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**Resubmission 2 of Ms (ISCJ.2023-0042)**

**Developing Close, Trusting Coach-Athlete Relationships with High Performance  
Adolescent Tennis Players**

**Date of resubmission: May 15, 2024**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to understand why and how experienced tennis coaches developed quality relationships with their high performance adolescent athletes that prioritized athletes' needs and well-being. Five highly regarded Canadian tennis coaches of internationally ranked adolescent players engaged in two semi-structured interviews and three story completion tasks. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings outlined that coaches unanimously believed establishing a close, trusting relationship with their adolescent athletes was fundamental to creating a caring environment in which empathy for athletes' athletic, academic, and personal demands could be demonstrated. Coaches also described the difficulties of navigating these close relationships in a climate that is under severe scrutiny because of athlete maltreatment allegations. Examples of coaching behaviours that fostered closeness and maintained athlete safety included demonstrating care towards athletes' social, emotional, academic, and athletic challenges, encouraging dialogue in which athletes expressed their wants and needs, and involving parents to help maintain transparency regarding the establishment of closeness. Uniquely, this study provides practical suggestions for how coaches can nurture closeness while promoting safe environments that prioritize athletes' welfare.

Word count: 180/200 words

**Key Words:** Coach-athlete closeness, athlete wellness, high performance youth sport.

43       **Developing Close, Trusting Coach-Athlete Relationships with High Performance**  
44   **Adolescent Tennis Players**

45           A coach’s effectiveness relies on their ability to teach the technical, tactical, and physical  
46 acumen of sport (*professional knowledge*), engage in self-reflection and self-awareness for  
47 continued learning (*intrapersonal knowledge*), and build and maintain relationships with sport  
48 participants (*interpersonal knowledge*; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Côté, 2013). A coach  
49 uses their interpersonal knowledge to build high quality relationships with athletes of different  
50 ages, competitive levels, and personalities (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Specifically, the coach-athlete  
51 relationship is a social situation where each person’s interpersonal feelings (*closeness*), thoughts  
52 (*commitment*), and behaviours (*complementarity*) continuously shape one another (Jowett, 2007).  
53 As each athlete has varying needs, goals, and expectations, it is important that coaches recognize  
54 these differences and find ways to relate to each athlete on an individual level (Becker, 2013;  
55 Côté & Gilbert, 2009). As such, developing these relationships requires coaches to invest a great  
56 deal of time and effort as each coach-athlete relationship is as “difficult to manage and as  
57 complex to understand as the people concerned” (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016, p. 472). In fact,  
58 according to Jowett and Shanmugam (2016), the interpersonal connection built between a coach  
59 and athlete lies at the heart of effective/successful coaching. Additionally, this relationship may  
60 be even more important in individual sports such as tennis, where the primary coach has a direct  
61 influence on an athlete’s sporting experience.

62           When the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is high, the coaching process contains  
63 mutual trust, respect, and appreciation, and the relationship becomes a medium that motivates,  
64 assures, and comforts each member (Jowett, 2007). High quality coach-athlete relationships are  
65 associated with increased or enhanced athlete motivation (Adie & Jowett, 2010; Riley & Smith,  
66 2011), passion (Lafrenière et al., 2011), performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), communication

67 (Rhind & Jowett, 2011), and psychological well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Importantly,  
68 with numerous athlete maltreatment allegations in Canadian high performance sport (see  
69 MacIntosh et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2022), coaches must promote and prioritize positive values  
70 and ensure athletes feel safe in their care. To this end, coaches can create psychologically safe  
71 environments where athletes feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks by speaking up, sharing  
72 concerns, asking questions, and offering new ideas (Edmondson, 2018). In fact, Jowett and  
73 colleagues (2023) recently found that openness<sup>1</sup> and conflict management<sup>2</sup> were positively  
74 associated with high levels of psychological safety that impacted the coach-athlete relationship.  
75 While interpersonal relationships and climates of silence contribute to dangerous cultures and put  
76 athletes at risk, creating psychologically safe environments involving clear, direct, and honest  
77 communication between relationship members is fundamental (Edmondson, 2018).

### 78 **High Performance Sport**

79 While youth sport provides an opportunity for coaches to facilitate positive youth  
80 development (Bloom et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2017), high performance sport is characterized by  
81 high expectations and an emphasis on performance, which may not be compatible with positive  
82 youth development (Preston et al., 2021). Further, some researchers have questioned whether  
83 high performance youth sport offers the optimal climate for coaches to create meaningful  
84 relationships (Harwood & Johnston, 2016; Preston et al., 2021). However, given the frequent  
85 individual interactions between coaches and athletes in individual sports (Rhind et al., 2012),  
86 athletes may depend on closeness in the relationship for support in their athletic pursuits. Indeed,  
87 Kerr (2021) highlighted that from a safe sport perspective, establishing close, trusting coach-

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<sup>1</sup> Openness was defined as “efforts made by the athlete to identify, discuss, monitor, and resolve possible areas of disagreement, misunderstanding, or incompatibility” (Jowett et al., 2023, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Conflict management was defined as, “efforts by the athlete to engage in and maintain free-flowing, reciprocal and open lines of communication that are honest and transparent” (Jowett et al., 2023, p. 2).

88 athlete relationships is encouraged for the development of well-being and optimal performance  
89 outcomes.

90         There are three types of closeness: physical (non-sport related touches/behaviours, such  
91 as hugging and driving together), emotional (coach and athlete liking one another, coach taking  
92 on maternal/paternal role), and social (developing a friendship, going to dinner, attending social  
93 events together; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Although closeness is a desired  
94 component of the coach-athlete relationship, it also carries specific risks, including negative  
95 dependencies, the misuse of trust, and athlete abuse (Gaedicke et al., 2021). Consequently,  
96 boundaries must be maintained, and interactions should remain in public as much as possible  
97 (Kerr, 2021). Together, while establishing a close, trusting coach-athlete relationship is  
98 perceived as extremely important for youth athletes' positive development (Falcão et al., 2020;  
99 Holt et al., 2017) and athletic success (Jowett, 2017), high performance coaches are under severe  
100 scrutiny regarding the establishment and maintenance of these relationships, which may impact  
101 their decisions to establish such closeness. Importantly, Kerr and colleagues (2019) outlined how  
102 there are specific issues in high performance sport that contribute to the occurrence of athlete  
103 maltreatment. For instance, in high performance sport, coaches spend a lot of time alone with  
104 athletes, authority and decision-making are deferred from parents to coaches, and parents are  
105 socialized into sport norms. As such, it is important to consider how coaches develop quality  
106 relationships in high performance sport.

