



# Sport in Society

## Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcss20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcss20)

## On coaching and the ethics of care: a psychodynamic approach

Kutte Jönsson

To cite this article: Kutte Jönsson (2024) On coaching and the ethics of care: a psychodynamic approach, *Sport in Society*, 27:12, 2036-2046, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2024.2411497](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2411497)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2411497>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 29 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# On coaching and the ethics of care: a psychodynamic approach

Kutte Jönsson

Department of Sport Sciences, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

This paper is prompted by the intuition that the common ethical theories do not fully comprehend the (internal) psychological structures of the asymmetrical coach-athlete relationship. Through a few examples I attempt to investigate the ethically vulnerable coach-athlete relationships that often emerge. With a philosophical view taken from Nel Noddings' theory of an ethics of care, I argue that we may need a broader perspective on the ethical issues which also include a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic perspective towards the relationships in question. Doing that would in itself be an ethical approach to take for a deeper understanding of the relationships between coaches and athletes.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 August 2024

Accepted 4 July 2024

## KEYWORDS

Coaching; moral philosophy; ethics of care; psychodynamic psychology; Noddings; Freud

## Introduction

In 2006, the former Swedish elite swimmer Emma Igelström published her autobiography *Simmar-Emma: Min kamp mot bulimin* (eng. 'Swimming Emma: My Struggle Against Bulimia'). The book is an insider's account of a world in which a young swimmer with high ambitions meets the harsh reality of elite sports. In fact, in her book, Igelström describes how she developed eating disorders during her career. The problems started after a specific occasion, the day she was called to a meeting with her coach at the time, Hans Chrunak. Chrunak played a crucial role for her as a young and aspiring swimmer. He was her coach but not only that, he was also the captain of the national swimming team and a powerful force in Swedish swimming overall.

During the meeting, Chrunak briefly told what was required of her for becoming the best swimmer in the world, that was her goal. She needed to lose weight. Or, as Chrunak putted it: 'You are not too fat if you compare yourself to your school mates in the school yard, but you are too fat to be the best in the world' (Igelström and Olofsson 2006, 24). My translation). Later, Chrunak was confronted with the quote and admitted bluntly that he may very well have expressed himself that way.

The words from her coach stayed with her and this, she believes, was the beginning of the long struggle against bulimia. Having said that, she eventually achieved her goal to become the world champion in swimming.

**CONTACT** Kutte Jönsson  [kutte.jonsson@mau.se](mailto:kutte.jonsson@mau.se)  205 06 Malmö

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

So, what should we make of this story (and other stories like this one)? There are many questions one could raise. Did Chrunak care about Igelström? What is this an example of when it comes to the internally vulnerable relationship between coaches and athletes? What constitutes good (that is ethically sound) coaching? How should we understand the concept of care when it comes to the coach-athlete relationship?

That said, this paper is prompted by the intuition that the common ethical theories do not fully comprehend the somewhat unique structures of the coach-athlete relationship. Nor does sports psychology as we know it. In fact, my intuition is that we need a complementary approach in order to understand the limitations that come with sports coaching in general. Why not consider the often-overlooked psychoanalytic approach, in this paper specified as the psychodynamic approach? To be more specific, I will take the normative stand and claim that new perspectives may unlock ethically important dimensions that lies within the coach-athlete relationships, especially when talking about the concept of care in sports.

The structure of this paper will be as follow: I will begin the paper by giving account for some of the most commonly used ethical principles, and from there continue by connecting the ethical ideas to the more general issue regarding what constitutes a 'good coach', before I end by introducing the psychodynamic perspective as a possible solution to (some) of the problems that are related to coach-athlete relationships.

## Some ethical perspectives

Ethics play a significant role when it comes to sports. One of the key questions would be how we should act to act morally sound in a sporting environment. We all know for a fact that we often need ethical guidelines for how to act and behave in certain situations. From that point of view, ethical principles regulate us in different ways. At the same time, the human experience may be driven by forces that we do not fully understand, forces that may have an impact on how we behave and on the choices we make. To that, we may also have different views on the world and how we understand and perceive the world around us. That too may have an impact on how we ethically confront the world. In this regard, the ethical theories may work best on the conscious level, whereas we may need another set of tools in order to understand what is happening on the unconscious level, among emotions, experiences and relationships from the past, factors that may influence our lives today and also have an influence on our morally based decisions and actions. I will develop this line of thought later. First, let us return to the ethical theories.

