

THE DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND BOCCIA ATHLETES WITH CEREBRAL PALSY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of interpersonal communication in para sports, focusing on boccia, a precision ball sport designed for athletes with physical disabilities. Boccia provides individuals with limited mobility opportunities not only for competition and rehabilitation but also for meaningful social empowerment. This research specifically investigates how interpersonal communication strategies—such as clarity, empathy, motivation, consistency, and exemplary behavior—are utilized by coaches to support athletes with Cerebral Palsy (CP), a condition that affects motor skills and coordination due to early brain damage. Interpersonal communication serves as a key aspect of human interaction, enabling understanding, trust, and effective relationship-building, which are especially important in coaching contexts where athletes have diverse challenges. Drawing on theories of Interpersonal and Sports Communication, this study employs a qualitative case-study design with semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis as primary data collection methods. The findings highlight that boccia training not only enhances athletes' physical capabilities but also fosters social connections, emotional regulation, and resilience. These insights demonstrate the crucial role of communication in improving athletic performance, supporting personal growth, and promoting social integration. Ultimately, this study emphasizes communication strategies that strengthen inclusion, empowerment, and collaboration in para sports, contributing to a deeper understanding of how communication supports athletes with disabilities.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, sport communication, boccia

1. PREFACE

The declining emphasis on empathy in interpersonal communication has become a growing concern. As the emotional dimension of communication is often neglected, the quality of human connection and mutual understanding is significantly impacted. This issue is particularly critical when navigating interactions across racial, ethnic, and physical differences (Riess, 2017). The emotional dimension of communication can significantly impact the quality of human connection and mutual understanding. This issue is exemplified in sports like boccia, a Paralympic discipline designed for athletes with physical impairments, including Cerebral Palsy (CP).

Boccia, a Paralympic sport specifically designed for athletes with physical disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy (CP) and is always played in a wheelchair, exemplifies the intersection of inclusion, empowerment, and athletic performance. More than just a competitive activity, boccia serves as a platform for athletes to showcase their abilities, break societal barriers, and gain greater visibility. The sport's classification system (BC1, BC2, BC3, BC4) ensures equitable competition, providing athletes with varying levels of impairment the chance to compete on an equal footing (Alves et al., 2018). This reflects the core values of the Paralympic Games such as determination, equality, and inspiration (Bartsch et al., 2018). Boccia has been shown to not only enhance motor skills in individuals with disabilities but also to foster social integration, confidence, and teamwork (Lapresa et al., 2017). These outcomes highlight how sport communication can transcend physical limitations, fostering not only athletic performance but also the personal and social development of athletes.

Communication in sports differs significantly from other contexts, as it involves a blend of emotional regulation, physical performance, and interpersonal dynamics (Tamminen et al., 2022). Coaches play an even more pivotal role. They serve as mentors, emotional anchors, and facilitators of growth, providing guidance that extends beyond technical instruction to include emotional support. The coach-athlete relationship is fundamental to the success of athletes with disabilities. Coaches of athletes with disabilities often believe that they face dual challenges in understanding their athletes (Liu et al., 2024).

In the specific context of boccia, athletes with Cerebral Palsy often encounter multifaceted challenges due to cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, and sensory impairments, or a combination of these factors, which may lead to misunderstandings, reduced confidence, and increased anxiety (Ferreira et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies have shown that interpersonal communication between coaches and athletes can significantly motivate athletes, especially when they experience declines and shifts in self-belief (Azhari et al., 2023). Despite the growing popularity of boccia, there is a scarcity of scientific studies exploring the communication dynamics between coaches and CP athletes in this sport. Understanding these interactions is vital for enhancing performance and promoting inclusivity. This study aims to contribute to the development of best practices that can be implemented to support CP athletes in boccia and similar sports contexts.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Samples

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on selected participants who are directly involved in Boccia. The participants consist of two athletes with cerebral palsy, two coaches (one of whom has prior experience as a Boccia athlete), and a key informant who is an academic and researcher specializing in Sport, Media, and Society. The primary focus of this research is on interpersonal communication, examining the application of clarity, empathy, motivation, consistency, and exemplary behavior in fostering the development of athletes with disabilities through Boccia.

Measurement

The method for data collection used in this study is the case study approach. A case study is a research strategy that is holistic and conducted in a natural setting. "Natural" means that data collection occurs in a real-world social environment without distinguishing treatment for the study subjects. "Holistic" means that the research examines the entire context to ensure a comprehensive understanding without leaving out important information. The data obtained in a case study is based on the actual events that occur. In this study, the researcher not only gathers information from participants but also from those around the research subjects (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022).

