletes' autonomy, competence, and relatedness?
2. What are goalball coaches' knowledge about athlete-centered coaching (ACC) and what challenges and successes they encounter when applying it with youth athletes?
3. How do youth goalball athletes describe their sport experience during training and competition and the role of their coach in those moments?
4. What specific coaching strategies do youth goalball athletes perceive as either supporting or constraining their autonomy, competence, and relatedness during training and competition?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design

This study follows an interpretivist research paradigm, grounded in a relativist ontology that views reality as socially constructed through interactions, cultural norms, and individual experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It also aligns with a subjective epistemology, emphasizing that knowledge is co-created through the shared experiences of the researcher and participants rather than discovered as objective truth (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). These assumptions

are particularly relevant when exploring how youth goalball athletes and their coaches understand and make meaning of their experiences in the sport context.

A descriptive qualitative methodology was chosen, following Sandelowski's (2001) guidance and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014). This approach allows for rich, straightforward descriptions of participants' perspectives taking into consideration a theoretical framework, which is essential given the limited research on athlete-centered coaching and psychological need satisfaction in disability sport. Descriptive qualitative research is effective in answering fundamental questions such as who, what, and where (Sandelowski, 2000) and helps illuminate underexplored barriers and facilitators that influence athlete development and motivation in disability sport settings. In this sport context, athletes with visual impairments often bring a unique level of self-awareness and insight into their own needs. Rather than relying solely on coaches for direction, these athletes frequently express what works best for them in training and competition. They may suggest adjustments, take initiative during practice, or support teammates in ways that resemble coaching roles. In some cases, athletes become their own coach, drawing from personal experience, trial and error, and peer collaboration to guide their performance. This challenges traditional coach-led structures and reflects a more collaborative environment, where the athlete's is the expert and their voice carries weight in shaping the learning process. Recognizing this dynamic is essential to understanding how athlete-centered coaching unfolds in disability sport and how motivation and development are co-constructed rather than delivered top-down. This study aims to better understand how youth and coaches construct their experiences through athlete-centered coaching and the strategies that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness in goalball.

Participants

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's university research ethics board before participant recruitment. A purposive sample of goalball coaches and youth goalball athletes were recruited to participate in this study.

Goalball coaches were required to (a) be 18 years or older and (b) have at least one year of experience coaching youth goalball athletes, including participation in international events, national tournaments and local/regional/state tournaments. The coaches sample consisted of nine goalball coaches (three females and six males) from the United States and Canada, representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, Black or African American ($n = 2$), White ($n = 5$), and others ($n = 2$), with coaching experience ranging from 1 to 25 years ($M = 6.44$ years, $SD = 7.84$). Seven coaches reported formal training in coaching, with five having training specific to goalball. Coaches in this study had experience across a variety of competitive levels, including local and state-level goalball tournaments, national championships such as the Canadian Blind Sport Association (CBSA) Junior Goalball National Championship or the United States (US) National High School Goalball Championships, and international youth events sanctioned by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA). Five of the 10 participants had experience coaching athletes in able-bodied sport contexts. Given the small community of goalball coaches, some demographics such as coaches' educational level, race and country were withheld to assure participants anonymity.

Youth goalball participants were those who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) between the ages of 14-17 years; (b) had at least one year of competitive goalball experience, including participation in International, national, or local/regional/state tournaments. The age range of 14–17 was selected because athletes at this stage can meaningfully reflect on their experiences

and commonly compete in youth goalball tournaments. The athlete sample consisted of 10 youth goalball players (four females and six males) from the United States and Canada, representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black or African American ($n = 6$), White ($n = 3$), and others ($n = 1$). All participants reported having a visual impairment and self-identified their visual classification as B1 ($n = 5$), B2 ($n = 3$), or B3 ($n = 2$), following the IBSA classification system. Athletes had between 1 and 6 years of competitive experience in goalball ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.48$) and reported training frequencies ranging from 1-2 times per week ($n = 8$) to 3-4 times per week ($n = 2$).

Participant Recruitment and Procedures

Coach and athlete recruitment was conducted online. Coaches were recruited through blind sports organizations, local goalball clubs, social media, and established networks in the goalball community. Coaches were contacted via email, which included detailed information about the study, an online consent form, and a recruitment flyer. Youth athletes were recruited through direct communication with goalball coaches, parents and blind sport organizations. The researcher contacted coaches via email to inform them about the study and requested assistance identifying potential participants. Coaches or the organization notified parents of eligible athletes by email, providing information about the study and the option to participate. This email included a recruitment flyer and an online parental permission form for parents to review and approve their child's participation. The recruitment flyer was also shared on social media platforms to further inform potential participants about the study.

Prior to conducting interviews, parental permission (for parents), verbal assent (for athletes), and informed consent (for coaches) were obtained. Only the informed consent and parental permission forms provided both coaches and parents with a link to proceed to the interview

process. For parents, this allowed them to give permission for their child's participation and schedule the interview. Before conducting any interviews with athletes, the researcher read the assent form aloud to children to ensure comprehension. Verbal assent was obtained from each child and documented prior to being interviewed. The documents were not provided in braille.

Data Collection

Interviews

Data for this study was collected through a demographic questionnaire and one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted online via Zoom or by phone, depending on participants' preferences. Offering both options supported accessibility, particularly for youth with visual impairments. All interviews were audio-recorded and managed in the same way during transcription and analysis to ensure uniformity in data handling across both formats. Interviews were conducted with coaches ($n = 9$; six via Zoom, three by phone) and athletes ($n = 10$; two via Zoom, eight by phone). Following written informed consent by coaches and auditory consent by athletes, participants provided demographic details such as age, gender, years of coaching experience, education, and formal training. After completing the questionnaire, the lead author conducted the interviews, which lasted 60–90 minutes on average. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Cockatoo transcription software for data analysis. Interview recordings were securely stored using the platform's audio recording function and transcribed with measures in place to maintain participant confidentiality.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed in alignment with SDT and were carefully developed based on an extensive literature review. To ensure content validity, a panel of four experts in kinesiology, disability sports, and coaching reviewed the interview protocol. The principal investigator incorporated their feedback, which included reordering questions,

before submitting the final version for approval. The researcher maintained reflective notes during and after each interview to document personal reactions, evolving interpretations, and emerging patterns in the data. To ensure reflexivity and reduce bias, the researcher critically examined and recorded personal values and assumptions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2013). These notes were guided by the theoretical framework, capturing contextual reflections and were revised as needed based on new insights (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Data Confidentiality

Participants' confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms in all study records, including reflective notes. No personal information (e.g., names or contact details) was linked to research data. Identifying details were anonymized, and a secure, password-protected system stored the key linking pseudonyms to participants. All data, including reflective notes and interview transcripts, were stored on encrypted, password-protected servers, accessible only to the primary researcher. No IP addresses or personally identifiable information were collected. Participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted a reflective thematic analysis of the 19 interview transcripts (9 coaches and 10 athletes) using a line-by-line approach to identify recurring patterns and themes. The analysis followed both a deductive and inductive process, beginning with data preparation, which involved transcribing interviews and thoroughly reviewing the transcripts. Following transcription, the data underwent reduction, where key sections were identified, bracketed, and refined to focus on relevant content. Thematic coding was conducted manually, with similar codes grouped into categories, and related categories further clustered into broader themes. Throughout

this, reflective notes were utilized to document emerging insights, researcher assumptions, and evolving interpretations. To ensure credibility and rigor, the researcher presented the identified themes with supporting quotes to co-authors for conceptual critique. Based on their feedback, themes were reorganized to enhance clarity and consistency. The final thematic structure was reviewed and approved by the authorship team before inclusion in the study findings.

Validation of the data

The quality of this study was assessed using eight key indicators of rigorous qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). First, this research is among the few studies examining ACC in goalball, particularly from the perspectives of youth athletes and their coaches, making it an important and valuable contribution to the field of disability sport coaching. Second, rigor was ensured by grounding the study in SDT, collecting rich qualitative data, and conducting a systematic and thorough analysis of participants' experiences. Third, the researcher maintained self-reflexivity, acknowledging personal biases as an insider in the goalball community, while employing strategies to mitigate undue influence on data collection and interpretation. Fourth, reliability was established by presenting detailed and in-depth examples of themes, directly supported by participant quotes to ensure transparency and authenticity. Fifth, the results and discussion sections were carefully written to engage readers and describe the experiences of goalball athletes and coaches. Sixth, the study contributes new insights to the existing body of literature on disability sport coaching and youth athlete development, acknowledging the limitations of self-reported experiences and the limited exploration of external influences (e.g., parental influence, economic barriers, or socio-cultural factors). Ethical research practices were upheld procedurally, situationally, and relationally. Informed consent was obtained from coaches, with parental permission and youth assent secured for minor participants. The researcher remained responsive to participant

comfort during interviews and prioritized respectful, trusting relationships. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data handling. Lastly, the study remained coherent and aligned with its declared research purpose, ensuring that findings were meaningfully connected to both the literature and the research design.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness was a central priority in this qualitative study. Several strategies were implemented based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through peer debriefing, in which the primary researcher engaged in reflective discussions with colleagues not directly involved with the research process. These conversations provided a space to critically examine assumptions, question the fit of the methodology in relation to the research questions, and explore the alignment between the use of STD and the descriptive approach. Dependability was addressed through a peer checking process used to support the interpretation of the data. Following initial coding by the primary researcher, a second researcher independently reviewed the coded transcripts and proposed themes. The two researchers then met to debrief, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus on the structure and meaning of the themes. This collaborative process helped ensure consistency and transparency in the analytical approach. Additionally, broader peer examination of coding decisions, theme development, and methodological procedures was conducted to further strengthen the rigor and dependability of the study. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling conducted both during and after data collection and analysis. The researcher documented personal reflections, positionality, decision-making processes, and evolving interpretations in order to remain aware of their influence on the research. Direct participant quotes were used to support and illustrate the final themes. These quotes were not presented as objective truths but rather as

meaningful representations of each participant's lived experience. This approach aligns with a post-positivist orientation, which recognizes that knowledge is shaped by context and interaction. Unlike positivism, which seeks singular, objective realities, post-positivism acknowledges multiple perspectives and emphasizes transparent, rigorous methods for getting closer to shared understanding. Quotes were selected not to prove the themes, but to give voice to participants' perspectives and validate the meaning-making process central to this study.

Positionality Statement

The primary researcher recognized that his coaching background could influence interactions with participants, particularly in building rapport and creating a safe space for goalball coaches and athletes to share their experiences. While this shared identity may have fostered trust and openness, it also had the potential to shape participant responses based on what they believed the researcher expected. To address these biases, the researcher engaged in interpersonal reflexivity, maintaining reflective notes to document thoughts, decisions, and reflections on how his positionality influenced the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Palaganas et al., 2017). The researcher also acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in research, especially when working with minors. To mitigate this, recruitment was conducted transparently, with participants fully informed of his dual role as coach and researcher.

RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections: the first focuses on coaches' experiences, and the second on athletes' perspectives. Each section includes major themes and subthemes that reflect how individuals experience goalball, their relationships, and the strategies that shape motivation and development.

Coaches

Four major themes were constructed depicting coaches' experiences. These themes are: (1) Helping Athletes Find Their Voice, (2) Learning the Game Without Seeing It, (3) Goalball Isn't Just a Sport – It's a Family, and (4) Have We Always Been Athlete-Centered? The themes from coaches are supported by subthemes that further illustrate how coaches experience the sport of goalball, their interactions with their players, and the strategies that promote or constrain competence, autonomy and relatedness (see Figure 1).

Theme 1: Helping Athletes Find Their Voice

During the interviews, coaches described a commitment to supporting athlete autonomy in ways that helped young players develop independence, confidence, and leadership skills. Helping athletes find their voice was not about turning over complete control but rather creating intentional opportunities for athletes to make decisions in supportive environments. This process of promoting autonomy was shaped by athletes' age, skill level, and the context of training or competition. While some coaches emphasized small decision-making moments to build athlete confidence, others highlighted the importance of maintaining final authority over certain aspects of coaching. This theme is supported by two subthemes (1) Let them lead, if they're ready and (2) "I listen to all of them, and I make that decision."

Subtheme 1: Let Them Lead, If They're Ready. Many coaches shared that they liked giving athletes chances to make decisions, especially during practice. They believed that these moments helped athletes feel confident, take ownership of their experience, and gradually develop leadership skills. At the same time, coaches were thoughtful about when and how much freedom they gave, often considering the athlete's maturity, skill level, and comfort.

Coach Joseph explained that he tried to let athletes shape their own experience in the sport, stating, “How they want to play the game, I want to give them the opportunity to play the way they want.” For him, autonomy helped athletes feel more connected to the game. Nia had a similar approach and said, “I like it when athletes make choices. I like it when athletes take ownership of the game, even at a younger level.” Several described intentionally incorporating small decisions into training sessions to build athlete confidence while maintaining structure. Zavier built on this idea by explaining how he included small leadership moments in practice.

I love it. I think we should if they are capable. And then you're just giving guided leadership...you're simply picking a team... Or letting them choose if they want to roll with someone or switch. Making them small decisions so they can feel confident.

These small choices were seen as foundational experiences that could later translate into more meaningful leadership on the court. Nia further emphasized that autonomy was not just helpful, but necessary in the sport. She commented, “Autonomy is super important, I think, in goalball. Even for younger and newer athletes, we have to teach them ahead of time how to be autonomous players.” Coach Zavier echoed this point by linking autonomy with leadership development. He asserted,

Giving praise for praise is it should be given. Being ready, helping others, when someone is new, and you are there, ‘Hey, this is the wing.’ Taking the initiative as one and being a leader... You got to show a foundational leadership, and it can start as soon as the simple of things.

As athletes gained more experience, coaches were more willing to let them make tactical decisions during play. Nia described how she adjusted the level of autonomy depending on the athlete. She mentioned,

I'm not going to tell him [skilled athlete] every single time whether I want a smooth ball, skip ball, bounce ball...I'll tell him what I see that's open; I'll tell him what gaps I see and what I think he can exploit, but...I trust a player like that to have a great deal of autonomy. With another player, a different type of player, I might give them a lot less responsibility.

Similarly, Kevin encouraged autonomy during warm-ups, giving athletes the chance to manage their own. He indicated, "I let them do warm-ups. They always just do warm-ups on themselves, and if they want to waste time on warm-ups and they get less practice time, that's on them. His strategy extended into gameplay decisions, allowing athletes to have a say in their court positions. He noted, "If they want to switch from center to wing and they want to call that, I'm fine with that...as long as it seems to be making sense to me from the bench, I would allow them to do that."

Some coaches also offered athletes input in areas beyond the game itself. Andre, for example, allowed his athletes to select their own incentives. He said, "I try to make sure they are involved, so I let them pick things like their rewards when they win games, movie tickets, smoothies, or ice cream." Even for coaches who supported athlete choice, there was a recognition that some structure was necessary. Joseph explained,

Giving them that freedom to choose things and try things out on their own and giving them that ownership of their own team, I think is very good, a good thing to do. I give them as much freedom as I can with as many choices as I can, but whatever sorts of things would cause conflict, I definitely just tell them what to do.

Other coaches pointed out that not all athletes were equally comfortable or capable of handling those decisions. Stella described how some athletes needed more direct support. She

commented, “Some fully blind athletes that are totally capable, independent, confident, and don’t need to be guided on and off the court. There’s a couple that are super more hesitant. They need to make sure they have that guidance.”

Subtheme 2: I listen to them, and I make the decision. While some coaches embraced athlete leadership when appropriate, others described a more coach-directed approach. In these cases, athlete input was still encouraged, but coaches felt that they needed to be the ones to make final decisions. Especially when it came to team structure, strategy, or maintaining consistency. Theo explained how he balances openness with leadership. He shared,

I always encourage them to share how they feel about each game and about each training (...) I listen to all of them, and I make that decision. This is not about imposing but advising and saying ‘this is what's good for the team’, not ‘this is what I want to be done in the team.’

His coaching style valued communication while preserving decision-making authority. Jenna also welcomed athlete voices, particularly during practice. She wanted her athletes to feel heard, even if their choices were part of a larger plan. She said,

At a tournament, I don't necessarily give them the freedom. But [during practice] at least the youth are thinking ‘oh, this is awesome. I have a coach who respects me and listens to my opinion and lets me do this.’ But in the same sense, they don’t realize I’m letting you do this, but it’s stuff I know you need to do and to get done.

Other coaches were more direct about their belief that young athletes were not yet ready for decision-making responsibilities. Harold explained, “At the youth level, I don’t give them a lot of sense in making decisions. I know what they're doing. I know what they're thinking. And that's my job as a coach, to tell them.” Stella described a similarly structured approach in her practices.

