Journal of Sport Behavior 2025
Vol. 48(2), 26-42

Article

Secondary School 1st XV Rugby Players' Perceptions of the Coaching Environment: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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Abstract: The physical, social, and psychological benefits of participating in secondary school-level sport are largely mediated by coaches. This qualitative descriptive study explores New Zealand secondary school 1st XV male rugby union (rugby) players' perceptions of the coaching environment and how it affects their sport experiences. Descriptive data was gathered from three focus groups comprised of male secondary school rugby players (16-18 years old) competing in a top-level 1st XV rugby competition in New Zealand. Findings revealed coaches influenced athletes' sense of 'brotherhood' and controlled which sports they played, how they played, and their ability to express themselves while playing. Players used covert and overt practices at times to resist control. Coaches also placed high expectations and significant pressure on players. The findings in this study extend the literature by offering insight into New Zealand's secondary school 1st XV male rugby coaching environment. Findings might enhance coaches and coach educators' awareness of how coach behaviors impact secondary school athletes' sport experiences.

Keywords: youth sport; coach development; coach behavior; athlete voice; youth coaching

Introduction

Coaches play an integral role in shaping youth athletes' experiences of sport in relation to performance outcomes, well-being, and perceived quality of their experiences (Jowett, 2017). At the heart of a coach's effectiveness in achieving these outcomes is the nature of the motivational environment they create. Self-determination theory (SDT) is a key theoretical framework used extensively to explore and understand the impact of coach behaviors on youth athlete experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Three basic psychological needs underpin SDT: (1) the need for autonomy, perceived participation in decision-making and actions aligning with sense of self (Gillet et al., 2010); (2) the need for competence, self-perceptions of the effectiveness of one's behavior and whether ability matches tasks set (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007); and (3) the need for relatedness, feeling connected to others and having a sense of belonging (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2012). Satisfaction of these needs appears to foster optimal psychological health and well-being (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Standage and Ryan (2020) reviewed some of the key findings related to SDT in the sport and exercise literature. The thwarting of the three basic psychological needs has been shown to be universal across different contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Pertinent to this study, however, is that a lack of autonomy support contributes to dropout from youth team sports, highlighting that the sporting environment created has an important role in encouraging ongoing participation in sport. A study on elite New Zealand rugby academy players utilized an SDT framework and reported that low perceptions of autonomy and competence were linked with higher burnout, while relatedness was a low to moderate predictor of burnout (Hodge et al., 2008). Therefore, autonomy-supportive environments are vital to support self-determined behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Viewed through an SDT lens, coaches can create an environment that either enhances or negatively impacts athletes' motivation and sporting experiences, depending on whether their coach behaviors are autonomy-supportive or controlling. Mageau and Vallerand (2003) identified seven autonomy-supportive coach behaviors that nurture athletes' intrinsic motivation: (1) offering choices within specific rules and limits; (2) providing rationale for tasks and limits; (3) acknowledging others' feelings and perspectives; (4) enabling opportunities for initiative taking and independent work; (5) delivering non-controlling competence feedback; (6) avoiding controlling behaviors; and (7) preventing ego involvement. Importantly, autonomy-supportive coach behaviors have been shown to positively influence athletes' intrinsic motivation (Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005), physical activity (Conroy & Coatsworh, 2007), and feelings of well-being (Balaguer et al., 2018). Conversely, the following controlling coach behaviors have been linked with psychological needs thwarting and maladaptive outcomes from sport: (1) tangible reward; (2) controlling feedback; (3) excessive personal control; (4) intimidating behaviors; (5) promoting ego-involvement; and (6) conditional regard (Bartholomew et al., 2009).

A factor that influences a coach's effectiveness in creating an autonomy-supportive environment is the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2017; Philippe et al., 2011; Wekesser et al., 2021). The coach-athlete relationship is a dynamic interpersonal relationship whereby coaches and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are mutually and causally interconnected (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Four key properties (4Cs) of quality coach-athlete relationships have been proposed: (1) closeness, coaches and athletes' interpersonal feelings such as trust, appreciation, and liking each other; (2) commitment, coaches and athletes' interpersonal thoughts regarding close long-term relationships; (3) complementarity, coaches and athletes' interpersonal leadership and co-operation behaviors; and (4) co-orientation, interdependence between coaches and athletes regarding

similarity and understanding of their respective views on the quality of the relationship (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Jowett et al., 2012). According to Olympiou et al. (2008), levels of perceived closeness, commitment, and complementarity decrease when coaches' actions include controlling behaviors, punitive responses to mistakes, unequal recognition, and emphasis on player rivalry. Conversely, these levels increase when coach-created environments emphasize role importance, co-operation, and improvement.

However, athletes and coaches' perceptions of their environment can differ, as athletes generally consider motivational climates to be significantly more performance orientated (Møllerløkken et al., 2017). The quality of the motivational climate created by coaches directly impacts an individual's overall sport experience and performance (Bartholomew et al., 2009; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), and desire to commit long term to activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This may lead to positive and/or negative developmental experiences (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009), collective efficacy within team sport (Hampson & Jowett, 2014), exhaustion (Davis et al., 2018), burnout (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016), altered perceptions of one's physical health, appearance, and capabilities (Jowett & Cramer, 2010), and satisfaction (or thwarting) of athletes' basic psychological needs (Jowett et al., 2017). To summarize, coaches play a key role in fostering autonomy-supportive environments for athletes (Fenton et al., 2014), and the foundation for their effectiveness in this regard is dependent upon the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

The New Zealand Context

Rugby is widely acknowledged as a sport of historical, national, and cultural significance in New Zealand, including in secondary schools (Pringle, 2001). In New Zealand, secondary schools, also referred to as high schools, comprise students from grades 9-13, who are usually aged 13-18 years. Recent data suggests approximately 50% of secondary school students participate in one or more individual and/or team sports, with rugby a top four participant sport ("School Sport," 2024). Inter-regional secondary school 1st XV male rugby competitions are contested annually between schools' premier teams over a 3-4-month period, with the top teams from each region then competing in the National Secondary School 1st XV Championship.

