

Barriers and Opportunities for Age-specific National Football Team Coaches' Impact on the Development of Their National Team Players

Stig Arve Sæther¹, Line Marie Johansen Torvik¹, Nadine Ohla¹, and Carsten Hvid Larsen²

¹Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway

²Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark.

Corresponding author: Stig Arve Sæther

E-mail: stigarve@ntnu.no

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Dragvoll,
7491 Trondheim, Norway

Abstract

The aim of this study was to study coach-athlete relationships in age-specific national teams, from the coach's perspective. The coach-athlete relationship has been found to be important in the talent development process. Even though much is known about this relationship in the team and club context in football, there is less knowledge about its importance in age-specific national teams. This study focuses on the coaches' relationships with their male or female players in the Norwegian age-specific national teams. Seven age-specific national team coaches (six men and one woman, mean age of 44.9 years) representing both male and female national teams were interviewed. The main findings are that the coaches' relationships ranged from being superficial or transitory among the U15-U17 players to more existential and personal for the U18-U21 players. The coaches also described a change from working with regional coaches (coaches employed by the regional football federation) for the U15-U17 players to working with development coaches in professional clubs for the U18-U21 players. The main intention from the Norwegian football federation, of introducing an international reference for the players, seems to be met, while the coaches also acted as advisors or discussion partners for the players regarding their development and club transitions.

Keywords: *Talent Development, Coach-athlete Relationship, Collaboration*

Highlights:

- The aim of this study was to study the coach-athlete relationship in age-specific national teams, from a coach perspective.
- This study focuses on coach-athlete relationship from a national team both for male and female players on the Norwegian age-specific national team. Seven age-specific national team coaches (mean age of 44.9 years) were interviewed representing both male and female national teams.
- The main findings indicate that the coaches' relationship went from a superficial or transitory among the younger players, to a more existential and personal for the older players. The main intention of introducing an international reference for the players seemed met, while the coaches also acted as advisors or discussion partners for the players regarding their development and coach transitions.

Age-specific national teams have an essential place in the talent development process among the most talented players in an age cohort (Røsten et al., 2023; Nesse et al., 2020). And even though selection to an age-specific national team is a critical part of the talent development process in sports, the process has also been found to be more non-linear than most models on talent development also for players selected to age-specific national teams (Baker et al., 2018; Till & Baker, 2020). Still, being selected to age-specific national teams in the talent development pathway are also commonly acknowledged as important for

players learning (Sweeney et al., 2023), and where the national team coaches have an essential place for the players both learning and development (Røsten et al., 2023).

The coach-athlete relationship is the most important intrapersonal relationship in elite sports (López de Subijana et al., 2021), fundamental for influencing athletes' psychosocial development, and particularly, fostering caring and trusting relationships (e.g. Cronin, 2023; Dohlstén et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022). The coach-athlete relationship has together with

transformational leadership behaviour been found to give positive developmental experiences for athletes (da Silva et al., 2025; Vella et al., 2012). While studies also have shown that empowering a coach-created motivational climate on mental toughness depends on there being high quality coach-athlete relationships, impacting on their healthy psychological development (da Silva et al., 2025). Karayel et al (2024) found in a study on elite football players that the quality of coach-athlete relationships also impacted on team resilience. Effective communication and collaboration among coaches, athletes, and other stakeholders is therefore critical, as it ensures that athletes receive appropriate guidance and feedback tailored to their individual needs and developmental stage (e.g., Mathorne et al., 2021). Even so, Newland et al., (2023) demonstrated that the coach-athlete relationship was introduced superficially on UEFA A and B licence courses given by the English football association and furthermore stated that future research should clarify the knowledge coaches require to develop high-quality coach-athlete relationship within a high-performance footballing context. The coaches need to balance support with challenges, shaping athletes' emotional experiences and providing feedback that encourages reflection and learning rather than simply conveying information (Sæther et al., 2025).