She said, “At this moment in time, there's no autonomy. Because of the ages (...) They're given directions on what to do. Yeah, we're direct.”

Even among coaches who supported some autonomy in practice, many agreed that competition required a different level of structure. Theo explained that once games begin, athletes must make decisions on their own. He commented, “I can't really help them with decisions during competition”. Still, Harold expressed concern that some youth athletes believed they were more capable than they actually were. He expanded, “The biggest challenge with youth players is they tend to think of themselves as adults. They know everything.”

In specific cases like lineup and substitutions, coaches were clear that those decisions should remain entirely in their hands. Nia stated, “I don't really love it when athletes try to make decisions or tell coaches about subbing decisions in particular... I feel that has to be a coach decision.” Joseph held the same view, explaining, “So an example would be who is going to start in a game and what substitutions we're going to make, decisions I don't let them even really talk about it.” As seen in this theme, coaches often work within a range. While many try to encourage athlete input and leadership when possible, they also recognize the importance of providing direction and support, especially in situations that require team cohesion or competitive focus.

Theme 2: Learning the Game Without Seeing It

Coaches discussed how goalball athletes develop skills primarily through kinesthetic and auditory learning. Without visual feedback, athletes rely on physical sensation, tactile cues, and sound to recognize mistakes, refine technique, and improve performance. Developing competence in goalball requires athletes to “feel” the game, through their movements, body positioning, and spatial awareness. Because athletes cannot see their success or failure, they must learn to understand their bodies and the court in completely non-visual ways. This theme is supported by

three subthemes: (1) *Can't See the Mistake, Can't Fix the Skill*, (2) *What They Think vs. What They Do* and, (3) *Throwing Eye Shades Against the Wall*.

Subtheme 1: Can't See the Mistake, Can't Fix the Skill. In the absence of visual cues, athletes depend on how their movements feel and how the environment sounds. Coaches explained that learning goalball is physical. Athletes must recognize their own mistakes and improvements by sensing them, not seeing them. Zavier summed this up by stating,

With blind athletes, they have to feel it. If you are not feeling what you are doing wrong, then we can't fix it. If you don't feel what you are doing right, we don't know what we are doing. It's a lot of kinesthetic.

Nia reflected on how drawing from past success can support this learning. She said, "Letting them figure out what's going on and reminding them that you've had success before. I know you can do this because I've seen you do it, you felt it, you know how it works." Physical orientation is also key. Stella emphasized the importance of tactile court markings. Stella stated, "If that court's not set up for them, then they're not able to play the game to their best ability because they don't have the tactile court." Some athletes, according to Zavier, pick up auditory skills more naturally than others. He shared, "In blind sports, you either got really good ears or you don't. You can get better at tracking. But you know that ear level is a thing that you can't really coach." Theo noted that athletes often communicate through physical movement during play. He commented, "They are communicating with movements, that's how they communicate when they are defending." Zavier pointed out that verbal feedback must be carefully worded for athletes who cannot see. She indicated, "You can't just say, 'uh, put your arm over here.' I do feel some sighted people have a hard time talking like that."

To meet athletes' needs, Nia emphasized tailoring instruction through multiple strategies.

She asserted,

They're athletes and they're very, very capable people...work with them and within the modalities that work for them. So that could be tactile modeling, it could be enhanced verbal descriptions, it could be all kinds of different stuff.

Stella also discussed the emotional barriers athletes face, especially around blocking. She believes visualization can still play a role. She said, "I really firmly believe in visualization, and I think you can do that as a fully blind athlete. So imagine yourself doing your skill the way that you're being instructed." She also shared how practical positioning can ease fear. She added, "[female athletes] they're afraid to be hit in the face with the ball. So how do you encourage them to not be afraid of the ball? Okay, well where's your hand position?"

Subtheme 2: What They Think vs. What They Do. Coaches noticed a common challenge when working with goalball athletes. Many had difficulty accurately understanding their own performance. Without the ability to visually compare themselves to others or watch their own movement, athletes often believed they were performing better than they actually were. This gap between what athletes thought they were doing and what they were actually doing made it harder for coaches to provide feedback and support learning. Joseph explained the mismatch between perception and reality,

They [athletes] have a mismatch between their belief in their abilities and the result on the court. So, you know, this player believes he knows he can block the goalball, and yet he got scored on three times in a row.

Kevin expressed a similar perspective, noting how visual impairment, especially among athletes who were born blind, affects self-awareness. He shared, "It sounds crazy, but sometimes the kids

don't even know they're bad, essentially, especially if they're completely blind. If they were born blind, they almost can't visualize that they're not playing remotely on the same level as their teammates." Coaches also described how this misalignment often led to pushbacks when athletes were asked to adjust their technique. Harold explained, "Sometimes they don't know anything, and you're trying to convince them that maybe what they're doing isn't the best way and doing it a different way is a better way." Beyond technique, fitness levels often posed an additional barrier to learning and performance. Kevin commented, "They tend to be bad at fitness in general. They just ran out of gas. Friday through Sunday they're sedentary, they're sitting around the house or watching YouTube or playing video games." Other athletes faced physical or cognitive challenges that limited their ability to engage fully in certain drills. Stella explained how coaching had to be adapted to individual needs. She noted,

If you're working with an athlete that has another complexity on top of their blindness, like they have a physical limitation, they may not be able to do that drill because that's not in their physical ability per se, and they would need support to do that.

In some cases, mental barriers limited growth even when physical potential was high. Harold noted, "Some athletes have all the ability in the world from the neck down, but from the neck up they're hurting their progress." Coaches also shared that repeated drills aimed at improving accuracy or spatial awareness were sometimes met with frustration or disinterest. Jenna described,

Their accuracy is horrible. I can work on accuracy over and over and over again. But then they hate doing it. They're like, 'Oh, again?' But [during] Christmas and Halloween, I brought candy. I set up the pylons and said, 'If you can hit these cones, you'll get a candy.'

Subtheme 3: Throwing Eye Shades Against the Wall. In addition to perceptual challenges, coaches described how frustration sometimes surfaced when athletes struggled to improve or could not understand why their performance was lacking. Without immediate, visible signs of progress, athletes occasionally responded with emotional outbursts or physical expressions of anger. Zavier described his difficulty managing visible signs of athlete frustration. He said, “I do have a little problem with athletes who aren't doing well, and they start pounding on the court. I don't know how to do well with that.” Kevin noted how repeated effort without success could lead athletes to shut down or act out. He shared, “I can teach them all day how to block, but it's crazy to me how they don't seem to want to do it.”

One of the more intense reactions Kevin witnessed involved a player removing their eye shades in anger. He indicated, “I've had kids get up and take their eye shades off and throw them against the wall.” Coaches recognized that this type of frustration was often rooted in athletes' own expectations. Joseph explained, “I think that when these players are struggling the most or having the hardest time, it's really when they feel they should be doing better than they do.” Some coaches worked to normalize frustration as part of the athletic journey. Andre offered this perspective to the athletes. He shared, “It's okay to feel frustrated. And I tell everyone this, even the able-bodied sports have tough days. Michael Jordan had tough days.” In response to ongoing performance issues, coaches sometimes introduced mild consequences to refocus athletes and maintain practice flow. Kevin shared his approach,

If I have a kid that keeps rolling out of bounds every time, I'll try to stop practice and we'll try to figure out what the deal is or whatever, but then sometimes I'll be like, ‘Man, if you roll it out again, just give me 10 push-ups or something like that.

Theme 3: Goalball Isn't Just a Sport - It's a Family.

The experience of relatedness, the sense of belonging, social connection, and mutual support among teammates, was a central aspect of the coaches' narratives. While some athletes naturally formed strong bonds, others had difficulty feeling included on the team, which led to tension with their teammates. The role of the coach in promoting a welcoming, inclusive environment was seen as essential, yet not without challenges. Coaches emphasized the importance of team camaraderie and lifelong friendships, both on and off the court. Some coaches took intentional steps, recognizing that simply being part of a team did not guarantee social inclusion. Coaches frequently emphasized that goalball stands out from other sports because of its strong sense of community and support. This theme is supported by two subthemes (1) *Camaraderie Is Part of The Game Plan* (2) *Being on the Team Doesn't Mean You Feel Like It*

Subtheme 1: Camaraderie Is Part of The Game Plan. Coaches described goalball not only as a sport but as a powerful social space where lasting bonds are formed. For many, the team environment extended beyond practices and tournaments to become a family, providing athletes with emotional support, friendship, and a sense of belonging. This atmosphere was seen as a defining feature of the goalball community and sometimes that set it apart from other sports. Coaches emphasized that this closeness did not happen automatically. It required intentional effort to build trust, encourage open communication, and create inclusive environments where all athletes felt valued. Through shared experiences on the court or meaningful conversations off it, goalball teams were often described as communities that continued to shape athletes well beyond their competitive years. Several coaches felt the sense of connection in goalball surpassed what they had seen in other sports.

Nia explained, “Goalball is one of the most welcoming sports.” Stella echoed this and linked it to the tight-knit nature of the community. She shared, “I’ve seen a difference in the community of goalball versus other sports because it’s so small. There’s so much support for people coming in, as a volunteer, as a coach, as a referee.” Even in this welcoming environment, coaches noted that social inclusion required ongoing effort. Zavier shared how he encouraged connection during practices. He commented, “Help introduce the new athletes to other athletes, especially if they are doing a drill... That’s a good way to not only work on names but also to help them work with other people.” Andre viewed building friendships as essential to his coaching. He noted, “There’s always life after goalball. So, if they could have a friendship bond after training or just work together, that’s really fun. That just makes my work so much easier.”

Other coaches created a sense of team through fun, shared routines, and open dialogue. Theo encouraged athletes to stay connected. He said, “I’m always encouraging them to stay according to each other, always be friends.” Harold made space for connection at the end of each practice. He added, “We always sit down at the end of the practice... I kind of try to build camaraderie within the structure... I don’t like to be an autocrat. I think it should be fun. We should enjoy it.” Nia added that being a team might look different for each athlete’s needs. She said, “Let’s build that camaraderie with the team. But we have to understand that when we’re doing team stuff, we are a unit, and that might mean different things for different people.”

Coaches also used team discussions and shared decision-making to ensure every athlete felt heard. Andre described his approach,

Everyone is involved. Everyone has a say. Everyone has an opinion. I get opinions from each and every one of them and work with what they give me... They know their buddies and themselves as friends in ways that I might not.

This inclusive environment often led athletes to support one another without being asked. Nia reflected,

By encouraging that one person to be there for the team and keep everybody together... then when they need something, another player will step up because they feel the culture of it. They feel the camaraderie.

At a more personal level, coaches emphasized the value of one-on-one conversations. Joseph shared how these helped athletes re-engage with the team. He commented, "I think the most important thing is to have those one-on-one conversations... and give that player an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings... to get that person back involved in the team." For many, the impact of goalball extended beyond tournaments and practices. Jenna described what the community meant to her. She shared, "It's just such a unique sport... when you go to tournaments and meet other people, I call it my goalball family."

Subtheme 2: Being on the Team Doesn't Mean You Feel Like It. Coaches described a range of experiences related to the social integration of new athletes. While many goalball teams are built on strong foundations of support, inclusion is not always guaranteed. New athletes often faced challenges when trying to join already close groups, especially when trust and social routines had already been established. Being part of the group did not always mean an athlete felt they belonged. Coaches emphasized that even in welcoming environments, true inclusion took time, effort, and mutual engagement. Athletes had to do more than show up. They needed to participate, build trust, and invest in the relationships that held the team together.

Jenna recalled an experience with a new athlete who had trouble connecting with a long-standing group. She shared,

The four girls I brought to tournaments have played together for two years and have a tight bond. A new student joined ... I told them to include her. She told me she doesn't feel part of the team ... but we had to remind her that she also has to make an effort. She's still shy and not comfortable wearing the eye shades.

Despite encouragement, the athlete's hesitation added to her sense of exclusion. Jenna added

During scrimmages, she moves because she can see, and teammates have said, 'She's not where she's supposed to be.' I stress that even if she can see, she still needs to put in effort ...she wants to be included, but in a way, she's excluding herself.

This showed how athletes need to meet the team halfway. While invitations to connect were important, new members also had to step forward and engage. Some coaches described how they addressed these challenges directly. Joseph emphasized the power of small actions. He indicated, "If one player is feeling really down and they're sitting by themselves, just saying to another player, 'Hey, go sit next to that player and just like talk to him'. Andre also stepped in when he noticed exclusion. He shared, "If I feel a player is being isolated, I work on that immediately by integrating them into the team". Coaches actively watched for signs of disconnect and tried to build a sense of belonging. Still, not every athlete responded right away. Kevin said that for some, connection took time. He asserted,

I have kids that come and do goalball, and they're still not into it. But then I got others that, a year or two later, they are long way from saying, 'Man, I don't want to do goalball, it looks dumb,' to being super excited, but then they get through that competition again that they got to feel when they were playing with their friends.

For some athletes, the challenge was not just social hesitation. Outside influences could shape behavior. Andre reflected on how background and environment sometimes affected team

dynamics. He noted, “Even though they are disabled, it doesn’t stop them from being bad. And some kids are just bad as a result of influences, whether it be from friends or even family members”. Over time, Andre said he had learned to manage these situations with more patience. He indicated, “over the years, I’ve gotten better in terms of tolerance, understanding, [and] patience. Because I used to really get angry, and I used to shout a lot. But now I think I’m better now.” His reflections suggest that not all barriers were rooted in the team setting. Sometimes they came from deeper personal or environmental challenges. At other times, the reasons were less visible. Theo explained, “Sometimes you might not really know what’s wrong with them. And they just don’t want to talk about it”. Andre shared a similar challenge, “They do not tell me even as a coach”.

Theme 4: Have We Always Been Athlete-Centered?

This theme was constructed from a pattern across interviews. Most coaches were unfamiliar with the term athlete centered coaching, which raised questions about whether their existing practices could be considered athlete centered. While many had never encountered the phrase, the underlying values (e.g., supporting autonomy, empowerment, and athlete well-being) often showed up in their daily coaching. For some, the term brought confusion or curiosity. For others, it sounded familiar but remained unclear, often due to limited exposure.

Even without knowing the term, coaches frequently described decisions and strategies that reflected athlete centered principles. Their comments showed a range of awareness and application, from unknowingly using these strategies to intentionally building empowering environments. Some saw the approach as holistic or focused on the whole person. Others acknowledged that it required effort and a shift away from traditional directive methods. While many coaches were practicing some elements of athlete centered coaching, the absence of shared

language and formal education created uncertainty around what it actually means. This theme is supported by four subthemes (1) *Athlete-Centered What?* (2) *ACC It's Better for the Whole Person* (3) *It's Harder Than Traditional Coaching* (4) *We're empowering people*

Subtheme 1: Athlete-Centered What? Coaches described different levels of familiarity with the concept of athlete centered coaching. While a few had heard of it before, most did not associate it with their own coaching. Joseph said, "I read that phrase athlete-centered coaching in the documentation, but I don't think I had ever heard of athlete-centered coaching named that before reading the waiver earlier today." Nia responded similarly, "No, I haven't heard that specifically, but please tell me about it." Some coaches recognized the underlying philosophy but not the label. Kevin shared, "You might be able to tell me the philosophy behind it. It might seem familiar to you, but the actual phrase, an athlete-centered coaching, is not something I'm familiar with." Harold added, "Not in that term, no." Xavier had heard of it but was unsure of its meaning, stating, "I have heard of it, but no, I know I will not know the definition of that." Others were more familiar with the concept, even if they had different interpretations. Theo explained,

I feel like athlete-centered coaching is a philosophy that places the athlete in making decisions and all the activities as far as I know the athletes' individual needs and development. It's basically almost what I do. It's to improve the athletes and to improve the overall well-being. They have to think and take ownership of those decisions and also they have to be intentional about their development.

Stella recognized the idea but emphasized that it varies by context. She commented,

It's not a new term. I think it's also case by case because every athlete comes with a different set of athletic sense, confidence, sportsmanship. I think there's a combination of

athlete-centered delivery and coaching, but it's also, there's a trust factor there. You need to rely on that person to get you down that health safety.

Some coaches recalled limited exposure to the concept during certification. Andre stated,

It sounds familiar. I don't have to do much about it, but when I was trying to get my certificate, we were briefed about it. You are basically giving the athlete autonomy and focusing on every single bit of their wellbeing.

Jenna also shared general awareness, “ I am not completely familiar with it, but I know there's been stuff out there, but I haven't fully researched it, done anything about it.”