107         Although the importance of quality coach-athlete relationships is well established (Jowett  
108 & Shanmugam, 2016; Jowett et al., 2023), most research in this domain has relied on  
109 quantitative measures (Jowett, 2007), thus there remains a limited understanding of *how* coaches  
110 can establish quality relationships in high performance individual sports, such as tennis. To this  
111 end, the purpose of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of why and how tennis

112 coaches developed quality relationships with their high performance adolescent (14–18 year old)  
113 athletes while prioritizing athletes' needs and well-being. This age range was selected as athletes  
114 undergo significant cognitive, social, physical, and environmental changes that can impact  
115 relationships with their peers, coaches, and parents during this time (Kipp, 2017). Additionally,  
116 the unique combination of sport, academic, and social pressures that this age group is dealing  
117 with may impact how coaches develop coach-athlete relationships (Kipp, 2017). Specifically, the  
118 present study was guided by three research questions: (1) What are the coaches' perceived  
119 importance of developing quality relationships with high performance, adolescent athletes? (2)  
120 What strategies do tennis coaches employ to build quality relationships with their athletes? (3)  
121 What is the perceived role of coaches in managing athletes' athletic, as well as personal and  
122 emotional success?

### 123 **Methods**

124 The study adopted a generic approach to qualitative inquiry to explore participants'  
125 attitudes, opinions, and beliefs regarding the research questions (Percy et al., 2015). The study  
126 was situated within a constructionist paradigm, underpinned by a subjective/transactional  
127 epistemology and ontological relativism (Poucher et al., 2020). A constructionist epistemology  
128 implies that knowledge is constructed by human beings as they interact with one another and  
129 their social world (Crotty, 1998). The subjective/transactional position implies that knowledge  
130 cannot be created free of the influence of one's prior experiences and information (Lincoln et al.,  
131 2018). A relativist ontology implies that reality is subjective and dependent on the individuals  
132 interpreting it (Lincoln et al., 2018). In line with the constructionist epistemology, meaning was  
133 constructed through the engagement of semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and story completion  
134 tasks (SCTs). This methodological approach allowed the research team to explore different  
135 experiences and strategies used to establish quality coach-athlete relationships.

**136 Researchers**

137           In line with the constructionist epistemology, the data interpretations are a joint  
138 construction of the research team and five participants (Smith & Caddick, 2012). It is therefore  
139 important to provide insight into the authors' backgrounds. All three authors have extensive  
140 athletic experience in tennis and expertise in coaching science and qualitative research  
141 methodologies. Specifically, the lead author has 18 years of experience training at the national  
142 level. She also competed on a division 1 varsity tennis team in the United States for four years  
143 and has been coaching 6-18 year-old tennis players for six years. Throughout her competitive  
144 experience, she trained 20 hours per week while coping with depression, dyslexia, and a back  
145 injury that required a spinal fusion. Having had both healthy and unhealthy relationships with  
146 coaches, she felt that the coaches who understood and responded to her emotional, personal, and  
147 developmental needs provided a more enjoyable and motivating training environment. Together,  
148 the state of these relationships had a powerful impact on her development and success. The  
149 second author played tennis at the provincial level in his youth and has over 30 years of research  
150 experience in sport psychology, specializing in coaching science. The third author was a former  
151 youth national tennis player in Europe, has three years of tennis coaching experience, and has a  
152 rich background in positive youth development and sport coaching research. Together, the three  
153 authors' collective research and athletic backgrounds influenced the purpose, research questions,  
154 and methods. Additionally, in line with the constructionist epistemology, the results and the  
155 discussion are a combination of the participants' words and the three researchers' interpretations.

**156 Participants**

157           Participants were purposefully chosen via criterion-based sampling to address the  
158 research questions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A regional director of Tennis Canada who has been  
159 involved in high performance junior tennis for 20 years referred individuals who: (a) were

160 currently coaching 14-18 year-old players who were internationally ranked, (b) had worked with  
161 internationally ranked players for a minimum of five years, (c) were well-respected in the tennis  
162 community and who were known to have good relationship skills, and (d) held a full-time  
163 coaching position. Based on the referrals from this regional director combined with the first  
164 author's involvement in the high performance Canadian tennis scene, the research team carefully  
165 chose coaches who fit the recruitment criteria noted above. The inclusion criteria helped ensure  
166 that the participants had sufficient experience training high level adolescent tennis players to  
167 draw from and had a positive reputation in the tennis community. In total, five coaches (three  
168 males and two females between 40-55 years old) were recruited from Tennis Canada facilities  
169 (see Appendix for participant demographics). Four of the coaches had been coaching for over 30  
170 years and played tennis throughout their youth (two played recreationally; two played high  
171 performance tennis). One coach had competed on the professional tour and had been coaching  
172 for 10 years. All coaches operated as athletes' primary coaches, engaging in 60–90-minute  
173 training sessions 3-6 times per week. These sessions consisted of the coach observing the athlete  
174 and providing technical, tactical, physical, and emotional instructions a) from the opposite side  
175 of the court while hitting themselves with the athlete, or b) on the same side of the court while  
176 the athlete was hitting with another player (cooperatively or competitively). Lastly, all coaches  
177 trained athletes who spent half the day at school and half the day training at their sporting  
178 facility.

### 179 **Procedure**

180 Following institutional ethical approval, participant coaches who met the inclusion  
181 criteria were emailed a formal recruitment letter that included an explanation of the research  
182 purpose and the lead researcher's contact information. Coaches who expressed interest contacted  
183 the first author by email. All coaches signed consent forms before data collection, which



184 highlighted their right to confidentiality (coaches were provided pseudonym names to protect  
185 their identity) and withdrawal from the study at any time.

### 186 **Data Collection**

187         Qualitative research relies on multiple data sources to build a rich, contextual  
188 understanding of each case (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In the current study, data were collected at  
189 two time points using semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and story completion tasks (SCTs).  
190 Although coaches were not instructed to do so, almost all of their responses in the SSIs and SCTs  
191 described interactions between themselves and their athletes during their one-on-one training  
192 sessions, rather than during group sessions. This highlights how much of the relationship-  
193 building process between tennis coaches and athletes happens on a one-to-one basis.