The nature of different coach-athlete relationships has been explored by Storm et al. (2014) in a study of influential relationships between youth players and their coaches through in-depth biographical interviewing of 17 elite athletes. The athletes reported two main aspects of critical coach-athlete relationships: firstly, coaches can offer players support in the transition from one phase or performance/competition level to another. This is a relationship which is described as primarily *transitory*, lasts for a short period of time, and is focused on a sporting context and is with a coach with a high degree of legitimacy. Secondly, coaches can offer continuity, influencing the athlete's sporting and non-sporting context, in a relationship which is described as *existential*, which is usually more personal and closer, and exists over a longer period (Storm et al., 2014).

When comparing national team coaches with club coaches, the coaches and players in the clubs spend long periods of time together, whereas the coach-athlete relationship in an age-specific national team is significantly constrained by their limited time together. Nevertheless, in both groups, the coaches' relationship with their athletes is characterised by an unbalanced distribution of power between them. This unbalance becomes even more exaggerated in selection processes because the national team coaches are essential for, and instrumental to, athletes' career opportunities since they have selected them to the national team (Kilger & Börjesson, 2015; Olesen et al., 2020). Even though there are examples of studies on the coaching role in development and performance sport (Collins et al., 2012), surprisingly little attention has been given to how the national team context and roles influence the characteristics of coach-athlete relationships and athlete talent development.

Since most research on the coach-athlete relationship has been on this relationship in a club context or environment (Collins et al., 2012; Zhao & Jowett, 2023), there has been less research on this relationship in a national team context. The use of a qualitative approach was therefore considered most appropriate based on our wish to get insight into how the coaches' perceive their role as a national team coach, and their coach-athlete relationship with their players. The aim of this study was to study the coach-athlete relationship in age-specific

national teams from the coach's perspective. Our research question was therefore: What barriers and opportunities do national team coaches encounter in their work with player development and especially the coach-athlete relationship?

Methods

This study examines the role of coaches and the talent development environment within the age-specific national teams for male and female players in Norway, with a specific focus on the coach-athlete relationship and the barriers and opportunities the coaches have in their development of players.

Philosophical position

The study is positioned within a social interactionist ontology (Ponterotto, 2005), which suggests that multiple realities exist and that social reality is a subjective experience, and thereby adopts a constructionist approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008). With this approach the authors tried to let the participants construct their reality within their own contexts and hoped to understand how they negotiated their priorities in relation to their relationship with the players and club coaches and regional coaches (coaches employed by the regional branch of the football federation), and their role in the players' talent development pathway. Hence, the authors never attempted to find an absolute 'truth'.

Participants

All the seven interviewed coaches (six men and one woman) were head coaches for one of the age-specific national teams for male or female players in Norway. They had a mean age of 44.9 years (SD = 6.1) and represented seven different age-specific national teams from under-15s to under-21s for both boys and girls. Most of the coaches had between 15 and 20 years of experience as a coach at different levels. Because of the issue of anonymity, we have categorized the coaches in two groups, coaching players between the age of 15-17 years (U15-U17), and 18-21 years (U18-U21), without describing which gender the coaches are coaching (see table 1 for a description of the coaches).

Interviews

The interviews were done digitally (using Zoom) and lasted between 32 and 55 minutes, with an average of 46 minutes. Each participant was interviewed only once. The interviews used a semi-structured approach, as detailed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), and were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were anonymised in the transcriptions, and their pseudonyms were used (see Table 1). The interview guide was developed based on earlier research on the coaching role as national team coaches (Hansen et al., 2021), and coaches' role in the talent pathway for national team players (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). The interview guide therefore included the following three main topics: the role of coaches and age-specific national teams (e.g., what is your role in the development of young talented national team players?); the collaboration between the national team coach and the club coach (e.g., who do you have contact with in your work to support the development of the players?); and the role of national team coaches in the talent development pathway (e.g., can you give an example of how your role has contributed to the development of an athlete and/or a team?).

