

Mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship Comportamientos de maltrato en la relación Deportista-entrenador

*Philippe Marracho, *Eduarda Maria Rocha Teles de Castro Coelho, **Antonino Manuel Almeida Pereira, ***Miguel
Venda da Graça Nery

*Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Portugal), **Instituto Politécnico de Viseu e Centro de Estudos em Educação e
Inovação (Portugal), ***Universidade Europeia (Portugal)

Abstract. This qualitative study aimed to describe the nature of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, in the region of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal. For our study, we interviewed 12 athletes of federated sports. We focused on young athletes, aged 13-18 years old, who practiced a collective, combat, or individual sports discipline. The data was then studied through content analysis. In the case of athletes as victims, there were no mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship. However, as observers, the athletes have reported forms of abuse in the Athlete-coach relationship, such as verbal emotional abuse and denial of attention and support. As preventative measures for mistreatment behaviours, the athletes mentioned supervision and even the dismissal of the coach. Respondents stress the need to deepen the topic for the strategies to be effective. They emphasize the need to sensitize clubs for the protection of athletes, through investigations in the area under study, for fighting and preventing mistreatment behaviour in sports practice.

Keywords: Emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglecting, federated sports.

Resumen. Este estudio cualitativo tuvo como objetivo describir la naturaleza de las conductas de maltrato en la relación deportista-entrenador, en la región de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal. Para nuestro estudio, entrevistamos a 12 deportistas de deportes federados. Nos enfocamos en deportistas jóvenes, de 13 a 18 años, que practicaban un deporte colectivo, de combate o individual. Los datos fueron estudiados a través del análisis del contenido. En el caso de los deportistas como víctimas, no hubo conductas de maltrato en la relación Deportista-entrenador. Sin embargo, como observadores, los deportistas informaron formas de abuso en la relación deportista-entrenador, como abuso emocional verbal y negación de atención y apoyo. Como medidas preventivas de las conductas de maltrato, los deportistas mencionaron la supervisión e incluso el despido del entrenador. Los encuestados destacan la necesidad de profundizar el tema para que las estrategias sean efectivas. Destacan la necesidad de sensibilizar a los clubes para la protección de los deportistas, mediante investigaciones en el área del estudio, para combatir y prevenir conductas de maltrato en la práctica deportiva.

Palabras clave: Maltrato emocional, abuso sexual, maltrato físico, abandono, deportes federados.

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Philippe Marracho
philippemarracho@hotmail.com

Introduction

The protection of children in sports has received greater attention in recent decades. Interpersonal violence in sports can occur through relational and non-relational abusive behaviour. Relational behaviours include emotional, sexual and physical abuse, as well as neglect. In non-relational mistreatment, the behaviours of harassment, bullying, corruption, child labour and aggression are indicated by the literature (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007; Stirling, 2009; Vertommen et al., 2016).

The studies regarding mistreatment behaviours in sports, namely emotional, sexual and physical abuse, as well as the neglecting behaviours, have emerged in the 1990s (Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Gervis & Dunn, 2004). These behaviours, which are characterized by the imbalance of power between aggressor and victim, occur intentionally, making young athletes more vulnerable (Krug et al., 2002; Mountjoy et al., 2016) to injuries and/or psychological issues (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007).

Physical abuse is defined as the infliction of physical harm to an individual by a caregiver. It can include physically abusive behaviour with or without physical contact. Physical abuse with contact is understood as the act of an individual that involves physically abusive behaviour, such as pushing, biting, hitting or kicking another individual.

Non-contact physical abuse can include, for example, banning the athlete from accessing the toilet during the training schedule (Matthews, 2004; Stirling, 2009; Stirling & Kerr, 2010).

Sexual abuse is interpreted as a sexual intention against the will of a certain victim, which can be carried out, without physical contact, through sexual comments and indecent exposure, and/or with physical contact (Matthews, 2004; Ryan & Lane, 1997; Stirling, 2009; Stirling & Kerr, 2010).