Along the history of ethics, there are a few ethical theories that stands out; theories that may lead us to different conclusions in concrete examples. These theories also have an impact on sports. The theories most frequently referred to is named consequence ethics, duty ethics and virtue ethics.

In short, according to consequence ethics, the moral value of an action is measured by the outcome of the action. The most common variant of this form is utilitarianism, a moral doctrine that states that one should act in such a way that the sum of happiness (or well-being) in universe is as great as possible (see for example Bentham [1780] 2008; Mill [1859] 1978). What can this imply in a sports coaching context? Here is a suggestion. Consider a situation where a coach succeeds in promoting athletic success. The athlete wins important competitions, which in turn leads to great joy for many people. But as it turns out, the

success comes with a prize, for the athlete. S/he gets burned out and must end his/her career earlier than planned. Of course, we may claim that this is sad. On the other hand, the joy and happiness that resulted from the athlete's short career seemed to be greater than the shortening of the athlete's career. So, all things considered, the overall amount of happiness justified the ill-health of the athlete. And from a coaching perspective, the fact that the coach pushed the athlete to become successful can be morally defended. To put it blunt, it is about simple moral mathematics. And putting it this way, we have embraced an utilitarian approach.

Duty ethics guides us in a different way. Following this theory, once developed by Kant ([1785] 1964), we should follow rationally grounded rules. This, however, may mean that we should act in ways that does not necessarily lead to an overall (hedonistic) increase of well-being among the majority. From a duty-ethical, or Kantian, perspective, we are not as interested in the outcome in terms of happiness or utility, but more interested in having followed the rationally founded rules – regardless of the outcome. If we on rational grounds hold the view that coaches should act in a certain way, based on rational principles, then that is precisely we (or, as in this case, a coach) should obey, rather than whether the outcome leads to success. It is as simple as that.

The third theory often referred to is virtue ethics. Based upon the writings of Aristotle (1996), and much later refined by Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), the right thing to do is what *a good person* would do in a given situation. But what is 'a good person', and what is a good coach? That may be an open question. Applied to coaching, great importance would be placed on the character of the coaches, i.e. how 'wise' the coach is, regardless of whether this leads to success or not.

Albeit the differences between these theories, they have one thing in common: they are all normative and therefore action-guiding. Another thing they have in common, is that they can be seen as rather abstract. *In principle* and *in theory* we may lean on one or another ethical theory. But things may very well change when we are faced with a concrete situation with actual people of flesh and blood. So, perhaps these theories are *too* abstract?

The abstract levels of these theories have invited some to criticize the theories on that ground. And here is when ethics of care comes into play. Some of those who advocate another branch of ethics – ethics of care – might claim that.

So, how describe this branch of ethics? Perhaps Virginia Held (2005) describes it best, when she says:

The ethics of care is only a few decades old. Some theorists do not like the term 'care' to designate this approach to moral issues and have tried substituting 'the ethic of love', or 'relational ethics', but the discourse keep returning to 'care' as the so far more satisfactory of the terms considered, though dissatisfactions with it remain (Held 2005, 9).

Whether we prefer to call this branch of ethics 'ethics of care', 'relational ethics' or the more demanding concept 'ethics of love' (for this paper I will use 'ethics of care'), it is a feminist response to the abstract principles of the most common ethical theories.

Feminist philosophers, from the 1960s and onwards, have at times criticized utilitarianism, duty ethics and virtue ethics for being way too abstract. But ethics, and moral philosophy in general, is not only about principles and (abstract) rationalities, it is also about real people; people guided by emotions, unconscious drives and certain relationship patterns. However, even if utilitarianism, duty ethics and virtue ethics do not totally neglect the

impact for example emotions might have on our actions in real life, one can easily see the point relational ethicists may have.

That said, there are many aspects to consider when talking and thinking about ethics of care. One is purported by Trudy Govier, who focus on the importance of trust as a ground element of ethics of care. Govier says:

The ethic of caring is one of reciprocity because the person who is cared for contributes in essential ways to the relationship. Reciprocity is not understood in tit-for-tat terms, or as a matter of mutual compliance with contracts, rules, or principles. It is a matter of attitude and response: the one cared for must complete the relationship by apprehending and receiving the care given (Govier 1992, 25–26).