Subtheme 2: ACC It's Better for the Whole Person. For coaches who were familiar with the philosophy or intuitively aligned with it, athlete-centered coaching was seen as more than a strategy to improve sport performance. It was viewed as a holistic approach that supports athletes as people, not just as players. Coaches described it as a way to build character, confidence, and independence that athletes could carry with them beyond the game. Nia explained how the benefits of athlete-centered coaching go beyond the court, stating, “ [Athlete-centered coaching] is better for the sport, it's better for the team it's better for the outcome, but it's better for the whole person.” She emphasized that the approach must be flexible and responsive to individual needs. Nia stated,, “Athlete-centered coaching or need-supportive coaching is pretty much always the way. It's not one size fits all.” She added that applying it thoughtfully matters more than simply following a formula,

If you're acting there's only one way to do athlete-centered coaching or these are the ingredients that always, in the same amounts, that always result in athlete-centered coaching, I think you're not approaching it thoughtfully, and therefore you're not actually doing athlete-centered coaching.

Some coaches described how they incorporated elements of athlete-centered coaching without naming it. Kevin reflected on his coaching approach, explaining, “I kind of do some of that just naturally, not doing it on purpose. I want them to have fun.” He shared how he adjusts practice plans based on athlete input. He expanded,

Sometimes they'll ask me, ‘Can we work on rolling today?’ or ‘Can we work on penalty shots today?’ and maybe you run with a practice that wasn't what I think we're working on today, but I'm fine to be flexible and allow them to do that.

Kevin also felt that the structure of goalball naturally encourages athlete autonomy. He stated, “Goalball lends itself more than other sports. They can coach themselves essentially. They're basically the players running the show themselves.” He gave an example of how experienced players take control on the court. He commented,

The players on the court know what to do and how to do it. The women out there, they can probably coach themselves to a lot of extent, they don't need a coach to tell them they got four seconds left to roll the ball. They know it, they know what's going on.

Joseph described his coaching style as more structured but still aligned with the core of athlete centered coaching. He explained, “I probably would as far as drills and our time together as a team. I tend to be more controlling over that than athlete-centered coaching seems like it would be.” Still, he gave athletes freedom when it came to personal development. He added,

As far as their own personal development in their style of play, and developing their skills, and what they do for their training, and how they work together as a team. It sounds like I'm very much aligning with athlete-centered coaching, allowing them to make their own decisions about what they want to do and how they want to do it.

Some coaches stressed the need to balance autonomy with support, especially for younger players. Jenna described how youth athletes often seek direction while still wanting to feel in control, stating, “Youth are still learning and want your guidance and are reaching out to you and want you there.” She shared how offering structured choices can still support independence. Jenna commented,

They respect you more when you do give them that little bit of athlete-centered focus. As long as they think maybe they're in control, you're giving them choices; but you're giving them choices that you are okay with.

Subtheme 3: It's Harder Than Traditional Coaching. Adopting an athlete-centered approach often comes with challenges. Coaches who attempted to use this philosophy reflected on how much more demanding it can be compared to traditional coaching. Instead of simply telling athletes what to do, they had to listen more, stay flexible, and adapt to each athlete's individual needs. This required emotional investment, patience, and a willingness to step back and allow athletes space to grow, especially when working with youth who were still developing confidence and decision-making skills. Despite the effort involved, many coaches felt the results were worth it. Nia spoke directly about how difficult this kind of coaching can be. She shared, “It's harder than just traditional coaching can be. I'm not saying I get it right all the time, but it's what I aspire to all the time.” Theo shared one of his main struggles, especially when athletes are not comfortable expressing their needs. He explained, “Some of these players are not really vocal. Some of them don't really voice things they don't like. There's a lot of psychological things. Most of the challenges we have are most psychological.” Stella added that while some athletes can direct their own learning, others need structured support, saying, “If it couldn't be self-

directed for the athlete, you would support them to do that, but it may not be athlete-centered.”

For Nia, one major challenge was the lack of training many coaches receive. She commented,

It's tough for coaches who are maybe by themselves starting a program or have very limited training. We see it right and especially in youth competitions, we see a lot of teams that clearly coaches lack some understanding of the basics of the sport. I don't know how you can really do athlete-centered coaching with regard to competence, particularly if you don't have that background yourself. I think coach education can be a very big stumbling block.

She also acknowledged how mentally demanding the approach can be. She said, “If you really, really want to do athlete-centered coaching, It's a lot of mental homework.” Kevin also acknowledged how mentally demanding it can be. He asserted,

The challenge of it is, are they knowledgeable of the game? I've seen teams out there where you have three individuals that are not playing as a team. They're all out, they're all ball hogs. I wouldn't want them [using] an athlete-centered [approach] because I don't think they're gonna play good.

Kevin also highlighted how unpredictable coaching can be and how quickly plans have to change. He said,

There are gonna be days where they have good attitudes, days with bad attitudes, and you just got to roll with it. You might have the perfect practice planned, and within three minutes of it, you realize you have to toss out the whole plan, start a practice, and do a whole new practice based on what came in the door that day.

Joseph mentioned a different challenge, reflecting on times when parents questioned his approach. He said, “I have gotten some pushback from family members, like parents, who think

that something should be done in a certain way or think we should have done something differently.”

Subtheme 4: We're empowering people. Coaches described athlete centered coaching as a way to help athletes take ownership of their learning and development. It was not just about improving skills or performance but about building confidence and encouraging athletes to grow as people. This approach meant trusting athletes to make decisions, reflect on their progress, and move at their own pace. While some admitted that this method does not always lead to quick wins, they believed it supported long-term growth and self-awareness. Joseph reflected on what this looks like in practice and the trade-off between outcomes and empowerment. He said,

Our team finished 0-4. So, our performance wasn't basically as good as it was going to be. It could have been slightly better in a couple of circumstances if I had told them what to do, but they would not have had as much fun, they wouldn't have been as empowered. The trade-off is definitely worth it.

Zavier shared a similar experience at a youth competition where he encouraged athletes to make their own decisions. He noted, “At youth nationals, I felt I need to empower them to make the decision if you want to switch. I think you give them more confidence in taking the decision.

Zavier added to this statement, “And it ended up working. It was a good feeling to let them make a decision and work for them.” Some coaches saw this form of empowerment as extending beyond sports. Nia explained that goalball was not just about playing but about learning how to navigate life. She said, “I love the idea of empowerment as an important function of a coach. Because you'll hear people in sports a lot of the time talk about this is goalball, but it's also about life.” She continued,

Empowering people to make choices on the court means we're empowering people to make choices off the court, empowering people to see themselves as being really competent and being able to do much more than maybe they thought that they could.

Joseph shared that including athletes in decisions helped them feel a sense of ownership. He commented, "I don't necessarily just tell them, 'play whatever position you want,' but I do have a lot of conversations with them, asking them, 'Which position would you like to play? And which players would you want to play with?'" He explained how this process made a difference,

I know that when an athlete tells me what they want to do... I know how powerful that is for them, and I know it gives them a great sense of being included in the process and not just being like a soldier.

Jenna described a similar dynamic in her coaching. She commented,

Athletes can pick their own drills. They may know what they want to work on this week. Like, 'I really want to work on this, I've been struggling this week with my throw, with whatever, so can we do drills focusing on that?'

She explained that when athletes' needs are overlooked, it can create frustration. She noted, "If I'm picking a drill that doesn't even focus on that, then that's not going to help them. And they're just going to be frustrated at the practice." She added that coaches should respect that athletes know what they need. "I'm a coach, I'm not playing the sport. They know best what they need to work on." Andre highlighted how success can be a powerful source of empowerment for youth. He explained,

Nothing empowers a teenager more than the feeling of winning. Make sure that you believe in them as much as they do themselves, or even when they don't believe in themselves, you have to show them that you believe in them and they can win.

For Andre, empowerment was not only about the athletes. Coaching goalball gave him a sense of meaning and purpose. He stated, “Goalball is like an escape. It's an escape for me out of the real world. It gives me a sense of inspiration. It empowers me as much as I feel I'm empowering the kids.” He explained how this connection strengthened his ties to the community, “It gives me a sense of belonging to my society wherever I am.”

Summary of Findings - Coaches

The four themes highlight how goalball coaches support youth athletes' psychological needs and growth through a mix of intentional strategies and intuitive practices. Coaches fostered autonomy by creating decision-making opportunities tailored to athletes' readiness, while also guiding them through the unique challenges of learning a sport without visual input. They emphasized the importance of team connection and belonging, recognizing that social inclusion required ongoing effort. Although most were unfamiliar with the term “athlete-centered coaching,” many described values and approaches aligned with it, prioritizing holistic development, empowerment, and emotional support. Despite limited formal training, coaches often applied athlete-centered principles in ways that helped athletes grow both on and off the court.

Athletes

Three themes were constructed related to the experiences of the athletes. These themes are: (5) We Just Want to Scrimmage, (6) Managing the Pressure During Competition, (7) My Coach Knows How to Support Me. The themes from athletes are further supported by subthemes that reflect how athletes experience the sport of goalball, their interactions with one another and their coach, and the coaches' behaviors that satisfy or frustrate competence, autonomy and relatedness (see Figure 2)

Theme 5: “We Just Want to Scrimmage”

This theme explores how the structure of practice sessions shaped athletes’ motivation, focus, and overall enjoyment of the sport. Many athletes described scrimmaging as the most engaging and effective part of training, offering opportunities to improve through real-time play while building confidence, teamwork, and situational awareness. Game-based formats made practices feel more exciting and meaningful. In contrast, athletes reflected on the challenges of drill-heavy sessions, especially when practice felt repetitive, lacked variety, or didn’t involve the full team. These moments were often described as boring, less motivating, or disconnected from the actual experience of playing goalball. This theme is explored through two subthemes: (1) Learning Through Game-Based Practice and (2) The Other Face of Drill-Based Practices.

Subtheme 1: Learning Through Game-Based Practice. Athletes described scrimmaging as the part of practice they enjoyed and felt they learned from the most. They shared that playing in real-time situations helped them improve specific skills like throwing, blocking, and teamwork. Scrimmages allowed athletes to practice under pressure, adjust to teammates, and develop confidence in their abilities, all while keeping training enjoyable and competitive. Yeni expressed clearly that, “Often good practice is when we do little scrimmages because we just want to play.” Martin and Devin both expressed that they improved the most by playing. Martin explained,

The majority of our practices recently have just been scrimmaging, which I feel like is the best way for us to learn, because practicing throwing and practicing blocking can help, but just being in the game and scrimmaging with each other is what makes me better at being in that active play.

Devin added, “One thing I like about goalball is that the best way to learn it, and the best way to figure out your throws, is to play it.” Devin also described what a typical session looked like for his team, “We’ll practice some dives... but a lot of our sessions is just playing goalball, just throwing the goalball, trying to figure out what’s best for you as a player and who you work with the. That’s how our practices are.” Samantha and Diandre both described practices that followed a drill-to-scrimmage model. Samantha explained, “We start off with drills, we practice throwing and then we go on to a simulation of a competition. So, we do three-on-three play.” Diandre said,

[After warming up] we get into accuracy where we practice throwing at the cones... then we get into a scrimmage where we put a certain amount of players on each side and then you had three people in at once, you just start scrimmaging.

Christian also walked through their regular practice routine, highlighting how scrimmages helped him focus on improvement without the stress of competition,

[We start our practices] with a warmup. Practice our defense a little bit and then jog in place for a little bit. [After that] we get into a little practice game, and we do one on one for one minute. Then we go back to the game again. [During] practice I really don’t care about losing I just worried about my technique.

Similarly, Mohamed described how scrimmages added an element of game simulation and opportunities for athletes to develop autonomy and leadership. “After you’re done [with the drills], we do a scrimmage, where it’s basically like a mock goalball game. And the captain usually gets to pick the teams.” Diandre reflected on how he viewed scrimmages as equally important as actual matches, “I treat every game as I treat the practice because it’s nothing different. It’s just like in front of everyone.” Monica shared that scrimmaging varied depending on attendance, but it was always a valued part of her routine. Monica said, “We start off by doing like groundwork...

and then we can do like some two-on-two practice depending on how many people are there.”

Kharrison described, “First it's conditioning so a little running and stretching, [after this] blocking drills and throwing drills and then just a little scrimmaging, [at the end] we do accuracy drills.”

Martin and Kyle both described how scrimmages were integrated with technical instruction when needed. Martin noted, “Sometimes we will stop scrimmaging and work on a technique that the coach can see that multiple people are struggling with but most of the time we will scrimmage through most of practice.” Kyle described a simulation drill designed to mimic tournament pressure, “[We] practice the dives if we were in a real tournament blocking the ball, [the coach would] split [the groups] and one group practice the defense as the other group attempt to score and then switch off like that.”

Subtheme 2: The Other Face of Drill-Based Practices. While scrimmaging was widely seen as the most enjoyable and effective part of practice, athletes also shared their experiences with less engaging sessions, especially those centered on drills or routines that lacked variation. These athletes described how practices that felt repetitive, isolating, or overly quiet could lead to boredom and a drop in motivation. For some, the absence of key teammates or coaches also changed the dynamic, making sessions feel less serious or even disconnected from the energy of competition. Yeni was particularly vocal about how unstructured or repetitive training impacted her motivation. She explained, “We did more [training] camps and boring stuff.” She continued by clarifying what that meant for her, “Boring stuff meaning either really boring practices or times where we practiced a lot and it was pretty much the same things.” For Yeni, the feeling of disinterest often increased when the practice group was missing important people, “If a teammate is not there, it gets pretty boring because we’re so used to having everyone.” She also mentioned how the absence of a coach changed the experience, “It gets pretty boring when we don't have

like one of our coaches.” Even when drills were useful, some athletes shared how they could become tiresome or physically unpleasant, especially when repeated without variety. Yeni noted that some parts of training, like defending, were both boring and physically painful, as she described, “Defending can get pretty boring and hurt. If my friend who has a really fast shot hits me in the stomach, that hurts.” Martin and Monica also reflected on how drill-based sessions impacted their energy and focus. Martin described how the lack of intensity during drills could lead to athletes not fully engaging,

When you're doing drills, you can get a little lazy if you're not feeling it that day, but when you're in a game, you feel you have that pressure where it's I got to lock in and actually do my best here... you can lose some of that in drills.

Monica commented on the repetitive nature of some sessions, saying, “It was just a lot of practicing the same things over and over to get it just right. It's more laid back for sure.” In some cases, the problem wasn't just the content of practice, but how it failed to prepare athletes for real competition. Kyle reflected on the gap between practice and the emotional intensity of games, “The training sessions don't prepare you for the cameras and the spectators, so [during competitions] you have that added feeling of fear of embarrassing yourself in front of someone.” Christian described how practice initially felt isolating for him, especially when he hadn't yet connected with his teammates, “[When I started practicing] I didn't want to be there. I had no friends and did not know anybody. Pretty boring, because I had to sit on a bench.” For some newer athletes, being placed on the sidelines during scrimmages could make it difficult to engage or feel part of the team, particularly if they were still learning the rules or adapting to the pace of play. At times, the overall atmosphere of practice also made a difference in how invested athletes felt. Yeni described, “Often during our practices, it's more chill because we don't really have much of a real

competition, except for maybe another student or the actual coach just throwing back at us.”

Martin described the tone of some practices as more casual and less focused, especially when scrimmaging wasn't included, “[During practice] It's a little more relaxed. So, a lot of times, there's extra noise, and it's more casual. Scrimmaging is a lot more light-hearted.”

Theme 6: Managing the Pressure During Competition

Athletes described a range of emotional experiences tied to the competitive environment, from nerves and self-doubt to moments of focus and resilience. For many, managing pressure wasn't just about the outcome of the game, it was about staying mentally composed, especially after making mistakes or facing strong opponents. Some athletes spoke about putting pressure on themselves to meet personal or team expectations, while others found support from teammates and coaches that helped them stay grounded. This theme is explored through two subthemes: (1) “Coach, Don't Kill Me Please. I Didn't Mean to Do It” and (2) “Just Calm Down. We're Still in the Game.”