Emotional abuse is characterized by a pattern of intentional behaviours, which occur within a relationship that is potentially harmful to the individual, compromising their affective, behavioural, cognitive or physical well-being (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

These abusive behaviours can occur through physical behaviours, verbal behaviours and denial of attention and support, which are favoured by the sports context. The literature reports that some coaches throw markers to their athletes (physical behaviour), scream and humiliate (verbal behaviour), and that they often fail to approach their athletes (denial of attention and support) (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

Negligence is characterized by lack of reasonable care from the responsible person (Glaser, 2002). Neglect can be physical, educational and emotional. Emotional neglect consists of inappropriate parenting behaviours and social neglect (Matthews, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

Although there is a greater awareness from the majority of people in sports, in order to protect athletes, there are still abusive behaviours, which can lead to the abandonment of sports, depression and social isolation (A. A. Stirling & Kerr, 2008). The Athlete-coach relationship is often one of the most important and influential relationships experienced by an athlete (Bettega et al., 2018; Sánchez & Bores-García, 2023) which, allied to sports practice, can be an opportunity for self-knowledge (Cunti et al., 2016), with a positive impact on the athlete, both psychological and social (Eime et al., 2013).

The fact that it is regulated by specific rules, the separation of regular time and space, the physical activity and training, among other aspects, makes sports a product with peculiar and indistinguishable characteristics (Mullin et al., 2000), with the potential to improve mental health, physical health and social skills (Felfe et al., 2016).

Factors such as performance, success and victory are often the most valued criteria in sports, even among children and young people. Regardless of how they are achieved, they can lead to problematic sports practices (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2009), often leading to athletes being victims of mistreatment (Vertommen et al., 2016).

Athletes tend to remain silent in the face of mistreatment behaviour in sports (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020; Stirling et al., 2011). Indicators such as the intensity of the Athlete-coach relationship (Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2001; A. Stirling & Kerr, 2009), the inherent hierarchy of competitive sports, and the dependence on the coach for achieving sporting success (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Tofler et al., 1996) cause the creation, in some cases, of a deep "code of silence" on the part of the athletes (Stirling et al., 2011). Athletes may be afraid of retaliation from coaches, leading them to stay silent about the violence they experience (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020; Stirling et al., 2011). This fear can arise from concerns about losing their position on the team, being subjected to further abuse, or facing other negative consequences such as social and interpersonal rejection (Stirling et al., 2011).

According to the literature, athletes in a sporting context are not immune to experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000; Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2010; Stirling & Kerr, 2009), which may increase as the athlete progresses in his sports performance (Vertommen et al., 2015), thus increasing the competitive demand and the requirement of training hours, leading to a greater proximity in the Athlete-coach relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). There are several studies that prove such indications. Among them, we highlight the study carried out in Canada, where 25% of the 266 respondents have declared that they had been insulted, ridiculed, and even attacked by sports actors, including parents and coaches (Kirby et al., 2000). In another investigation, based on the perception of interpersonal re-

lationships between coach and athlete, carried out by Toftegaard (2001), it was possible to verify that 2% of athletes were victims of sexual abuse in sports, and that 3% of coaches admitted to being intimately involved with an athlete under 18 years old. Gervis & Dunn (2004), in a retrospective study carried out with 12 former top athletes in the UK, have found relevant data on the prevalence of emotional abuse. From this study, it emerged that the athletes reported that screaming, belittling, threatening and humiliating are the most common forms of emotional abuse. These behaviours caused the participants a feeling of inferiority, less confidence, and fear of the behaviour of the coach as to whether goals were met or not. Such behaviour causes psychological problems in athletes. In qualitative research conducted through semi-structured interviews by Stirling & Kerr, (2008) to 14 former swimming athletes, it was found that abusive behaviours (i.e., physical, verbal and denial of attention and support) in high competition sports vary according to the level of the event/competition and the athlete's sporting performance. Also, in some cases, it was mentioned by respondents that the achievement of goals in swimming events led to abusive behaviour. In other reports, respondents affirmed that the fact that they did not meet the goals made the coaches demonstrate inappropriate behaviour, such as feelings of anger.

Qualitative research methodologies aim, more than explaining, the understanding, building on studies in depth (Glesne, 2016), a factor that can help to better understand sports, exercise, physical practices and, in this specific case, mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship.

In Portugal, there is a shortage of qualitative investigations in this area; that is why the aim of our study was to understand the nature of mistreatment behaviour in sports in the Athlete-coach relationship. We were focused on young athletes aged 13-18 years old, who practiced a collective, combat or individual sports discipline. More specifically, the study intended to 1) identify mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, experienced by young people as victims; 2) describe mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as observers; 3) learn how to identify and characterize the concept of mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship, from the perspective of federated athletes; 4) identify the measures/strategies, and respective actors, suggested by federated athletes, for fighting and preventing mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship. The study was carried out in the region of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, in Portugal, more specifically in the cities of Bragança, Chaves, Mirandela and Vila Real, supported by a qualitative methodology, given the need for a deep understanding of this theme.

