

Girls' Preferences for Coaches' Pedagogical Behaviors in Sport Training

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Abstract

Despite the well-documented benefits of physical activity, many girls still face age- and gender-based barriers, which limit their opportunities to participate in sport programs compared to boys, and contribute to a tendency to drop out of athletic activities during adolescence. Although these obstacles are widely recognized, effective strategies for overcoming them remain under-explored. Coaches play a pivotal role in shaping young athletes' experiences, serving as socializing agents in youth sport. Research indicates that fulfilling the basic psychological needs of young athletes, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, can promote their continued involvement. Sport-training sessions typically comprise three pedagogical segments: preparatory, main, and concluding; yet it remains unclear how coaches can leverage these segments to support their trainees' psychological needs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the preferences of young female athletes regarding coaches' behaviors across the various pedagogical segments of a training session. The findings indicate that different segments, including a new training segment as perceived by the participants—an introduction section—hold the potential for fulfilling the athlete's basic needs: autonomy in the introductory and concluding segments, competence in the preparatory segment, and relatedness in the concluding segment. This study identifies how coaches can systematically address the psychological needs of young female athletes within the pedagogical framework of sport training, and offers insights for developing more effective and inclusive coaching practices that foster girls' sustained participation in sport.

Keywords

Coach Behaviors, Sport Pedagogy, Adolescent Girls, Participation in Sport, Basic Psychological Needs

1. Introduction

Engagement in physical activity is widely associated with positive cognitive, social, and mental health outcomes (Blom et al., 2013; LaVoi, 2018; Li, 2024). Yet despite these benefits, significant gender and age disparities persist in sport participation. Girls continue to have fewer opportunities to participate in sport than boys (Aspen Institute, 2021; LaVoi, 2018). Moreover, during middle- and late-adolescence (ages 13 - 17), girls often discontinue their involvement in sport activities (Eime et al., 2016; Eime et al., 2020). Factors such as societal gender-role perceptions, limited access, and perceived low competence contribute to these disparities (Eime et al., 2020; LaVoi, 2018). However, a gap persists in both theory and practice regarding measures that should be taken to effectively address and overcome these barriers.

Girls are a vital asset to society and should enjoy the same opportunities and knowledge as boys (LaVoi, 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Nevertheless, they often remain marginalized, failing to realize their full potential, particularly within the context of sports (LaVoi, 2018). Social stereotypes and rigid gender roles frequently restrict girls' participation in sport, positioning them as inferior within a traditionally masculine domain (LaVoi et al., 2018). Consequently, adolescent girls may internalize the belief that exhibiting traits that are associated with masculinity undermines their femininity, leading to withdrawal from sports. This is further complicated by the observation that girls tend to select activities with a social component, while boys often gravitate towards competitive or game-like activities, underscoring the gendered patterns that shape sport-participation opportunities and preferences (da Silva Filho et al., 2012). Recognizing these patterns highlights the importance of understanding their multifaceted experiences and perspectives within the sporting context.

The current study offered girls a platform for articulating their preferences regarding a key influencing factor in sport, i.e., coach behaviors. Amplifying girls' voices is crucial for combating exclusion, challenging gender stereotypes, and transforming societal views towards girls' participation in sport. Moreover, understanding and addressing girls' preferences is crucial for enabling them to maintain their engagement in sport.

The behaviors of socializing agents, including coaches, offer a means for supporting the participation of adolescent girls in sport, thereby helping them overcome the challenges that they face (Weiss & Kipp, 2018). However, girls' preferences regarding coaches' behaviors remain under-researched, especially in qualitative studies. While some have examined the perceptions of female athletes regarding coaches' behaviors, these tend to focus on adults rather than on adolescents (e.g., Lau et al., 2020; Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011). Other studies have included adolescents, yet did not disaggregate the findings by gender, and/or focused solely on preferences related to parental behaviors (e.g., Burke et al., 2023; Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011).

It is important to directly engage with female adolescent athletes in order to understand their preferences regarding coach behaviors, especially in light of the discrepancy between coaches' perceptions and those of young female athletes (Cooky, 2009; Hull et al., 2021). In other words, researchers have not yet asked this population of athletes how they would like their coaches to behave. As such, listening to their voices could empower coaches to provide more meaningful and impactful support, fostering self-confidence among young female athletes and enabling them to reach their full athletic potential.

1.1. Gender Perspectives in the Coaching of Young Female Athletes

When addressing the issue of girls in sport, one prominent area of discourse centers on identifying the most effective training approaches for this population in athletic settings (LaVoi & Goorevich, 2024; Norman, 2016; Roper & Polasek, 2019; Tjønndal, 2019). This discourse encompasses two primary viewpoints: the gender differences perspective and the gender similarity perspective (Hyde, 2005). The former is grounded in gender essentialism, which classifies individuals into groups and posits that members of the same group share inherent characteristics, while those in other groups exhibit contrasting traits (Messner, 2011; Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). As such, coaches who hold essentialist beliefs may treat girls differently than boys, possibly compromising the quality and inclusivity of their training experiences (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; LaVoi & Goorevich, 2024).