Subtheme 1: “Coach, Don't Kill Me Please. I Didn't Mean to Do It.” Athletes spoke in detail about the pressure they experienced during competition. Although most said their coaches did not directly pressure them, many described putting pressure on themselves to perform well. This pressure often showed up after making mistakes, during close games, or when they felt responsible for leading or supporting the team. Athletes described feeling nervous, frustrated, or discouraged, even when others weren't blaming them. The emotional weight of competition, especially in high-stakes moments, was something they often carried alone. Yeni shared one of these moments during a gold medal match, “When I got that high ball during the overtime in the gold medal match and I was like, ‘Coach, don't kill me please. I didn't mean to do it.’” However, she explained that this kind of pressure didn't come from the coach, “The pressure

doesn't usually come from the coach... it just comes from me." Similarly, Martin described the pressure as something internal, not something the coach placed on him, "I've never gotten pressured by [my coach]. The only pressure I've ever felt is either self-induced or occasionally from a teammate, but I feel like I've never felt real pressure from him that has affected my ability to play." In another moment, he explained how that pressure felt during a game, "When you're in a game, you feel you have that pressure where it's 'I got to lock in and actually do my best here.'" Even when athletes didn't express it outwardly, pressure could build mentally. Martin said,

I would get in my head a lot. I've gotten better at it, but I still have some teammates that sometimes struggle with difficult games, [they] get in and can get very stressed and that can sometimes affect how we play.

Yeni had a similar experience. She described how losing could make the pressure worse, "If we're losing, that would be also a time where I feel a bunch of pressure and feel I need to shoot better and communicate better. But often when I'm pressured, my communication just dies." She went on to describe how pressure could lead to negative thoughts, especially when trying to meet expectations,

So if the other team has five goals and we have two or maybe one, that can be pretty stressful and be like, 'oh, we're not going to win this...' you put yourself under pressure because I have to listen to the coach... and then if you don't hit that spot where your coach is telling you to hit, that can be like, 'oh, I'm not good enough' and all that bad things that your mind gives you.

Martin added that pressure often came from making mistakes, which could quickly lead to frustration and a loss of focus,

The root of most of the pressure, or at least that I've experienced, or that I've seen other people experience, it's usually making mistakes, which is where you just start to get frustrated, and you start to lose it a little bit. I've struggled with that a lot.

In a related way, Yeni shared that the pressure wasn't always about the situation or the outcome of the game, it often came from her own expectations to match the level of her teammates, "Even if my teammates are doing good, I feel like I need to do good too. Most of the pressure I just put on myself." Both athletes pointed to the internal nature of performance pressure, showing how it could build from the desire to meet personal or team standards, even in the absence of external demands. Devin also described in several moments what it felt like to be in a leadership position and still feel like he had to carry more than just his own role. He explained,

I was the best player on the team, so if I wasn't scoring or defending, that would throw off the whole team. There was a lot of pressure on me to cover for them or teach them.

That pressure wasn't from the coach, it was from me.

In high-pressured situations, he often felt the need to hold everything together, not just for himself, but for the group,

I felt a lot of pressure in those moments [during competition] to try to score, to try to keep the team morale up, to try to be that leader in that position. You're going against good teams, so it's not an easy thing for me.

When playing with less experienced teammates, this sense of pressure could build throughout the game,

If you have newer players on your team, you feel the pressure to cover for them or teach them. There was a lot of pressure on me if I did something wrong. It's definitely tense and it's physically and emotionally draining sometimes for me after the game.

Again, he made it clear that this pressure wasn't coming from his coach, it came from within, "[The pressure] is not really coming from my coach. It just comes from that competitiveness in me." While Devin reflected on the pressure that came from leading others, Monica described how pressure could build after a single mistake, especially when she felt personally responsible for the outcome, "If I make a mistake, it's my fault, I cost the team something. I have to fix it. It's always that repetitive thought of 'it's my fault.'" Other athletes also talked about how a string of mistakes could lead to discouragement. Diandre recalled a moment during a game when nothing seemed to go right, and it started affecting both his confidence and his teammates,

I was throwing a couple penalties, I was missing a couple blocks and getting scored on. I was basically beating myself up with the body in my head thinking I'm not good enough, I'm not doing my best and my teammates were getting a little frustrated.

Even for those who had support, the mental side of the game required real focus and effort. Kyle explained how bouncing back after mistakes depended on staying aware and grounded, "[Sometimes] you're nervous, especially after you mess up, but having that mental awareness [helps] to get back on track so you can stay focused. It obviously needs a lot of positive and strong mindset to keep focused."

Mohamed explained that competition came with more pressure than practice, especially because others were watching, "In competitions, it's a lot more pressure on you because there's people cheering for you and you want to win." Diandre also talked about how competition changed the emotional tone, "I know the practice is important but it's not as much pressure [as the competition]. But I treat every game as I treat the practice because it's nothing different. It's just like in front of everyone." He added, "We win constantly... We had pressure to be good. It

wasn't coming from our coach; it was just coming from our nerves.” Mohamed shared how comparing himself to older athletes sometimes made him question if he belonged,

I know there are a lot of good juniors and seniors that are really good at the sport... I still have a lot of time to do better. But sometimes I feel [discouraged]. I feel like I'm not performing as good as they are... Sometimes I think, is this a sport for me?

Kharson described how one mistake in a big match led to more,

The only time I really felt discouraged... was in a gold medal match and getting scored on. It just made me feel I wasn't doing anything right and I was doing everything wrong. I started making minor mistakes after I got scored on. I was nervous. I didn't want it to happen again.

Subtheme 2: “Just Calm Down. We’re Still in the Game” Alongside the personal pressure athletes placed on themselves, many shared how their teammates played an important role in helping them manage the emotional highs and lows of competition. Whether dealing with nerves, frustration, or discouragement, athletes found that small moments of connection, encouraging words, shared routines, or light-hearted reminders, often made a difference. This support helped them reset, regain focus, and feel grounded in the team environment. Christian described how his teammates offered reassurance during difficult moments, “If I’m in the wrong head-space, [my teammates] are like, ‘It’s okay, man, just calm down. We’re still in the game.’” Dianne shared a moment early in a tournament when he felt overwhelmed, and his teammates noticed,

The first game I was really nervous, further into the tournament [we] had to play one of the toughest teams, and I was really in my head at the beginning, I was really quiet, and my teammates were trying to help me get out of my head. I didn't play my best.

Others described learning to provide that same support to their teammates. Martin reflected on how he tried to be present without overstepping,

I always try and encourage [my teammates] to figure it out the same way that I have but sometimes you just have to let them because everyone deals with that kind of [stress] differently, so you just have to let them figure it out for themselves.

Kharson recalled a medal match where the pressure of being scored on started affecting his performance. He said,

[During] a medal match I got scored on and I was nervous because I didn't want to have it again. So, for a little period of time, I started making minor mistakes, but I started adjusting because my teammates really supported me.

Athletes also talked about the comfort of open team communication. Diandre explained how talking through problems helped create a sense of belonging,

We all talk to each other, if we notice a problem or if we all notice anything we're doing wrong with our teammates. We give them feedback, we're able to communicate... just giving each other reassurance that you're a part of the team.

Monica echoed this idea. While she described feeling isolated in the beginning, conversations with teammates helped her feel more connected,

[My teammates] were very encouraging. They were like, 'you got this. Just try your best. We're not going to hold that against you or anything.' But when I started talking to the teammates that I had and the coaches more, that sense of isolation went away. It was mainly just in the very beginning.

Yeni added that emotional support could come during short breaks or halftime chats, helping the team settle down, "If we're all feeling pretty stressful, we can either tell our teammates about it

during the breaks, [during] the halftime, or we could just calm ourselves down because we know we'll be fine.” Christian described how players were expected to focus and separate what happens off the court from their performance during games, “In the game, you got to realize the stuff that happened that was off the court. Now, we're on the court. Y'all can handle that somewhere else.” For some, being able to support teammates was just as important as receiving support. Devin expressed how much this team connection meant to him, “I like helping my teammates out. We're together. That's one thing I really love about goalball.” Martin said that over time, he learned how to handle pressure by keeping things lighter and relying on his teammates for support, “Sometimes you can get in your own head a little bit... I've managed it by relying on my teammates and having a more light-hearted attitude during play which has helped me relieve some of that stress.” Diandre described the team's pre-game rituals as another way to create calm and confidence,

Me and my teammates, we all are in our weight room or in our locker room before a match, we listen to music, we talk about how we're feeling... you can stretch, you can meditate, listen to music, whatever helps you, you find out whatever fits you.

These routines were built over time. According to Diandre, the team's connection had grown stronger with experience, “We already build up so much of a connection while playing while we were younger, we up to that level now, we play, we all know our best, we all know each other's head and our own head.” Devin explained that mindset wasn't just personal, it affected everyone on the team. When one player was struggling emotionally, it could ripple through the group,

If I didn't have confidence when I'm playing goalball, then I'm pretty much not good for nothing. Especially because your confidence as a player can affect your team. It's a team

sport. So, if you're negative, if you have a low confidence, and then you're more than likely [to fail], especially if you're in a leader position.

Christian described how, even in defeat, teams came together,

We all, me and our team and [the] other team, we started celebrating together, even though we lost. Because usually if we lost, people are like, 'oh, good game.' But everybody started celebrating, screaming, and hugging.

Mohamed appreciated learning from older teammates and saw that support as part of his personal growth in the sport, "I like getting that mentorship from the other players on the court to become a better player each year. I got to slowly see myself getting better and better at goalball each year. So, I'm proud of that." As some athletes received guidance, others stepped into the role of providing it. Samantha shared how she took an active role in helping her teammates stay focused and engaged during games, "I tell my teammates to stay focused. I tell them where to throw it." This kind of teammate-to-teammate support, whether through quiet encouragement, tactical direction, or mentorship, was often seen as more than just a part of gameplay. Martin reflected on this by pointing out that teammates, unlike coaches, are the ones who go through each moment together, "The coach is great, but [my teammates] are the other people that I play with on my team, they experience the same things with me. So, it's easier for them to understand and be more empathetic."

Theme 7: "My Coach Knows How to Support Me"

This theme captures how athletes experienced their coaches not only as instructors, but as meaningful sources of emotional, motivational, and developmental support. Across practices and competitions, athletes described coaches who helped them regulate emotions, encouraged autonomy, reinforced confidence, offered constructive feedback, affirmed belonging, and sometimes

stepped into mentorship roles that extended beyond the court. This theme is explored through six subthemes: (1) My Coach Helps Me Stay Calm, (2) My Coach Lets Me Decide, (3) My Coach Believes in Me, (4) My Coach Gives Me Feedback, (5) My Coach Says I Belong, (6) My Coach Is More Than a Coach.

Subtheme 1: My Coach Helps Me Stay Calm. Many athletes described how their coaches played a steady and calming role during moments of stress, frustration, or uncertainty. This support often came in the form of quiet reassurance, space to regroup, or encouragement that helped athletes reset emotionally and stay focused on the game. Whether during high-pressure matches or difficult practices, athletes valued having coaches who helped them manage their nerves without adding more pressure. Yeni shared that her coach would often give simple reminders to breathe and keep things in perspective, "[The coach] tells us, 'Just breathe. Think of this as practice.' She helps us not spiral or get all overwhelmed." Kyle explained that on hard days, just having a coach who listened made a difference. When he opened up about frustration or personal challenges, his coach responded with care and curiosity rather than judgment, "Upon frustration or having a bad day, I'll just say it to [my coach] ... he'll first ask, 'what exactly is it that's making you have that bad day or what can I do to help you?'" For Diandre, moments when the team wasn't playing well were especially hard. He recalled a time when frustration was building, and their coach stepped in to settle the group and shift the tone,

[Me and my teammates] were just getting frustrated because we know we all could have played better. We all made silly mistakes, and we weren't clicking as a team... so our coach calmed us all down, had a talk with us individually, together, and just told us that we can go through it, that we can fix it.

Yeni described how her coach noticed when a player was too overwhelmed and offered them a break, "She switches us out if one of us is too stressed, just gives us a break." Sometimes the reminders were simple but grounding. As Samantha recalled, "They [coaches] told us to stay calm." Devin appreciated that his coach never made him feel judged or pressured. He explained, "There's not usually anything that [my coach] would tell me that would make me uncomfortable." He also noted that sometimes athletes go through streaks where their performance dips, and during those times, calm support was more helpful than anything else,

I've been told [by my coach] to slow down, be calm and be relaxed. Sometimes as an athlete you have those moments where you can be super good at one moment and then you'll have a game or two where you're completely off and there's nothing going your way.

Kharson also recognized the value of feeling supported, especially when the team was struggling. He shared, "[My coach] knew we were tired, and he was just there to support us. When we weren't doing so well, he would tell us, 'It's good.'" For Mohamed, that support also came in the form of honest, motivating feedback at halftime that helped shift his mindset going into the second half,

If we're struggling he tells us to like keep moving and he just tells us we can perform better based on what he saw in the first half... he'll tell us what we need to do better and we usually do better in the second half.

Monica emphasized how the emotional tone her coaches set during timeouts helped her develop a healthier mindset, not just about performance, but about the purpose of sport,

During the timeouts... [my coaches] would say like, this is what you guys have been doing great, keep doing that... in a very supportive way, not like, you're doing this wrong...

[it was] more 'we got this, you're good, you're fine'... if we can't win, just have fun...' it makes the team feel more supported... it helped me develop that mentality of this is fun and I don't have to be perfect... having that relationship with them made a huge difference to me.

Subtheme 2: My Coach Lets Me Decide. Athletes described a sense of autonomy and trust in the way their coaches involved them in decision-making. This freedom was most often felt during practices, but it also carried into parts of competition. Whether it was choosing positions or leading warm-ups, athletes expressed appreciation for being treated as capable and thoughtful contributors to the team. Devin explained that practices often felt open and player-driven, allowing room for athletes to adjust their roles and respond to how things were going on the court, "It's pretty free flowing. We can do what we want on the court. We can switch positions and make those types of decisions." This flexibility extended to adjusting training sessions based on the athletes' needs. Kharson recalled times when the team proposed alternatives to scrimmaging and the coach was open to their input,

If we don't want to scrimmage [during practice], we would converse and come up with what we want to do. [For example] accuracy drills, we would tell the coach that we think it would be more beneficial to do accuracy drills instead of scrimmaging for this practice.

He just says okay, or we'll do that first and then we'll sprint or something of some sorts.

Monica gave an example of how her coach supported her decision to switch sides after she communicated her preference,

We talked about it with the coach... and she's like, 'yeah, that's fine. If you feel more comfortable there, go ahead, switch.' They definitely let us make those choices. They have input, but they allow us to notice things.

Others shared that coaches sometimes asked athletes directly what they wanted to focus on that day. Diandre said, “Sometimes the coach asks us, what do you feel you need to work on today? What do you feel you need to improve?” Monica added that this sense of control also applied to warm-ups, which athletes often led themselves,

A lot of us, as team members, lead the warm-ups. We can pick the warm-ups we do... we have a lot of say in how we warm up and how we throw. My coach isn't really leading us at all.

In some situations, players were also allowed to make in-game decisions, unless coaches needed to step in. Yeni explained, “We have mostly free decision-making during the game unless the coach says otherwise.” Devin described how this approach extended to his personal goals and needs as well, “I would say I make decisions for myself, and if I want something, my coach helps me get it.” For athletes in leadership positions, like team captains, decision-making often included strategic input. Kharson shared,

Because I'm a captain I get some say-so. I talk to our coaches about what I think will be beneficial to the team and what we should do, so I get input and then the coach gets the final say-so of what we usually do.

Mohamed added that while younger players had less influence, coaches still welcomed their input if it made sense,

I wouldn't say I have a lot, but I have some say-so. Obviously, the juniors and seniors have the most say-so, because they're the most experienced, they're older and they know more than I do. But the coach lets me say my opinion too. And if what I'm saying makes sense to him, he goes with it.

In mock games and scrimmages, captains were sometimes given the responsibility to organize teams. Mohamed recalled, “We do a scrimmage, where it's basically like a mock goalball game, and the captain usually gets to pick the teams.” Kyle summarized his experience by noting that his coach always gave options rather than making demands, “He pretty much gives you the option, he doesn't force you or make you choose or decide.” As a captain, Samantha spoke about how her communication with the coach helped build confidence among her teammates, “I talk to my coach, and I relay it back to my teammates. I think [my teammates] feel good about it and they feel confident that I'm the team captain of the team.”

Subtheme 3: My Coach Believes in Me. Athletes frequently talked about how their coaches encouraged them, gave them confidence, and showed belief in their potential. This sense of belief wasn't just about praise, it came through in the way coaches challenged athletes, gave them opportunities, and reminded them of what they were capable of. For many, these affirmations became powerful motivators, helping them work harder and set bigger goals.