Our study was justified, because the bibliographical research that we had completed allowed us to confirm the lack of investigations on this subject, for this region. There is also evidence of the need for deepening the understanding of behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship.

Material and method

The qualitative method was the method used for this investigation, being considered as the appropriate method for obtaining rich and detailed interpretations of social contexts and integrations (Sandelowski, 2000).

Twelve federated athletes aged between 13 and 18 years old have participated in this study. The sample was selected randomly from Portuguese federated clubs having regard to the following eligibility criteria: (i) athletes between 13 and 18 years, being in the "Training to Compete Phase" according to the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Balyi et al., 2013); (ii) federated athletes in team, individual and combat sports. In this group of athletes, eight are male and are players of several collective sports – football (2 athletes), basketball (2 athletes), roller hockey (1 athlete) and handball (1 athlete) – and combat sports – karate (2 athletes). The remaining 4 athletes are female, and they practice individual sports – athletics (2 athletes) and swimming (1 athlete) – whereas 1 athlete practices roller hockey. The number of sample participants was not previously defined for the study in question; the athletes were interviewed until the beginning of the saturation technique was reached, reached after the transcription of the 12th respondent (Sandelowski, 2000).

The methodology used for data collection was the semi-structured interview: being the most frequently instrument used in qualitative research, it has also proved to be versatile and flexible (Bardin, 2008; Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001). Interviews can be carried out individually (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews involve deep conversations between the researcher and the interviewee, according to the research objective, but are strongly guided by the perceptions, opinions and experiences of the interviewee (Carrington & Graham, 2001).

The interview scripts were developed according to the following steps: i) preparation of a first draft based on the purposes of the study and the relevant literature in the scope of mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship; ii) analysis of the first version of the script, carried out by three PhD Professors, who are experts in both the subject and this methodology; iii) discussion of results based on suggestions made by each of the experts; iv) conducting a pilot interview with two elements of the universe under study; v) final readjustment of the interview script considering the data resulting from the pilot interview.

After the above stages were completed, and without structural changes to the initial draft, the experts unanimously decided to prepare the final version of the interview script, divided into four major dimensions of analysis: i) identifying mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as victims; ii) learning about mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as observers; iii) learning and characterizing the concept of mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship, from the perspective of federated athletes; iv) identifying the

measures/strategies, and respective actors, recommended by federated athletes for fighting and preventing mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship.

Parents were contacted via e-mail requesting authorization for their children to participate in the study. Participants, parents and/or legal guardians were informed in writing about research aims and risks, and athletes were only included in the sample with informed consent. The Declaration of Helsinki's code of ethics guided the conduct of the current study (UNESCO, 2006). The interviews were conducted by the author between 22 June and 3 August 2020, via the videoconference platform Zoom® video communications (Heiselberg & Stępińska, 2022). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, each participant was provided brief information about the purposes of the study. The interviews lasted between 5 and 11 minutes each and, with the consent of the guardians and the interviewees, they were recorded in video format with incorporated audio and transcribed in full.

Data treatment was performed through content analysis (Bardin, 2008). The construction of the category system was divided into *a priori* and *a posteriori* categories. The organization of *a priori* categories stemmed from a pre-elaborated structure in terms of theoretical substantiation, as well as from experiences in organizing and conducting interviews on the research subjects. These categories arise from a theoretical framework, considering the characteristics that stand out. The *a posteriori* system resulted from the classification of elements (sentence, words). The resulting categories were submitted to the aforementioned panel of experts, in order to comply with the standards of fidelity and validity of the process (Bardin, 2008).

Results

Considering the four main objectives of our investigation – i) identifying mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as victims; ii) learning about mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as observers; iii) learning and characterizing the concept of mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship, from the perspective of federated athletes; iv) identifying the measures/strategies, and respective actors, recommended by federated athletes for fighting and preventing mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship – below we present the categories found during the analysis of the results, regarding the four objectives under study.

Identifying mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as victims

The purpose was to understand if there were mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship as victims. Regarding the victim's perspective, the following category was identified: I was not mistreated.

I was not mistreated – All the athletes interviewed affirm that they were never mistreated in the scope of the Athlete-coach relationship

My coaches have always been respectful and never mistreated anyone. (Athlete #4)

With me, there was never any mistreatment. (Athlete #8)

Learning about mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship experienced by young people as victims

Regarding the observer, we aimed to understand if he experienced mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, as an athlete. The following categories were identified by the observer athletes: I did not witness and mistreatment behaviours, as well as the subcategory “emotional abuse”.

