

Original article

Determinants of Trust in the Coach–Athlete Relationship: Evidence from Elite Judo

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Abstract. The quality of the coach–athlete relationship is widely recognized as a determinant of motivation, performance, and long-term career development in sport. However, empirical evidence on predictors of trust in elite combat sports remains scarce. This study investigated the mechanisms that underpin athletes’ trust in their coaches, with a particular focus on judo. Quantitative survey data were collected from 55 judokas, and analyzed using correlations and multiple regression. The results demonstrated that psychological support was the strongest and statistically significant predictor of trust, while balanced leadership style also contributed positively. Career-related planning during and after sport was positively associated with trust but did not reach statistical significance. To contextualize these findings, a qualitative case study of the long-term partnership between elite judoka Piotr Kuczera and his coach Artur Kejza was conducted. The case highlighted how process-oriented coaching, emotional reassurance, and interpersonal accessibility sustained trust over time and compensated for broader systemic uncertainties. Together, these findings suggest that trust in the coach–athlete dyad is primarily rooted in relational and psychological dimensions, rather than strategic career planning. The study contributes to sport psychology and coaching research by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, underscoring the practical importance of psychological support and balanced leadership in fostering durable trust in elite sport.

Keywords: coach–athlete relationship; trust; psychological support; leadership style; career planning; judo; elite sport

Introduction

The coach–athlete relationship has been conceptualized as a central determinant of athletes’ development, performance, and psychological well-being. Jowett’s 3+1Cs model remains one of the most influential frameworks, emphasizing closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation as interdependent dimensions of this relationship (Jowett, 2007). Later, Jowett and Poczwardowski (2007) further developed this approach, showing that trust is embedded in each dimension: it underpins closeness as a sense of emotional safety, enables commitment as sustained investment, and supports complementarity as coordinated behaviors. Without mutual trust, the dynamic becomes fragile, particularly in high-performance contexts where uncertainty and pressure are inherent.

Trust itself has been defined in psychology as a generalized expectancy of reliability (Rotter, 1967) and in sociology as a mechanism reducing complexity in situations of uncertainty (Luhmann, 1979). In sport, athletes must routinely delegate authority to coaches regarding training loads, tactical choices, and career planning, which makes trust particularly salient. Empirical research confirms that trust in coaches correlates positively with athletes’ motivation and satisfaction (Dirks, 2000). More recently, studies also demonstrate that high-quality trust predicts stronger adherence to training programs (Davis & Jowett, 2014). Conversely, lack of confidence is associated with conflict, burnout, and premature dropout from sport (Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2016).

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Received: 10 September 2025, **Accepted:** 14 September 2025

Cite: Kuczera, W. (2025). Determinants of Trust in the Coach–Athlete Relationship: Evidence from Elite Judo. *J Lead Sports Manag*, 1(6):1-9.

Leadership style plays a decisive role in shaping trust within the coach–athlete dyad. Transformational leadership theory emphasizes that supportive and empowering behaviors are associated with higher levels of trust (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In sport, transformational leadership has been shown to predict team cohesion and improved outcomes (Callow et al., 2009). In contrast, authoritarian approaches often yield short-term compliance but reduce open communication and weaken relational bonds over time (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Balanced leadership, combining clear direction with autonomy support, has been found to foster stronger trust than either purely directive or laissez-faire styles (Høigaard et al., 2008). Psychological support represents another crucial factor influencing trust. According to self-determination theory, coaches who provide emotional reassurance and recognize athletes' individual needs foster well-being and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In applied sport settings, perceived psychological support has been linked to athletes' resilience during injury recovery and to enhanced confidence in performance contexts (Freeman & Rees, 2009). These findings suggest that psychological support not only facilitates positive affect but also serves as a mediator between coaching behaviors and athletes' perceived competence.