Kharson explained that his coach's belief was shown through the roles he was given during games, “He believes in me because he's giving me shots I can hit and I know I can hit.” For Samantha, simply having coaches who supported her growth as an athlete had a lasting impact, “I think just having coaches influenced me to be a better athlete and better player overall.” Coaches also made an effort to check in with athletes, offering both feedback and emotional support. Diandre shared, “He gives us feedback and also asks how we're feeling.” That kind of encouragement was especially valuable in high-pressure moments. Yeni recalled, “During a competition, [my coach] encourages us that we can do this... she'll tell us what to do and that we can win this because she's very encouraging.” Martin emphasized that his coach not only wanted him to succeed, but was willing to walk the journey with him,

I can 100% tell that [my coach] wants me to progress as far as I want to and he's going to be there every step of the way to help me as far as he can to achieve anything I want to. Similarly, Yeni described a coach who pushed her and her teammates in a way that felt both challenging and supportive, “She pushes us, not too hard, but she pushes us to do our best... she is very good at coaching us.” Some athletes shared that their coaches helped them see possibilities they hadn’t seen for themselves. Monica reflected on something her coach often told her, “My coach told me multiple times, ‘Wherever you want to go, we’ll get you there.’” Devin described receiving consistent positivity from coaches, which shaped how he viewed his potential, “Whoever’s coaching, they’ve given me a lot of positivity, and that’s what has been encouraging to me. [My coaches] tell me I could be one of the best, go to the Paralympics, that I’ve got a lot of potential.” Mohamed mentioned how small encouragements from his coach helped him stay focused on growth, “He motivates us to keep playing better than the last play.” For some athletes, like Mohhamed, feeling believed in helped them recognize their own progress, “I felt really supported by the coaching staff... I started to find myself getting better at the sport.” Kharson explained that this kind of coaching made a difference in how he saw himself, “He gave me a sense that I could do it and made me feel good.” Still, not every athlete immediately felt completely confident. Samantha noted that even when she received praise, she didn’t always believe it right away, “They said I was doing great, but I didn’t really feel like I was doing good.” Part of what made these coaches effective, according to Kyle, was their openness and willingness to meet athletes where they were, “[My coach] is completely open to communication. He always encourages questions or gives us opportunities to excel and achieve our best.”

Subtheme 4: My Coach Gives Me Feedback. In addition to encouragement, athletes valued coaches who gave clear, honest feedback, especially when it helped them improve

specific skills or reflect on their performance. Many athletes emphasized that feedback didn't need to be intense or harsh to be effective. Instead, what mattered most was that coaches offered guidance in a calm, respectful, and straightforward way. Kyle explained that when he was struggling with something specific, his coach was quick to notice and offer one-on-one support, "If [struggling] with something like a throw, [my coach] says what he noticed and then does a little one-on-one to better improve that throw." Diandre described how his coach gave corrections in a way that helped him grow without feeling discouraged, "He doesn't yell. He tells us what we did wrong and shows us how to fix it." He added that his coach sometimes gave athletes the opportunity to reflect first, "If we know, he asks us, 'do you know what you did wrong,' sometimes he does constructive criticism, he doesn't angrily show that we messed up."

Kyle also shared that in games, when coaches were allowed to speak, the feedback was always clear and helpful, "There's only certain times when coaches are allowed to have their input during the game... when he's able to communicate it's completely spot on, you can tell he's giving his honest feedback." He appreciated even the quick reminders during play, saying, "[My coach] will shout out whenever he can... to throw that ball or switch positions. Having those shots of feedback is encouraging for me because we're also getting a little guidance being new players." Diandre also experienced this, emphasizing that his coach was consistent in giving advice that helped the team stay on track, "He gives us feedback, he guides us in the right direction [when] having issues." Others, like Yeni, explained that their coach was responsive when feedback was needed, but not overbearing, "Often she'll give us feedback if we need it... But usually if we seek feedback, we'll get our feedback in a simple answer or just like a suggestion." She also noted how feedback could come through individualized attention during practice, "During practice... she might work one-on-one with one of us and help us." Kharson appreciated how

specific and effective the feedback was, “[Coach’s feedback] It’s usually very quick, precise and sort on point which helps in any type of situations.” Monica reflected on how the tone of feedback during practice helped reduce pressure and encourage learning,

In practice, I think the mentality is different. You don’t feel the same pressure to perform perfectly, it’s less stressful because you’re allowed to make mistakes, improve, and focus on getting better. You can ask for feedback and get specific attention on what you can work on and how to fix it.

For Christian, honesty was an important part of receiving feedback. He recalled a moment from a recent session,

[My coach] is very blunt, he’s very honest. So, if I’m not doing something right, he’s going to tell me. Last practice, I [asked], ‘is there anything I did wrong?’ and he [responded], ‘Yes, your defense was not that good. We can get it better, you just have to extend more.’

Devin highlighted that what he appreciated most from his coaches was useful feedback delivered in a way that was supportive, not critical, “I feel very fortunate to have the coaches I have and I’m very glad about the positive feedback I’ve been getting from them... Things that I value from my coaches is information and encouragement.” Across these reflections, athletes described feedback not just as correction, but as a key part of feeling seen, guided, and trusted. Coaches who offered feedback in a constructive and respectful manner created spaces where athletes could learn, adjust, and continue improving.

Subtheme 5: “My Coach Says I Belong” Several athletes reflected on the powerful impact of feeling like they belonged on the team, an experience often shaped by their coaches’ words and actions. For many, that sense of belonging wasn’t just about being allowed to play,

but about being valued, accepted, and seen as a meaningful part of the group. Diandre shared one moment that stood out to him clearly, “Coach told me I’m the player that belongs, that gave me reassurance.” Samantha described how inclusion went beyond the game itself, extending into team conversations and decisions, “I do feel included in the conversation [about competition strategies]. It feels good.”

Being part of those discussions helped her feel respected and recognized. Christian saw team acceptance as the foundation for connection and unity, “I feel like everybody has to be accepted on the team to make the team work. So, once you accept everybody on the team, then y'all eventually gonna come together and y'all are going to connect.” For Devin, the feeling of acceptance was something he consistently experienced, no matter who he was playing with, “Whether I'm playing with [my coach] or whoever, I've felt that acceptance a lot, whether it be from a teammate or from a coach... I've always felt included no matter who I'm playing, no matter who I play with.” Monica emphasized that communication played a big role in shaping this sense of inclusion. Through open dialogue and teamwork, she developed stronger relationships and a stronger sense of self within the sport, “Feeling accepted on the team is purely communication based and that's why goalball itself has made me focus on personal relationships more and help develop it.” Diandre added that team communication wasn’t just about logistics, it was also about emotional connection,

“I feel I am accepted [on the team]. We all have great communication. We all talk to each other if we notice a problem or if we all notice anything we're doing wrong with our teammates, just giving each other reassurance that you're a part of the team.”

Kyle described this feeling in a more personal way, tying it to the sense of having found the right people to grow with, “Feeling a part of the team is something that feels good, you feel you found the circle of people you want to have in your corner or even probably in your life.”

Subtheme 6: My Coach Is More Than a Coach. For many athletes, their coach was more than someone who designed drills or called timeouts. Several participants described their coach as a mentor, supporter, and consistent presence who cared about their well-being both on and off the court. Martin credited his coach not only for introducing him to the sport but for continuing to invest in him personally and athletically, “He’s the only reason I’ve ever played goalball, and I owe him so much. He made every effort to bring goalball to me.” He later shared another moment that showed this dedication, “My coach has done that four-hour drive just to get to me and two other players to do almost a one-on-one practice day with us and he’s been my constant motivation to keep working and keep trying harder. Monica recalled her coach telling her something that stuck with her, “My coach told me multiple times, ‘Wherever you want to go, we’ll get you there.’” That message reflected a level of commitment that went beyond performance or winning games, it was about helping her reach her full potential. Other athletes described how coaches supported them in personal matters and helped them navigate tough moments. Diandre said,

We can talk to our coach about other stuff, not just goalball. We can talk to him about what’s going on in our personal life. He could help and guide us through it, and give us advice on problems, because we have that relationship with our coaches and our teammates.

He added, “Our coach, he’s great. He communicates with us; he asks about our feelings. Sometimes we have morning practice, he makes sure we have breakfast for that.” Similarly, Kyle

noted, “My coach, he’s able to meet us on our level, understand what we need.” For Kharson, small gestures showed his coach’s care,

He brings us food, protein bars and Gatorade if we’re tired during training. He takes the time out to have chats with us about, not just goalball, [but] life in general. If I ever needed something, he would provide it for me.

This type of support extended to helping athletes think through their individual goals and challenges. Devin shared, “[My coach] is trying to help me figure out what's best for me.” Mohamed also felt that his coach cared deeply about what was best for the athletes, “He really cares about what we want to. He really cares about what is better for us.” Yeni added, “[The coach] she pushes us, not too hard, but she pushes us to do our best and she is pretty fun to work with too. She's pretty nice and she is very good at coaching us.” Even after tough games, athletes felt supported. Christian put it simply, “Even if we lose, [My coach] he'll still be very supportive of us.” Devin described what it was like to train with a Paralympian athlete-coach, someone who motivated him through example,

Playing with [my coach] is different, it inspires me to be better, I hear some throws he's doing as I'm on the court with him and that inspires me to be better at what I do. He's a Paralympian so that kind of just pushes me as well. I want to be one of the best in the sport, I want to be you know as good as him, maybe better.

Summary of Findings - Athletes

The three themes illustrate how youth goalball athletes experience personal growth, connection, and motivation through a sport environment that meets their psychological needs. Athletes described goalball as a space designed for them, where they could belong, build friendships, and participate on equal footing. Practice design played a central role in shaping their

engagement, with scrimmaging seen as both enjoyable and effective, while drill-heavy sessions often felt boring or disconnected. During competition, many athletes internalized pressure to perform, especially in leadership roles, but relied on teammates for emotional support and reassurance. Across all themes, coaching behaviors emerged as a critical influence, athletes valued when coaches helped them stay calm, invited them into decision-making, provided encouragement, and gave constructive feedback. For some, the coach-athlete relationship extended beyond sport, offering mentorship and care that supported well-being and confidence. Together, these findings show how athlete-centered environments, whether structured or intuitive, can foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness in meaningful ways.

DISCUSSION

Researchers have long emphasized the role of coaching in athlete development and motivation, particularly when working with youth (Côté, J., & Gilbert, W., 2009; Marinho et al., 2024). In disability sport contexts, however, little is known about how coaches satisfy or frustrate the psychological needs of youth athletes with VI, or how these athletes experience and describe their coaches' behaviors. ACC has emerged as a framework for promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sport (Varghese et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025) yet its application in disability sports like goalball remains underexplored. To address these gaps, this study examined how goalball coaches use ACC strategies to support the psychological needs for athlete's autonomy, competence and relatedness, and how athletes perceive their coaches to support or constrain their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness during practice and competition. The discussion that follows uses the research questions as a structure to organize the data

and connect the findings to existing literature. As athletes and coaches were from different teams, insights from both coaches and athletes will be addressed separately.

Coaching Strategies to Support Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

Our findings confirm that ACC is strongly tied to SDT particularly in its emphasis on supporting athletes' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. The following section addresses the first research question inquiring what coaching strategies are used by goalball coaches to support or constrain youth athlete's autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy

Goalball coaches supported autonomy primarily through two key strategies: offering choices and creating leadership opportunities. These approaches align with autonomy-supportive coaching practices outlined in the literature, which emphasize the importance of involving athletes in their own learning to foster motivation (Cheon et al., 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ryan et al., 2009). With regards to choices, it wasn't just about letting athletes choose, it was about listening and showing that their opinions mattered. Even small decisions, like asking which position they wanted to play, who they wanted to practice with, or if and when to switch positions helped athletes feel included and respected. Research has shown that offering choices can help athletes feel more motivated, take more responsibility for their learning, and build trusting relationships with their coaches (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Ball et al., 2021; Jowett, 2008). Coaches who created space for athletes to make choices over aspects of training and competition were, whether intentionally or not, promoting autonomy-supportive environments. For youth with disabilities, having the opportunity to make choices is especially powerful, as it challenges common stereotypes of dependence or limitation (Goodley, 2017; DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Some coaches explained that letting athletes make decisions in

sport helped them build the skills and confidence to handle challenges outside of sport as well. Some coaches also used choices in the form of rewards and incentives as an extrinsic motivator to encourage participation. This latter approach, however, will be discussed in more detail as a strategy to develop competence more than autonomy. Despite valuing athlete autonomy, coaches often limited meaningful choices during competition. The use of choices to support autonomy was conditional, typically based on the coach's perception of an athlete's readiness, ability to meet certain standards, or level of maturity. While athletes were offered more choices during practice, competitive environments tended to shift toward a more controlled, and coach-led approach. This reflects a form of selective autonomy, where decision-making opportunities are granted only when the athlete was perceived as "ready," rather than as a tool to help develop that very readiness. This conditional framing, while perhaps rooted in good intentions, diverges from autonomy-supportive best practices. The literature clearly argues that autonomy is a basic psychological need, not a reward to be earned through competence or behavior (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). When coaches labeled athletes with visual impairments as either "capable" or "not capable," they implicitly position themselves as the sole arbiters of whose voices and choices matter (Haeghele et al., 2022). This reinforces ableist assumptions that competence must align with normative (often able-bodied) standards (Sharma & Prabhu, 2025; Wickman, 2007). Even well-intentioned coaches may fall into the trap of "protecting" athletes by withholding opportunities for autonomy, failing to recognize that choices are not reserved for those already perceived as competent, but essential experiences through which competence is cultivated (Ball et al., 2021; Hutzler et al., 2002). When athletes are excluded from decisions that affect their training and development, their autonomy is compromised. Over time, this could turn into autonomy need frustration,

which has been linked to reduced motivation, disengagement, and diminished well-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Giving athletes leadership roles was another strategy coaches used to support autonomy, such as letting them pick teams, lead warmups, select the types of throws to use in games or serve as team captains. While these decisions may seem small, they offered athletes with visual impairments the chance to take ownership of their environment and develop decision-making skills. In disability contexts, where leadership and self-direction are frequently constrained, providing a space for athlete leadership is especially important for promoting motivation and inclusion (Banack et al., 2011; Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). Coaches reported to prompt athletes to take initiative, especially when helping new players. Coaches described this as “foundational leadership,” where autonomy is supported by giving athletes responsibility in low-pressure and peer-centered situations. However, the structure and purpose of these leadership moments varied widely. In some cases, they lacked intentionality, offered without clear expectations or feedback, which risked turning them into what Mageau and Vallerand (2003) describe as “permissive” autonomy. Athletes may have felt recognized in the moment, but without guidance or reflection, these opportunities may have fallen short of being transformative. Over time, this lack of direction can contribute to confusion, underperformance, or disengagement (Brinton et al., 2017; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). This concern is amplified in disability sport, where ableist assumptions can shape how coaches view leadership potential. When coaches assume they know what athletes with visual impairments need, without inviting their input or allowing them to lead, they risk reinforcing dependency and silencing athletes' voices (Elipe-Lorenzo et al., 2025; Hammond et al., 2019; Rivel, 2015). Excluding athletes from meaningful leadership, especially during high-pressure situations, may unintentionally suggest their contributions are not relevant or

valuable. In disability contexts, where people with visual impairments already face social and structural barriers, being excluded from decisions, especially under the assumption that they are not capable, can deepen disengagement and erode their sense of agency over time (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; Ruin et al., 2023; Shapiro & Martin, 2014).

During competitions, coaches often used strategies that constrained athlete autonomy, especially in high-pressure situations. For example, athletes were typically not given the freedom to comment on or suggest substitutions or request time-outs, even though the official rules of goalball allow players to do so. These decisions were reserved for coaches, with little to no input from the athletes. Excluding athletes from in-game decisions, especially when the stakes are high, may unintentionally send the message that their voices are not trusted or valued. This reinforces a coach-centered hierarchy and sidelines athletes at moments when their involvement could be most meaningful. While it is common in many able-bodied sports for coaches to take full control during competition, especially under pressure, this approach stands in contrast to research that highlights the value of shared decision-making and guided autonomy, even in high-pressure environments. For youth with visual impairments, who already face barriers to independence, being excluded from meaningful decisions can limit their sense of agency and self-belief. In contrast, authentic leadership opportunities, when purposefully supported, are shown to strengthen autonomy and promote motivation in disability sport (Banack et al., 2011; Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). Coaches may believe they are protecting athletes by taking full control, but without space for athletes to lead, question, or contribute, key opportunities for learning and empowerment are lost.