This view is in turn based upon a specific approach towards what the human nature entails. Govier again, claims:

Human nature is not rooted in the egoistic pursuit of self-interest. Rather, it includes a longing for relatedness, a longing fulfilled in caring relationships, relationships that can lead to deep joy (Govier 1992, 26).

For example:

Mothering and teaching are prime examples of such relationships: the one who cares will, after years of care leading eventually to the development of adult human beings, feel a deep joy in the completion of this work. The productive and joyful caretaker, not the lonely man in existential anguish, is the model for a morally sensitive and successful human being (Govier 1992, 26).

If we look pass the gendered approach in the quote above, and halt at the core idea, it seems that ethics of care is a response to the traditional masculine philosophical approach towards (in)dependence. In fact, one can see Govier's understanding of this branch of ethics as an example of how one can turn the back on abstractions in favor of ethics based on relationships.

One of the most famous theories of ethics of care comes from the writings of Nel Noddings. In her seminal work *Caring* (Noddings 1984), Noddings articulates an alternative to the commonly used (abstract) ethical theories. Much like Govier, Noddings claims that morality has its roots from relational circumstances, rather than coming from ideas. In that sense she holds a special focus on the intersubjectivity of our existence. For example, to care about someone involves a 'feeling with' another person (Noddings 1984, 30). The other person is not an abstraction, s/he is real. However, it is not sufficient to just notice another person for the sake of caring, we may also have to show or express empathy. In fact, Noddings goes as far as to say: 'When I receive the other, I am totally with the other' (Noddings 1984, 32).

So, how should we relate this theory to sports and sports coaching? If utilitarianism, duty ethics and virtue ethics are concerned with the idea of independent, rational beings, the ethics of care is more concerned with the *relations* between human beings.

So, even if the common ethical theories have their benefits, they are all focused on individuality rather than on specific (and unique) relations. This issue come into play not least talking about athlete-coach relationships. In addition to that, the ethical issues connect to another big issue, namely what constitutes a good coach in general.

## Some philosophical aspects of 'good' coaching

What constitutes a good coach and what constitutes good (that is ethically sound) coaching? What can we reasonably demand? Many have been working on this key question over the years, and as it seems the issue is difficult to fully comprehend. What we usually must face is a set of ideas and ideals of what it means to be a good coach. Sigmund Loland (2011), for example, recognizes two separate understandings for the normative aims of coaching.

Loland distinguishes between two theoretical perspectives regarding the moral nature of coaching (and of being a good coach): one perspective is based upon natural science, and the other one is based upon a socio-cultural understanding. Both of these perspectives, or understandings, play a vital part in the theoretical making of the coaching concept. So, let us say something short about the mentioned perspectives.

The natural science perspective is preconditioned by the idea that the athletes are carriers of bodies first and foremost, bodies that are supposed to function in specific sporting contexts. From this (narrow) point of view, the body (and the human that carries the body), is reduced to a mechanical object. Based on this view, a good coach can predict realistic results on how the athlete's body is processed through the exercises needed to be successful. This view also implies that the body will be separated from the mind. What the individual athlete may think, or feel is of no importance, what is important is how the body functions in the specific sporting environment. From this view, the human body can be compared to, say, a car, or any other machine.

What should we make of this view? Undeniably, the natural scientific perspective has its merits. With tools from the natural sciences, new techniques and methods for training have been developed. And this has improved sports. Also, disconnected from the mind, the body can come in a state of flow, where the mind is beyond the body and beyond the psychological self. In one respect, one can explain it by saying that the athlete *becomes* the sport (and what the sport demands of the athlete). The distinction between humans and machines dissolves and become one entity. That said, one might object to this by rightfully saying that this perspective alone would make sports way too one-sided. More important, taking only the natural scientific perspective into consideration would not deepen the understanding of the nature of sports and sports coaching fully, only some parts of it. That is also why the socio-cultural understanding plays a significant part.