Career planning and dual-career support have also become recognized as integral components of contemporary coaching. Research shows that effective coaching extends beyond immediate performance to include guidance for long-term development and post-sport transitions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). For example, Henriksen et al. (2019) documented how national team environments that integrate dual-career support strengthen athletes' trust in their coaches. At the same time, the evidence is not uniform: while career-related guidance reinforces perceptions of care, its predictive value for trust is less consistent than that of psychological support or leadership style (Henriksen et al., 2019). Despite a growing body of research on the coach–athlete relationship, combat sports remain underrepresented in empirical studies. While predictors of trust have been investigated in team sports such as soccer and basketball, little is known about these dynamics in judo, where the dyadic relationship is particularly central. This study addresses this gap by combining quantitative survey data with a qualitative case study.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The quality of the coach–athlete relationship has repeatedly been shown to influence athletes' motivation, performance, and long-term career development. Trust, psychological support, and leadership style constitute core elements of this dynamic (Jowett, 2007; Davis & Jowett, 2014). Despite the extensive literature on these constructs, empirical evidence specific to elite combat sports such as judo remains limited. Furthermore, while quantitative surveys can identify statistical predictors of trust, complementary qualitative insights are necessary to understand how trust is constructed and sustained in concrete relationships.

The present study was designed to address this gap by investigating how judo athletes perceive trust in their coaches and which factors predict higher levels of trust. Drawing on survey data, we examined the relative importance of psychological support, leadership style, and career-related planning. To complement the quantitative analysis, we conducted a qualitative case study of the long-term partnership between Piotr Kuczera and his club coach Artur Kejza, which has been publicly described as an exemplar of a stable and trusting coach–athlete dyad.

Based on prior research, we formulated the following research questions. First, we asked about the relative contribution of psychological support, leadership style, and career-related planning to athletes' trust (RQ1). Second, we investigated how athletes' perceptions of trust correlate with these relational and contextual factors (RQ2). Finally, we examined how trust is enacted and sustained in long-term coach–athlete partnerships in elite judo, using the Kuczera–Kejza relationship as a case study (RQ3).

From these questions, four hypotheses were derived. We hypothesized that athletes perceiving higher levels of psychological support would report higher trust (H1), and that those experiencing a balanced leadership style would demonstrate stronger trust compared to those under authoritarian leadership (H2). We further expected that career-related planning, both during and after sport, would be positively but less strongly associated with trust (H3). Finally, we anticipated that the case study would qualitatively illustrate the mechanisms revealed in the survey, particularly the role of psychological support and balanced leadership in sustaining trust (H4).

Materials and Methods

Participants

A total of 55 judokas participated in the survey. The sample consisted of 23 women and 32 men, with a mean age of 26.5 years ($SD = 5.0$). All participants reported at least three years of constant training experience and regular engagement in competitive sport. Participants were recruited from both regional judo clubs and national-level training centers, ensuring representation of athletes across different levels of competitive experience. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the institutional ethics committee.

Measures

The survey instrument was designed to assess the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship, with particular emphasis on trust and its potential predictors. Items addressed the following dimensions:

1. Trust – athletes' confidence in the coach's competence, fairness, and reliability.
2. Psychological support – perceptions of empathy, encouragement, and emotional reassurance provided by the coach.
3. Leadership style – assessment of whether the coach was perceived as authoritarian or balanced in decision-making.
4. Career planning – perceptions of the coach's involvement in long-term sport-related planning (e.g., training loads, competitive schedules, injury recovery) as well as support for post-sport career transitions.

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was piloted with a small group of athletes for clarity before administration.

Procedure

The survey was distributed in both paper and online formats to athletes training in Polish sports clubs and centers. Respondents were informed of the study's aims, assured of complete anonymity, and instructed that there were no right or wrong answers. Completion time was approximately 10 minutes. Data were collected over four weeks during the competitive season.

Data Analysis

Data were screened for completeness, and responses from non-judo athletes were removed from the primary

dataset. Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine associations between trust and the independent variables. Multiple linear regression was applied to assess the predictive value of psychological support, leadership style, and career planning on trust. Statistical analyses were performed using standard packages in Python and R, with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative Case Study

To complement the quantitative survey, a qualitative case study was conducted focusing on the long-term partnership between elite judoka Piotr Kuczera and his club coach Artur Kejza. This case was selected because of its prominence in Polish judo and the public availability of interviews, press coverage, and club reports. These materials were thematically analyzed, with a focus on expressions of trust, psychological support, and leadership style. The case study was intended to illustrate how the mechanisms identified in the survey manifest in a concrete coach–athlete relationship.