### 194 *Semi-Structured Interviews*

195         The purpose of the SSIs was to encourage participants to tell stories about their  
196 perspectives, insights, experiences, feelings, and behaviours relating to the research questions  
197 (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As such, these interviews allowed the researchers and participant(s) to  
198 engage in a conversation to construct knowledge about themselves and their social world (Smith  
199 & Sparkes, 2016). More specifically, SSIs were guided by 12 open-ended questions to direct the  
200 conversation, while also providing the participants with the flexibility to express their thoughts  
201 and feelings pertaining to the conversation (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The purpose of the first  
202 interview was to explore 1) the coaches' perceived importance of developing quality  
203 relationships with adolescent tennis players, 2) the strategies coaches used to establish quality  
204 relationships with their athletes, and 3) the perceived role of coaches in managing athletes'  
205 athletic, as well as personal and emotional success. The SSI interview guide included opening  
206 questions, main questions, and concluding questions. Opening questions included: "What  
207 initially sparked your interest in coaching young tennis players?" and "In addition to on-court

208 training, are there aspects off the court that you consider part of your job as a coach?” Some  
209 main questions included: “What does connecting to a player mean to you? What are some  
210 strategies you use to connect with a player?” and “What are some challenges you have  
211 encountered in creating relationships with your players?” A concluding question included: “Is  
212 there anything that we didn’t cover that you wish to add?” The SSIs were audio recorded and  
213 transcribed verbatim by the first author and ranged from 54 to 110 minutes ( $M = 82$ ). Although  
214 the questions centred around developing quality relationships, participants primarily discussed  
215 closeness in the relationship, which informed the conversations in the SSIs and SCTs.

### 216 *Story Completion Tasks*

217 While semi-structured interviews explore participants’ experiences or perspectives, SCTs  
218 allow participants to engage with hypothetical scenarios (Clarke et al., 2019). SCTs begin with a  
219 *story stem* or *cue*, followed by completion instructions (Clarke et al., 2019). SCTs allow  
220 participants to use their imagination and the researcher to explore participants’ assumptions  
221 about topics that may not be revealed during interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al.,  
222 2017). The purpose of the SCTs was to focus specifically on hypothetical, emotionally charged  
223 situations to further expand on the three research questions guiding this study, as well as on the  
224 preliminary findings pointing to the importance of the establishment of closeness within the  
225 coach-athlete relationships. Throughout the SCTs, coaches more directly described their  
226 perceived role of managing athletes’ athletic, as well as personal and emotional success, focusing  
227 specifically on the third research question guiding this study. In the current study, participants  
228 were given three gender-neutral hypothetical interactions between a tennis coach and an athlete.  
229 The first story stem described a 2-time national champion who was optimistic, upbeat, and  
230 hardworking and unexpectedly lost in the semi-final to a player well below their caliber. The  
231 second story stem described an athlete applying for a scholarship to a competitive American

232 university who got rejected from all three of their top choices. The third story stem described an  
233 athlete who had recently experienced a relationship break-up. Each story was designed to  
234 describe an athlete who was in distress due to sport-, personal- and academic-related stress. After  
235 each participants' SSI interview, they were emailed the three story stems and asked to describe  
236 what they would do in the particular scenario (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were  
237 instructed to complete the story in a space provided on the word document. Coaches were not  
238 instructed to reflect on a specific relationship with an athlete. It was up to coaches to engage with  
239 the stories in any way they chose. Once completed, participants emailed their written responses  
240 to the lead researcher. The lead researcher reviewed the participants' answers prior to the SCT  
241 interviews, which were scheduled one to two weeks after the participants' SSI interview. The  
242 goal of this conversation was to learn more about how coaches would manage emotionally  
243 charged situations with their athletes based on their relationship with each athlete.

244         During the SCT interview, the lead researcher read the story stems and the participants'  
245 responses aloud, allowing the lead researcher and participant to further discuss the responses. For  
246 example, the lead researcher asked, "Can you tell me more about why you would respond this  
247 way?" As this was the second interview, the lead researcher also used relevant information from  
248 the SSI to engage in further reflection with the participants, such as information about the  
249 importance of closeness in the coach-athlete relationship. For example, the lead researcher asked,  
250 "If this situation happened with Athlete A or C, would you respond the same way?" Since SCTs  
251 provide hypothetical situations, the participants imagined various ways of responding to the  
252 same situation and reflected on how and why they would respond differently based on their  
253 relationship with their athlete. Ultimately the SCT interviews added rich, contextual, and  
254 sociocultural data outlining how coaches managed emotionally charged and sensitive situations  
255 with athletes based on a variety of variables (e.g., gender, personality, emotions, past

256 interactions), and thus expanded upon information gathered during the SSI. The SCT interviews  
257 were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author and ranged from 77 to 151  
258 minutes (M = 114).

### 259 **Data Analysis**

260 *A reflexive thematic analysis* was used to generate, analyze, interpret, and report themes  
261 within the SSI and SCT data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The reflexive thematic analysis was  
262 informed by the constructionist epistemology, whereby themes were identified through the  
263 research team's interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As theories and experiences influence an  
264 individual's mental constructions, the interviewer was committed to engaging in the co-  
265 construction of knowledge with her participants (Lincoln et al., 2018). Further, the lead  
266 researchers' experience in Canadian tennis was considered a strength of the study as it facilitated  
267 rapport between her and the participant coaches, some of whom she had personally met before  
268 the study. Related to this, reflexivity was practiced as each of the three authors were encouraged  
269 to share their reflections which were informed by their social and cultural lens, theoretical  
270 assumptions, and scholarly knowledge (Braun et al., 2018). Once the interviews were conducted,  
271 the first author transcribed each interview verbatim (SSI = 125 pages; SCT = 28 pages) and  
272 immersed herself in the data, reading each transcript three times (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).  
273 Following this, the first author inductively identified codes describing the data set. The first  
274 author shared the codes with the second and third authors and the three authors reflected on and  
275 discussed how to sort codes into themes, describing the meaning of the data. All three authors  
276 engaged in bi-weekly discussions until all themes were refined and defined (Sparkes & Smith,  
277 2014).