In some respect, the socio-cultural understanding can be seen as the opposite of the natural scientific one. The presumption of the socio-cultural perspective is to say that the body does not come first, but rather the body immersed in a specific social and cultural environment. Differently put, in order to seriously understand sports performances, one needs to understand the social and cultural context in which the performances take place. Without this perspective it would be difficult to discover how certain environments may benefit athletes and sports. So goes the argument.

From this reasoning alone one might reach the somewhat trivial conclusion that both perspectives are needed. More important though, a good coach, Loland claims, is aware of the tension of these perspectives. Because, on one hand athletes are usually expected to obey the instructions articulated by the coaches (and according to the 'laws' of natural science). On the other hand, there may also be an expectation that athletes should be independent and stimulated to be creative (that is, knowing how to navigate not only in relation

to what the body mechanically can perform but also in relation to the human mind). The crucial issue here would be how to balance these two aspects.

Following Loland, and to answer the question what a good coach looks like (or should look like), he introduces the concept *phronesis*.

The concept *phronesis* originates from Aristotle (1996). Often the concept is translated as ‘practical wisdom’, and means that merely knowledge is not enough, a prudent person also needs to be practical and experienced. Or, differently put, it is not sufficient to have knowledge about particular facts, the (textbook) knowledge also needs to be processed and translated into practice. Or, as Aristotle describes it:

The reason is that prudence includes a knowledge of particular facts, and this is derived from experience... (Aristotle 1996, 6, 1141b32-1142a25).

Translating this into the issue of sports coaching one can, as Loland argues, mean that a good coach should be a ‘enlightened generalist’ (Loland 2011, 21). A coach may be good in particularities, but if s/he does not see the athletes from a bigger and perhaps clearer view, it is difficult to claim that it is a good coach taken as a whole. Perhaps the Igelström case is a good example of that.

### The Igelström case revisited

The Igelström case took place within a Swedish context during the 1990s. One can of course question if that matter at large, but in some respect it might. For one thing, one need to know something about the context in which the book was published. In 2006 very few talked openly and publicly about deep and dark problems related to sports. Eating disorders, abuse (sexual or otherwise), violence, bullying, drug abuse and alcoholism, was something that ‘everyone’ knew took place in sports but hardly ever talked about. In this respect, Igelström’s book broke new ground, at least in Sweden. Today, I would say, most autobiographies by former athletes reveal sides that are not shown before the public, at least not during their active careers. So, simply from this point of view, there is a reason to look closer on Igelström’s story.

As said in the beginning of this paper, Igelström developed an eating disorder during her career as an elite swimmer. And according to herself it all began after a meeting with her coach, the captain of the national swimming team, Hans Chrunak. Let us therefore take a step back to the day it all started and take a closer look on the supposed circumstances. Let us set the scene.

To begin with, we have two people in a room in a swimming hall. One of them carries the dream of becoming the world’s best swimmer, the other has the tools to make it happen. One of them is a fifteen-year-old girl, the other a middle-aged man. One of them has recently moved away from a safe home environment (with parents and siblings and friends), the other is well established in the environment. One of them has things to prove before the next step can be taken for a successful sports career, the other is in a position of power by virtue of being an already successful coach. One of them lacks experience, the other has lot of experience. In short, the asymmetrical situation cannot be mistaken. The unequal, or asymmetrical, circumstances probably had an impact on how the words from the coach was received with the athlete. However, and this may be an important point to make, it does not mean that the coach was wrong with the ‘facts’. Probably he was not. But – it was the

way the coach presented the facts that was the issue, here. In other words, the problem was not the truth (assumed that it was true), but how it was said and how the truth landed within the athlete. One might even claim, that Chrunak, in this case, was too focused on the 'mechanical' aspect of sports (merely focusing on the sporting body) and not on the psychological or social aspects of sport.

What this example also may suggest, is that there was a close relationship between the coach and the athlete but that they did not speak the same language. Another thing this example may show, is that it illustrates the difficulties when it comes to coach-athlete relationships, and that the idea of care can look very different dependent on what factors we consider to be relevant in a specific situation.

Again, one can recognize that different coaching styles may have the same desires. They can both be authoritative, although in different ways. And, as I will later suggest, they can both be about caring.