On the other hand, the gender similarity perspective maintains that girls and boys exhibit more similarities than differences (Hyde, 2005), with coaches being encouraged to train them in the same manner. However, this viewpoint tends to overlook the impact of socialization—the process through which individuals learn and internalize the norms and values of their social group (Cranmer, 2019). Although women and men may possess similar abilities, they navigate distinct social contexts, including in sport settings (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). Barriers that are unique to girls include traditional gender norms, concerns about safety, low perceptions of competence, embarrassment, teasing, limited access to sport activities, societal expectations to maintain femininity through appearance, and a lack of social support (Abadi & Gill, 2019; Crane & Temple, 2015; LaVoi et al., 2018; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010; Staniford, 2013; Williams et al., 2013).

Both approaches present challenges: one reinforces gender stereotypes, while the other fails to recognize the distinctive experiences of girls and neglects crucial social differences (LaVoi & Goorevich, 2024). Consequently, there is a pressing need to understand girls' preferences, in order to tailor coaching methods to their specific needs. This study underscores the significance of directly addressing the preferences of athletic girls in both research and in the field. Indeed, coaching that specifically addresses the three fundamental needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—could enhance the participation of girls in sport.

1.2. Barriers to Coaching Girls

One challenge that coaches face when working with young female athletes is the lack of relevant training in coaching education programs, highlighting the need to expand their knowledge on addressing and meeting the unique requirements of athletic girls (Botler et al., 2018). In their systematic review, Raabe et al. (2019) show that providing such training, through autonomy-support interventions, for example, can be effective. Their results indicate positive effects on various cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, including intention to engage in physical activity, social functioning, well-being, and self-development. The review also emphasizes that such benefits can be intentionally fostered through targeted interventions. Indeed, Orbach et al. (2022) highlight that providing psychological tools and a supportive environment—through improved coach training and the inclusion of sport psychology consultants—can reduce drop-out rates and increase long-term success for young female athletes.

A second barrier is related to how girls are represented in sports books and in the media. LaVoi et al. (2007), for example, found that various books portray athletic girls as problematic, using negative terms such as “issues with girls” and “the other,” thereby marginalizing them in sport. Some books further reinforce gender stereotypes, depicting boys as competitive and tough, while portraying girls as eager to please, weak, and incompetent in sport. In their study on women’s representation in the cover art of young-adult sport fiction, Roper and Santiago (2021) found that while most covers portray a female character, they are rarely depicted in active, athletic poses. Moreover, few showcase them in sport attire or settings. Similarly, Cooky et al. (2015) found that women’s sports receive minimal coverage in televised news and highlight shows; when featured, female athletes are often framed in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes rather than celebrating their athletic achievements. This underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of girls in sport likely contributes to the challenges that coaches face in fostering positive and equitable opportunities for young female athletes.

Finally, coaches have limited knowledge regarding the preferences of girls in sport, with few studies having directly sought to understand the expectations of female athletes regarding coach behaviors. Surujlal and Dhurup (2011) reported that female soccer players desired coaches who were sensitive to their needs. Similarly, Lau et al. (2020) found that female athletes preferred coaches who view them as whole individuals beyond their athletic identity and who tailor their coaching style accordingly. Female athletes also emphasize their need for trust, noting that coaches’ trust cultivates open communications between them (Stewart, 2016; Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011).

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Coaches can influence their athletes by supporting their psychological needs, as outlined in Ryan and Deci’s basic psychological needs theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to this framework, satisfying the need for autonomy, competence, and

relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation to engage in activities (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). While there is substantial evidence for applying this theory in the context of athletes in general, research that focuses on girls—particularly adolescent athletic girls from non-Western cultures—is relatively limited.

The term *autonomy* refers to the individuals' need to regulate their actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In sport, this need can be met when coaches enable young female athletes to perceive themselves as the source of their behavior, ensuring that their actions feel voluntary (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Conversely, autonomy may be compromised when individuals perceive their actions as coerced by internal or external pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the domain of sport, coaches can adopt an autonomy-supportive approach to address this need. This is evident when coaches acknowledge and validate athletes' perspectives and emotions, offer choices within defined boundaries, explain the rationale behind decisions, and promote self-driven actions (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2006; Duda, 2013; Gano-Overway & Harrison, 2024; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

There is considerable evidence demonstrating a positive relationship between autonomy satisfaction and a commitment to sport (Adie et al., 2008; Back et al., 2022; Quested et al., 2013; Sevil-Serrano et al., 2021), as well as between autonomy satisfaction and higher-quality coach-athlete relationships (Choi et al., 2013; Mossman et al., 2024). However, the existing research predominantly focuses on adults and/or on males, or fails to address gender in the data analysis. Furthermore, much of the literature relies on quantitative research methods, leaving the qualitative voices of girls largely unexplored.

The term *competence* refers to individuals' need to feel effective and capable in areas that they deem important (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In sport, this need can be met when coaches provide girls with opportunities to experience, develop, and specialize in the given activity. On the other hand, competence is undermined when coaches make girls feel incapable and ineffective (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Indeed, adolescent girls report lower perceived competence than boys in both structured and unstructured physical activities (Fraguela-Vale et al., 2020; Morano et al., 2020; Valero-Valenzuela et al., 2024). Kipp and Weiss (2013) found that coach behaviors which enhance perceived competence promote positive affect and higher self-esteem, supporting psychological need satisfaction and overall well-being. Whitehead et al. (2019) found that coaches play a pivotal role in fostering female athletes' competence, in turn sustaining participation in sport.