Results

Survey Results on Trust and Leadership in the Coach–Athlete Relationship

The quality of the coach–athlete relationship has long been recognised as a decisive factor in shaping athletes' experiences, motivation, and career trajectories. In the present study, we investigated the relationship between trust in the coach and perceptions of leadership style, psychological support, and career-related guidance. This section reports descriptive statistics, correlations among the measured variables, and results of the regression analysis.

Descriptive statistics indicated that athletes reported generally high levels of trust in their coaches ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.74$ on a five-point scale). Only a minority of respondents expressed low trust, suggesting that confidence in the coach was a shared experience across the sample. Leadership style classifications were unevenly distributed. The Balanced style was most frequently identified ($n = 22$), followed by the Authoritative style ($n = 11$), while the Partnership style was rarely reported ($n = 3$). Mean trust scores varied accordingly: athletes perceiving a Balanced approach reported the highest levels of trust ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.52$), those identifying Partnership indicated comparably high but more uniform levels of trust ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$), whereas the Authoritative style was associated with lower trust ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.68$). This pattern suggests that a balanced leadership approach

fosters stronger perceptions of trust than either authoritative or partnership-oriented coaching.

Bivariate correlations provided further support for these associations. Trust was positively related to psychological support ($r = .25$) and to post-sport career planning ($r = .39$). A weaker correlation was observed with leadership style ($r = .15$). Leadership style was negatively associated with psychological support ($r = -.27$). In contrast, the link between psychological support and post-sport planning was negligible ($r = .09$). Due to insufficient variance, career (sport) planning could not be reliably analysed.

Regression analysis clarified the unique predictive contributions of the measured variables. The model accounted for 23% of the variance in trust ($R^2 = .23$). Among the predictors, only psychological support emerged as statistically significant ($\beta = 1.11$, $SE = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.05, 2.17], $p = .044$), indicating that higher levels of perceived support were robustly associated with greater trust in the coach. Career planning during sport showed a positive but non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.85$, $SE = 0.72$, 95% CI [-0.99, 2.69], $p = .290$), while post-sport career planning was unrelated to trust ($\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.29$, 95% CI [-0.88, 0.61], $p = .658$).

Exploring the Coach–Athlete Dyad Through the Kuczera–Kejza Partnership Case Study

The coach–athlete relationship between Piotr Kuczera and his long-term club coach, Artur Kejza, exemplifies how trust, psychological safety, and balanced leadership can foster continuity in elite sport. In the context of Polish judo, where athletes have at times publicly expressed dissatisfaction with national-level communication and coaching structures, the Kuczera–Kejza dyad stands out as an enduring partnership built on mutual confidence and stability. As one club commentary emphasized after a key international competition, “this duo trusts each other and understands one another without unnecessary words – CONGRATULATIONS!!!!” (Kejza Team Rybnik, 2024). This description, though concise, encapsulates what scholars describe as a relational contract: a shared framework of expectations that minimizes the need for constant negotiation and verbal reassurance.

Kejza’s own reflections repeatedly highlight patience and process orientation, particularly in moments of recovery from injury. Asked about the pressure of preparing Kuczera for competition after a setback, he stated, “It doesn’t have to; it just has to be done well. There is no stress that something has to happen immediately, that something must be accelerated. We never do anything by force – this is a

process, and Piotr is step by step returning to his form.” (Kamer, 2024). This articulation of calm and measured progression is a clear example of creating psychological safety, whereby the athlete can place trust in the process rather than fear arbitrary decision-making. Our quantitative analyses demonstrated that precisely this dimension—perceived psychological support—was the strongest predictor of athletes’ trust in coaches, underscoring how the Kuczera–Kejza relationship illustrates a broader empirical pattern.

The interpersonal dimension of the relationship further extends beyond technical preparation. As Kuczera himself emphasized, “I also have a great coach at my club. When I won a medal in Sofia, I heard that success is not only about talent and hard work, but also about the contributions of many people – not only the coaches in the national team and at the club, but also my family.” (Pechman, 2023). This observation demonstrates what the literature refers to as relational depth, where task-oriented collaboration is combined with human connection. In practice, this creates an environment in which trust is not only an instrumental mechanism supporting performance but also a social bond that stabilizes the athlete’s career trajectory.