### 278 **Quality Criteria**

279 Researchers have suggested that there are no universal criteria for judging the rigor and  
280 quality of qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology (Smith & McGannon, 2018;  
281 Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Instead, researchers can establish rigor by selecting criteria from lists  
282 that are open-ended rather than lists that are fixed or predetermined before the study has begun.  
283 Further, rigorous qualitative research produces “complex, layered, and rich interpretative insights  
284 of people’s lives” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113). Several qualitative research guidelines  
285 were followed and used to establish rigor, authenticity, and trustworthiness throughout the  
286 research process (Smith et al., 2014; Smith & Sparkes, 2016; Tracy, 2010). In the current study,  
287 *methodological coherence* was achieved through the congruence between the theoretical  
288 perspective, ontological and epistemological assumptions, choice of methods, and choice of  
289 analysis (Poucher et al., 2020). The study established *transparency* and *reflexivity* as the first and  
290 third author acted as *critical friends* to each other (Smith et al., 2014). They challenged each  
291 other’s interpretations, potential biases, and assumptions and offered alternative perspectives and  
292 explanations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Throughout the data analysis and interpretation phase,  
293 all three authors met regularly to discuss the findings and co-construct the interpretations  
294 together. To achieve *substantive width*, many quotations were included in the results section,  
295 allowing readers to form their own interpretations of the findings (Smith et al., 2014; Smith &  
296 Sparkes, 2016). Finally, the implications of our findings provide a *substantive contribution*  
297 (Smith et al., 2014) to the ongoing dialogue around how to nurture close, trusting youth sport  
298 coach-athlete relationships while respecting safe sport policies.

## 299 **Results**

300 Following the analysis, the authors generated two over-arching themes: *Coach-Athlete*  
301 *Closeness; Navigating Close Coach-Athlete Relationships*. The following section provides

302 descriptions and quotes that describe these two themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout the  
303 section to protect participants' identities.

#### 304 **Coach-Athlete Closeness**

305 This over-arching theme describes how the coach-athlete relationship affected athletes'  
306 athletic experience. The section is split into two themes: *Connecting with Each Athlete*;  
307 *Importance of Closeness*.

#### 308 ***Connecting with Each Athlete***

309 This theme explores the establishment of a shared bond between the coach and athlete,  
310 namely the coach-athlete connection. Coaches believed the connection developed with each  
311 athlete was fundamental for building a strong relationship with them:

312 Connecting to the player is about being able to go beyond the sport and beyond my role  
313 as a coach. I believe that each kid has a story. I believe that kids experience different  
314 situations that will make them give you a lot of energy or a little energy on the court.  
315 There is always a reason why they are happy, and why they perform or not... they need  
316 to always feel comfortable enough to tell you what is going on. (Julie, SSI)

317 This connection was nurtured by mutual trust between the coach and their athlete. For  
318 example, through travelling together for competition, Charlotte (SSI) felt:

319 I got to know the athlete better from travelling with her. [Then] she started to tell me stuff  
320 that is more personal: How she felt, and why she was reacting a certain way. I felt a big  
321 responsibility. She did not have many people to talk to about what she was feeling. Then  
322 when she opened up, she started playing so much better, and I could feel that she trusted  
323 me.

324           Although these coaches believed in the importance of getting to know athletes on a more  
325 personal level, David and Jordan discussed the difficulties of managing coach-athlete  
326 relationships after recent allegations in the media involving athlete maltreatment.

327           Trust is very important to connect to a player, especially with the negative things we have  
328 heard about sexual allegations or coaches who put too much pressure on the player. I'm  
329 afraid that the good coaches who want to establish good relationships with players are  
330 going to become more distant. We cannot hug players anymore. There is no more tapping  
331 on the shoulder. How are we going to get close to players and gain their trust? It's going  
332 to be harder, but we are just going to have to do it. (David, SSI)

333           The question, 'how do you create a relationship' is so important because it's even more  
334 difficult now with everything we're hearing. Whether they are a male or female, we hear  
335 these stories about coaches, and then the trust is lost. So, even for me to travel alone with  
336 Athlete A... It is not very easy. Even the connection we have. You do not want people to  
337 think anything. You know, you always have this in the back of your mind. (Jordan, SSI)

338 Interestingly, Jordan (SSI) provided a specific moment where he feared how other people might  
339 misinterpret the situation:

340           My most memorable moment was when Athlete A won nationals. She is not the most  
341 expressive girl. Her mom was there too, but [after she won] she threw her things, ran  
342 towards me, and jumped into my arms. She had never done this before in her life. She did  
343 this once in her life and it was in this moment. The people around us were like...  
344 (awkward and surprised). Because we went to all the tournaments together and people did  
345 not understand the relationship we had. Some people even thought I was her father. But  
346 this is the only athlete I had this relationship with. I could not do this with all my juniors.

347           While David is under the impression that hugging is no longer allowed in youth sport due  
348 to the numerous athlete maltreatment allegations, Jordan provided an example where his athlete  
349 initiated a hug with him in celebration of a successful performance. Despite Athlete A's  
350 initiation, Jordan's fear of how others may interpret the hug could inadvertently create distance  
351 between a coach and a player, potentially impacting closeness in the relationship.

352           In sum, the connection between coaches and their athletes involved getting to know  
353 athletes on a more personal level. Although the connection appeared to be a necessary ingredient  
354 of their relationships, some coaches emphasized how delicate trust is in these relationships given  
355 examples of athlete maltreatment by coaches, as well as the growing suspicion that may be felt  
356 toward coaches in these relationships.

### 357 *Importance of Closeness*

358           This theme explores coaches' perceived importance of maintaining a close relationship  
359 with each tennis player characterized by mutual care and respect. Due to the amount of shared  
360 one-on-one time between tennis coaches and athletes, the closeness of the relationship had a  
361 major impact on the athletes' tennis and overall well-being, as noted by Lee (SSI):

362           You want to make sure your relationship with your coach is good on the court and that he  
363 is going to help you with your game. But there should also be a good relationship off the  
364 court because you end up spending a *lot* of time with that person. If you are a tennis  
365 player, it's a very lonely world. You better have a good relationship with your coach. It is  
366 not going to be fun otherwise.

367           The coach-athlete relationship had a major influence on the athletes' personal and athletic  
368 success, as noted in these two quotes:



369 I call them my other children... I don't want to coach too many kids because I feel like it  
370 is too much responsibility. I do not want to let them down. I know how important I am in  
371 their lives, and I want to make sure I am available for them. (Charlotte, SSI)

372 To build the relationship, you need to have conversations and go through a process where  
373 you get to know the player. I still see kids who are 16 years old. They come into my  
374 office to have discussions and get my opinion. They come to speak to me because I *know*  
375 them. They get this honesty with me that they would not have with others because of the  
376 relationship we have. (Julie, SCT)

377 It was through this closeness that coaches learned to understand their players. Lee (SSI)  
378 reflected on a relationship he had with an athlete who recently achieved athletic success. He felt  
379 he really understood this player:

380 I know what triggers her. I know which button to press to get her going and to get her  
381 passionate, to increase her confidence, and to sort of elevate her. I think it is a skill to  
382 have that feel. She is a dreamer. I noticed that and I tapped into it... I think I was able to  
383 wake something up in her. It was there, it was just sleeping or something.