Finally, the term *relatedness* refers to the need to feel a significant part of a social group, experiencing closeness, warmth, and a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In sport, relatedness is fulfilled when coaches ensure that girls feel influential, valued, needed, and cared for. When coaches fail to recognize this need, these athletes may feel excluded and isolated (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Coaches can foster relatedness by expressing a genuine interest in their athletes, interacting in a warm and caring manner, demonstrating empathy, and implementing grouping strategies, such as cooperative activities (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2006; Fry &

Moore, 2019; Gano-Overway & Harrison, 2024; Stuntz & Weiss, 2010; Visek et al., 2018). Williams and colleagues (2013) found that female athletes who felt cared for by their coaches were more likely to remain active, while those who lacked this sense of closeness tended to drop out. Similarly, Kipp and Weiss (2013) identified a strong correlation between autonomy-supportive coaching and perceived coach-relatedness among athletic girls. It is important to note that studies on relatedness in adolescent athletes primarily examine their sense of relatedness with their teammates (i.e., peer belonging) rather than with their coaches.

Several studies involving Israeli adolescent girls, similar to the participants in this study, have examined the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in a manner that enables inferences about coach behaviors. For example, Goldner and Berenshtein-Dagan (2016) found that adolescents with a sense of connectedness (i.e., relatedness) to their parents experience greater freedom to express their authentic selves. Given that coaches, like parents, hold an authoritative role, this may also apply to the coach-athlete relationship. In another study, Katz (2017) found that Israeli adolescent boys exhibit lower autonomous motivation and higher controlled motivation towards studying compared to girls—possibly since they receive greater support from teachers that reinforces their controlled motivation. This may suggest that adolescent girls have lower expectations regarding their coaches' behavior, anticipating less support for their psychological needs.

1.4. Satisfying Psychological Needs through a Pedagogical Lens

Pedagogically, a single training session or physical education lesson is typically divided into the following three segments: introductory, main, and concluding. Researchers may adopt different terms, such as preparatory, basic, and final (Vaskov, 2022) or introduction, exercises, and closing (Hartoto et al., 2023) to describe these sections. Yet the underlying concept remains consistent. The preparatory segment, also referred to as the anticipatory set, is intended to prepare the athlete's body and mindset for the physical demands of the training regime (Afonso et al., 2024; Larson, 2023; McGowan et al., 2015). The main segment focuses on developing motor skills or on enhancing tactical preparation for competitive scenarios (Hartoto et al., 2023; Vaskov, 2022). Finally, the concluding segment aims to promote muscle relaxation and reduce arousal levels (Hartoto et al., 2023; Van Hooren & Peake, 2018; Larson, 2023).

Each segment plays a vital role in supporting both physical and mental aspects of the athlete, contributing to effective training. However, studies often adopt a holistic approach, treating training as a single, unified entity. Furthermore, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding coach behaviors across the different training segments. As such, studies are needed to determine whether coaches can leverage the unique characteristics of each segment to fulfill a basic need among the athletes. The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine the preferences of adolescent girls regarding coach behaviors during the various segments of a sports-training session.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology using interviews—both group and individual—to explore the perspectives of young female athletes. This approach enabled the researchers to gain in-depth insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and preferences regarding coach behaviors during sport training.

2.2. Participants

A total of 24 young female athletes, aged 13 - 17 years ($M = 14.71$), participated in this study. All were engaged in a team sport or trained in a group setting: basketball ($n = 13$), soccer ($n = 5$), judo ($n = 4$), track and field ($n = 1$), and triathlon ($n = 1$). The participants had been active in their sport for 0.5 - 10 years ($M = 5.75$) and had been training with their current coach for 0.16 - 9 years ($M = 3.2$ years). The participants referred to a total of 12 coaches, nine of whom were male coaches and three female coaches. All coaches held formal qualifications, either a coaching certification or instructor training. Details of the participants' demographic characteristics and focus-group interviews are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Participants' demographics and focus-group details.

Focus Group	Pseudonym	Age	Sport	No. of Years Playing	No. of Years with Current Coach	Region	Coach's Gender	No. of Participants in Interview	Duration (min)
1 (Trial)	Mackenzie	11	Basketball	3	3	South	Female	4	53
	Lilly	11	Basketball	3	3	South	Female		
	Eleanor	11	Basketball	1.25	1.25	South	Female		
	Iris	11	Basketball			South	Female		
2	Odalis	17	Track & Field	3.5	3	South	Male	1	26
3	Dayana	15	Soccer	1.2	0.16	South	Male	1	39
4	Jackie	15	Soccer	4	0.5	South	Female	4	52
	Stephanie	14	Soccer	3	0.5	South	Male		
	Abby	13	Soccer	8	1	South	Male		
	Arielle	14	Soccer	2	1	Center	Male		
5	Colleen	15	Triathlon	7.5	7	Center	Male	3	42
	Alex	13	Basketball	7.5	3.5	Center	Male		
	Naomi	16	Basketball	10	3.5	Center	Male		
6	Lindsey	15	Basketball	6	1.5	Center	Male	2	54
	Chavi	14	Basketball	5	2	Center	Male		
7	Samantha	15	Judo	9	8	Center	Male	1	42
8	Clare	15	Judo	9.5	2	Center	Female	1	44