However, one might say, or even object, that the social asymmetry between Igelström and Chrunak, that is between the talent and the coach, was more than a social fact. There is also a psychological fact to consider. In fact, we probably have reason to believe that these two aspects coincide. One might argue that due to status, he should have approached the talent differently than he did. That is a trivial thing to say, though. However, it does not mean that he did not care. One might say that the coach in this example acted unethically (or not), or that he should have known more about the athlete's emotional status (or not), nonetheless one can assume that he still cared about her desires of becoming a world-class swimmer. But – perhaps the coach only saw what was in front of him, not what was going on inside the athlete. And that, in turn, may be something that makes the idea of care less potent.

This example is far from unique. In fact, one has every reason to think more on the very nature of the coach-athlete relationship, with or without the ethical aspects. Athletes, one can assume, is subjected to the coach and the coaches' view on the world.

## When athletes become their coach

We know for a fact that the asymmetrical relationship between coaches and athletes have consequences, not only regarding the possibility of becoming a better athlete but also when it comes to issues that has to do with the (psychological) self. Usually, I believe that most athletes who are being subjected to coaches, know how to distinguish between the self and the coach. However, in some cases athletes may lose their self and *become* the coach. When the athlete becomes his/her coach means that the athletes' own person will be replaced by the coaches' ideas, thoughts, and view on the world. More specific, in means that the athlete put their life in the hands of the coach. One may see this as controversial in some respect, especially in a world where individuality and self-ownership have a crucial place. Some may claim that there is something morally disturbing in the idea of letting other people (here, coaches with status and power to execute decisions that at best is in favour for the athlete), decide what the athlete should think, do, and perhaps even feel under certain circumstances. Being subjected to the coaches' influence can mean different things. To make this argument a bit clearer I will illustrate this by two examples, both taken from an American context but nonetheless applicable to other sports contexts as well.



*The first example:* In 2010, the former American tennis player Andre Agassi published his bestselling book *Open: An autobiography* (Agassi 2009). In contrast to many autobiographies about former sport stars, this is not the usual melodramatic success story, not a rags-to-riches-story, but a story about a person who struggled his inner demons. First and foremost, it is a story about the mental wounds inflicted to Agassi during his successful career.

As a young boy, Agassi hated playing tennis. The reason for that is simple. He lost himself under the pressure from his father. Agassi writes:

After years of hearing my father rant at my flaws, one loss has caused me to take up his rant. I've internalized my father – his impatience, his perfectionism, his rage – until his voice doesn't just feel like my own, it is my own. I no longer need my father to torture me. From this day on, I can do it all by myself (Agassi 2009, 38).

The internalization Agassi describes is strong. It is about losing oneself, and not in a good way. In fact, the father and the coach did not respect Agassi's interests. They did not have his mental welfare at heart when they trained him, and the care they showed was instrumentally based only. And according to Agassi, it led to a situation where he eventually lost his own voice. Or bluntly put, he lost himself but gained athletic success. Following Agassi's own view, it was bad for him.

*The second example:* For many years the former American basketball player Bill Walton played and practiced under the legendary basketball coach John Wooden.

During the 1970s and 80s John Wooden made a name in American basketball as a unique coach, especially when it came to his relationships with the players he fostered. This became evident not least in his autobiography *They Call Me Coach* (2014). In the foreword to the book, Bill Walton describes the relationship with the following words:

Our practices, our lives are constantly structured around the four laws of learning: demonstration, imitation, correction, and repetition. And repeat we do – everything, everyday, until we have become John Wooden ourselves (Walton 2004, in Wooden and Tobin 2004, 6).

Coached by Wooden, Walton lost himself, at least in some respect. Walton (and the other players under Wooden) 'became' Wooden. Their own subjectivity diminished and turned into another subjectivity, Wooden's subjectivity. Their own voices were not their own, but the coaches voice.

So, how to understand these examples? First, they resemble each other. Agassi and Walton, both lost themselves and became their coaches. But their experiences differ radically. Agassi portrayed his experience as something bad, whereas Walton thought of it as something welcomed. In both cases they became successful athletes, though. In other words, from a strict sporting perspective it served them to lose themselves. But in Agassi's case it was to the prize of mental ill-health, whereas in Walton's case it was a personal improvement as a human being. To be fair, their respective coaches had different styles. Agassi's coaches were harder on him, whereas Wooden was known for a softer coaching style. That of course is of importance. But apart from that, the consequences were almost the same. One might think though, that if Agassi would have a coach such as Wooden, he might very well have looked back on his career and the experience of losing himself in a different way.