384 Similarly, Julie (SSI) felt that she was able to consistently read and interpret how her  
385 players were feeling on the court: "I have a good feeling. I have a good sense. I read my players.  
386 After 30 years, I sense when a kid is not happy. I sense when there is something going on."

387 Charlotte (SSI) expanded on how her ability to read players dictated how she approached them  
388 and whether she adapted the intensity of training:

389 I trust my judgment to know how they are feeling, when to push harder and when to use  
390 drills they like more, or to do something a little more relaxed. However, just because they  
391 are feeling bad does not mean I will make it more relaxed. Sometimes they are not

392 feeling good, and I know they can push more, and I will push them more. That is the  
393 advantage of working with an athlete for a long time.

394 Ultimately this understanding allowed coaches to individualize training sessions to keep  
395 them enjoyable yet challenging for athletes.

396 Given the age of these athletes (14–18), coaches discussed the importance of knowing  
397 how to respect the athlete’s privacy and speaking to parents when sensitive matters arose:

398 The athletes know that whatever they talk to me about stays between them and me.

399 Nevertheless, they know that there is a limit. If there is an issue and they are suffering, I  
400 may ask their permission to speak to their parents. I will say, “Are you ok if I discuss this  
401 with your parents?” I need to work on one end to make sure the other end is ok. That is  
402 why I like to say that I am the leader of the orchestra. (Julie, SSI)

403 I will reach out to the parents if there is a situation where I’m worried about something. It  
404 is always a delicate situation. If the player has trusted me with information and it is  
405 something private, I do not want to tell the parent because that’s probably the last person  
406 that they would want me to tell. However, I may test the water to see how much the  
407 parent knows about what is going on and if it’s something important then obviously I will  
408 tell the parents. (Charlotte, SCT)

409 Coaches highlighted that athletes’ parents play a vital role in their personal and athletic  
410 development. As such, developing a relationship with parents helped them to develop closeness  
411 with the athletes on and off the court, while also safeguarding themselves by being transparent  
412 about all aspects of their coach-athlete relationship. For example, upon the request of Athlete A’s  
413 parents, Jordan (SSI) often drove the athlete to school after practice: “I would not do this with all  
414 my athletes. I did this with Athlete A because I had an incredible connection and trusting  
415 relationship with her parents.” While this is not a behaviour he engages in with all his athletes,

416 Jordan and Athlete A's parents had the mutual agreement that this behaviour was appropriate for  
417 their circumstances. In a similar manner when athletes' parents were out of town, they were  
418 welcome to stay with David and his family: "My children know that I make sacrifices for players  
419 whom I have worked with for a while. I bring them to my house and my wife cooks for them.  
420 They stay and they become friends with my daughters" (David, SSI). Although David had the  
421 trust of his family members and the athletes' parents to have the athlete over for dinner, this is  
422 not a behaviour that should be promoted and encouraged to all coaches. Ultimately, the  
423 behaviours of both David and Jordan were built through trusting working relationships with  
424 athletes and their parents.

425 Interestingly, Jordan (SSI) explained how his relationships with players are changing  
426 because of new rules and guidelines to protect youth athletes:

427 Tennis Canada has created new rules to protect players. For example, a man can no  
428 longer travel alone with girls in Canada. Travelling is special because it allows you to  
429 progress much quicker. When I travel with one player, instead of 3-4 players, the player  
430 is more likely to listen because they want to succeed and there are no distractions.

431 Therefore, the changes in the coaching rules are influencing our relationships.

432 In sum, coaches underscored the importance of developing and nurturing a close, trusting  
433 relationship on and off the court between them, their athletes, and their parents. Especially with  
434 changes being made across Tennis Canada to protect athletes, coaches felt a big responsibility to  
435 ensure that feelings of closeness contributed to a positive experience for the athlete. Yet, as  
436 highlighted in the selected quotes and their interpretations, it can be challenging for coaches to  
437 know where and how to set boundaries that foster closeness. Ongoing communication and  
438 reflection between all individuals involved in the relationship are recommended.

439 **Navigating Close Coach-Athlete Relationships**

440 This over-arching theme describes *how* coaches navigated close, trusting relationships  
441 with their tennis players. The section is split into two themes: *Understanding the Person;*  
442 *Athlete's Personal Relationships.*

#### 443 ***Understanding the Person***

444 This theme explores how coaches learned to understand the person behind the athlete,  
445 allowing coaches to gauge how athletes were feeling throughout training sessions. Coaches  
446 prioritized this understanding as they believed it helped create psychologically safe environments  
447 where athletes felt supported and safe in their care. If the athlete was struggling emotionally,  
448 coaches often noticed by observing changes in their athletes' mannerisms:

449 A lot of the time, it is the way they carry themselves and their body language. I will see  
450 how they carry themselves during practice and how they respond. Because sometimes  
451 someone will give a good effort, but I can just see, like it is something in their eyes. Their  
452 persona is just different, and you can see that there is something there. (Lee, SSI)

453 Similarly, Charlotte reflected on a moment where she confronted her athlete because she  
454 "didn't feel like she was really into it" and it was interfering with the quality of training. She  
455 approached the athlete and said:

456 You know, it's normal to sometimes not feel so motivated. But you're the only one who  
457 knows how you feel. You're the only one who knows what your 100% is today and it's  
458 important that you can evaluate it for yourself and tell me that you're giving the best that  
459 you can today.' But just by opening the door like that, she opened up about how she was  
460 feeling and how she was having a tough time (Charlotte, SSI).

461 By pausing the training, bringing the athlete to the net, and demonstrating empathy for  
462 the observed lack of motivation, Charlotte was able to demonstrate care for the athlete's needs.  
463 Additionally, coaches encouraged athletes to be honest and provide feedback so coaches could

464 better respond to their needs. For instance, Julie provided an example where she adjusted herself  
465 after her athlete explained his aversion towards the decision she was about to make. Julie's  
466 athlete (Athlete B) was not selected for one of the national programs despite being one of the  
467 higher ranked players in his age group. A coach who was responsible for the selection process,  
468 Ryan, walked by during a practice between Julie and Athlete B. Julie was giving Athlete B  
469 technical feedback and thought it would be beneficial to get another coach's opinion. Athlete B  
470 walked up to Julie and said, "If [Ryan] comes on the court, I'm telling you right now, I'll take  
471 my stuff and leave." Julie believed this was out of character, but also understood that the athlete  
472 "meant what [they] said." Julie was empathic towards Athlete B's feelings and did not ask Ryan  
473 to come on the court. Julie later emphasized "the ability and willingness to be honest [with one  
474 another] is 100% part of developing a good relationship" (Julie, SSI).