Continued

9	Mia	15	Judo	7.5	7.5	North	Male	2	58
	Valerie	14	Judo	7	7	North	Male		
10	Annika	15	Basketball	4	1	Center	Female	6	59
	Erika	15	Basketball	7	2	Center	Female		
	Rachel	17	Basketball	9	9	Center	Female		
	Bridget	14	Basketball			Center	Female		
	Kate	15	Basketball	4	3	Center	Female		
	Maxine	17	Basketball	9	9	Center	Female		
11	Lizzie	13	Basketball	0.5	0.5	South	Male	3	59
	Maya	13	Basketball	5	0.5	South	Male		
	Sammy	14	Basketball	3	0.5	South	Male		

The [International Council for Coaching Excellence \(2012\)](#) and the [Aspen Institute \(2021\)](#) also present separate analyses for the 13 - 17 years' age group in relation to sport participation, providing additional rationale for focusing on this age group. The authors of the current study distinguished between athletes who trained in a group context and those who trained individually, as coach-athlete dynamics differ between these settings ([Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016](#)). As such, athletes in individual sports (such as judo) who trained in a group context were considered eligible to participate in this study.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited via the snowball sampling method. The first author initially contacted key participants who met the inclusion criteria (age, gender, and sport), and asked them to recommend additional potential participants ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). After the girls themselves and their parents provided their informed consent to participate, each participant was asked to take part in a group interview, conducted via the Zoom platform. Each interview began with a warm-up question to put the participants at ease and build rapport ([Roulston, 2010](#)). This was followed by an explanation of the interview guidelines to ensure respectful dialogue. The employed question guide was adapted from Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal's study on children's preferred parental behaviors at sporting events ([Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011](#)). The guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses, with intermediate questions used to further explore the participants' input ([Dana et al., 1993](#); [Rubin & Rubin, 2005](#)). The interviews included questions such as, "What does your coach do during the warm-up?" "What would you like your coach to do?" "Why would you like them to do that?"

Eleven group interviews were conducted, with the first serving as a pilot and the remaining ten being analyzed for this study. Focus-group interviews were chosen since they encourage discussions during which participants agree with or con-

tradict one another, seek clarifications, and elaborate on their perspectives (Freeman, 2006; Guest et al., 2013; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; O'Reilly et al., 2013). This method captures a wide range of perceptions and facilitates the expression of diverse viewpoints (Guest et al., 2013), aligning with the objectives of the current study. Three individual interviews were also conducted: one by choice, as one participant preferred a more private setting, and two due to the absence of these participants in the scheduled focus groups, due to their unavailability. The largest group consisted of six participants, with interviews lasting about 25 - 60 minutes ($M = 47.5$). In all group interviews except one, the participants all practiced the same sport (yet not necessarily under the same coach).

2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted in Hebrew, the native language of both the authors and the participants, to ensure comfort and ease of expression. This also facilitated the authors' understanding of nuanced expressions and colloquial language (Dana et al., 1993). With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The first author carefully translated the quotations into English, ensuring that their original meaning was preserved throughout the process (Padgett, 2008). Thematic analysis was employed to systematically organize and interpret the complete dataset, while allowing flexibility when generating shared categories (Braun & Clarke, 2017; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were developed by identifying commonalities among multiple codes and grouping them under overarching themes. The first author then reviewed and refined the themes, breaking down broad themes into sub-themes as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2017; Liebenberg et al., 2020).

2.5. Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility of the findings. First, saturation was reached when the researcher repeatedly listened to the same information, with no new data emerging (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morse, 2015). The first author observed consistent responses across participants and focus groups and determined that saturation had been achieved by the ninth interview. Nevertheless, to ensure comprehensive saturation, the author conducted an additional interview. Second, reflexivity was practiced to acknowledge the potential influence of the researchers' biases, preferences, and personal experiences on the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). A subjectivity statement—written prior to the data collection and analysis stages—was revisited throughout these phases to engage in self-reflection, enhance awareness of potential bias, and minimize its impact on the analysis process.

To ensure transferability, the study incorporated rich and thick descriptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first author provided detailed accounts of the girls' preferences, supported by illustrative quotations. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the participants' privacy

and confidentiality. Additionally, variations in the study sample were sought to enhance the applicability of the findings across diverse contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were recruited cross-sectionally, included girls from the Northern, Central, and Southern regions of Israel, and represented diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. However, the small sample of participants limited the ability to draw conclusions about the cultural context and the mixed religious backgrounds. Finally, the study was approved by the authors' affiliated academic institution.

3. Results

Analysis of the data gathered during the interviews led to the emergence of three themes and several sub-themes regarding coach behaviors during training sessions. These themes included an introductory segment, a preparatory segment, and a concluding segment. Notably, this thematic structure diverges from the commonly accepted three-part segment of sport-training sessions (preparatory, main segment, and conclusion), offering a unique perspective on how young female athletes experience and interpret their training environment in general and their coaching in particular.