In some respect these examples can be applied to the Emma Igelström case as well. One might even claim that Igelström too lost herself, wounded by the words of her coach, during a sensible time in her life.

All these examples can illustrate how ethics and psychology are intertwined. From an outsider-position one can suggest how coaches should act in different situations dependent on the status of the athlete, but that take us only so far. We may add something to the issue for making the ethical suggestions stronger. In other words, I believe we need to take the issue to another level.

## The psychodynamic approach

To begin with, the psychodynamic approach derives from psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis is not especially common in sports psychology or for that matter in the branch of ethics of sport. That may be a mistake.

In fact, psychoanalytic theories might provide important insights in soul of sports, not least as a complement to contemporary and instrumentally based sport psychology (McFee 2005; Free 2008; Burston 2019; Ferraro 2019; Jönsson 2024; Meeuwse 2024; Pisk 2024; Tuncel 2024; et cetera). Or, as some have claimed, ‘sports exemplify basic Freudian concepts, such as unconscious motivation, unconscious conflict and compromise...’ (Hansell 2010, 539). These aspects may also be relevant when investigating the coach-athlete relationship, not least in terms of care. Or, as Strean and Strean (1998, 209) puts it: ‘Psychodynamic theory is a philosophy about normal personality, a perspective on maladaptive functioning, and a form of therapeutic intervention.’

Following the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud’s theory (1923), the human mind consists of the id (which is the primitive and unconscious part of the mind, such as drives and aggressions), the ego (which develops through experience and over time, and which shapes the personality), and the superego (which among other things values and makes moral judgments). From a general point of view, one might think that psychoanalytical perspectives can play a role also when it comes to sports. Or, as Graham McFee puts it:

[...] Freud’s work offers ways of viewing the mind, the person and action more plausible than many currently espoused by sports psychology; and this is especially important when we consider methodologies, as Freud’s ideas can help combat a dominant scientism (McFee 2005, 85).

Based on McFee’s assumption one can explore the relationships between coaches and athletes by using in terms of transference and countertransference (see for example Freud 1912). Shortly speaking, the idea of transference is that it is a redirection of feelings from one person onto another person, as a form of projection. Countertransference, on the other hand, is the redirection of for example a therapist, but could also be a coach, toward the client/athlete.

This means that there is always a *possibility* that certain person’s actions can derive from circumstances that is not easy to reveal but have an impact on our actions and re-actions. And this goes for both coaches and athletes. This in turn is just another example of the internal and mutual vulnerability that comes with the relationship, which in turn contain ethical dimensions. What if, for example, Chrunak would have known more

about Igelström's drives for becoming a top-athlete? And what if Agassi's father would have been interested in what his son was thinking and feeling about playing tennis? And, for that matter, what if Wooden would have known would impact he had on his players (perhaps he did)? These questions are all related to ethics. But more important, the questions acknowledge that there might be structures that lies imbedded within the coaches and the athletes.

Again, if the common ethical ideas are mostly concerned with things on the conscious level, psychoanalytic or psychodynamic theories may present us before things that is functioning on the unconscious level. Also, *not* to consider the possibility of unconscious sentiments can be (or lead to) obstacles for thinking rational when it comes to sports coaching. More than that, it can hinder the care coaches are supposed to give the athletes for the sake of athletic performance.

### Final remarks

In this paper, I have argued that the foundation of a good relationship between coaches and athletes is built upon relational aspects we easily cannot foresee. On that premise, every ethical theory concerning the coach-athlete relationship have its internal limitations. Subsequently, I have argued in favor of a developed ethical approach in terms of coaching based upon the inner (psychological) dynamics that may occur in every coach-athlete relationship.