Club communications consistently emphasized the long-term and sequential nature of Kuczera’s development. One report described that “Piotr is step by step returning to top form and consistently achieving his goals. This path has not been easy, but its strength lies in patience and trust in the process.” (Rybnik.com.pl, 2023). Such narratives highlight the temporal dimension of trust, which, in theoretical terms, aligns with Luhmann’s concept of trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity. Trust allows the athlete to engage in action despite uncertainty about the future, because predictability is generated by adherence to an established plan. While our survey results indicated that career planning was not an independent statistical predictor of trust, this case study illustrates how planning contributes to perceptions of stability and continuity, which in turn sustain trust over time.

The ethos of the relationship is also reflected in how Kejza publicly evaluates his athlete. Commenting on Kuczera’s qualities, he noted his “maturity, calmness, self-confidence, composure, and heart for the fight” (Rybnicka.eu, 2022). Such descriptions frame the athlete not only in terms of performance but also in terms of personal character, further strengthening the relational bond. From the perspective of leadership theory, this resonates with the balanced style identified in our quantitative analysis as being associated with higher levels of trust, in contrast

to authoritarian tendencies that correlated with lower trust.

Finally, the dyad’s relational stability contrasts with the turbulence often described in national-level structures. Whereas some athletes have reported distance and communication breakdowns with central coaching staff, Kuczera and Kejza consistently

articulated a narrative of shared plans, mutual understanding, and perseverance. As Kejza asserted before a major international event, “We will fight with all our strength and with full faith in success, because we believe in it!” (Rybnicka.eu, 2023). In this way, the club-based relationship not only sustained high