3.1. The Introductory Segment

Based on the findings of this study, this segment refers to the period from when coaches begin to gather the athletes until they provide instructions about the first activity. The participants stated that their coaches typically begin with a conversation. As noted by Dayana, "When the training begins, the coach gathers us in a circle and starts talking," and by Sammy, "We wait until all the girls arrive, and then the coach begins by going over a few things." These conversations often include a summary of a recent competition or an explanation of what the current practice will entail.

Preference for a Clear Introduction to the Training Session Content

In the current study, the participants expressed a preference for an introduction that clarifies the content of the upcoming session, to provide them with a better understanding of the training focus. As explained by Jackie,

It's important to first hear what he [the coach] has to update us on and then learn what's going to happen during the practice. That way I know what we're doing, what we're working on, and what we're improving, instead of just doing it without any explanation.

This suggests that the girls would like the training session to begin with both a brief conversation linked to a previous session or competition and an outline of what can be expected during the current training. This aligns with pedagogical recommendations to begin a lesson or session with a recap and an introduction of the upcoming content (Hartoto et al. 2023; Tajeddin & Ghanbar, 2016; Wanphet, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education's WIPPEA model for lesson planning (warm-up, introduction, presentation, practice, evaluation, and ap-

plication), teachers and instructors are encouraged to begin each lesson with a brief overview of its content. This approach helps learners focus their attention on the task at hand (TEAL Center, 2010). Indeed, O'Connor et al. (2018), for example, observed that in youth football, coaches spend about three minutes at the start of a session or activity explaining its content. As such, presenting a type of schedule at the onset of a training session seems to serve as a reassuring factor for young athletes, likely providing them with a greater sense of control and, in turn, supporting their sense of autonomy as they feel that they can regulate their actions.

3.2. The Preparatory Segment

The participants in this study also spoke of the preparatory segment—the initial phase of practice is dedicated to preparing the athlete's mind and body for the upcoming physical activity. Commonly referred to as the warm-up, its primary purpose is to raise body temperature, increase joint range-of-motion, enhance muscle elasticity, and facilitate a mental shift into training mode (McGowan et al., 2015). The girls mentioned the warm-up's importance, its components, and the coach's behaviors during this segment (three sub-themes).

3.2.1. Warm-Up Importance

First, several girls emphasized the role of the warm-up in physically preparing the body, as stated by Naomi, "I'm not always in the mood to do the warm-up because it's so time-consuming. But I understand that it's important because it prevents us from getting injured." In one focus group, the girls highlighted the importance of the physical warm-up as part of their mental preparation. As explained by Anika, "Sometimes, what happened [that day] at school or how you come to the practice affects the actual training." Rachel, on the other hand, said,

I disagree. When you come to practice, you need to forget everything that happened to you during the day and only focus on the training. If we let something that happened during the day affect us, it will continue to influence us during practice. And it won't just affect us; it will affect the entire practice, our teammates, the coach, and everyone.

The findings regarding the athletes' moods at the onset of the practice underscore the mental significance of a warm-up. Although warming up is commonly recognized for its physical benefits, such as raising body temperature, enhancing joint lubrication, and increasing muscle elasticity—all associated with injury prevention (McGowan et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2007)—its psychological role may be equally important. It promotes a gradual mental transition into the activity (McGowan et al., 2015), highlighting its dual importance for both body and mind, as recognized by the girls in the current study.

3.2.2. Components of the Warm-Up

Some girls in the sample suggested incorporating playful content into the warm-up, since games could create a more relaxed atmosphere, reduce pre-workout tension, and generate positive energy for the rest of the practice session. As noted by

Samantha, “It would be nice to play a short game. Something that warms your body and is fun. Something that breaks the tense atmosphere.” Agreeing with Samantha, Valerie added, “I like warm-ups that are playful. It’s more enjoyable to start practice with a game because it’s fun and energizes the rest of the training.” Mia also expressed a preference for a varied warm-up that incorporates skills or games from other sports: “I like warm-ups where the coach brings tennis balls and asks us to do different tasks.” It is important to note that this preference was particularly evident among athletes in individual sports in the sample, specifically judo. Finally, Alex’s comment summarizes the girls’ preferences: “I’d keep the duration of the warm-up but reduce the time spent on static activities and incorporate various games as well.” These quotes highlight the importance of variety in training and underscore the potential of the preparatory segment to offer diverse and engaging activities.

Tomsovsky et al. (2020) found that diverse activities in the warm-up segment support motor learning and foster relatedness. Data from the current study indicate that playful content in the preparatory segment could support the athletes’ basic psychological needs. Clare mentioned how coaches can also use the preparatory segment to satisfy the athletes’ need for autonomy: “You don’t need autonomy throughout the entire session, but we could be given some autonomy during warm-up. For example, we would decide which exercises to perform during the warm-up.” This quote is in line with the literature regarding the need for autonomy-supportive coaching in young athletes, where coaches offer options and delegate responsibilities (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2006; Weiss & Williams, 2004). In this study, the preferences stated by the participants indicate their need for a game-like warm-up and, at times, their desire to choose the warm-up exercises themselves, which would in turn provide them with a sense of autonomy, an important basic need.

