



# Other oriented perfectionism, player-coach relationships and performance in tennis

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## ABSTRACT

Other oriented perfectionism describes a pre-occupation with the expectation that others will achieve excessively high standards of performance. Projecting unrealistic expectations on to each other in a player-coach dyad may disrupt the working relationship and impact on the athlete's experience within the sport. This study uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore, from the coach's viewpoint, the effects of other oriented perfectionism in tennis coaching. After conducting semi-structured interviews with high level coaches from the United Kingdom, two superordinate themes emerged. 'Negative effects of coaches' other-oriented perfectionism' and 'Redefining perfectionism'. The findings of this study assist in highlighting areas for possible intervention as well as identifying avenues for future research.

**Key words:** other oriented perfectionism, coaching, expectations, performance.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Cockerill & Jowett (2002) the coach-athlete relationship serves as a platform from which the coach and the athlete interact in unique ways in order to bring about performance accomplishments, success and satisfaction. Relationships such as in this example are sustained on the basis that the actions of one agent affect the behavior of the other which in turn influences how that person then behaves towards the original agent. On this basis any factor that influences how, and what, an individual communicates to someone else will also be implicated in determining the likely course and outcomes of social interactions.

Perfectionism, defined as "the setting of excessively high standards of performance in conjunction with a tendency to make overly critical self-evaluations" (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; p.450) is one such factor that may influence interactions and consequently relationships between a coach and tennis player. To date, perfectionism has largely been viewed from an athlete's perspective and considered as a personality characteristic linked to both maladaptive (e.g., burnout) and adaptive (e.g., commitment) outcomes. Perfectionism has been described across two dimensions namely 'perfectionistic concerns' and 'perfectionistic strivings'.

High perfectionistic strivings are generally considered to be adaptive in the sports arena, driving for example, attention to detail, commitment to training and a desire to improve. However, excessive levels have also been shown to correlate with an increased potential for the use of performance enhancing drugs (Flett & Hewitt, 2005). Perfectionistic concerns defined as "concerns over making mistakes, fear of negative social evaluation, feelings of discrepancy between one's expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection" (Gotwals et al., 2012; p. 264) have been shown to correlate with ego orientation, mastery avoidance and a range of negative emotions (e.g., negative affect, anxiety, and anger) (Hill, Mallinson-Howard, & Jowett, 2018).

The concept of 'other oriented perfectionism' has received limited research attention but is crucially concerned with the demand for perfection conveyed by one person towards another individual (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Other oriented perfectionists create high expectations for others and constantly compare them against the high standards they set. Over a decade ago Flett & Hewitt (2005) highlighted the possible role that other oriented perfectionism may play in coaching, questioning the application of this theorizing to sport, asking, for example "At what point do the perfectionistic demands of coaches contribute to a loss of motivation in athletes?" (p.17).

The extant literature considering player-coach relationships is currently dominated by quantitative data and analysis. However, relationships in sport mirror those in wider societies to the extent that they are defined by intricacies and nuances that cannot be quantified. As such it would appear that the impact of one's perfectionistic tendencies on the player-coach relationship is an area that may be suited to more qualitative investigation. Sellars, Evans & Thomas (2016) recently emphasized this point stating that; "a reliance on quantitative research designs has resulted in a limited insight into athletes' perceptions of the effects of perfectionism within sport." (p.220). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is one approach that lends itself to understanding novel phenomena (Malhotra, 2015). By exploring a certain experience/phenomenon with genuine depth, important information can be provided which may open other avenues of exploration. The current lack of literature on how perfectionism affects the player-coach relationship makes IPA a fitting qualitative research method to employ in this study.

This short review aims to explore, from a tennis coach's perspective, the perceived influence of other oriented perfectionism on the player-coach relationship. In doing so it is hoped this review will both increase coach awareness of the phenomenon and highlight some outcomes associated with other oriented perfectionism in coaching.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participant sampling in IPA focuses on the small and is purposive, and given that the current work was exploratory in nature and meant for illustrative purposes only a small but homogenous sample was sought. Participants were selected because they have important experiences and perspectives about the phenomenon under study. Ethical approval to conduct this research study was granted by the ethics committee of the lead author's institution. Participants from various tennis clubs in London, United Kingdom were contacted by 'cold' e-mailing and then followed up face to face after an initial response was received.

Coach X is a male PTR (Professional Tennis Registry) certified and LTA (Lawn Tennis Association) level 4 coach. He has played at numerous British tour and ITF futures events and has been coaching full-time for 29 years. Coach Y is female and a PTR instructor certified. Coach Y has an LTA level 3 license, and 17+ years of experience in tennis. Coach Z is a Male PTR professional level certified coach with an LTA level 4 coaching license. This coach has 43 years of experience in tennis, and 20 years' experience of educating other coaches as a certification instructor. All three coaches are from the United Kingdom (U.K.) and have a vast majority of their tennis experience from the U.K.

## PROCEDURE

This study conducted multiple semi-structured individual interviews lasting 25 - 40 minutes. Before the interviews commenced, participants signed consent forms and received printed or electronic copies of information about the study and contact information for the researcher. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. Each interview took place in different pre-planned private spaces at various tennis clubs in London.