475         Although coaches felt strongly about their ability to accurately read athletes' thoughts  
476 and emotions, they also wanted athletes to tell them if something was on their mind without  
477 feeling as if they needed to share intimate details. Jordan (SSI) said, "without necessarily telling  
478 me [what's wrong], the athlete needs to tell me how they feel... Then I explain to them, 'It is  
479 totally normal that it is not working today, but you need to be able to talk to me.'"

480         Whether it was about their athletic development or personal struggles, when an athlete  
481 communicated their thoughts and feelings, coaches reported listening attentively "to what the  
482 player wants and needs" (David, SSI):

483         Do players come to me and ask for my advice on many things? They do. Often it is not  
484 related to tennis. I try to just listen because sometimes that is what they want: For  
485 someone to talk to and listen to them, and to be able to express himself or herself and  
486 vent. Sometimes they want advice and when that is the case, I always try to be a good  
487 sounding board. (Lee, SSI)

488           The coaches used their understanding of their athletes to recognize and interpret their  
489 emotional state throughout practice, and ultimately establish – what they believed to be – a  
490 positive emotional climate on the court. For instance, as social media appears to be becoming  
491 more problematic among young adolescents, David (SSI) explained that his athletes sometimes  
492 come to practice and perform below their potential because they are thinking about something  
493 they saw/heard on social media:

494           The athletes are going to be dealing with so much stress outside of tennis and that is why  
495 the relationship is so important. You have to get through to the young boy who is  
496 embarrassed because someone made a mean comment about him on social media. Let us  
497 just stop serving. Let us have a seat and have a conversation. The problem is not the  
498 explosion in his serve. It is that he is bothered by the comment on social media.

499           David's choice to take a break from training provided a safe space for the athlete to  
500 communicate his feelings. Had they continued practicing, the athlete would have most likely  
501 continued serving poorly and David may have gotten frustrated by the athlete's poor  
502 performance.

503           Finally, all five coaches had a similar approach to managing parental involvement as they  
504 valued the influence a parent has on their child's development and athletic experience. Especially  
505 in youth tennis, parents tend to get extremely involved in their children's athletic careers, which  
506 can feel overbearing for coaches. David (SSI) explained that this led some coaches to exclude  
507 parents from coaching practices. Yet, he understood why parents can be emotionally invested in  
508 their children's sporting involvement: "They invest so much time, energy, and money into [their  
509 child's tennis]." For this reason, David described doing "the opposite [to other coaches]. I bring  
510 them in as much as possible because how the parents think is so important." Jordan (SSI) held  
511 similar views about the importance of involving parents within their children's sporting

512 experience: “I am not the type of coach who is going to tell a parent to move aside and just pay  
513 the bills, and to only be there when their child is crying or is happy. There is an important role  
514 here.”

515         It was also important for coaches to get parents more involved instead of pushing them  
516 away. Charlotte liked to inform parents of “what the athlete is working on and what path they are  
517 going on at all times so that the voice they echo is similar to [hers].” Charlotte (SSI) wanted  
518 parents to be “on board with what [she was] saying. [Her] approach with the players needs to be  
519 consistent with what the parents’ approach is.” Considering the influence parents had on their  
520 child’s thoughts and perspective, coaches believed it was more effective when they were  
521 communicating similar messages to the athlete about their development. The coaches were also  
522 empathetic towards how much parents cared about their children’s success and wanted to find  
523 creative ways to get them involved to ensure everyone is “on the same page” (David, SSI).

524         David outlined one strategy he used to get parents more involved. He regularly  
525 encouraged parents to chart technical and mental strategies throughout their children’s matches  
526 so they could understand the athletes’ goals and improvement over time. For example, David  
527 wanted one of his players to “come up to the net more often.” After the son lost a match in a  
528 tournament, the mother said, “I cannot believe my son lost to this guy.” David was stunned at the  
529 mother’s response because the athlete had been doing exactly what they were working on. David  
530 asked the mother to look at the chart and notice how often the boy came to the net and how often  
531 he won the point. The mother noticed “he won 7 points out of 10 at the net.” David responded,  
532 “about 3 months ago he came to the net 3 times, and he won 1 point.” The mother was still  
533 focused on the fact that her son lost, so David said, “When you are at work, if you go from 30%  
534 to 70%, you have an increase of 40% in performance. Would your boss give you a thumbs up or  
535 down for this?” The mother finally understood what David was explaining and instead of getting

536 upset at her son for losing, she congratulated him on his commitment to coming to the net. This  
537 example illustrates how useful it can be to find creative ways to get parents involved in the  
538 athletes' goals.

539         Taken together, learning to understand the person behind the athlete allowed coaches to  
540 develop trust and closeness as they demonstrated care for the athlete's well-being as well as their  
541 emotional and athletic success. Further, coaches respected and valued parents' emotional  
542 investment in their child and benefitted from involving them. Ultimately coaches developed a  
543 partnership with parents as they understood that a coach and the parents would have a greater  
544 impact when they were communicating similar, constructive messages to the athlete.

#### 545 *Athlete's Personal Relationships*

546         This theme explores how coaches were empathetic towards what athletes were dealing  
547 with outside of sport, including their personal relationships with friends, significant others, and  
548 family members. Coaches recognized that tennis players inevitably bring their emotions onto the  
549 court and believed they had an impactful role in helping them cope with these challenges. A  
550 commonality between the five coaches was how much they appreciated the effects of athletes'  
551 holistic development on their tennis performance. For example, the third story completion task  
552 asked coaches to describe how they would manage a 90-minute practice with an athlete who has  
553 recently gone through a relationship breakup and walked onto the court looking "completely  
554 distraught." All five coaches emphasized that they were always there for advice when needed.

555         When you know your player, you know how they are feeling based on their actions and  
556 words, and by the way they walk on the court. You know when something is wrong.

557         Most of the time, I go off tennis, I ask different questions, and then automatically they  
558 come to the situation. I think to really calm the mood and change the mood, [allows us] to



559 get into the core of the problem and see if there is a conversation that needs to happen or  
560 not. Then respect whatever comes out. (Julie, SCT)

561 Similarly, Jordan (SCT) described that he adjusted the drills and his interpersonal approach  
562 rather than directly drawing attention to the problem:

563 Maybe it will start a conversation and they'll say, "yeah, I hate that exercise. Yesterday  
564 this happened to me..." Yeah, I'm not surprised this athlete is telling me about something  
565 that happened to them yesterday. I'll be happy because then we'll be able to address it.  
566 Often, at the end of the lesson, I'll say, "it's good you told me." However, at the same  
567 time, I'm proud of myself because it's thanks to what I did that the athlete finally felt  
568 they could tell me what happened. When they are ready, they will let me know what is  
569 going on in their head. That is important to me.