Some participants also reported that warm-up content which is conducted in small groups, fosters their need for relatedness. As explained by Annika, “I’d like there to be more activities in pairs and small games during the warm-up. It helps incorporate laughter and creates a positive atmosphere among the girls.” The need for relatedness was also expressed in relation to coach behaviors, throughout the training session in general and during the warm-up in particular. As Lindsay said, “The coach can help us feel like we belong. He can bring us closer to the other girls.” Similarly, Clare said,

At first, I didn’t like coming to practice. I had no one to talk to, and all the other girls were already friends; they already knew each other. I felt alone, and it wasn’t fun coming to practice. I had no one to talk to—before, during, or after practice. I would’ve appreciated it if the coaches had helped with that...they could have paired a senior athlete with a new athlete at the beginning of each practice.

3.2.3. Coach Behaviors during the Warm-Up

In this sub-theme, the girls conveyed their appreciation of coaches who observe, correct, and provide feedback during the warm-up. Some girls noted that their

coaches assign them tasks and then shift their focus to other issues, leaving the athletes feeling neglected. Such behavior was viewed negatively. Lizzie, who described a more desirable behavior, said, “During the warm-up, the coach observes, corrects, and provides feedback.” Yet speaking from her own experience, Clare said that her coaches “stand on the sidelines, talk among themselves, and then assign the next drill.” From the interview it seems that Clare’s coaches were novice trainers who had transitioned from being former athletes.

3.3. The Concluding Segment

This segment refers to the period from the end of the main segment until the coach dismisses the athletes. This segment usually includes a game or match, a muscle stretching session (cool-down), and a summary. The girls noted the importance of this segment as well as the coaches’ behaviors during this phase (two sub-themes).

3.3.1. Importance of the Concluding Segment

In this sub-theme, Dayana commented, “The coach always gives us a game towards the end of the practice. That’s important because it helps us apply the skills that we’ve just learned.” Mia said, “I’d like him to leave enough time for stretching”—a response that, in addition to reflecting a physiological need, may also suggest a need for more time to fulfill basic needs. This is seen in the following quote by Samantha, who highlighted the importance of autonomy in the final segment, saying, “It’s nice that in every practice, the coach lets a different athlete lead the stretching.” This response could indicate a sense of competence, as leading an activity may increase the athlete’s self-efficacy (Raven & Pels, 2021). The likelihood of successful leadership depends, among other factors, on the social bond between teammates. Odalis referred to the importance of the concluding segment in fostering a sense of relatedness with teammates, saying, “Sometimes I feel like skipping the stretches, but I do them anyway because my friends are there and we do them together.”

3.3.2. Coach Behaviors in the Concluding Segment

Some girls reported that the concluding segment also has the potential to foster a sense of relatedness with the coach. As Chavi explained, “At the end of each training session, we gather together and give ourselves a round of applause. Then he [the coach] gives a short talk, we stretch, and go home. Most times, he stays behind with us and jokes around.” Conversely, some coaches leave the gymnasium before the girls, which was perceived as undesirable, possibly indicating a lack of care. Samantha shared, “I wish the coaches wouldn’t rush to end practice and leave. I’d like them to stay so that I can talk to them or ask about something that happened during the practice. They should stay and explain things.” These findings suggest that the concluding segment can do more than simply address motor skills or serve a physiological function; it could also play a pivotal role in fostering autonomy and a sense of relatedness with the other teammates and with the coaches.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the preferences of adolescent athletic girls regarding their coaches' behaviors. The uniqueness of the study lies in its design, whereby rather than considering a training session as a single pedagogical unit, it was divided into segments, with the participants' preferred coach behaviors being examined in each phase. The findings reveal that the various segments of the training session—introductory, preparatory, and concluding—offer a unique opportunity to effectively address the three fundamental needs among young female athletes—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Moreover, this study directly engaged the girls themselves, a typically marginalized population in sport, by examining their preferences firsthand. This approach differs from studies that rely on coaches' assumptions about what girls might prefer, or on findings from research about boys in sport, which are often generalized to girls.

Regarding the introductory segment, the participants would prefer their coaches to begin training with a brief description of the session plan. This preference aligns with existing literature on class introductions (Tajeddin & Ghanbar, 2016; Wanphet, 2016) and with O'Connor et al. (2018), who reported that coaches typically spend about three minutes on this phase. However, the literature on this phase of the practice, which is distinct from the preparatory segment, is limited, possibly since it has not been formally defined, or because coaches may be unaware of its significance, therefore omitting it. Hartoto et al. (2023) implemented an intervention program designed to strengthen athletes' commitment to sport, in which the introduction constituted an essential component. This study highlights the need for additional research on the pedagogy of sport coaching, as a means for defining the introductory segment and acknowledging it as an integral part of a training session. Doing so could prompt coaches to appreciate its value and incorporate it, to enhance the training process.

4.1. Supporting Basic Psychological Needs

4.1.1. Supporting the Need for Autonomy

The introductory segment can also serve as an essential instructional tool due to its transitional nature. In educational settings, a transition refers to the process of moving from one phase or activity to another, and requires physical, psychological, or behavioral adjustments among learners (Kaplaka, 2009; Kramer & Kovarik, 2013). From a psychological perspective, introducing a daily schedule fosters a sense of security and reduces anxiety among youth (Kaplaka, 2009). This suggests that when coaches provide an introduction, they may be meeting their athletes' need for autonomy by helping them feel that they can regulate their actions. As such, this introductory phase plays a role in fulfilling the basic psychological need of autonomy, a significance that has not previously been noted in the literature. However, it remains unclear whether coaches recognize the potential of the introductory segment in strengthening their athletes' autonomy. One practical implication for coaches is to present the daily agenda to their athletes at the beginning

of the training session. This presentation should be clear, concise, and focused, avoiding excessive detail.