Each audio recording was transcribed verbatim and checked by the coaches to ensure that the text accurately reflected their intended message. Following this, the data was read and interpreted with themes being extracted from the data. After completion of data analysis, all private electronic and hardcopy data was destroyed and all personal data was not kept for longer than necessary for the purpose(s) for which it was collected.

## DATA ANALYSIS

IPA was developed by Smith (1996) and has its origins in hermeneutics and phenomenology. Data in this study was analyzed from a bottom-up approach meaning that instead of applying existing theories to the data collected, codes/themes were generated from the data itself. The codes generated from the data are a result of the IPA process with the researcher mixing descriptions and insight generated from the participant's accounts. IPA analysis utilizes multiple reading and note taking cycles to help immerse the researcher within the data. When extracting themes any inferences that are drawn from the data are done so cautiously, and with a contextual awareness of the cultural, social, and other contextual factors in which the study is concerned.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Superordinate Theme I:

'Negative effects of coaches' other-oriented perfectionism'

The coaches reported mainly negative effects on the player-coach relationship from displays of other-oriented perfectionism. Interestingly this came through strongly in accounts when reflecting on the coach's own playing career and was not referred to as an issue in their current coaching practice. This may indicate a lack of awareness, or perhaps a reluctance to accept the role that the coach's perfectionistic tendencies may play in influencing their current performers.

Coach Y responded:

"So, I had a coach that was extremely attentive to detail, like always wanted perfection and it just put too much pressure on us as players. And I think it had a negative impact on our

performance because we were always worried about doing something wrong... personally I was more nervous, and I know others were nervous too."

Coach Y indicated that a negative impact on the player-coach relationship resulted from a loss of respect, "I think that I had lost respect for her, which is a big thing for me to have between your player and coach". Cockerill & Jowett (2002) highlight that to achieve a healthy player-coach relationship, appreciation and respect for each other as individuals is essential. This scenario illustrates how a coach's perfectionistic strivings can impact on the bond between an athlete and coach and thus disrupt an athletic working alliance.

Coach Z suggested that coaches can "lose motivation/interest in coaching tennis because of their negative experiences in perfectionistic tennis environments". This quote touches on the potential for organizational perfectionism to be conveyed by expectations projected by parents, head coaches or sponsors in any given environment. A significant body of literature already exists highlighting the need to create mastery climates where emphasis is placed on effort and task mastery. This structure needs to permeate throughout the whole performance environment, creating a culture of support and acceptance for players and coaches, acknowledging that at times things may not work out as planned.

Coach Y describes how at times in her playing career a watching coach had the potential to make her feel, "physically sick and emotionally extremely stressed". She goes on to state,

"some were able to cope better than others. I was someone who - I'm very sensitive so I will take information very personally and sort of put it on my shoulders and it would definitely impact me, whereas there were girls who didn't have those cares as much as I did."

The excerpt touches on the presence of individual differences in the way feedback from perfectionistic coaches is interpreted and how different athletes cope with negative performance information. This emphasizes the need for coaches to be aware of their own perfectionistic tendencies and for the need to attenuate how this is transmitted to the range of players in their group.

#### Superordinate Theme II:

##### 'Redefining perfectionism'

Reflecting on various athletes that the coaches had worked with and the relationships they developed with their players, Coach X commented;

"There was a girl I worked with, and all of the coaches knew about her and would sort of comment to each other about, we

need to let her know that she can't expect perfection with tennis.

....she was actually a dancer, which was interesting, because I think dancing teaches you to try and achieve perfection, so I guess you try and perfect a move.

....when she missed, she found it really really hard to understand why she was making that mistake. So, she would constantly say, why did I miss that? Why am I - why do I suck? Why am I not playing well? And we had to make her realize that that's kind of tennis."

When the young athlete projected her understanding of perfectionism established in dance to tennis this caused uncertainty and frustration. The nature of tennis is such that external factors influence the outcome so there is always an element of performance that is outside of one's control. An understanding that external regulation, or just that factors outside our control sometimes act upon us, causes unrest in certain personality types. Joint awareness may help to rationalize these feelings in both the athlete and coach and promote a sense of coping in times when perfection is not reached.

Exploration into how multi-sport athletes develop and transfer their idea of perfectionism from one sport to another also seems like an interesting area to pursue. Tennis coaches may benefit from understanding how messages around perfectionism are inherently communicated in different sports. In this light, tennis might learn from team based sports where the achievement of perfectionism lies more naturally in a collective effort as athletes are dependent on each other for success.

In bringing this review to a close Coach X provides for a nice summary and recommendation for other coaches,

"Coaches should be vigilant around keeping a casual check on how an athlete describes their performance in training or matches either through purposeful dialogue with the coach or self-talk during contests. Elevated perfectionistic concerns need to be challenged early through education via discussions with the player working to understand and then replace dysfunctional perceptions around the need to achieve perfection to reach the top of the game."

The purpose of this review was to raise awareness of the role that perfectionism plays in influencing the player-coach relationship and the development of an athlete in tennis. Future research might examine situations where player-coach perfectionist combinations either align or are at odds with each other and the resultant influence these combinations have on various outcomes. Work might also consider other key agents in the player's immediate environment such as parents and how their perfectionistic tendencies influence a child's long term development in a sport. Bringing these two ideas together it may be that parent-coach perfectionistic tendencies need to align so that this essential aspect of the developmental triangle functions effectively for the good of the player.

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