Competence

Goalball coaches in this study employed a range of strategies to support their athletes' competence. These strategies included tactile and kinesthetic instruction, verbal reassurance, use of intrinsic and descriptive extrinsic feedback, and positive reinforcement. Such approaches were seen as especially important given athletes' limited access to visual feedback. For youth with visual impairments, competence was often nurtured by helping them "*feel*" what they were doing right or wrong, and by providing auditory cues that gave concrete, real-time information about performance. Coaches described using a tactile modeling and kinesthetic approach, encouraging athletes to build body awareness and understand their movements through guided practice and physical correction. These practices align with prior research highlighting the effectiveness of tactile feedback in disability sport (O'Connell et al., 2006).

Coaches explained signs of frustration when athletes disengaged from play or reacted physically to mistakes, such as pounding the court. Emotional regulation around failure and effort may be more complex in disability sport due to historical exclusion and ongoing structural barriers (Townsend et al., 2015) [Goodley, 2017](#)). Existing literature shows that competence frustration is a major predictor of demotivation and dropout in sport, especially when repeated failure is not met with supportive coaching (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Ntoumanis et al., 2021). In response to demonstrations of competence frustration, some coaches used verbal reassurance to validate athletes' emotions while encouraging continued effort. Clear verbal reassurance supports perceived competence by reaffirming the athlete's potential and effort, especially in high intensity moments (Romdhani et al., 2024). It helps reduce confusion, anxiety, or tension that can arise after setbacks, feelings that are intensified in a sport where feedback is often delayed due to communication constraints (Gomes-da-Silva et al., 2015; Romdhani et al., 2024). Verbal

reassurance, such as reframing mistakes or allowing goals as part of the game, served to normalize struggle and communicate that failure is part of the learning process, not a reflection of incompetence (Meân & Kassing, 2008). Some coaches attempted to normalize mistakes reframing frustration as a natural and expected part of the learning process by comparing them to struggles in able-bodied sport, saying, for example, “*even able-bodied athletes have tough days.*” While well-intentioned, such comparisons may unintentionally minimize the deeper challenges faced by athletes with visual impairments. More effective forms of verbal reassurance were those that centered on the athlete’s own experiences and prior successes. For example, when coaches reminded athletes of past achievements, it helped reinforce their belief in their abilities and fostered a sense of progress over time. This type of reassurance reflects autonomy-supportive coaching practices, which promote emotional validation, resilience, and growth-oriented mindsets (Reeve, 2009). In goalball, the influence of coaching quality on athletes’ perceived competence is particularly pronounced. Due to the absence of visual references, athletes frequently assess their performance based on internal sensations or prior experiences. While these cues can be meaningful, they are not always reliable. In the absence of clear and descriptive feedback, athletes may find it difficult to accurately interpret their performance; what went wrong, what went well, and what to focus on next. Without this level of clarity, encouragement alone may be insufficient, and athletes may struggle to translate emotional support into actionable improvement.

Feedback strategies that work in able-bodied contexts may be ineffective or even counterproductive in goalball unless adapted for sensory access. For example, in able-bodied sports, athletes often use visual modeling, video analysis, and peer comparison as feedback to assess performance. In goalball, however, these sources of feedback may be less accessible, not tailored to the athlete's needs in real time, or may not serve as the primary means through which athletes

evaluate their performance. Positive reinforcement through incentive-based reinforcement was one strategy used, however, not widely across all coaches, to make practice more rewarding. To re-engage athletes, the coach creatively introduced small rewards, such as candy for hitting specific targets during throwing drills. While the reward itself was minor, its role in reframing the task was significant. It transformed a repetitive challenge into a playful opportunity, helping athletes stay focused and feel accomplished when they met the objective. This form of extrinsic reinforcement, when clearly tied to a performance goal, can help sustain motivation and reinforce the athlete's perception that progress is both possible and recognized. In the absence of visual comparison or poor performance, the use of extrinsic rewards serve as external cues that signal success to athletes, reinforcing effort and guiding improvement. When implemented with intention and linked to specific behaviors or skill progressions, they play a crucial role in building self-belief and task persistence, especially in youth athletes who rely more heavily on coach-delivered feedback to evaluate their performance.

Relatedness

Coaches described using deliberate strategies to promote relatedness, such as assigning athletes to introduce new teammates during drills, facilitating group debriefs, encouraging peer bonding or camaraderie, and engaging in one-on-one conversations. These efforts align with previous findings that underscore the role of coach-initiated social structures in creating a positive team atmosphere (Eys et al., 2013), and they reflect a deliberate attempt to build inclusive environments where all athletes feel recognized and connected. Collectively, these strategies align with a broader relational coaching approach aimed at enhancing motivation through social inclusion.

One key strategy involved having current team members introduce or welcome new athletes during drills or team activities. This approach served multiple functions: it reduced the social pressure on new athletes, encouraged peer leadership, and indicated that inclusion was a shared team responsibility, not solely the coach's responsibility. In the context of disability sport, this type of peer-facilitated inclusion aligns with findings by Block and Obrusnikova (2007), who noted that structured peer interaction is a powerful tool for reducing stigma and promoting social acceptance (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). Similarly, research in able-bodied sport has shown that when coaches intentionally assign social tasks, such as welcoming or mentoring roles, it enhances team cohesion and supports athletes' sense of belonging (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Smith et al., 2007)

Having athletes introduce new teammates can support relatedness by reshaping team dynamics. However, if not implemented thoughtfully, this strategy may unintentionally constrain relatedness. For example, assigning a socially anxious athlete to a leadership role without adequate support, or neglecting to check in afterward, may cause the interaction to feel forced or inauthentic. This is particularly relevant for athletes with complex needs or those still navigating their sense of belonging within the team (Goodwin et al., 2009).

Another strategy involved group debriefs following practices or games, where athletes were encouraged to reflect collectively on their experiences. These sessions allowed teammates to share feedback, celebrate effort, and acknowledge group progress. Group debriefs are commonly recognized in both able-bodied and disability sport literature as practices that promote relatedness, communication, and emotional processing (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Cheon et al., 2015). In goalball, such debriefs can be especially important for building shared understanding among

athletes with diverse communication styles, sensory needs, and sport experience (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018).

Coaches also described encouraging informal peer bonding or building “*camaraderie*”, such as allowing time after practice for teammates to socialize or check in with athletes about their lives outside of sport. These small, everyday routines contributed to a culture of connection and emotional safety, essential elements of relatedness support (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In both able-bodied and disability sport, informal team routines are linked to stronger social bonds and a greater sense of belonging (Townsend et al., 2015). For athletes with disabilities, especially those who have experienced exclusion in school or community settings, these low-pressure social spaces may be where authentic connection begins to form. However, not all athletes easily access or benefit from informal bonding. Shy athletes, those still navigating their disability identity, or athletes new to competitive sport may feel hesitant to engage without active facilitation. Coaches in this study acknowledged this and attempted to bridge gaps through social prompts, such as encouraging teammates to check on one another or initiating conversations themselves.

Another strategy that emerged as critical to supporting relatedness was the use of one-on-one conversations between coaches and athletes. One coach emphasized that beyond group structures and team dynamics, it was often these private, individualized interactions that opened space for connection and trust-building. This approach reflects a relational coaching model, where the coach-athlete relationship is central to athlete development and well-being. One-on-one conversations served several purposes. First, they provided a protected space where athletes could express concerns, frustrations, or feelings of exclusion without fear of judgment from peers. Second, they allowed coaches to offer personalized feedback and clarify misunderstandings. In cases where athletes were disengaged or disconnected from the group, these conversations often

became a first step toward reintegrating the athlete into the team environment. This strategy is particularly important in disability sport, where athletes may face social and emotional barriers that are not always visible or openly discussed. As research suggests, athletes with disabilities may experience bullying and other forms of exclusions in sports settings (Goodley, 2017; De-Pauw & Gavron, 2005). When coaches take the time to meet with athletes individually, they show care, validate emotions, and affirm the athlete's place within the team.

Coaches' Knowledge, Challenges and Successes on Athlete-Centered Coaching

ACC is widely supported in the literature as an approach that focuses on the whole athlete, not just performance. It encourages autonomy, shared decision-making, and long-term growth, and has been linked to higher motivation, confidence, and athlete well-being, especially in youth sport (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Vella et al., 2011). Instead of coaches directing everything, ACC emphasizes working with athletes to meet their individual needs, both on and off the court (Cassidy, 2010). The research question addressed in this section focuses on goalball coach's knowledge about ACC and what challenges and successes they encounter when applying ACC with youth athletes. While many coaches supported athlete growth in practice, most were unfamiliar with the actual term athlete-centered coaching. Several openly said they had never heard of it. Coach's responses reflected a gap between what is promoted in coaching education and what is known in practice, especially in disability sport, where coaches often come from non-traditional pathways or have limited access to formal training (Cassidy et al., 2008). Even without using the term, many coaches described behaviors that reflect ACC principles. For example, they talked about letting athletes choose drills, adjust strategies, or guide parts of practice. While the philosophy of ACC may not be widely taught, it can still

emerge naturally through experience and a strong commitment to athlete development (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The fact that goalball coaches were not familiar with ACC may be less about the sport itself and more about broader gaps in how coaches are recruited and trained. This gap in knowledge is not entirely surprising, particularly given the volunteer-driven and under-resourced nature of many disability sport systems, including goalball (Haegele & Zhu, 2017). Coaches are often recruited based on proximity, passion, or personal experience with disability, rather than through formal coach education programs. While the concept of ACC has gained traction in coach education literature over the past decades, research has shown that many coaches, both in able-bodied and disability sport, struggle to define or implement ACC in practice (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020). Research in able-bodied sport contexts suggests that while coaches may endorse the idea of being "player-centered," their methods often remain largely coach-directed, with a focus on performance outcomes rather than athlete empowerment (Cushion & Partington, 2016). Similarly, in disability sport, coaches often receive minimal formal training specific to working with athletes with disabilities, let alone training on pedagogical frameworks like ACC (Cregan et al., 2007; Townsend et al., 2022)

Many coaches found implementing ACC challenging, pointing out difficulties such as learning to listen to athletes who may struggle with communication, feeling uncertain about how to balance flexibility with effective instruction, and lacking sport-specific knowledge. These concerns confirm those in the literature, which notes that ACC tends to be more mentally demanding often requiring more preparation, flexibility, and emotional awareness than traditional approaches (Romo et al., 2014). The challenge can be even greater in goalball, where athletes may need more sensory-specific support or where coaches might feel underprepared to adapt

strategies in inclusive ways. The limited awareness or inconsistent application of ACC principles among goalball coaches in this study raises important questions about whether this pattern reflects a context-specific gap or is part of a broader trend across sport coaching domains. In this study, several coaches described successes in implementing ACC with athlete empowerment as the most important measure of success, more important than winning games. While they still valued competition, they often saw long term personal growth, confidence, independence, and ownership of learning as additional indicators of success of using ACC. These positive outcomes reflect the core of athlete-centered coaching, which focuses on the whole person (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Vella et al., 2011). However, this study does not suggest that supporting athletes' psychological needs should come at the expense of competitive performance. In fact, the two are not mutually exclusive. ACC should exist on a continuum, coaches adjust their approach based on the needs, maturity, and context of their athletes. Coaches may shift toward more structured or directive strategies during specific competitions, but this does not mean they abandon ACC principles. Instead, effective coaches find ways to maintain athlete involvement, choice, and voice even in high-pressure settings. Based on this study's findings, some coaches seem to be deeply invested in developing competitive goalball athletes and committed to nurturing their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, not all coaches may be equally prepared or supported to manage this balance. This study supports the idea that competitive success and athlete-centered coaching are not opposites but interdependent in creating meaningful, sustainable sport experiences.

Athletes' Experiences During Training and Competition

This section addresses the research question exploring how youth goalball athletes experienced training and competition and the role of their coach in these settings. Findings from this

study show that youth goalball athletes perceive their sport experience as highly dependent on how training sessions are structured and how emotional support is managed during competition. While coaches were not described as sources of direct pressure, their influence was clearly embedded in the training climate and team culture they created. These insights are consistent with literature on coaching climate and athlete engagement but also offer new considerations for practice in disability sport contexts.

Athletes emphasized that scrimmage-based training was one of the most meaningful and motivating aspects of their sport experience. Athletes consistently positioned it as the core site of learning describing real-time play as the best way to develop skills central to goalball performance (i.e. throwing). These findings support prior research highlighting the motivational and developmental value of game-based learning environments (Light, 2004; Pill, 2018). From an SDT perspective, game-based practice supports key psychological needs, by placing athletes in situations where they must make decisions, adapt, and solve problems under conditions that resemble real competition (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The effectiveness of game-based learning has long been recognized in pedagogical models such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) and the Tactical Games Model (Griffin & Butler, 2005). These models advocate for introducing tactical problems early in training, allowing athletes to explore strategies and understand game demands, before refining technical skills in context. While these models were originally developed in able-bodied sport, the principles they represent could be relevant to goalball and disability sport more broadly. When athletes are allowed to learn through play, they become more engaged, more reflective, and more prepared to apply their skills in meaningful ways (Kirk & MacPhail, 2002).

During training, athletes described feeling disengaged during repetitive drills, especially when the activities lacked relevance to game play or were done without full team involvement. One athlete explained that when this happens, *“it gets boring,”* pointing to how monotony and lack of social connection can diminish motivation. In addition, some drills such as those related to blocking, when done repeatedly can be painful for athletes. These reflections align with existing research in disability sport, which emphasizes that training is most effective when it incorporates variability, challenge, interaction, and a clear sense of purpose (Evans et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2015).

During competition, athletes described a range of emotional experiences that extended beyond the physical demands of the game. Although most participants in this study stated that performance pressure was largely self-imposed, the findings revealed a more complex dynamic. This self-imposed pressure is consistent with concepts of performance anxiety and athlete perfectionism, frequently reported in both able-bodied and disability sport literature (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Many athletes carried an emotional burden, particularly the fear of disappointing their coaches or teammates. This suggests that self-worth, performance, and social approval were often deeply intertwined. Even in the absence of direct pressure from others, the internalized expectation to perform well, combined with the desire to feel valued and competent within the team, shaped how athletes experienced success and failure. The experience of making mistakes was frequently described by athletes as emotionally charged, often accompanied by internalized blame: *“It’s my fault,” “I beat myself up,”* and *“I cost the team something.”* These repeated expressions point to underlying need frustration, as athletes described feeling ineffective, rejected, or pressured. For many participants, a single mistake seemed to undermine their sense of competence, suggesting that even isolated errors could carry significant emotional weight and impact

their overall motivation during competition. Feelings of guilt and fear of letting others down are well-documented in able-bodied sport (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). but in disability sport, and particularly in goalball, these emotions may be intensified. Athletes with disabilities have historically been underestimated or praised in ways that reinforce conditional acceptance (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Goodley, 2017). In goalball, mistakes have immediate consequences, the emotional pressure of each action can feel especially high. Without access to visual cues or conventional feedback mechanisms, athletes may struggle to process success and failure during competition, which can impact their confidence and motivation.

Athletes in this study reported managing not only their own frustrations but also trying to uphold team morale, support newer teammates, and stay composed under competitive pressure. Despite this internal burden, participants consistently stated that coaches were not the source of stress. In fact, across interviews, athletes emphasized the value of emotional reassurance and composure provided by their coaches. These findings are consistent with literature emphasizing the role of coach-athlete relationships in athlete emotional well-being (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). The supportive tone, presence, and empathy shown by coaches during stressful moments helped athletes regulate anxiety, recover from mistakes, and remain calm. This contrasts with traditional sport environments where emotional demands are often internalized or overlooked. Coaches in this study were described as proactive in identifying athletes' emotional states and tailoring their responses accordingly, such as offering breaks, using calming language, or initiating private conversations. At the same time, peer support played a critical role in easing these pressures. Most athletes described their teammates, not coaches, as their first line of emotional support. These responses highlight the importance of strong peer bonds, where mutual support and consistent team routines (e.g., pre-game rituals and emotional check-ins) fostered a deeper

sense of connection. While coaches remained central to guiding the team during pressured moments, it was the athletes' shared sense of trust and communication that often helped restore confidence mid-game.

Athletes in this study consistently highlighted the role of the coach not only as an instructor but as a deeply influential figure in their athletic and personal lives. Across interviews, athletes described their coaches as sources of motivation, going beyond technical instruction to meet players' needs. Several athletes shared how coaches made extraordinary efforts to include them, such as driving hours for one-on-one practices, offering life advice, or supplying food and hydration during long training days. Others spoke about coaches who helped them set long-term goals, expressed consistent belief in their potential, or inspired them through their own athletic achievements. These accounts underscore the meaningfulness of coach-athlete relationships in sustaining motivation and promoting well-being in disability sports (Allan et al., 2020).