Another potential opportunity to foster autonomy was identified during both the preparatory segment and the concluding one. The girls in the current study wanted to lead the warm-up or stretches themselves or choose their own content. This preference is supported by studies demonstrating that autonomy satisfaction is a key predictor of continued participation (Adie et al., 2008; Amorse & Anderson-Butcher, 2006; Back et al., 2022; Sevil-Serrano et al., 2021). Moreover, fulfilling basic psychological needs has been shown to correlate with youths' intention to remain engaged in sport (Castillo-Jimenez et al., 2022; Garcia-Bengoechea & Stern, 2007; Visek et al., 2018). However, most studies do not focus exclusively on adolescent athletic girls, nor do they address the timing and opportunities for providing autonomy within each pedagogical segment of the training session.

It should be noted that although the girls in our study expressed a desire for autonomy, they were not satisfied when the coaches allowed them to lead a task, yet then redirected their attention to unrelated activities. This finding is significant as it underscores that fostering autonomy does not necessarily mean relinquishing all responsibility to the athlete who is leading the activity. Rather, it highlights the need for coaches to maintain involvement and guidance, meaning autonomy does not mean the absence of guidance. It is possible that this practice among coaches stems from them being former athletes who lack formal coaching education. Studies show that athletes prefer to work with coaches who possess both professional expertise and pedagogical knowledge (Becker, 2009; Stewart, 2016), particularly regarding teaching methodologies (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; ICCE, 2012; Visek et al., 2018). The Aspen Institute's 2022 report revealed that many U.S. youth coaches lack essential competencies for working effectively with young athletes (Aspen Institute, 2022). This underscores that even former athletes with extensive experience may lack the necessary skills to coach youth, especially girls (Mallett & Rynne, 2015).

Sport organizations could benefit from integrating sport pedagogy into coaching education programs, with an emphasis on training youth in general and young girls in particular, and recruiting trained, certified coaches. More specifically, coaches should allow girls to lead or select warm-up and cool-down activities, while providing guidance throughout the process to ensure that the training objectives are met, maintaining focus on the activity and steering it, rather than using the opportunity to shift attention to unrelated environmental issues.

4.1.2. Supporting the Need for Competence

In the preparatory segment, participants in this study emphasized the importance of the warm-up phase, not only for physical readiness but also for mental preparation. While research primarily focuses on physiological aspects (McGowan et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2007), the mental dimension is often overlooked. The current findings, however, indicate that athletes value warm-ups for preparing both

body and mind. Furthermore, physical and mental preparations are indirectly linked to a sense of competence—the need to feel capable in areas that one deems important (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Indeed, the literature indicates that competence is associated with girls' persistence in sport (Weiss & Kipp, 2018). However, when considering perceptions of competence in sport and their association with gender, girls consistently report lower perceptions of motor competence (Fraguela-Vale et al., 2020; Kipp & Weiss, 2013; Morano et al., 2020; Whitehead et al., 2019). This disparity is multifaceted, likely stemming from limited motor-skill experiences (Horn, 2019; Horn & Horn, 2007) and from societal perceptions that portray girls as less competent in sport (Crane & Temple, 2015; LaVoi & Goorevich, 2024; Standiford, 2013).

Recommended means for enhancing competence perceptions include creating a mastery motivational climate that focuses on improvement, learning, and effort, offering optimal challenges, and providing contingent feedback (Horn, 2019; Stuntz & Weiss, 2010; Visek et al., 2015; Weiss, 2019). In this context, examining the relationship between warm-ups and competence perceptions through a pedagogical lens becomes particularly significant. When athletic girls feel physically and mentally prepared for the sport activity, they may be more likely to succeed in the task, thereby enhancing their sense of competence.

In addition, the participants in our study reported a preference for warm-ups that include playful activities rather than generic ones such as running laps. This preference was particularly evident among the individual-sport athletes in our sample, specifically the judokas. Pluhar et al. (2019) explain that athletes in individual sports may be more susceptible to stress, anxiety, and depression compared to those in team sports. Therefore, exercises that offer opportunities for social interaction with other athletes and break the routine, such as playful warm-ups, may foster a sense of enjoyment and contribute to stress relief. Evidence on the topic of playful warm-ups is inconclusive: while some studies suggest that warm-ups involving group or ball activities increase enjoyment (e.g., Tomsofsky et al., 2020), others indicate that warm-ups with excessive stimuli do not improve attention compared to traditional warm-ups (e.g., Silva-Capella et al., 2021). It is possible that activities that require frequent decision-making within a short period of time may deplete the athletes' mental capacity during the main segment of the training session. This idea resonates with the concept of gamification in physical education, where specific elements of a sport are integrated into games (Ahn et al., 2019; Ferraz et al., 2024; Sotos-Martinez et al., 2024). Evidence shows that gamification enhances competence and intrinsic motivation among youth to participate in physical education classes (Ferraz et al., 2024; Sotos-Martinez et al., 2024). Based on these findings, one practical implication for coaches is to incorporate games and group exercises into warm-ups, ones that are simple, include basic movement skills, and require minimal decision-making.