Table 1: Description of the coaches in the study

Pseudonym	Age group	Coach experience	Education
Peter	U15-17	Nearly 15 years	UEFA-A license
Dan	U18-21	Over 15 years	UEFA pro license, Master in sport science
John	U18-21	Over 20 years	UEFA pro license
Sam	U18-21	Over 20 years	UEFA pro license, Sport science education
Max	U15-17	Over 15 years	UEFA pro license, Higher education
Mary	U18-21	Nearly 20 years	UEFA pro license, Bachelor in sport science
Martin	U18-21	Nearly 20 years	UEFA pro license

Data analysis

The analysis was done in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps of thematic analysis: a) familiarising yourself with the data, b) generating initial codes, c) searching for themes, d) reviewing themes, e) defining and naming themes and f) producing the report. After the interviews were transcribed, the fourth author read the transcripts to get a general sense of the material and to generate initial thematic codes. After the third author had analysed the material, the fourth authors analysed the material independently before looking at the analysis of the third author, before the fourth author presented a suggestion to the rest of the authors who acted as critical friends (Tracy, 2010)(a). In the next step, some interesting features (e.g., coach-athlete relationship, national team coach and club coach collaboration, changes in roles with the players' ages) were collected into different sub-themes (b) and labelled (c). In step (d), the preliminary sub-themes (e.g., coaching girls and boys, developing human being not just players) were reviewed and discussed by all the authors based on different research perspectives and thereafter refined and labelled into two main themes (e). The two themes were: a) *Building good people through a tight coach-athlete relationship*, and b) *Differences in coaching different age groups and genders*. Finally, quotes that reflected the themes and the study aim were selected and presented in the report (f). During this step, we went back to the codes that we had defined during the report writing process. We also returned to the raw data to ensure that the content was fairly and accurately reflected in the final categories we chose.

Research rigor

Before collecting the data, the authors discussed the focus of the study (worthy topic), the selection of content and the interview guide topics (rich rigor) (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, we continuously sought to discuss possible interpretations of the data during the data analysis (credibility) and used critical self-reflection to try to be aware of potential biases and predispositions (sincerity) (Ponterotto, 2005). Finally, we would argue that the collected data has high 'information power' because of the specific experiences of the participants, which has been studied less than in the club coach context (Malterud et al., 2016).

Ethical statement

Before the interviews were conducted, all the participants received a letter containing information about the study's objectives, the interview topics, the procedures and confidentiality. All participants were also informed that participating in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time during the process, until the findings were published, without giving a reason. Before the data were analysed, all the participants received their interview

transcript and were given an opportunity to add, remove or correct information. To avoid the possibility of the participants being identified through the selected quotations presented in the findings, the participants were given pseudonyms to which only the researchers had access. Further, any specific information that could have revealed the identity of an informant (e.g., age, teams, clubs) was rewritten or removed. The study was carried out according to the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Ref. 400401).

Results

The main themes arising from the process of analysing the data was the two themes: a) *Building good people through a tight coach-athlete relationship*, and b) *Differences in coaching different age groups and genders*.

Building good people through a tight coach-athlete relationship

Because of the short time that national team coaches and players have together (national team gatherings for only a few days at a time), their relationship on and off the pitch was highlighted as being essential for their collaboration and mutual impact. The coaches had little time to connect with and develop relationships with the players. Compared to other national teams, the coaching teams for the age-specific national teams are small, which gives the coaches challenges related to the time and space to influence not only their players, but also their coaching staff. This small group of coaches in the different national teams, was however also considered to have a positive impact on the relationships since the communication was better (because of the group size) and easier to handle for the players, as stated by John: *"I think that we as a team can benefit from it in the long run. That you have close, short lines and just a few people, that makes the players feel safe"*.