Athlete Perceptions of Coaching Strategies for Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

Lastly, we discuss the final research question examining what specific coaching strategies youth goalball players perceive as either supporting or constraining their autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Autonomy

In this study, two main coaching strategies were identified by youth goalball athletes as shaping their experience of autonomy: (1) asking for athlete input to make decisions, and (2) giving leadership roles to athletes. While these strategies were similarly identified by coaches as supporting athletes' sense of autonomy, athletes noted important differences in how they were applied and the extent to which they influenced their sport experience.

Athletes shared many positive examples of being asked for their input during practices. They were invited to suggest drills, lead warm-up activities, or express what skills they wanted to work on. Some athletes noted that their coaches asked them what they felt they needed to improve and allowed them to prioritize certain skill areas. These moments helped athletes feel involved in their training and gave them a sense of ownership over their development. Having a say in these decisions supported their motivation and made them feel included by their coaches. This approach reflects autonomy-supportive coaching and aligns with best practices in youth sport (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

However, athletes also recognized that these choices were ultimately guided by the coach. While they were encouraged to speak up, the final decision often rested with the coach, who would proceed based on what they believed made the most sense for the team. Some athletes expressed that their input was welcomed only if it aligned with the coach's perspective. This balance between input and authority reflects a conditional form of autonomy. While being asked for feedback helped some athletes feel heard, others sensed that their suggestions carried limited weight. Research has shown that motivation is enhanced when athletes perceive their contributions to have real influence (Bartholomew et al., 2011). When decisions are consistently filtered or overridden, the sense of shared decision-making can feel superficial. This issue becomes even more relevant in youth disability sport, where athletes may already feel under-involved in their own development. While it's true that younger athletes may lack the long-term perspective to guide every decision, the same could be said for some volunteer coaches who may have limited training in coaching.

In addition to input, some athletes described being given leadership roles, particularly older players or team captains. These opportunities helped them build confidence, feel trusted,

and take initiative during practice and competition. For instance, athletes mentioned being responsible for communicating with teammates, organizing warm-ups, or making in-game decisions. These experiences supported both autonomy and competence and reflected strategies that can promote athlete development (Vella et al., 2013). Leadership roles are especially important in disability sport, where athletes may be overlooked due to assumptions about their abilities (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). However, not all athletes experienced these roles equally. Some noted that newer or younger players had fewer opportunities to lead, and it was unclear whether coaches distributed these responsibilities intentionally or if they emerged informally based on age, experience, or perceived skill. This raises questions about equity and whether all athletes are being equally prepared to take on leadership roles or simply conform to an existing team hierarchy.

Competence

In this study, youth goalball athletes identified three main coaching strategies that supported their sense of competence: (1) teaching technical skills, (2) providing emotional encouragement, and (3) delivering constructive feedback. Together, these strategies shaped how athletes perceived their growth, readiness, and value within the sport. The findings suggest unique considerations within goalball, particularly related to the athletes' visual impairments and the adaptive learning environments required.

Athletes frequently emphasized the importance of direct instruction and one-on-one attention when learning or refining skills. They described how their coaches worked closely with them to correct mistakes, refine throws, or develop defensive positioning. These moments of focused technical instruction were highly valued, as they allowed athletes to feel supported rather than judged during practice. These findings align with previous research showing that goalball

athletes often receive frequent technical instruction from their coaches (De Luna-Vazquez et al., 2024). One athlete noted that practices were less stressful because they allowed room for mistakes and growth, framing the learning environment as one centered on development rather than performance perfection. This task mastery approach is consistent with the literature, highlighting the role of instructional clarity and task-specific feedback in fostering perceived competence (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007).

Beyond technical instruction, athletes frequently highlighted the emotional encouragement they received from their coaches. They spoke about being believed in, motivated, and reminded of their progress, even when outcomes weren't ideal. Coaches were seen not only as instructors but as supportive figures who cared about the athlete as a whole person. In some cases, the coach is the first adult to consistently believe in the athlete's potential. These realities elevate the role of the coach from a technical expert to the central figure in the athlete's psychosocial development. These relational dynamics are well-documented in sport psychology as critical to competence development (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007). Several athletes described moments where their coach's belief in them helped them persevere through setbacks or stay committed to their goals. This kind of emotional support contributes to a motivational climate that fosters skill development.

Constructive feedback was also a powerful tool in supporting athlete competence. Athletes appreciated when coaches offered feedback that was clear, specific and focused on improvement rather than punishment. Importantly, they noted that even blunt or critical feedback was well-received when delivered respectfully and paired with belief in their potential. This aligns with motivational coaching literature, which emphasizes that effective feedback should be both competence-relevant and emotionally attuned (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In this study,

one-on-one instruction and feedback loops during practice were seen as especially helpful. These moments allowed athletes to reflect, make adjustments, and feel that their learning was taken seriously. Additionally, athletes described their coaches creating environments where mistakes were not punished but treated as natural parts of the learning process. This “mistake-friendly” approach is essential in fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

These findings reinforce existing literature on competence support but also point to nuances in how it manifests in disability sport. Although the strategies identified may also be seen in other sports, their impact appears to be amplified in goalball, where athletes often rely heavily on one another and may enter the sport with limited prior exposure to structured physical activity. This is particularly relevant given that many adolescents with visual impairments face systemic barriers to quality physical education and sport participation in school settings (Haegele & Zhu, 2017). As a result, the opportunity to receive consistent coaching and feel competent within a team environment may carry deeper significance for these athletes. Coaches who combine technical instruction, emotional support, and feedback appear best positioned to build both competence and confidence in youth with visual impairments.

Relatedness

In this study, youth goalball athletes identified several coaching strategies that supported their psychological need for relatedness, helping them feel valued, connected, and emotionally safe within their teams. These strategies included (1) verbal affirmations of belonging, (2) promoting communication and peer dialogue, and (3) mentorship through holistic support beyond the sport. Together, these coaching practices shaped athletes’ experiences of inclusion, cohesion, and identity within the team environment.

One strategy that stood out was the coach's use of affirming language to explicitly communicate that athletes were valued members of the team. These verbal reassurances helped reduce self-doubt and contributed to a sense of psychological safety. Athletes recalled moments when coaches told them they "*belonged*" on the team or included them in strategic conversations, which made them feel more secure in their role. This reflects key components of SDT, where relatedness is supported not only through proximity or shared experience but through intentional confirmation of worth and connection (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In line with prior research on disability sport, such affirmations may be especially meaningful for youth who have previously encountered exclusion, bullying, or ableist assumptions in physical education, physical activity, and sports settings (Dehghansai et al., 2020).

Another strategy perceived by athletes was their coaches' promotion of team communication. Athletes described how coaches encouraged open, ongoing conversations among teammates and modeled the importance of listening, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. For many, this meant creating an environment where all voices were heard. Athletes noted that this atmosphere allowed them to speak freely about game strategies, address interpersonal concerns, and offer peer-to-peer reassurance. This type of interaction supported not only team cohesion but also personal growth, especially in the development of social-emotional skills.

This emphasis on communication was not limited to technical instruction or coach-to-athlete dialogue, it extended to facilitating relationships within the team. Some athletes reflected on how coaches encouraged them to resolve conflicts and give each other reassurance that they belonged. These practices are consistent with research showing that when athletes are encouraged to talk and connect with each other in meaningful ways, teams tend to be closer and feel like safer, more supportive environments (Smith et al., 2016). In this way, communication became

more than a tactical tool; it served as a vehicle for shaping team culture, and fostering relatedness and emotional security. Given that many youth with visual impairments have experienced marginalization in physical activity and sport settings (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015), these communication strategies may offer a positive emotional experience. These communication strategies align with SDT, which posits that relatedness is fostered when individuals feel they are known, accepted, and connected to others in their environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Coaches who promoted communication encouraged feedback, and treated their athletes' contributions as valuable helped satisfy this basic psychological need. In turn, this may promote not only sustained motivation but also a deeper sense of loyalty to the team and the sport. A third coaching strategy described by athletes to support relatedness involved coaches acting as mentors who supported them beyond sport-specific roles. This included helping with transportation, providing snacks, checking in on personal challenges, and offering life advice. Instead of seeing these actions as minor or optional, athletes viewed them as clear signs that their coaches genuinely cared about them as people, not just players. These perceived efforts strengthened their connection to the team and the sport. The importance of mentorship is amplified in disability sport, where having a designated full-time coach is not always guaranteed. While mentorship is not traditionally listed as a coaching "strategy," in this context it functioned in this capacity, an intentional way to deepen the athlete-coach relationship and affirm the athlete's value. Similar findings have emerged in other studies of youth sport, where mentoring behaviors foster trust, resilience, and long-term engagement (Felton & Jowett, 2013).

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the primary researcher's role as a goalball coach may have introduced bias during both data collection and analysis. While efforts were made to maintain reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process, the dual role of insider and investigator may have influenced how participants shared their experiences and how themes were interpreted. Second, while the study collected perspectives from both coaches and youth athletes, participants were not recruited from the same teams. As a result, it was not possible to explore the dynamics of individual coach-athlete relationships or examine the alignment between coaches' reported strategies and their athletes' lived experiences with the strategies used. Instead, the data were analyzed within each group separately. This limited the ability to triangulate perspectives and gain insight into how specific behaviors were received within a shared team context. Third, the sample size was relatively small and restricted to a North American context, which may limit the transferability of findings to other regions, cultural settings, or disability sport systems. Participants also represented a range of competitive levels and experiences, but not all voices, such as athletes new to the sport or those at the elite international level, were equally represented. Finally, the study focused exclusively on athletes and coaches, omitting other influential stakeholders such as parents, teachers of students with visual impairments, or tournament coordinators. These individuals often play critical roles in the early identification, access, and support of youth with visual impairments entering sport, and their absence represents a gap in understanding the broader ecosystem of athlete development. Additionally, this study did not explore how the strategies described by coaches may have been influenced by their backgrounds, such as their training,

coaching experience, or education level, which limits a deeper understanding of the coaching behaviors and strategies used.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study provide deeper insight into how athlete-centered coaching plays out in youth goalball and the ways in which athletes' psychological needs are supported or challenged through interactions with their coaches. One important takeaway is how athletes navigate the added stresses of competition, often shaped by access-related barriers, communication needs, and expectations for performance. While the focus was on athletes' perceptions, these findings raise important questions about the strategies coaches use to help athletes manage those pressures. A logical next step would be to conduct a follow-up study that explores those strategies in greater depth, possibly comparing the experiences of goalball athletes with those in other blind sports or across different types of disability sport. Such comparisons could reveal both shared approaches and context-specific challenges that influence how psychological needs are supported in competitive settings. Future studies should also consider recruiting coaches and athletes from the same teams to allow for in-depth exploration of coach-athlete relationships. This would enable researchers to directly examine how coaches' autonomy, competence, and relatedness-supportive strategies are perceived and experienced by the athletes they work with. It would allow for within-team comparisons that could highlight congruencies or tensions in the implementation and reception of athlete-centered coaching practices. Another direction is to conduct intervention-based research examining the effects of coach education on the implementation of ACC strategies, particularly through tactical instructional models such as the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), the Sport Education Model, or the Tactical Games Model. For

example, researchers could investigate whether coaches trained in these models are more effective in supporting athletes' autonomy, competence, and relatedness over the course of a season, and how these changes are reflected in both coach and athlete perceptions and its subsequent impact on individual and team performance. Since, the findings of this study suggest that game-based practice is preferred by athletes future research could explore how coaches implement and adapt game-based pedagogies in goalball and how psychological needs are being met. Additionally, future research could explore how coaches' backgrounds, such as their training, coaching experience, and education level, influence the strategies they use to support psychological needs. Research might also examine how these dynamics shift in other populations, such as adult or elite-level goalball athletes, to explore whether perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness evolve with age, experience, or performance level.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This study highlights four actionable coaching practices that can meaningfully enhance the development, motivation, and long-term engagement of youth goalball athletes with visual impairments. These recommendations reflect the voices of athletes and coaches in this study and align with the principles of ACC and SDT, which emphasize the fulfillment of athletes' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Support Autonomy

Empowering athletes begins by inviting them to actively participate in shaping their own sport experience. Rather than reserving decision-making for coaches alone, athletes should be involved in selecting team goals, adjusting strategies mid-game, or leading parts of practice. For example, coaches can ask athletes to reflect on their performance and identify one thing they

want to focus on in the next session or allow them to make tactical substitutions or call time-outs during scrimmages. Another powerful way to foster autonomy and responsibility is by creating opportunities for athletes to take on leadership roles, such as serving as team captain or leading warm-ups and cooldowns. Rotating captain roles can ensure every athlete has a chance to build leadership skills, including communication, decision-making, and supporting teammates. Even small roles can help athletes feel more invested and valued, especially for those who may not often be viewed as leaders in traditional sport contexts.

Support Competence

Designing practices that emphasize skill development through play. Youth athletes could benefit from learning that is hands-on, exploratory, and directly connected to the game. Instead of telling youth athletes exactly what to do, ask guided questions like, “Did the ball go where you wanted it to?” or “What would you change on defense next time?”. Use small-sided games (e.g., 2v2 defense scenarios) or constraint-based drills (e.g., playing without a center for a few minutes) to challenge decision-making and reinforce key concepts (Bowles & O’Dwyer, 2020). Provide timely, specific feedback like “Great adjustment on your positioning there, that’s what kept the ball out.” This could help athletes see their progress in context.

Support Relatedness

Establish a positive team climate where athletes feel seen, supported, and valued, not just as players, but as people. Check in with how they’re feeling before and after games and celebrate both small improvements and effort. Offer relational feedback like, “I appreciate how you supported your teammate after that play,” or “Thanks for helping set up today, it means a lot.” These moments build connection and belonging. In addition, take an interest in athletes’ lives beyond the sport. Ask about school, hobbies, or family, and offer encouragement that reinforces their

growth. This kind of mentorship and reassurance fosters trust and helps athletes feel that their development is valued in a holistic way.

Coaching Education

The following are selected professional development content recommendations stemming from the findings in this current study and their alignment with SDT principles in parentheses:

(a) how to adapt instructions and training sessions for athletes with visual impairments by modifying instructional models such as the Sport Education Model (competence-autonomy) (De Luna-Vazquez et al., 2023), (b) how to co-create practice goals with athletes (autonomy-competence-relatedness), and (c) how to recognize when athletes are emotionally disengaged and respond supportively (competence-relatedness). Training should also emphasize how to coach *with* athletes by incorporating active listening techniques, using reflective questioning (Bowles & O'Dwyer, 2020), and offering structured choices that promote autonomy and shared decision-making. These content areas could help coaches move from command-style leadership to a social-relational responsive coaching that fosters trust, inclusion, and long-term athlete.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Guiding Questions for Interviews - For Coaches

Script

[Note: Get verbal consent then turn on audio/video recorder]

[Note: Where appropriate, the following clarification, expansion, probe, and supplementary questions should be asked: (1) Please tell me what that was like for you (2) Can you give me some examples? (3) What do you mean by that? (4) Why do you say that? (5) describe that in more detail for me.]

Preamble

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. I would like to remind you that our discussions will be kept confidential, and you will remain anonymous throughout this research. If there are any questions you do not want to answer, then that is perfectly fine. You also have the right to pause or discontinue the interview at any time and for any or no reason. If this happens, all data gathered from you will be deleted. As a reminder, today I will be talking about your experiences as a youth goalball coach. Specifically, I am interested in learning about how you understand and implement athlete-centered coaching. Please know that you're free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable, there are no right responses, and if at any point you want to pause or stop, that's completely fine.

RQ1: How do goalball coaches understand and apply athlete-centered coaching (ACC) to support athletes' autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

First Session of the Interview with Coaches

Opening Questions for coaches

I would like to begin by learning about your journey of becoming a goalball coach. Can you describe in as much detail as possible what that was like and what influenced how you operate...?

1. What led you to become a goalball coach?
2. What is your coaching philosophy?
3. How would you define your role as a youth coach?
4. What principles or beliefs guide your interactions with your youth athletes?
5. As a coach, how do you feel when the ball is in play and you are unable to communicate with your athletes, and how does that impact your coaching approach?

Thank you for that... Now let's talk about your interactions with the athletes. Describe what that is like to someone who does not know anything about the game...

Need Satisfaction – SDT

Supporting Autonomy

6. Do you support athletes in pursuing their own goals, or do you guide them towards goals that you believe are important?
7. How do your athletes participate in making decisions during training or competition? Do they have a say in how things are done during training or competition?
8. Can you reflect on a situation where you gave your athletes freedom in training decisions? What was that experience like?

