



**Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE**

Project: The role of social environment and motivation on sports participation and performance of athletes with Learning Disabilities: coaches' reports.

FINDINGS (Study 1: questionnaires' completion)

- **The coaching style between coaches of athletes with and without Learning Disabilities (LD) is similar.**

A possible explanation of the coaching style similarities could be i) the lack of appropriate professional training in coaching athletes with LD and ii) that most of the LD coaches are coming from mainstream sports and have a traditional coaching education background.

- **Athletes with LD progress more in the total performance domain.**

A reason that the sports performance progression of athletes with LD is higher could be the less training age and the lower levels of physical fitness and muscle strength of this population compared to athletes without LD. The strength and muscle mass alternations are rapid in novice athletes, followed by slowed progression over time (more experienced athletes), so maybe the sports performance progression of athletes with LD is easier to be identified by the coaches.

- **Athletes with LD adopt more controlled types of motivation compared to athletes without LD. Athletes with LD adopt less autonomous types of motivation compared to athletes without LD.**

These results could provide some justification for the lower levels of participation in sports and exercise of people with LD compared to people without LD, as autonomous motivation is related to athletes' long-term exercise engagement and is associated with persistence sports behaviour compared to athletes who adopt more controlled forms of motivation. The stronger trend towards controlled types of motivation could be a result of the policies and practices utilized in exercise settings for people with LD, where the provision of tangible rewards (e.g., ribbons and medals) and generalised positive feedback to all the athletes with LD regardless of their performance accomplishments, is a common practice.

- **Need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching style predict autonomous motivation in athletes without LD but only the need-supportive style predicts autonomous motivation in athletes with LD. On the other hand, both need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching style predict amotivation (amotivation) in athletes with LD but only the need-thwarting style predicts amotivation in athletes without LD.**

These findings indicate the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in LD sports and suggest that athletes with LD have the capability to recognize different coaching styles and respond accordingly. The different coaching style predictors of autonomous motivation and amotivation of athletes with and without LD, along with our findings that coaching style differences between coaches of athletes with and without LD are non-significant, make the necessity of training in coaching athletes with LD even more critical. However, the coaches' education towards disability will be beneficial only if the coaches acknowledge that each athlete (with or without LD) has a unique personality, and they need to adapt their behaviour to each athlete's needs. For this to happen, adaptable coaches should build a meaningful relationship with their athletes by investing to adequate communication with them.

FINDINGS (Study 2: interviews)

The participants let us know about their coaching motivations, gave their opinions about athletes' motivation, and identified social agents [(i) coaches, ii) family and carers, and iii) teammates and opponents)] that have a significant role in athletes' sports participation and performance progression. Please find below a brief summary of the results:

Coaches' motivation

- Reasons that inspired them to start coaching (e.g., coaches wanted to engage more people in sports; coaches love the sport)
- What motivates them to continue coaching (e.g., coaching is a fulfilling experience; coaches want to help athletes to reach their potential).

Athletes' motivation

- Personal accomplishment (e.g., exercisers want to achieve something)
- Social participation (e.g., exercisers got inspired by someone else)
- Emotional and health-related motives (e.g., exercisers want to have fun)
- Other (e.g., music motivates athletes)

Athletes' perceptions of competition

- Positive aspects of competition (e.g., competition builds athletes' confidence)
- Negative aspects of competition (e.g., athletes feel anxious when they compete)

- Lack of competitiveness (e.g., athletes do not understand the concept of competition)

Coaches' attitudes towards athletes:

- Focus on athletes' independency (e.g., coaches engage their athletes in problem-solving situations)
- Focus on athletes' psychological development (e.g., coaches focus on transferable life skills)
- Focus on athletes' sports performance development (sports skills; e.g., coaches keep track of the athletes' performance progression)
- Try to be adaptable (e.g., coaches adapt their coaching style according to their athletes' ability)
- Try to be inclusive and engage more people in exercise and sports (e.g., coaches give equal opportunities to each athlete)
- Try to connect with their athletes and build meaningful relationships (e.g., coaches are trying to be a role model for the athletes)
- Give instructions (e.g., coaches provide positive feedback and reinforcement)

Teammates and opponents:

- Could be barriers of exercise participation (e.g., some teammates bully each other)
- Could be facilitators of exercise participation (e.g., teammates and opponents are friendly to each other)

Family and carers:

- Could be barriers of exercise participation (e.g., parents can be overprotective)
- Could be facilitators of exercise participation (e.g., parents provide positive reinforcement during competition)

It seems that athletes' and coaches' motives shape the coaches' interpersonal styles. When coaches are setting goals, giving instructions and building (meaningful) relationships with the athletes, are taking into consideration the athletes' motives while at the same time, their personal needs and inspirations guide their behaviour. It is worth mentioning that athletes with LD are less competitive compared to athletes without LD and they prefer to participate in sports mainly for social reasons. It appears though that coaches of athletes with LD identify themselves more as pedagogists/tutors and less as sport coaches. They are trying to teach athletes with LD life skills concurrently with their sports-related skills and to make people with LD feel more included in sports and society. On the other hand, coaches of athletes without LD focus more on the sports

performance development of their athletes. Moreover, family members, teammates and opponents have the potential to be facilitators for the people's sport participation, however, sometimes are barriers, a finding that is more prevalent in exercisers with LD. A possible explanation could be the lack of appropriate training and knowledge in supporting athletes with LD in sports settings.

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the social environment-athlete relationship in sports settings for exercisers with LD. The findings of this study identified barriers and facilitators for sports participation of people with LD, their motives, and possibly shed some light on the appropriate and inclusive strategies and practices that the social environment should adopt to promote exercise engagement and adherence of this population. The findings can also inform stakeholders about the necessity of a multidisciplinary collaboration (e.g., governing and community bodies, coaches, families, exercisers) that will further support exercisers with LD and will offer them enhanced opportunities to participate (and maintain) in sport of their choice.

* ***Autonomous motivation:*** refers to acting out of a sense of willingness, volition, and choice.

** ***Controlled motivation:*** refers to acting out of a sense of pressure, demand, or obligation.

*** ***Need supportive coaching style:*** When coaches support athletes' basic psychological needs (coaches give choice and provide opportunities for initiative; provide positive feedback and encourage skill improvement; show understanding and support).

**** ***Need thwarting coaching style:*** When coaches thwart athletes' basic psychological needs (coaches use controlling rewards and make demands; emphasise on faults and doubt athletes' capacity; engage in behaviours when they reject their athletes).