One way the coaches worked to develop a tight coach-athlete relationship was by building on trust and care during the team gatherings, with the added intention of helping the athletes enjoy the development process. Such an approach strengthened the coach-athlete relationship, which again was important for the communication process and helped the coaches to get to know how the players were doing. Some of the coaches also highlighted the gender issue: when an older man was coaching adolescent girls, he pointed to the need for a woman as an assistant coach, which he had arranged. Others highlighted the barrier and described a need to tear down this barrier to be able to communicate better: *"I feel that if I manage to break down that national team coach-man thing for them, then a lot has been done"* (Max). Furthermore, since players are different and therefore have

different needs based on their situations, it was important to have this information from the relationship to be able to better pinpoint the feedback and push the players in the 'right' direction.

Of course, you need to meet them on a [interpersonal] level, which is important. It is important to connect, call it a relationship through who you are and not what you are. So, trust and demands and care in each other in the coach-athlete relationship, it's essential to create ownership of the development. This for them to enjoy what you do, to want to be good. The coach has a lot to say, I think, for a player's motivation and enjoyment in playing football. (Peter)

I have to know the player well, know which communication is receptive, what it is that he benefits from the most. So perhaps one of the most difficult things in a coaching job, in my opinion, is the human factors. After all, it is 70% human factors, and then there is 30% knowledge about football. (Martin)

Even though the small number of coaches on each age-specific national team was considered an advantage, it was a challenge in terms of the communication process with the players. The already mentioned limited time together, combined with the fact that the focus during team gatherings was very much about professionalism, skill drills and tactical factors, meant that the set-up of national team football makes the coach-athlete relationship challenging.

I think it's a consequence, not to excuse myself, but I think it's a consequence of not having a coaching team to work with. Then you have to focus on football. It is difficult to provide a good enough follow-up in these areas [overall development], when you are the only one who does the entire professional analysis and evaluation of it. (Dan)

Sharing competence and knowledge was considered important for the national team coaches, as it enabled them to help both players and coaches develop in their clubs. An important task for them was to specifically share their experiences from international matches. They described this as the international reference, which is an important reference for training in the expected skills and the level of skills in international football.

The reference we see internationally, that [we have to get] into the everyday life of the club, so I would say that an important part of the job is to collaborate with the clubs. Because that is where they [the players] are 90% of the time and where the development happens. Then maybe the time we were out travelling [during] a year with the national team was maybe 5%, but the effect was 20, 25, 30%. (Sam)

The coaches also emphasised an additional reason for focusing on the interpersonal relationship with their players. Many of the players do not go on to professional football, but the coaches have an opportunity to influence them on a more intrapersonal level, as exemplified by Peter:

But I think it is important with the human aspect because there are quite a few of those here who do

not become professional football players. So, there is something about creating good and healthy values among the players in a larger perspective than just becoming good at football. And in that regard, I think that national team coaches have a much bigger role than we might think. (Peter)

The national teams and the coaches could thereby take a bigger responsibility and have an impact on the players beyond the goal of a career in football. Even so, the coaches felt that they had to have a selective focus on coaching during the national team gatherings. Ideally, the head coaches would have had more days together with the players (today a gathering normally lasts four days), which might have had a greater impact on their development, as described by John:

Ideally, they should have been longer at the national team gatherings, not played too many matches, but had several days of practice. Maybe three or four days of practice before match. That would have been ideal in terms of development, and then we could have mixed up the intensity in practice in a larger part. (John)

Differences in coaching different age groups and genders

The national team coaches described to have different roles depending on the age group they coached and the gender of the players. The coaches described the club coaches, naturally have the main role in the talent development pathway, while the national team coaches' main way of influencing the players' performances was through the national team gatherings. Still, the national team coaches highlighted the need to communicate with the players club coaches during the season, in between the national team gatherings, indicating a role as a facilitator in the players' coach-athlete relationships with their club coaches. This communication included status updates, feedback (e.g., through video analysis), development plans and focus areas for practice and development. For the youngest teams (athletes aged up to 16 years) this communication was mostly between the national head coach and the regional coach. One challenge the coaches addressed regarding this communication was the large variation in knowledge among the club coaches, which was most often related to the club's size and resources (for example, some clubs do not have a head of development). In addition, some of the coaches pointed out that they often communicate mostly with the head coach (or assistant), which could be problematic in terms of getting the depth of the players development, since the head coaches often have less information about the player and their development.