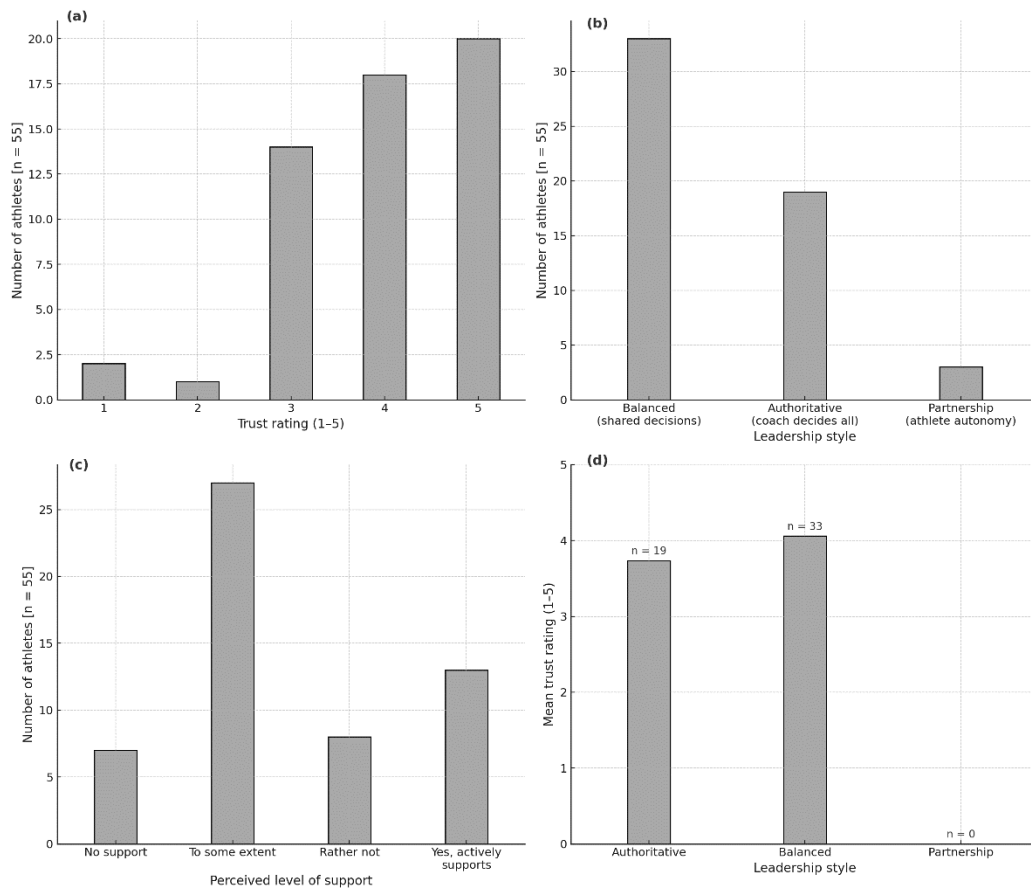


Figure 1. Distribution of survey responses and trust ratings in the coach–athlete relationship. (a) Distribution of athletes’ trust ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low trust, 5 = very high trust). (b) Distribution of athletes’ perceptions of coaching leadership style (Authoritative, Balanced, Partnership). (c) Distribution of athletes’ perceptions of psychological support provided by the coach (No support, To some extent, Rather not, Yes, actively supports). (d) Mean trust ratings (1–5) reported by athletes across leadership style groups, with error bars representing standard deviations and numbers above the bars indicating sample size (n).

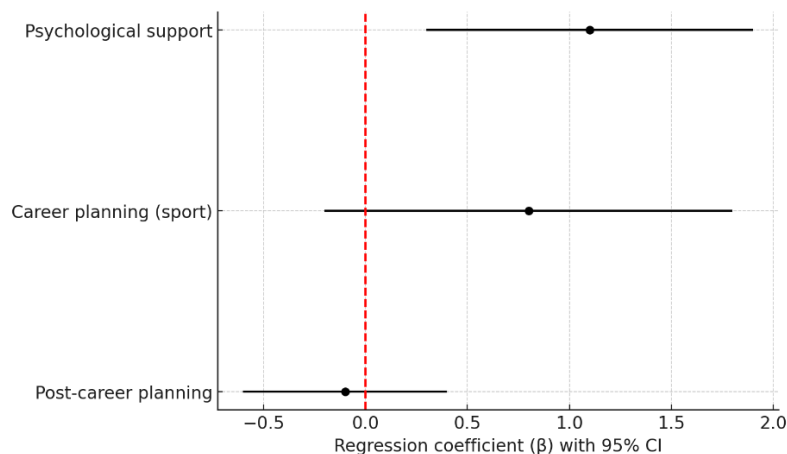


Figure 2. Regression coefficients (β) with 95% confidence intervals for psychological support, career planning during sport, and post-sport career planning as predictors of athletes' trust in their coach.

performance but also provided a compensatory psychological resource in the face of institutional uncertainty.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on the coach–athlete relationship by examining the predictors of trust among competitive judo athletes and by illustrating these dynamics through the case study of Piotr Kuczera and Artur Kejza. The findings confirm that psychological support is the most decisive factor influencing athletes' trust, while a balanced leadership style also plays a significant role. Career-related planning was positively associated with trust but did not reach the same level of explanatory power.

These results align with existing theoretical and empirical research. Jowett's (2007) 3+1Cs model emphasizes closeness, commitment, and complementarity as central to relationship quality, and psychological support can be understood as a key driver of closeness and co-orientation. Similarly, previous studies have shown that supportive coaching behaviors enhance athletes' motivation and satisfaction (Davis & Jowett, 2014), while authoritarian styles undermine trust and relational depth (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Our findings confirm this pattern in the specific context of judo, where athletes reported higher levels of trust when they perceived their coaches as balanced rather than authoritarian. The regression model accounted for 23% of the variance in athletes' confidence. This modest explanatory power indicates that additional factors, such as organizational climate, peer support, or broader institutional conditions, may also play a role and should be addressed in future research. These findings are consistent with research in team sports such as soccer and basketball, where

psychological support similarly emerges as a stronger predictor of trust than leadership style alone (Dirks, 2000; Høigaard et al., 2008). This suggests that the mechanisms underpinning trust may be robust across both team-based and individual combat sport contexts.

At the same time, the non-significant role of career planning as an independent predictor deserves attention. Previous research in dual-career development has highlighted the importance of planning for transitions during and after sport (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). While our results indicated that such planning is positively perceived, it did not emerge as a decisive predictor of trust. This may reflect the fact that athletes place greater weight on immediate, relational forms of support—particularly psychological reassurance—than on distant, strategic guidance. The implication is that career planning strengthens the broader relationship climate but does not directly determine the trust that sustains daily cooperation.