570 David (SCT) emphasized that each athlete and relationship was different, and he would  
571 approach sensitive information differently based on his or her relationship.

572 A similar situation happened with one player, but she did not want to talk about it. So, I  
573 said, "How about we just get you to hit the crap out of the ball and get the negative  
574 energy out? After you can make a decision." She worked hard, she pounded the ball, she  
575 felt better, and at the water break I said, "You decide if you want to go back to working  
576 hard or just talking about it." Then we had a conversation and I felt that it was okay.

577 These quotes exemplify how coaches were empathetic towards athletes' challenges with  
578 significant others and were able to effectively lower the intensity of the athletes' emotions.  
579 Subsequently, the athlete may have chosen to talk, but the coaches' intentions were to find ways  
580 to help the athlete move through their emotions and redirect their focus to tennis.

581 I am always there for my players, but I do not want them to feel that I should be their  
582 confidant on everything. I wait for my player to talk to me about it. I continue practice

583 with the understanding that it may not be their best day. They may have trouble staying  
584 focused or motivated because they have something on their mind that is not easy to  
585 handle. If the player chooses to open up, then we would take time during the practice to  
586 discuss the situation and I would listen. I am fine if a player is in a terrible state to cancel  
587 practice and just talk if that is what is needed. We are humans first with emotions, not  
588 robots. Players need to be treated as such, with respect and care. (Lee, SCT)

589 In conclusion, all five coaches felt that helping their adolescent athletes navigate their  
590 personal relationships was an important part of their job role. More specifically, coaches used a  
591 range of strategies (e.g., lower the intensity of practice, take a water break, ask them what they  
592 want to work on today) to help athletes move through their emotions on the tennis court, while  
593 providing a safe space for them to seek advice or talk through their personal struggles if desired.

#### 594 **Discussion**

595 The purpose of this study was to understand why and how experienced tennis coaches  
596 developed quality relationships with their high performance adolescent athletes that prioritized  
597 athletes' needs and well-being. The five coaches believed that developing close relationships  
598 built on mutual trust, empathy, and respect ensured that players felt safe in their care and were  
599 able to reach their athletic potential. The unanimous focus on closeness in these relationships,  
600 rather than commitment or complementarity, highlights the importance of the affective bond  
601 within adolescent high performance tennis. However, any conversation on trust and closeness  
602 between an adolescent athlete and a coach must be interpreted with caution and the athlete's  
603 welfare and safety prioritized. This discussion will focus on the implications of establishing  
604 close, trusting coach-athlete relationships.

605 The coaches in the current study emphasized that developing a close, trusting bond with  
606 their tennis players laid the foundation for achieving athletes' goals and performance success.

607 These findings are unsurprising given Jowett's (2007, 2017) extensive research on the associated  
608 performance and well-being outcomes in high-quality coach-athlete relationships, which include  
609 closeness. Specifically, closeness involves coaches connecting to their athletes by understanding  
610 their "back stories," who they are, as well as their wants, needs, and desires, to demonstrate  
611 compassion and empathy for them (Heelis et al., 2020). Although closeness is the affective  
612 component of coach-athlete relationships and the positive effects of these relationships are well  
613 documented (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Jowett, 2007), coaches appeared to feel uneasy as the  
614 culture of Canadian high performance sport is severely scrutinized for various instances of  
615 athlete maltreatment (MacIntosh et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2022). Indeed, the coaches in this  
616 study highlighted examples of when they feared others may misunderstand their intentions (e.g.,  
617 athlete hugs coach after performance success, coach drives athlete to school, athlete eats dinner  
618 at coach's house with family members also present). While these coaches had different types and  
619 amounts of closeness (e.g., social, emotional, physical) in each of their relationships, such  
620 closeness also carries a specific risk for the abuse of trust (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

621 In their scoping review of athlete sexual abuse within coach-athlete relationships,  
622 Gaedicke and colleagues (2021) highlighted the tension between the need for coaches to keep a  
623 physical and emotional distance from athletes to prevent abuse in sport, and the need for  
624 supportive, close, trusting coach-athlete relationships to foster athlete well-being. Coaches in the  
625 current study felt this tension. They aimed to continue to develop closeness as they deemed it  
626 fundamental for developing high functioning tennis players and human beings, but feared that  
627 certain behaviours that fostered closeness, such as a celebratory hug or convenient lift to school  
628 to lighten parental pressures, were no longer acceptable in high performance sport. These  
629 experiences add to recent claims suggesting that the advancement of safe sport across the sport  
630 system is currently failing for the following reasons: a) inconsistent definitions of unsafe

631 behaviour; b) policies focusing primarily on sexual abuse and neglect; c) educational programs  
632 that are perceived as victim-blaming; d) the delivery of educational programs that are not  
633 grounded in theory or empirical evidence; and e) ineffective monitoring and evaluation of  
634 educational programs (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Kerr & Kerr, 2020). More specifically, Gaedicke  
635 and colleagues (2021) suggested that the tendency for initiatives to focus primarily on the  
636 prevention of sexual abuse has partly contributed to a “moral panic, uncertainty, and fear of  
637 unjustified suspicion among coaches” (p. 2). Building on these studies, our findings suggest that  
638 some coaches with good intentions may experience uncertainty and anxiety in their interactions  
639 due to a fear of being misunderstood by people both within and outside of their sport.

640 In Canadian high performance sport, educational programs and policies are urgently  
641 being implemented to eradicate issues of abuse (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021) through the establishment  
642 of the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) and  
643 the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC; Sport Integrity Commissioner, n.d.), as  
644 well as The Athlete Representation Project (AthletesCAN, 2020). However, to stimulate a  
645 cultural shift from one that “embraces hegemonic masculine narratives, interpersonal violence  
646 and controlling coach-athlete relationships” (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021, p. 1) to one that promotes  
647 positive values and human rights, coaches should also be provided with specific guidelines on  
648 how to build close, trusting relationships with their players while maintaining their safety. The  
649 coaches in the current study built close, trusting relationships by 1) demonstrating care towards  
650 athletes’ social, emotional, academic, and athletic challenges; 2) encouraging athletes to express  
651 how they were feeling so coaches could adjust their communication and drill choice; 3) bringing  
652 athletes to the net when their emotions became unregulated; and 4) involving parents to guide  
653 their well-intended support and collaborate about positive coaching behaviours. These findings  
654 build on Jowett and colleagues’ (2023) research suggesting that an effective coach leader can be

655 a catalyst for creating a psychologically safe climate where athletes feel empowered to discuss,  
656 share, and deal with difficult interpersonal situations (e.g., disagreements, conflict), as well as  
657 errors and failures.