I didn't witness – In the observer's perception, there are no mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship.

I've never really witnessed mistreatment and bad ways to insult players, not that! (Athlete #2)

I've never seen my coach be aggressive, in this case, beating an athlete. (Athlete #7)

Mistreatment behaviours — Regarding the category of mistreatment behaviours, observers have witnessed mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship. We have identified the subcategory of emotional abuse, integrated in the category mistreatment behaviour. Observers qualify this type of abuse as a pattern of behaviour by a person within a relationship, with the potential of becoming harmful. The emotionally abusive behaviours specified by the observers were verbal emotional abuse, and denial of attention and support.

Verbal offenses, demeaning. (Athlete #11)

He didn't even bother learning if he was guilty or not; he left him out too, nor did he want to know if it was his fault. (Athlete #1)

Learning and characterizing the concept of mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship, from the perspective of federated athletes

When asked about their knowledge on this topic, the athletes identified it as a topic they are not aware of. The evidence of the lack of knowledge on this topic emerged from one category: I had no knowledge.

I've never heard stories like that, or anything. (Athlete #9)

I have never heard, nor have I ever witnessed coaches' mistreatment of athletes. (Athlete #8)

Despite the lack of knowledge about mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, we intended to know the notion that the athletes had about the subject. Regarding the concept of mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship, the following categories were identified: negative attitude from the coach, mistreatment behaviour, and the subcategory: emotional abuse and physical abuse.

Negative attitude from the coach – Respondents specify

the behaviour of the coach as a negative attitude towards the athlete and his sports performance.

Any mistreatment, even outside football, is capable of discouraging a person, and it is upsetting to see and think that one person can destroy the ambition of a young person who has a dream. (Athlete #2)

It will lower the player's morale; he will play worse. (Athlete #4)

Mistreatment behaviours – Concerning the category of mistreatment behaviour, we have identified the emotional abuse subcategory integrated in the mistreatment behaviour category. The emotionally abusive behaviours specified by the athletes were verbal emotional abuse, and denial of attention and support.

It's treating them badly, yelling at their ears. (Athlete #8)

The coach does not pay attention to the athlete. (Athlete #9)

In terms of the subcategory of physical abuse, under the mistreatment behaviour category, athletes characterize it as contact behaviours.

Mistreatment is hitting athletes. (Athlete #7)

Sometimes they can spank people. (Athlete #8)

Identifying the measures/strategies, and respective actors, recommended by federated athletes for fighting and preventing mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship

While questioning the athletes about measures and strategies that they considered adequate for the prevention of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, the selected categories were supervision, communication and dismissal of the coach.

Supervision – Athletes report that supervision can fight and prevent possible mistreatment behaviours.

Supervision at games and in changing rooms. (Athlete #1)

Having training supervision, checking if the coach is not aggressive with the athletes. (Athlete #7)

Communication – Communication can be an adequate strategy for preventing mistreatment behaviour.

I think someone should talk to these coaches and reason with them. (Athlete #3)

People should talk to him, find the reason why. (Athlete #4)

Dismissal of the coach – Athletes state that the measure to be taken involves the dismissal of the coach. According to them, dismissal is a way to fight mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship.

Possibly talking to the coach and dismissing him. (Athlete #5)

I think that, from the moment the coach mistreats an athlete, this coach should be reported, and stop training at that institution. (Athlete #8)

After knowing the prevention strategies, we intended to know the actors that should implement such strategies. Therefore, the data obtained allowed us to identify the following categories: federation, association, governing bodies of the club and parents.

Federation – Athletes state that the national federation

of a sports discipline should have a more active intervention, for raising awareness to this issue. With this type of communicative and interventional strategy, mistreatment behaviours will be fought.

The director of the federation. (Athlete #5)

Local association of the sports discipline – The association becomes an essential player for implementing the aforementioned strategies, due to the proximity with its affiliated clubs. Thus, it would have an active communication and intervention strategy with all the stakeholders of the club.

A coach doesn't have a team, it's not his team, it's from a club, and if the coach is mistreating someone, then the local association has to do something about it. (Athlete #4)

Governing bodies of the club – The administration of a club becomes an essential player for implementing the prevention of mistreatment behaviour already mentioned, due to the proximity with the players, and the ease of non-participant or participant observation, regarding the behaviour of its coaches towards the athletes of the club they represent.