Some of the coaches also highlighted a difference in the treatment of boys and girls, again based on differences in the level of knowledge but also based on the regional coaches' interests and knowledge, even though they are supposed to treat all players in a similar manner. One even stated in this regard that he had the impression that the regional coach considered boys' football more interesting and therefore gave less attention to the girls. One of the coaches on the girls' team stated the following in relation to these differences:

It is important to have a good cooperation with the clubs, on the player development. There has been a boost lately in hiring people in the women's professional clubs, employing more people to secure the development in the clubs. We have

seemed to be lagging behind, compared to the boys' side, in regard to the number of people in the clubs who work with player development at a good enough level. (Mary).

The club structure and the coaches' ability to collaborate varied, most often depended on the coaches' earlier relationships (e.g., if they had worked together before). Therefore, even though this depended on the club structure (i.e., whether the club had a head of development), it also depended on the relationship between the national team coach and the club coach.

Then it's about travelling around, watching matches and practices, mapping players, being in contact and talking with the clubs, talking to the players, following up players who have been in the national team. What I get back from this is a good dialogue regarding the players' development, their status medically, physically and football wise. (Peter)

The coaches' competence and knowledge (including their international reference) also meant that they became advisors and gave guidance to the players in their careers as players, as Peter described: *"I find that players use us national team coaches to consult [in transition phases]"*. However, the coaches were also aware of their impact on the players' choices, which they did not want to influence directly.

I don't want to be a coach who impacts their choices and tries to push them to make the choices. But I can be a coach who can give them the right background information/do the research for them. There are a lot of people who want to call me when they consider a transfer to another club. (John)

I guess that's the advice I give, and then it's difficult for me to say go right or go left or go straight ahead, because you don't really know that. But you can give some directions on what is important to think about in such processes. (Martin)

Discussion

The study had the following research question: What barriers and opportunities do national team coaches encounter in their work with player development and especially the coach-athlete relationship? Our analysis found the following two theme: a) *Building good people through a tight coach-athlete relationship*, and b) *Differences in coaching different age groups and genders*. The main findings indicate that the national team coaches' relationships with their players were partly superficial or transitory (Storm et al., 2014), especially for the U15-U17 players, indicating that while the club coaches have a more direct impact on the players' development, the national team coaches have a more indirect impact. The time and frequency of the follow-up of the players therefore was considered a barrier for their impact on the players. So, while the main intention of introducing an international reference for the players seemed to be met, the time constraints limited their impact on development in the players' pathways, so the coaches highlighted the need for close relationships with the regional coaches to be able to have a better impact on the players. These time constraints

meant that they felt they did not have time to develop a close coach-athlete relationship with the players, so they used regional coaches for the U15-U17 players and development coaches for the U18-U21 players to have an impact on the players' everyday life in their clubs. The coaches described working, especially among the U15-U17 teams, by giving feedback (Mathorne et al., 2021) to the players through the regional coaches, telling them how the players had worked and performed during their national team camps, while the U18-U21 players were influenced by the development coaches in the professional clubs (López de Subijana et al., 2021). Even though this lack of closeness is related to their role as national team coaches with less time and frequency to impact on the players development, the coaches still highlight the impact they have on the players through their role as advisors or discussion partners regarding the players development and club transitions.