Data collection and analysis

The data collection techniques used include in-depth interviews, observations and literature reviews. Once the data is gathered, it is processed, presented, and analyzed. Coding in qualitative research involves assigning meaning and categorizing the data for easier analysis in subsequent stages. This process includes creating categories for the information obtained (open coding), selecting a category and placing it into a theoretical model (axial coding), and then building a narrative from the relationships between these categories (selective coding) (Creswell, 2016).

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3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study draws on John Wooden's communication theory to analyze interactions between coaches and athletes with disabilities in Boccia training. Athletes with disabilities like Cerebral Palsy (CP) may have specific physical, emotional, and cognitive needs, Wooden's emphasis on positive reinforcement and adaptability becomes particularly relevant. Coaches must not only convey technical knowledge but also support athletes emotionally and mentally, adjusting their communication to meet the unique requirements of each individual.

John Wooden's theory focus on mutual respect and effective interpersonal relationships is significant in creating an environment where athletes feel valued, supported, and motivated to improve their performance and self-confidence. Insights from key informants, including Faridhian Anshari, M.A., an academic and researcher in the field of Sport, Media, & Society. are presented in Table 1 to facilitate understanding of these dynamics.

Table 1
Coach's Communication Approach and Athlete's Response

<i>Communication Theory (John Wooden)</i>	<i>Coach's Communication</i>	<i>Athlete's Response</i>
Clarity	Repetition of instructions; clear and simple messages	Slow response to instructions
Empathy	Understanding the athlete's emotional state and needs	Mood swings and emotional fluctuations
Motivation	Praise, encouragement, and guidance to sustain motivation	Athletes show acceptance of motivation and follow instructions with dedication
Consistency & Exemplary Behavior	Consistent presence and behavior; role model to the athletes	Athletes find inspiration and commit to pursuing the sport

Clarity

Clarity plays an important role in interpersonal communication, helping ensure that messages are conveyed and understood accurately. In coaching athletes with physical and cognitive disabilities, such as those with Cerebral Palsy (CP), clear communication is particularly significant to support effective learning and engagement in training. Providing clear and concise instructions is crucial, as these athletes may need additional time to process information. This approach often involves using simple language, repetition, and allowing ample time for comprehension and execution. For example, in boccia training, coaches may simplify instructions and position themselves in a way that allows for real-time feedback and corrections, facilitating better understanding and skill development.

Figure 1

Coach-Athlete Positioning in Boccia Training



Clear communication helps overcome challenges in understanding and responding to instructions, especially for athletes who may struggle with fragmented speech or sensory issues. Coaches often repeat key phrases or interpret fragmented communication to ensure mutual understanding. This approach not only improves comprehension but also reduces frustration, creating a supportive environment for athletes to thrive.

“...When it comes to communication challenges, especially with pure CP (Cerebral Palsy) speech, their language can be fragmented. But as a coach, I usually repeat what I said what the words are, what their request is—until they can express a clear sentence. CP athletes are often shy at first, miss. So the approach involves a lot of conversation. With someone like Alin, it’s different. She has sensory issues, so her speech is unclear—it’s fragmented, with sounds like 'e e e e e.' As a coach, I have to interpret it myself to connect the conversation..” (Akhmad Khunaefi)

Empathy

The observations reveal that athletes with CP often experience mood swings. This requires the coach to demonstrate patience and understanding. The coach’s empathetic response includes allowing the athlete time to recover emotionally, especially when mood swings affect their focus during training. For example, when an athlete experiences a mood swing, the coach will give them approximately 15 minutes to calm down before resuming the session, while other athletes continue training in rotation. After the break, the coach encourages the athlete to rejoin the session and refocus.