658         Uniquely, the coaches in this study involved parents in the athletes' performance  
659 environment to address their fear of being misunderstood. This involvement aimed to foster  
660 close, trusting relationships with their athletes. Interestingly, Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005)  
661 outlined that parents can enhance the quality of the coach-athlete relationship through frequent  
662 coach-parent communication and positive parental emotional support (e.g., empathy,  
663 appreciation, approval toward the coach and athlete). Specifically, coaches welcomed parents'  
664 insight into the athletes' changing psychological states enabling coaches to adjust their coaching  
665 style accordingly; similarly, parents appreciated coaches' updates on their child's progress  
666 (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). Indeed, the coaches in this study took the time to explain to  
667 the parents what specific behaviours were helpful (e.g., praising athletes' effort to try  
668 tactical/technical skills during a match despite the outcome, focusing on long-term skill  
669 development), as well as unhelpful (e.g., showing fluctuating emotions during a match, focusing  
670 solely on the outcome) to the athlete's confidence and long-term development. Further, the  
671 coaches were transparent and engaged in continued dialogue with parents to ensure the  
672 behaviours used to establish coach-athlete closeness were appropriate. These findings are  
673 particularly interesting given the unique characteristics of high performance youth sport that  
674 make athletes vulnerable to maltreatment, including 1) an emphasis on performance outcomes at  
675 the expense of health, well-being, and long-term development; 2) the extensive amount of time  
676 spent between the coach and athlete for travel, competition, and training; and 3) the socialization  
677 of parents into the acceptance of harmful behaviours that are normalized in sport (Kerr &  
678 Willson, 2022). Yet, as Dohme and colleagues' (2021) suggested, parents of elite tennis players

679 should be valued as well-intentioned individuals who are willing to learn how to effectively  
680 support their child's positive development.

681       Taken together, we suggest that involving parents can be beneficial for athletes' sporting  
682 experience (Dohme et al., 2021; Knight & Holt, 2014), as well as coaches who may feel more  
683 safeguarded as their behaviours towards athletes are transparent and continuously verified  
684 through ongoing dialogue with parents. Nevertheless, we need greater coach education on safe  
685 touch and boundary setting in the coach-athlete relationship. Of importance, the safe sport  
686 learning offered through the Canadian Tennis Professional Association recommends that when  
687 coaches are alone with an athlete, they should a) "use [their] best judgment;" b) "confirm that the  
688 young athlete feels comfortable around [them];" and c) "communicate regularly with the  
689 athletes' parents" (Tennis Professional Association, n.d.). Additionally, Milius and colleagues  
690 (2021) noted that a coach's use of positive-tactile communication with their athletes can be an  
691 effective strategy to demonstrate empathy and build trusting coach-athlete relationships.  
692 However, they also noted that a coach must develop an awareness of each athlete's learning  
693 preferences to continuously ensure a supportive, understanding, and safe environment for  
694 athletes (Milius et al., 2021). While the suggestions for coaches to "use [their] best judgment"  
695 and develop an awareness of the athlete's learning preferences are useful, it is imperative that  
696 coaches feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to develop close relationships with clear  
697 boundaries that effectively safeguard this vulnerable population of athletes.

### 698 **Limitations**

699       While the findings of this study offer rich insight into why and how high performance  
700 tennis coaches established close, trusting coach-athlete relationships, some limitations are  
701 outlined. First, the five coaches were selected based on their reputation for creating close,  
702 trusting coach-athlete relationships, and producing internationally ranked tennis players. While

703 this provided a homogenous sample of high performance coaches, it limits the transferability of  
704 the findings as the results may be less applicable to lower-level and/or less pressurized sports.  
705 Second, the sample consisted of Canadian tennis coaches and thus the findings may only be  
706 applicable to Canadian individual sports where coaches and athletes form a dyadic relationship  
707 without teammates and assistant coaches. A final limitation of this study is that we did not gain  
708 the perspective of the athletes and their parents. Future studies should recruit coach-athlete-  
709 parent triads to provide a deeper understanding of each person's perspective in navigating close,  
710 trusting coach-athlete relationships with careful consideration of ensuring what factors contribute  
711 to safe and unsafe coach-athlete environments.

## 712 **Conclusion**

713         Researchers, coaches, and sport governing bodies must monitor the implementation of  
714 safe sport policies to improve the clarity of and adherence to guidelines, ultimately improving  
715 the culture of the sport system. As several high-profile coaches and sport professionals have  
716 misused trust with athletes (e.g., Larry Nassar in the USA, cf. Kerr et al., 2019), educational  
717 programs and policies are urgently being implemented to advance a culture of safe sport (Gurgis  
718 & Kerr, 2021). However, to create a safe sport culture in Canadian high performance sport that  
719 promotes positive values, human rights, and a "climate of voice" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 492),  
720 coaches must be provided with clearly defined safe and unsafe coaching behaviours, as well as  
721 consequences for breaching policies. Although there are many benefits to positive, close coach-  
722 athlete relationships (Kerr, 2021), there is a serious concern for protecting athletes from  
723 maltreatment that requires further research attention. Together, we suggest the following: 1)  
724 scholars, sport leaders, coaches, athletes, and parents should work together to identify ways to  
725 promote close, trusting coach-athlete relationships that simultaneously safeguard coaches and  
726 athletes; 2) safe sport education should not only focus on preventing sexual abuse and neglect

727 but also on how to promote positive values through cultivating safe training environments and  
728 developing close, trusting coach-athlete relationships; and 3) coaches should aim to carefully  
729 involve parents in their children's sporting experience to optimize it and help coaches to feel  
730 more safeguarded as their behaviours towards athletes are transparent and supported by parents.  
731 Overall, these findings provide high performance coaches and coach education programs with  
732 important knowledge on how coaches can safely develop a deep understanding and strong  
733 connection with their athletes.

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**Appendix**

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**Participant Demographics**

Participant Pseudonym Name	Sex	Years of Coaching Experience	Playing Experience
Julie	Female	30+ years	High Performance (University Scholarship)
Charlotte	Female	10 years	Professional
David	Male	30+ years	High Performance (University Scholarship)
Jordan	Male	30+ years	Recreational
Lee	Male	30+ years	Recreational

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