Part of the reason for the difference between the coaches coaching different age groups, was the difference in the club coaches' competence. There seemed, therefore, to be a clear intention to influence the clubs' competence and thereby help the clubs to reduce these differences: the national team coaches used their competence to help the club coaches (Nesse et al, 2020), particularly coaches in smaller clubs with fewer resources. The coaches considered this as an obvious opportunity to impact on the players development directly, but also indirectly through their dialogue with their coaches in the clubs. This was however different between coaches for male and female players, and despite what the coaches of the female players described as a rapid increase in the female players development opportunities, there was still considered to be large differences in the coaches' perceptions of women's and men's football and the attractiveness in terms of recruiting competent coaches. Women's clubs were often described as having less competent coaches compared to men's clubs. This limitation has been a recurring challenge for female coaches in high-performance sport (Norman & Simpson, 2022; Sæther et al., 2025), while a connected challenge has been the limited research on female athletes compared to male athletes (Cowley et al., 2021). Despite the development of women's football in the European context, the coaches' responses suggested that women's football was still considered less attractive for coaches than men's football (Piggott et al., 2026).

One of the bigger impact the coaches felt they had on the players was on them as human beings or at an existential level (Storm et al., 2014); which was related to the small number of coaches in the national teams, which increased their individual impact on the players. This was considered as an opportunity for the coaches in terms of impacting the players and where they especially highlighted that this meant that it was easier to get their messages across, compared to larger comparable coaching teams. Even though the unbalanced distribution of power was not a focus in our current study, it naturally impacts on the coaches' relationship with their athletes and especially in a national team selection process. Since the national team coaches are essential for, and instrumental to, athletes' career opportunities (Kilger & Börjesson, 2015; Olesen et al., 2020), the players might become more normative and willing to do whatever the coaches tell them to do. This dilemma should be addressed between the players and coaches to secure the trust between them and their joint mission in the talent development process.

Limitations, practical implications and future research

The number of coaches included in the study is a limitation. Still, based on the lack of studies on national

team coaches, the small number of coaches provides a new insight into their role and impact on the players development. Our focus on the national team coaches coach-athlete relationship as the primary aim of the study, is another limitation.

Since the current study is one of the first studies on age-specific national teams coaches' perceptions of their impact on the talent development process and especially the coach-athlete relationship in their role as national team coaches, the knowledge should have value on the understanding of the national team's and their coaches' role in the talent development process. The national team coaches, the club coaches and the football federation should be aware how the collaboration between the national team coaches and club coaches' impact on the holistic development of the national team players. The football federation should, based on the current study, consider addressing the role as a national team coach and its place in the talent development pathway of national team players in their coach education. Such an highlighting of the role in the talent development pathway might have a positive impact on both players and coaches, since earlier research have found players to have a normative understanding of their development (Bergström et al., 2024). This normative understanding might lead the players to think that the process is linear, with clear phases and transitions, while the literature has shown that the talent development pathway most often is non-linear and hard to predict (Baker et al., 2018; Till & Baker, 2020).

Future research should also address how national team players perceive the national team coaches' role and impact on their development. Even if both the club and national team coaches main aim is to contribute to the players development, they might have conflicting

approaches for the players (e.g., signalize different priorities towards the players development), which might develop frustration or even have a negative impact on the players development.

Conclusion

The main findings are that the national team coaches' relationships with their players were partly superficial, especially among the U15-U17 players, because of the lack of time, and thereby of opportunity, to influence the players' talent development pathway. The national team coaches still considered their impact to be important on the players' development as players, both directly (through training and playing matches with an international reference) and indirectly (through sharing their knowledge and competence with the players' clubs and giving them advice on their future development opportunities). Finding that the coaches largely have an indirect impact on the players development through other coaches, was somewhat surprising, and should be considered in future studies on age-specific national team coaches and their role and impact on talented players development. The biggest impact was however considered to be their impact on them as human beings, which also somewhat ironically was related to the small number of coaches in the national teams, which increased their individual impact on each player. More research is needed on the role of age-specific national team coaches and especially related to their impact on the talent development pathway, and furthermore how the players attendance on national team camps impacts their everyday development in their clubs.

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