We talk with the coordinator, or with other club members who can help us, be it the president, or the training director in this case. (Athlete #2)

By the club president. (Athlete #3)

The club itself, the president himself. (Athlete #7)

Parents – Athletes report that parents are essential actors for implementing the prevention of mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship. Through a regular presence in training, making them observers of mistreatment behaviours.

The athlete who is suffering from this should immediately notify the parents to take the necessary precautions. (Athlete #10)

Discussion

Abusive behaviours in sports continue to emerge (Parent et al., 2016), leaving athletes more vulnerable to potential mistreatment behaviours (Zurc, 2017). Considering all the above, our study sought to identify and understand mistreatment behaviours that exist in the Athlete-coach relationship.

Regarding the mistreatment behaviour exposed by our study, described by the victims, it was possible to verify the inexistence of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship. However, according to what the literature suggests, some athletes may not admit, to themselves, that they are suffering from mistreatment, or may even not have the perception that they are being victims of these behaviours (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012; Ashley, Stirling & Kerr, 2009), and these behaviours can lead to disturbances for the athlete both physically and mentally (Diamond et al., 2016), given the difficulty of assessing whether or not competitive sports is conducive to the existence of mistreatment behaviours (Fasting et al., 2008).

From the perspective of the observer athletes in our study, some of the respondents mentioned the inexistence

of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, others reported that they have observed verbal abusive behaviour through verbal offenses, with the purpose of demeaning athletes and generating some frustration in the victims. Compared to our results, in another study carried out by Gervis & Dunn (2004) on the prevalence of emotional abuse in the Athlete-coach relationship, it was possible to verify the existence of abusive behaviours such as screaming, belittling, threatening and humiliating. According to another study carried out by Ashley, Stirling & Kerr, (2014), it was possible to conclude that the athletes' opinions are different: some refer that they need the screaming of their coach to achieve their goals, thus admitting the importance of the coach in their sports success. Others report that abusive behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship made them give up of sports, adding that if there were no mistreatment behaviours by the coach, they could have achieved their sports goals (Ashley, Stirling & Kerr, 2009, 2013). Gervis, Rhind, & Luzar, (2016) state that emotional abuse helps athletes to develop and improve their sports performance, making them more competitive and more successful in sports. Athletes who did not have the desired sports success, on the other hand, associate abusive behaviours with a negative effect, such as eating disorders and social isolation (AE Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Regardless of whether the coach has mistreatment behaviours, his reputation for training successful athletes leads to not questioning possible mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2014).

Denial of attention and support was the most identified form of emotional abuse by observer athletes of our study. Observer respondents reported that athletes did not feel supported by the coaches, feeling unconcern from them. These behaviours can have negative effects on the athlete, such as low self-esteem (Ashley, Stirling & Kerr, 2013). A. E. Stirling & Kerr (2008) have compared the denial of attention and support to physical behaviours, concluding that this type of action was more harmful to athletes when compared to physical behaviours. In part, this behaviour posed a threat to sports, i.e., the athlete felt that he was not developing his skills for achieving his goal.

When asked about their knowledge of the subject under study, we were able to verify that none of the athletes surveyed had any knowledge of the subject. Athletes surveyed characterize mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship with some agreement with the existing literature. The negative attitude of the coach identified in this study is in line with the study carried out by Gervis et al. (2016), where it was concluded that the athletes characterized the behaviour of the coach as unacceptable, considering them negative actions, more directed towards athletes with less sports success. Emotional abuse and physical abuse were recognized by respondents in our study as the most common mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship. Emotional abuse, more specifically the denial of attention referred to by our interviewees, is described as the lack of attention from coach towards the athlete. It is a

concern for the athlete, because, according to the literature, these feelings are often hidden by the athlete in order to survive and remain in competitive sports (Kavanagh et al., 2017). The emotional, verbal and physical abuse described by athletes often occur simultaneously (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Kirby et al. (2000), in their study carried out in Canada, concluded that 25% of the athletes in their sample reported having been insulted, ridiculed and assaulted, whereas A. Stirling & Kerr (2010) concluded that 72% of their respondents had experienced physical abuse behaviours from a coach or parents.