The qualitative case study of Kuczera and Kejza offered an opportunity to contextualize these findings. Their relationship exemplified the mechanisms identified in the survey: the athlete's trust was grounded in process-oriented communication, patience during recovery from injury, and the coach's availability beyond formal training. Importantly, this case also illustrated how local trust between an athlete and a coach can compensate for broader institutional uncertainties. Whereas some judokas in Poland have publicly reported difficulties with communication at the national level, Kuczera and Kejza constructed a stable dyad characterized by mutual confidence and shared goals. This highlights the potential for trust within the coach–athlete relationship to act as a buffer against systemic challenges, a finding that extends prior research by situating interpersonal trust within organizational contexts. Rather than simply reiterating

the results, these findings extend current theory by showing that in combat sports, trust depends less on structural planning and more on the everyday practices of support and balanced leadership. This highlights the relational character of trust as a dynamic resource enabling athletes to cope with uncertainty.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that athletes' trust in their coaches is most strongly rooted in perceptions of psychological support. Consistent with our expectations, athletes who felt that their coaches offered emotional reassurance and a sense of safety reported the highest levels of trust. Leadership style also mattered: balanced leadership, which combines direction with openness and autonomy, was associated with stronger trust than authoritarian approaches. Career-related planning, while positively linked to trust, did not carry the same explanatory weight. This suggests that although athletes appreciate guidance concerning their sport and post-sport careers, trust is built first and foremost through everyday relational practices rather than long-term strategic planning.

The case study of Piotr Kuczera and Artur Kejza offered a vivid illustration of these mechanisms. Their collaboration demonstrated how psychological support and balanced leadership are enacted in practice: in the patience shown during injury recovery, in the ability to communicate without pressure, and in the cultivation of normalcy beyond the tatami. These qualitative insights resonate with the quantitative findings and reinforce the conclusion that trust in elite sport is sustained through a combination of emotional security and relational balance.

Taken together, the results address the guiding research questions by showing that psychological support and leadership style are decisive in shaping trust, while career planning plays a secondary role. The hypotheses were confirmed mainly, with the case study providing further depth by illustrating how statistical patterns unfold in lived experience. Trust, therefore, should be understood not as a by-product of success but as an active resource that enables athletes to endure uncertainty and remain committed to long-term goals.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was modest, and demographic data such as sex and age were not collected, which restricts the generalizability of the

findings. Second, the survey relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Third, the study was cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between psychological support, leadership style, career planning, and trust. Finally, the case study of Kuczera–Kejza, while rich in detail, represents a single exemplar and may not be representative of all elite judo contexts. The case study drew partly on interviews and publicly available press materials. While these provide valuable insight, they may also reflect selective media framing. This reliance is acknowledged as a limitation and underscores the need for future studies to incorporate longitudinal qualitative data. The qualitative case relied primarily on interviews and press reports. While these materials enrich the narrative, they may also reflect the interpretive lens of journalists. This potential bias is acknowledged, and further studies should complement such sources with direct longitudinal interviews.

Future Research

Future studies should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, including athletes from different combat sports, genders, and age categories. Longitudinal designs would enable researchers to examine how trust develops over time and how critical transitions, such as injury, selection, or retirement, influence it. Moreover, integrating objective performance data with self-reported measures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between trust and outcomes. Comparative case studies across multiple coach–athlete dyads could further illuminate variations in relational dynamics. Ultimately, intervention-based research examining how coaches can effectively enhance psychological support and promote balanced leadership may yield practical strategies for fostering trust in high-performance environments.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions on Trust and Leadership in the Coach–Athlete Relationship

Participants answered the following questions. Unless otherwise indicated, responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low / strongly disagree; 5 = very high / strongly agree).

General Trust

- How would you rate your level of trust in your coach?

Leadership and Involvement

- Does your coach involve you in making decisions about your athletic development?
- Does your coach use an authoritarian or a more partnership-oriented leadership style?

Psychological Support and Crisis Response

- Does your coach help you in developing mental resilience and coping with stress?
- How does your coach react in crisis situations (e.g., injuries, defeats)?

Career Planning

- Does your coach help you with long-term career planning in sport (e.g., competition schedules, recovery, changes in age categories)?
- Does your coach advise you on planning for life after the end of your sporting career?

Open-Ended Items

- Which qualities of your coach most influence your athletic development?
- What has been the biggest challenge in your career, and how did your coach help you with it?
- What additional support from your coach would help you in your career?