Supporting competence

9. How would you describe your process of helping athletes feel capable by encouraging their input, or do you rely on your expertise to direct their training?
10. Can you describe a time when an athlete felt like a failure? How did you respond, and what was that experience like for both of you?
11. Can you share an experience where an athlete was struggling and felt useless? How did you handle that, and how did it feel for you as a coach?
12. When your athletes face challenges, do you guide them to solve problems on their own, or do you offer specific strategies? Can you describe what that process is like for you?

Supporting Relatedness

13. What steps do you take to help your athletes feel supported during their training and competitions?

14. When an athlete feels ignored, how do you recognize and address the situation?
15. How do you address situations where an athlete feels isolated or excluded during training or competition? Can you share an example?

Second Session of the Interview with Coaches

Understanding Athlete-centered Coaching

16. Can you speak to the role athletes should play in the decision-making process during training and competitions?
17. When making decisions during training and competitions, do you prioritize your athletes' input or rely more on your own judgment?
18. In your coaching style, do you emphasize developing the athlete's independence, or do you prefer to maintain more control over their training?
19. Would you say your coaching approach during training and competitions is more focused on athlete-driven decisions or coach-led strategies?

Applying Athlete-centered coaching

[Note: READ THE BELOW STATEMENT TO THE COACHES]

[STATEMENT: "There's a coaching philosophy known as Athlete-Centered Coaching that focuses on empowering athletes to take more control over their training and development. This approach aims to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness."]

20. Based on what you've shared, what aspects of your coaching philosophy do you feel already align with this athlete-centered coaching philosophy?
21. Can you share any specific outcomes or successes you've observed from adopting a more athlete-focused approach in your coaching?

22. When considering your current approach to coaching, are there specific areas where you believe there might be room for growth or improvement?
23. What challenges have you encountered when trying to implement a more athlete-centered approach in your coaching? How did you address them?

As we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix B - Guiding Questions for Interviews - For Athletes

Script

[Note: Get verbal consent then turn on audio/video recorder]

[Note: Where appropriate, the following clarification, expansion, probe, and supplementary questions should be asked: (1) Please tell me what that was like for you (2) Can you give me some examples? (3) What do you mean by that? (4) Why do you say that? (5) describe that in more detail for me.]

Preamble

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. I would like to remind you that our discussions will be kept confidential, and you will remain anonymous throughout this research. If there are any questions you do not want to answer, then that is perfectly fine. You also have the right to pause or discontinue the interview at any time and for any or no reason. If this happens, all data gathered from you will be deleted. As a reminder, today I will be talking about your experiences as a youth goalball athlete. Specifically, I am interested in learning about your experience support from your coach. I'll also ask about times when your coach supported or challenged you, and what those experiences meant to you. Please know that you're free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable, and if at any point you want to pause or stop, that's completely fine.

Before starting I have a few background questions. Can you tell me your...?

RQ2: How do athletes experience how their coaches support or constrain their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

First Session of Interview with Athletes

Opening questions for athletes:

I would like to begin by learning about your journey of becoming a goalball athlete. Please share as many details as you can about what that was like and what influenced you along the way...

1. What was it like when you first started playing goalball? How did it make you feel, and what moments do you remember the most?
2. How have the people or experiences in your journey changed the way you think about yourself as a goalball athlete?

Thank you for that... Now let's talk about your interactions with your coach during training and competitions. Describe what that is like to someone who does not know anything about the game...

3. Can you share what it's like to work with your coach?
4. Can you describe what it's like being on a team coached by your coach?
5. When the ball is in play and you can't get feedback from your coach, how do you make decisions?

Second Session of the Interview with Athletes

Need Satisfaction and Need Frustration

Supporting Autonomy

6. Do you ever feel like you have the freedom to make training decisions? Can you provide an example?
7. Can you share an example of a time when you were able to pursue goals that are your own during training or competition? How did your coach support you in achieving those goals?
8. Can you describe a time when your coach let you share your ideas or have a say during training or competition? What was that experience like for you?

Frustrating Autonomy

9. Do you ever feel forced to follow training decisions that you would not choose to do? How does that make you feel?
10. Can you tell me about a time when you felt excessive pressure by your coach during training or a competition? How did that affect you?
11. In what situations, if any, do you feel like you must do what you are told by your coach during training or competition? How does that make you feel?

Supporting Competence

12. Can you describe a time when your coach made you feel capable and skilled in your sport? What was that experience like for you?
13. Can you share a time when your coach made you feel confident that you can do well?
14. How does your coach give feedback that either makes you feel like a failure or makes you feel that you are good?

Frustrating Competence

15. Can you describe a time when you felt useless during practice or competition? How did your coach help you in that moment?

16. Has your coach ever given feedback that made you feel hopeless about your progress? If so, can you tell me what that experience was like?
17. Do you ever feel incapable of succeeding during training or a competition? If so, what role, if any, does your coach play in that feeling?

Supporting Relatedness

18. Think of a time when you felt supported by your coach... and describe that in as much detail as possible.
19. What do you think about the people around you, and do you feel connected to them?
20. Can you think of a time when you felt accepted by your coach and the team? What was that experience like?

Frustrating Relatedness

21. Can you describe fully a training or competition experience that made you feel either good or not so good.... Are there times when you feel isolated or excluded during training or competition? How does your coach respond?
22. Think of a time when you felt ignored... and describe that in as much detail as possible.

As we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix C - Demographic Survey

Thank you for participating in this research study. The following questions are designed to collect general background information about you, which will help us better understand your experiences as either an athlete or a coach in goalball. Please answer each question honestly and to the best of your ability. All responses will remain confidential, and your identity will not be revealed in any reports or publications. The information you provide is important to the success of this study. Your contact information will only be used for scheduling purposes related to the study.

If you are a parent/legal guardian, please allow your child to answer the following questions. If you have any questions while completing the survey, or if you would like more information about the study, please feel free to contact us at wdeluna1@student.gsu.edu or 787-929-3623. We appreciate your time and contribution to this research.

1. Name: What is your name?

- (Open-ended)

2. Age: What is your age?

- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- If older, please specify

3. Gender: What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

4. How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

- White
- Black or African American

- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other (please specify): _____
- Prefer not to say

5. What is your level of visual impairment?

- B1 (Totally blind or very limited light perception)
- B2 (Can recognize shapes and forms but not much detail)
- B3 (Can see more detail, but still legally blind)
- I do not have a visual impairment

6. What is your current level of involvement in goalball?

- School
- Club/Blind Sport Organization
- National team
- Other (please specify): _____

7. What is your role?

- Coach
- Athlete

8. Years of experience playing goalball: (For athletes only)

- Less than a year
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- If more, please specify _____

9. Years of experience playing goalball: (For coaches only)

- Less than a year
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- If more, please specify _____

10. Are you a certified coach by a regional/national sports organization? (For coaches only)

- No

- If yes, please specify the organization

11. Have you received any formal training related to coaching goalball or athletes with visual impairments? (For coaches only)

- Yes, I have received formal training specific to coaching goalball.
- Yes, I have received formal training, but it was not specific to coaching goalball.
- No, I have not received any formal training related to coaching goalball or athletes with visual impairments.

12. In what types of tournaments have you participated as an athlete? (please check all that apply): (For Athletes only)

- International Competitions (e.g. Youth Worlds, Youth Para Pan-American Games)
- National tournaments
- State/Regional tournaments
- Local/Community Club Tournaments

13. In what types of tournaments have you participated as a coach? (please check all that apply): (For coaches only)

- International Competitions (e.g. Youth Worlds, Youth Para Pan-American Games)
- National tournaments
- State/Regional tournaments
- Local/Community Club Tournaments

14. How many times per week do you typically train goalball? (For athletes only)

- 1-2 times per week
- 3-4 times per week
- 5-6 times per week
- 7 or more times per week

15. How many times per week do you typically coach goalball? (For coaches only)

- 1-2 times per week
- 3-4 times per week
- 5-6 times per week
- 7 or more times per week

16. Have you coached in any other sports besides goalball? (For coaches only)

- No
- Yes (please specify): _____

17. Are you currently being coached by multiple coaches? (For athletes only)

- Yes, I am currently being coached by more than one coach.
- No, I am only being coached by one coach.

18. What is your current status as a goalball coach? (for coaches only)

- I coach full-time (at least 40 hours per week)
- I coach part-time (at least 15 hours per week)
- I coach on a seasonal or occasional basis.

19. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (For coaches only)

- Less than a high school diploma
 - High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
 - Some college, no degree
 - Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
 - Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
 - Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
 - Doctorate or professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, PhD)
-

Contact Information for Scheduling Interview**20. Email Address:**

- (Open-ended)

21. Phone Number:

- (Open-ended)

22. Preferred Method of Contact:

- Email
- Phone

23. Preferred Time for Interview (please check all that apply):

- Morning (8:00 am – 12:00 pm)
- Afternoon (12:00 pm – 4:00 pm)
- Evening (4:00 pm – 8:00 pm)

Appendix D – Figures

Figure 1. Summary of Coaches' themes and subthemes.

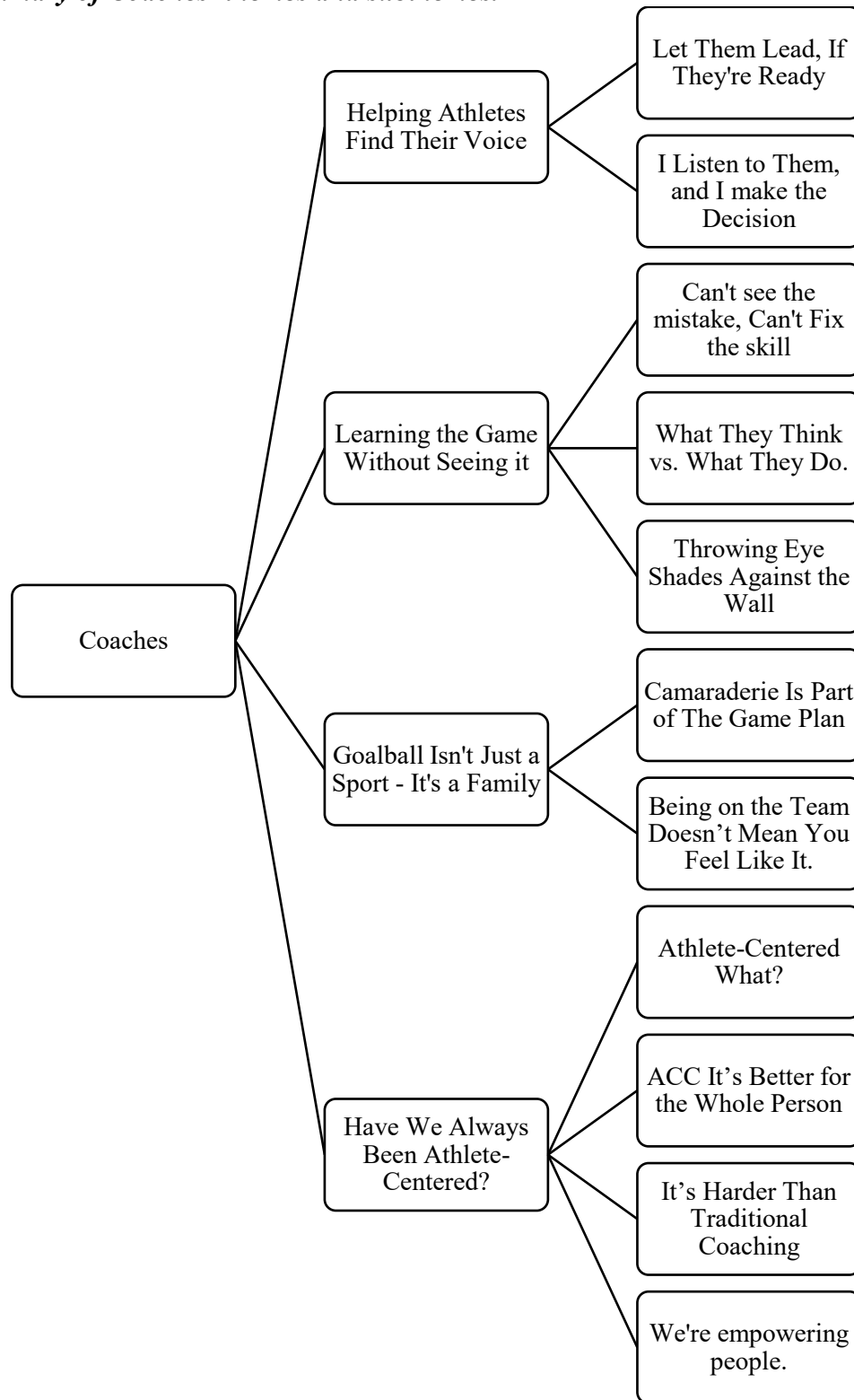


Figure 2. Summary of Athletes' themes and subthemes

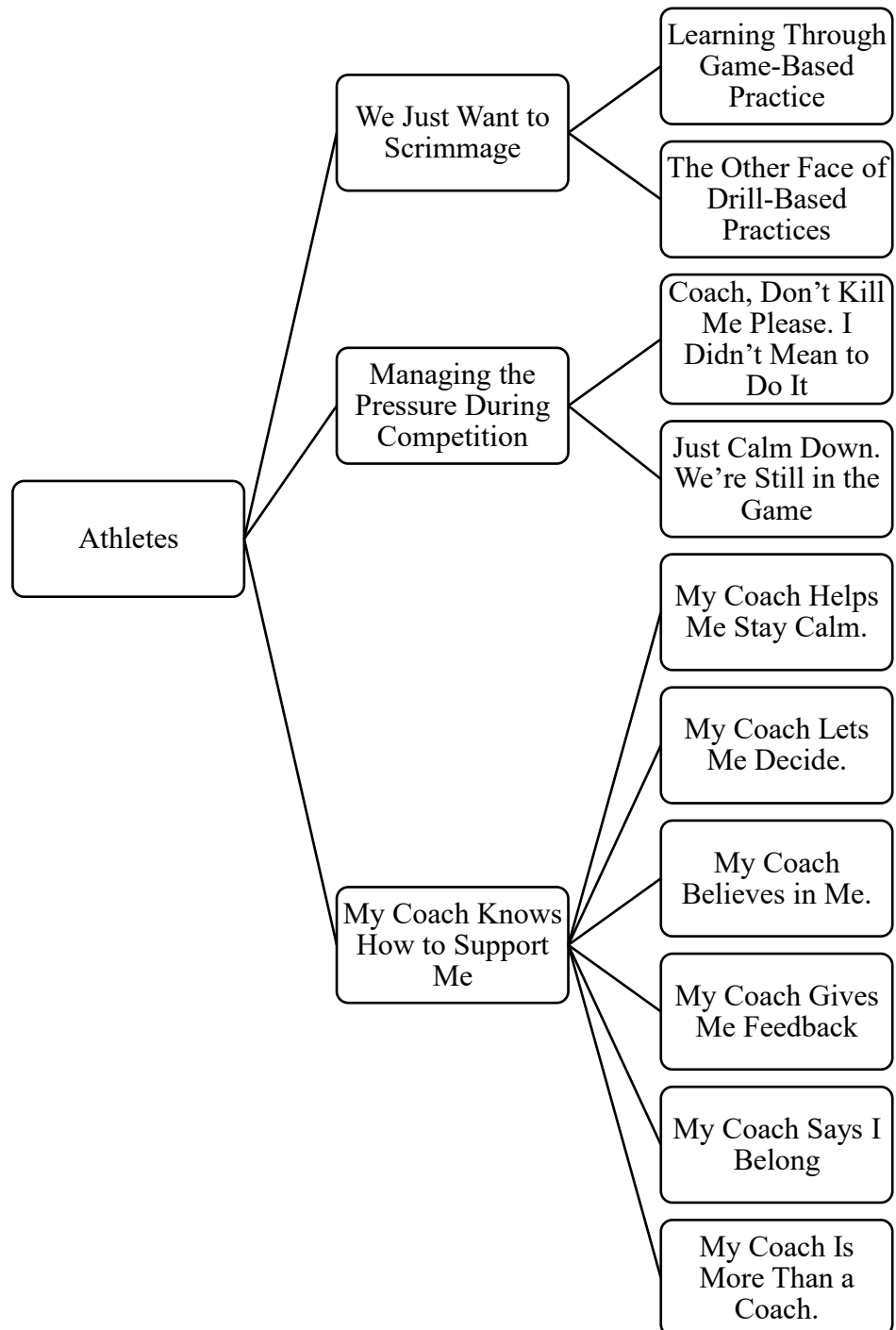


Figure 3. Diagram of Coaching Strategies to Support Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