To return to the example I started this paper with, the Igelström case, it was her coach Hans Chrunak's lack of (full) psychological awareness that opened the wound in Emma Igelström. However, it does not mean that Chrunak was a bad coach or that he was wrong in what he said to her at their meeting. The problem here lies on a different level, it was simply *how* he expressed himself and that he was not – in that particular situation – aware of how Igelström would receive what he had to say about her weight in order for her to become an elite swimmer, something that she really strived to become. And, as I have claimed, in some respect Chrunak did care about Igelström. But the example also says something about the dynamics that may arise from certain and perhaps vulnerable relationships, as in this case the relationship between a coach and an athlete.

The conclusion I draw from this, is that it is difficult to detect the distinction between good and bad coaching in terms of care, unless we do not first know more about the psychological dynamics between the coach and the athlete. Caring in this sense is something that develops from the relationship as such. Here, one can reconsider Nel Noddings' argument that when a person receives another person, it means that the first person is 'totally with the other', meaning that the boundaries between the persons involved in the relationship may be blurred. From this perspective we may find unconscious desires and experiences not always known for others (and ourselves). To unlock the unconscious can of course be difficult (and perhaps demand years in psychotherapy), but nonetheless relevant if we find caring in sports coaching important and valuable, not only for the persons involved in the relationships but also for sports in itself. It is a way of looking beyond the athletes and the sports and instead to the human being behind the performances. And that is in itself an ethical approach to take, not least when it comes to elite sports and to the vulnerable relationship between coaches and athletes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

- Agassi, A. 2009. *Open: An Autobiography*. London, UK: Harper.
- Aristotle. 1996. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions.
- Bentham, J. (1780) 2008. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Milton Keynes, UK: Dodo Press.
- Burston, D. 2019. In *Depth Sport Psychology: Reclaiming the Lost Soul of the Athlete*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ferraro, T. 2019. "Freudian Depth Sport Psychology." In *In Depth Sport Psychology: Reclaiming the Lost Soul of the Athlete*, edited by D. Burston, 179–188. London, UK: Routledge.
- Free, M. 2008. "Psychoanalytic Perspectives in Sport: A Critical Review." *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 5 (4): 273–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.181>.
- Freud, S. 1912. "The Dynamics of Transference." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 97–108. London, UK: The Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. 1923. "The Ego and the Id." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923- 1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, 1–66. London, UK: The Hogarth Press.
- Govier, T. 1992. "Trust, Distrust, and Feminist Theory." *Hypatia* 7 (1): 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1992.tb00695.x>.
- Hansell, J. 2010. "Sports: Applied Psychoanalysis Par Excellence." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 46 (4): 539–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.2010.10746080>.
- Held, V. 2005. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Igelström, E., and C. Olofsson. 2006. *Simmar-Emma: Min Kamp Mot Bulimin [Swimming Emma: My Struggle against Bulimia]*. Stockholm, Sweden: Bokförlaget Forum.
- Jönsson, K. 2024. "Abjection in Sports: An Ethical Approach." *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 29 (2): 312–322. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-023-00391-8>.
- Kant, I. (1785) 1964. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.
- Loland, S. 2011. "The Normative Aims of Sports Coaching: The Good Coach as an Enlightened Generalist." In *The Ethics of Sports Coaching*, edited by A. R. Hardman and C. Jones, 15–22. London: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, A. 1984. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McFee, G. 2005. "Why Doesn't Sports Psychologists Consider Freud?." In *Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport*, edited by M. McNamee, 85–117. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Meeuwssen, S. 2024. "Editorial: Special Issue Sport, Ethics and Philosophy: 'Sport and Psychoanalysis.'" *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 18 (1): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2295776>.
- Mill, J. S. (1859) 1978. *On Liberty*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, Inc.
- Noddings, N. 1984. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pisk, J. 2024. "Freud's Psychoanalysis and the Genealogy of Sport." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 18 (1): 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2279151>.
- Strean, W., and H. Strean. 1998. "Applying Psychodynamic Concepts to Sport Psychology." *The Sport Psychologist* 12 (2): 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.12.2.208>.
- Tuncel, Y. 2024. "Sublimation and Drives in Sports: A Psychoanalytic Perspective." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 18 (1): 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2236799>.
- Walton, B. 2004. "Foreword." In *They Call Me Coach*, edited by J. Wooden and J. Tobin, 5–8. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Wooden, J., and J. Tobin. 2004. *They Call Me Coach*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.