4.1.3. Supporting the Need for Relatedness

The content of the preparatory segment was found to hold the potential to foster

relatedness among teammates. Physical proximity and collaboration activities and interactions outside of the training arena foster shared experiences, which has the potential to build relatedness (Carron & Eys, 2012; Gano-Overway & Harrison, 2024). Based on these findings, coaches should consider incorporating cooperative activities into training sessions. Since such activities may not always align with the primary goals of the main segment, the warm-up phase may serve as an optimal time for their implementation.

It is, however, important to recognize the potential limitation of emphasizing relatedness, as coaches with a gender-essentialist perspective (LaVoi & Goorevich, 2024) may assume that girls inherently prioritize relatedness over autonomy and competence. Indeed, Valero-Valenzuela et al. (2024) found that girls reported higher levels of relatedness compared to boys. Essentialist beliefs about gender, coupled with the perception that girls naturally excel in cooperative activities, may lead coaches to design training programs that emphasize collaboration at the expense of competitive elements. However, research indicates that women and girls enjoy and seek competitive experiences (Hull et al., 2021). Coaches should therefore aim to incorporate activities that foster relatedness, as well as those that promote individual competition.

While previous research on relatedness primarily focuses on the sense of belonging among teammates, participants in our study emphasized the importance of also feeling connected to the coach. They spoke of the concluding segment of the training session as a key opportunity to enhance this relatedness, expressing a preference for their coaches to stay with them at the end of training for this purpose. Although existing research has largely examined the physiological aspects of the cool-down phase (Van Hooren & Peake, 2018), this study adds to the literature by exploring coach behaviors beyond the official training session. However, given the preliminary nature of the current study, additional research is needed to further understand coaches' roles and behaviors during the concluding segment. A summary of the practical implications for practitioners is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Practice-oriented table.

Segment	Practical Implications	Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction
Introductory	Start each session with a brief, clear overview of the training plan to enhance focus and engagement; avoid unnecessary details.	Autonomy
Preparatory	Allow athletes to lead warm-up exercises; however, remain actively involved in the process.	Autonomy
	Do not underestimate the value of warm-ups for both physical and mental preparation; a sense of readiness can enhance performance and build competence.	Competence

Continued

	Incorporate a variety of exercises, not necessarily specific to their sport, especially for athletes in individual sports, to promote engagement and overall skill development. Ensure that games are simple, incorporate fundamental motor skills, and involve minimal decision-making demands.	
	Use small-group activities that combine cooperation within groups and competition between groups.	Relatedness
	Allow athletes to lead cool-down exercises; however, remain actively involved in the process.	Autonomy
Concluding	Stay after practice to engage in casual one-on-one conversations with athletes; be the last to leave the gymnasium to foster connection.	Relatedness

4.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study demonstrates methodological rigor and offers valuable insights, a number of limitations should be addressed. In particular, the employed methodology—focus groups—is especially beneficial when the participants have no prior acquaintance with one another, as this helps eliminate hierarchical influences and encourages more open discussions (Guest et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, however, most of the focus groups (except for one) consisted of participants who already knew each other. Such familiarity may have introduced group dynamics and hierarchies that allow more dominant individuals to shape the discussion and discourage others from expressing opposing views. This concern is especially relevant during adolescence—a period that is characterized by a heightened desire for conformity (Bokhorst-Heng & Marshall, 2019; Goldner & Berenshtein-Dagan, 2016; Yu et al., 2019). Yet on the other hand, prior acquaintance among adolescents could facilitate comfort and openness, decreasing feelings of discomfort in an unfamiliar setting (Daley, 2013).

To minimize the impact of prior acquaintance on focus-group dynamics, three strategies were employed. First, an engaging, inclusive icebreaker (e.g., “What’s the number on your jersey and why?”) was used at the start of each interview (Roulston, 2010). Moreover, ground rules were established to prevent interruptions, allow contradicting views, and promote mutual respect (Daley, 2013). Finally, the participants were asked to individually complete a survey at the end of the interview, providing them with an additional opportunity to share their perspectives. Future research could benefit from conducting focus groups with individuals who have no prior acquaintance with one another.

The study employed a snowball, purposive sampling. A recognized limitation of this approach is the reduced potential for generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the objective of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the girls’ experiences and preferences rather than to produce broadly general-

izable findings. To enhance transferability, efforts were made to ensure a heterogeneous sample that included participants with a wide range of identities. This variation in the sample allowed for the representation of diverse perspectives relevant to the research focus.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the preferences of young female athletes regarding coach behaviors across the various segments of a sport-training session, focusing on how these behaviors may support their three basic needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The introductory segment, which differs from and precedes the preparatory one and is often overlooked by coaches, was identified as particularly valuable for fostering autonomy and competence. The concluding segment emerged as key to promoting autonomy and relatedness. Although these segments are much shorter than the main training segment, they hold significant potential for addressing the psychological needs of young female athletes and could enhance their retention in sport. Coaches should be mindful of the unique value of each pedagogical segment and leverage them strategically to support girls' sustained participation in sport.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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