Figure 2

Coach Exhibits Empathy Toward Athletes Experiencing Mood Swings



“...Miscommunication happens sometimes. There are things outside of training that need support. Even something seemingly trivial like clothing can disappoint athletes and make them uncomfortable. I usually communicate those things too. Sometimes, the Boccia

balls are different from the ones they use in practice—the weight feels different. They usually tell me, and I use it as an evaluation point to make improvements. Open communication is essential to make them comfortable even minor things should be communicated. Sometimes, an athlete will walk around the court instead of starting practice right away. I just let them be, they're trying to find their mood, right? If I force them, I'm afraid it will lower their spirits even more. But once they've had enough, I call them back and remind them to focus on practice. The most important thing is understanding that each athlete has their own way of preparing themselves. Continuous communication is key to make them feel understood..." (Akhmad Khunaefi)

".. Mr. Epi is nice, but once practice starts, he tells us not to talk—we have to focus. If we're not focused, Mr. Epi will get upset... just like that." (Radit)

The researcher's interview with a beginner athlete named Radit highlights the empathy demonstrated by the coach, who allows athletes to walk around the field as a way to calm themselves. However, according to Radit, the coach also maintains a firm stance on discipline during practice sessions. The coach's approach is grounded in the belief that while empathy is essential for supporting athletes emotionally, it is equally important to encourage independence and self-reliance in athletes. From the coach's perspective, allowing athletes the space to calm down is part of fostering emotional regulation, but it is also crucial to prevent athletes from becoming overly dependent or complacent. The coach aims to balance empathy with the promotion of personal responsibility, ensuring that athletes learn to manage their own emotions and stay disciplined without becoming overly reliant on external support. This approach is intended to build resilience, encouraging athletes to face challenges with a mindset of perseverance rather than seeking constant comfort.

Motivation

According to key informants in this study, motivation provided by the coach is not always limited to words of encouragement. It can also include practical instructions that support the continuity of the athlete's training, even outside of official schedules. For example, the coach emphasizes internal motivation and inner strength to inspire the athletes. Additionally, for coaches who themselves have Cerebral Palsy, the focus of motivation tends to center on pride and responsibility. These coaches remind the athletes with disabilities of the honor and pride they carry as representatives of the disability community. This type of motivation focuses on instilling a fighting spirit within the athletes, reminding them of their value and the importance of perseverance in the face of challenges.

Figure 3

Innovative Boccia Training Equipment: Sand-Filled Plastic Ball



Moreover, the coach introduced an alternative method for training by using plastic balls filled with sand, providing an innovative solution to enhance the athletes' mobility beyond the regular

training schedule. This creative approach helps athletes continue developing their skills even with limited training resources. The impact of such motivation is evident in the athletes' determination to practice despite the challenges posed by inadequate facilities. The coach's guidance also strengthens the athletes' resolve to continue improving and staying committed to their boccia training.

Consistency and Exemplary Behavior

One of the coaches in this study, diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, provides a unique example of consistency and leadership. This coach demonstrates resilience and independence in their daily life, without relying on others. Through their actions, they serve as a role model for the athletes, showing them the importance of perseverance and self-reliance. This inspiration is reflected in the comments from athletes, who express admiration and motivation drawn from the coach's achievements and presence.

“we saw Boccia on YouTube, we watched Mrs. Handayani. She's already international, so I just followed Radit here” (*Intansari*)

“At first, I watched Ms. Handayani” (*Radit*)

“I want to become a professional Boccia athlete, teteh (stammering)” (*Alin*)

The athletes find inspiration in the coach's consistent presence and exemplary behavior. This behavior not only strengthens the athletes' confidence but also sets an example of how they can overcome obstacles. The coach's resilience and commitment to both their own training and their athletes' development have a profound impact on the athletes' mindset. The athletes themselves report a higher level of motivation and confidence, inspired by the coach's example of overcoming physical limitations.

Based on interviews and observations, it is evident that coaches in this context employ clear communication to help athletes understand training objectives, facilitating goal-setting and active participation. This approach plays a key role in enhancing athletes' engagement and overall performance. The communication strategies observed also highlight how interpersonal interactions between coaches and athletes influence various dimensions of athletes' development, including physical, emotional, and social growth.

The study further highlights that applying John Wooden's communication framework serves as a valuable approach to understanding the interpersonal dynamics between coaches and athletes. Wooden's emphasis on trust, clear communication, and empathy provides a practical lens for analyzing how effective coaching can impact athletes' development. Coaches in this context utilize empathy towards athletes' physical and emotional conditions to foster a supportive environment, strengthening the coach-athlete relationship. Verbal encouragement and consistent attention to athletes' efforts motivate the athletes and reinforce the importance of perseverance and commitment.

The coach's consistent presence and exemplary behavior strengthen the athletes' confidence, showing them that perseverance and a strong will can help them overcome obstacles. The coach's ability to balance their own training and the development of their athletes further underscores their commitment to excellence. Their example instills in the athletes a sense of self-belief and determination, motivating them to push beyond their perceived limits. The athletes report feeling a heightened sense of motivation and confidence, directly influenced by

the coach's example of overcoming physical limitations and succeeding in both personal and professional domains.