For the prevention of mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship, A. Stirling (2013) suggests that coaches should have more training in this field of expertise. As reference, the author suggests the theory of Kolb's, in order to make coaches more sensitive on this issue, avoiding the need for supervision, lack of communication and dismissal of the coach, reported by the interviewees in our study, as measures and strategies they consider appropriate for the prevention of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship Baar & Wubbels, (2013). Ashley. Stirling & Kerr (2009) propose the reduction of power from the coach, in order to prevent experiences of mistreatment behaviour. This strategy, which can be used to prevent mistreatment behaviour involving the various sports agents, that is, the federation, the local association of the sports discipline, the governing bodies of the club and parents, pinpointed by respondents from our study as actors for fighting and preventing such behaviour. Obviously, there is a context in the training of coaches; all coaches must have the Professional Title of Sports Coach for exercising their role. These courses are administered in the local associations of the sports discipline, and the program is designed by the federation of each discipline. Although the program contains content on ethics in sports, we find it necessary to deepen these knowledge and values through specific training in this field of expertise. It is essential that the governing bodies of each club are aware of this issue, in order to prevent and fight this issue through training or awareness actions. Several authors reinforce the involvement of parents in the sports career of their children, considering them essential elements for the prevention of mistreatment behaviour in sports (Brackenridge, 1998; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Lally & Kerr, 2008), helping them to overcome negative emotions related to sports (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough 2009).

The positive relationship in the Athlete-coach relationship is crucial for the success of the players (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), often avoiding sports abandonment (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). Specifically, the prevention strategies that can be developed by coaches, athletes, parents, and volunteers to promote a positive, healthy and fruitful Athlete-coach relationship are: (1) promoting education and training to all coaches, staff, parents, and volunteers on child protection policies, recognizing signs of abuse, and the appropriate steps to report suspicions of abuse (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020). Also, clubs and associations can

conduct thorough background checks on all coaches, volunteers, and staff members who will be working directly with children providing a code of conduct (Alexandre et al., 2022); (2) monitoring and supervision to ensure that interactions between coaches and young athletes are regularly monitored and supervised; (3) encourage open communication within environment where children feel comfortable speaking up about any concerns or issues they may be facing (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003); (4) promote positive coaching: emphasize positive coaching techniques that focus on skill development, sportsmanship, and creating a nurturing environment for young athletes (Alexandre et al., 2022, Jowett & Cockerill, 2003); (5) safe sport policies to develop and implement comprehensive safe sport policies that address issues related to bullying, harassment, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse (Eime et al., 2013). Regularly review and update these policies as needed and this research aims to make some assumptions in this regard improve mental health, physical health and social skills (Felfe et al., 2016); (6) parental involvement: encourage parents to actively participate in their children's sports activities, attend practices, and observe interactions to be more aware of what happens during training sessions (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014); (7) support for victims: offer support and counselling services to victims of abuse and their families, and ensure that they have access to the necessary resources for recovery. Any protection actions to prevent the abuse of youth sports is better than intervention, which is sometimes much more dependent on legal action by external organisations (Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020). Thus, prevention and intervention strategies must work in tandem to prevent all other types of violence against or committed by sport's children and adolescents (Alexandre et al., 2022; Bascón-Seda & Ramírez-Macías, 2020).

One of the advantages of this study is essentially related to the scarce qualitative research on this topic in Portugal. Given the above, this research can contribute to the deepening of this field of expertise in Portugal, and consolidate the research carried out at an international level. On the other hand, this research motivates us to carry out future investigations at a national level, with different research methodologies, with a larger sample of athletes and coaches from different levels and modalities. Future perspectives should focus on understanding the most effective prevention and intervention strategies for maltreatment behaviours in the athlete-coach relationship.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, experienced by young people as victims and observers, as well as their interpretation of the concept under study. We also had the purpose of learning which measures and/or strategies might lead to the prevention of these behaviours, and who should apply these measures and/or strategies, in order to fight and

prevent mistreatment in the Athlete-coach relationship.

The results obtained allowed us to conclude the existence of mistreatment behaviours in the Athlete-coach relationship, from the perspective of the observer. In order to address these behaviours, the respondents reinforce the importance of supervision and communication with the coach, and if necessary, their dismissal, as strategies and measures for the prevention of these behaviours. Such measures, according to the athletes in the study, should be the responsibility of the federations and associations of each modality, of the social bodies of the club and the parents, as essential actors for the prevention and fighting of mistreatment behaviour in the Athlete-coach relationship. Future research ought to emphasize the most effective preventative and intervention strategies for maltreatment behaviours in the athlete-coach relationship. Also, differences in treatment behaviours in the athlete-coach (Sports contexts) and teacher-student (Physical Education teaching) relationship should be studied.

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