Interviews and observations conducted during the study reveal that coaches in this context employ clear and structured communication strategies to facilitate the development of their athletes. By ensuring that training objectives are well-articulated, coaches enable athletes to set realistic goals and actively participate in their development journey. This clarity fosters an environment where athletes feel informed and engaged, improving their focus and overall performance. Beyond verbal instructions, coaches also use non-verbal cues and practical demonstrations to ensure athletes with varying communication needs can effectively understand and implement training techniques.

Furthermore, interpersonal interactions between coaches and athletes in this study extend beyond the physical aspects of training, positively influencing the athletes' emotional and social development. Athletes experience emotional support through empathetic communication, which addresses their unique challenges and affirms their individual efforts. Socially, the strong coach-athlete relationship fosters a sense of belonging and camaraderie, contributing to the athletes' holistic growth as individuals and team members.

This study highlights the value of applying John Wooden's communication framework as a lens for understanding the dynamics between coaches and athletes. Wooden's principles—trust, clear communication, empathy, consistency, and motivation—serve as a practical foundation for building effective coaching practices. Trust and empathy are particularly evident in this context, as coaches demonstrate a deep understanding of their athletes' physical and emotional needs. This empathy enables coaches to create a supportive environment that prioritizes the well-being and development of each athlete, strengthening the coach-athlete bond and enhancing overall outcomes.

The study also underscores the importance of verbal encouragement and consistent recognition of athletes' efforts in fostering motivation and perseverance. Coaches consistently provide feedback, celebrate small achievements, and acknowledge the hard work of their athletes, reinforcing the value of their efforts and boosting their morale. This consistent encouragement not only builds the athletes' self-esteem but also helps them develop resilience in the face of challenges. By focusing on the strengths and potential of their athletes, coaches foster a growth mindset that encourages continual improvement.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the crucial role of interpersonal communication in coaching athletes with Cerebral Palsy disabilities, particularly within the context of Boccia at SKh Al-Khairiyah under the National Paralympic Committee of Indonesia (NPCI) Kota Cilegon. The findings illustrate that the application of John Wooden's communication principles—clarity, empathy, motivation, exemplary behavior, and consistency—serves as an effective foundation for fostering athlete development. By leveraging these principles, coaches create a positive, supportive, and motivating environment that enables athletes to not only improve their athletic performance but also build their resilience, self-confidence, and overall well-being.

A central takeaway from this research is the adaptability of coaches in maintaining athlete engagement and motivation, even amidst resource constraints. For example, the innovative use of sand-filled balls during training sessions demonstrates how creativity and resourcefulness can

address challenges without compromising the quality of coaching. This adaptability not only reinforces athletes' commitment to the sport but also instills a sense of pride and responsibility in their progress. Moreover, the presence of a coach with Cerebral Palsy serves as a powerful example of resilience and leadership, inspiring athletes to adopt a similar mindset and empowering them to overcome their own limitations. This highlights the profound impact of relatable role models in fostering a culture of determination and perseverance.

The study further highlights the importance of clear and empathetic communication in supporting the holistic growth of athletes with disabilities. In Boccia, where athletes often face distinct physical, emotional, and social challenges, communication that is both transparent and compassionate is essential. Such communication allows athletes to set realistic goals, stay focused, and feel emotionally supported. Coaches who consistently exhibit empathy and offer encouragement fulfill athletes' needs for social connection and validation, which in turn promotes self-esteem, personal development, and a sense of belonging within the team environment.

Given the multifaceted nature of coaching athletes with disabilities, this study offers several key recommendations for practitioners and stakeholders. First, coaches should be encouraged to undergo specialized training to better understand the unique needs of athletes with disabilities, ensuring their communication methods are inclusive. Second, sports organizations like NPCI should prioritize providing accessible and adaptive training resources to alleviate logistical challenges and enhance the overall training experience. Lastly, fostering mentorship programs that involve coaches and athletes with disabilities can amplify the positive impact of role modeling and further cultivate an empowering and inclusive athletic culture.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that applying John Wooden's communication principles, coupled with a flexible and resourceful coaching approach, provides practical solutions to the challenges faced by athletes with disabilities. Coaches who prioritize empathetic communication, creatively adapt to resource constraints, and lead by example can create an environment where athletes are empowered to transcend obstacles, achieve personal growth, and realize their full potential both in sports and in life.

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