Several New Zealand secondary schools offer rugby academies to students. Rugby academies provide a high-performance environment that focuses on developing key player attributes, including rugby-specific skills, leadership, and strength and conditioning, so that athletes are prepared for 1st XV match play and potential future professional opportunities (Rogers & Cassidy, 2015). Pathways to professional sport for secondary school rugby players include being identified by talent scouts for regional development camps and professional New Zealand rugby franchises (e.g., Auckland Blues), and invited to trial for their respective squads and/or development programs ("Our Pathways," 2021; "Secondary School," 2020).

To date, the only studies to have drawn upon the voices of New Zealand secondary school rugby players have been in relation to concussion management pathways initiated by the national sporting organization, New Zealand Rugby (Costa et al., 2024; Salmon et al., 2024). These studies highlighted the significant role coaches can have in creating an environment conducive to positive concussion reporting and disclosure behaviors and revealed that coaches can also foster an environment that pressures players to play through injury. The 'rugby culture' was viewed as problematic by these studies, as winning, being tough, and a sense of 'brotherhood' (not letting your teammates down) were often prioritized over athlete health and well-being. These athlete behaviors closely align with what Hughes and Coakley (1991) referred to as the 'sport ethic', where a 'real athlete' conforms to the norms and values embodied in their sport. A further study of junior sport

coaches in New Zealand by Walters et al. (2012) found that rugby coaches used significantly more negative and instructional comments than coaches from other sports, suggesting that the significance of rugby as New Zealand's 'national' sport was a contributing factor.

The Present Study

Coach behaviors significantly affect young athletes' sport experiences. Limited research exists on New Zealand secondary school athletes' perceptions of their coaching environment. Therefore, this study examines male rugby players', from an elite secondary school 1st XV competition, perceptions of their coaching environment. The study aims to answer the research questions: What are New Zealand secondary school 1st XV male rugby players' perceptions of their coaching environment? and how does the perceived 1st XV coaching environment affect players' experiences of sport? The purpose of this study is to extend understanding of how coach behavior in New Zealand mediates the environment for male secondary school-level rugby athletes.

Methods

Participants

The participants were 26 secondary school 1st XV male rugby players, aged 16-18 years, from schools competing in the top rugby competition in a large urban area of New Zealand.

Table 1. Number of participants per focus group

Focus group number	Number of participants
Focus group 1	12 (1st session), 11 (2nd session)
Focus group 2	7
Focus group 3	7

Twelve players attended the initial focus group, which was more than anticipated, as there was high interest from players wanting to discuss their experiences. Due to time constraints, this focus group was unable to be divided into smaller groups, so two sessions were conducted with this group. Consequently, the primary researcher was unable to stimulate sufficient depth from discussions while ensuring all participants were able to share their experiences within the allocated time. Therefore, attendance at subsequent focus groups was restricted to eight participants per group (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Procedure

This qualitative descriptive study utilized semi-structured focus groups of secondary school 1st XV male rugby players in an urban area of New Zealand. Full ethical approval was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) (18/113).

This study adopted a pragmatic, descriptive, qualitative approach (Sandelowski, 2000; Savin-Baden, 2013). A pragmatic approach is well suited to answering research questions that provide insight into solutions to real-world problems, and by finding the most practical and sensible way to answer research questions (Savin-Baden, 2013; Shaw et al., 2010). Utilizing qualitative descriptive studies informed by pragmatism enables discovery and understanding of phenomena through the perspectives of those involved and provides a

descriptive representation of participants' accounts (Sandelowski, 2000). To accurately depict events through the participants' words, Sandelowski's (2000) qualitative descriptive guidelines were followed. However, we acknowledge that a descriptive approach requires researchers to choose what they highlight.

Focus groups were scheduled for between 60 to 90 minutes. In total, there were three focus groups. One focus group was split into two sessions (conducted nine days apart), due to participant availability. Each focus group comprised players from one team only, so that the discussion centered on the same coaches and coaching environment. Focus groups were chosen over interviews to provide an opportunity for more players to contribute to the study. In line with a semi-structured interviewing approach, initial questions guided the focus groups. Initial questions were broad, asking participants to describe their daily lives and encouraging them to share familiar experiences (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). Teenagers appear to be more willing to share their feelings and thoughts when confidentiality is assured. Therefore, prior to commencement of focus groups, the primary researcher informed participants their involvement in the research process would be confidential (Daley, 2013). According to Krueger and Casey (2015), teenagers are also susceptible to 'collective voice' emerging, due to outspoken teenagers influencing groups. To mitigate this, the primary researcher provided opportunities for everyone to speak and discuss their experiences and opinions (Daley, 2013).

An inductive emergent approach for analysis enabled the primary researcher to use his familiarization with earlier focus groups to facilitate questioning in later focus groups. Sim (2001) refers to the role of focus group interviewers as 'active facilitators', who can direct conversations from the general to the specific, enabling the participant conversations to remain focused on the study aims. Focus group questions were agreed upon by the researchers and refined based on a review of coaching literature and consultation with other experienced university researchers. This included: establishing details about a typical week, training sessions, and season; what they enjoyed, loved, and struggled with in relation to playing and training; freedom to pursue other activities or sports; coaching environments and coaching styles; coach behaviors towards athletes in training sessions and games based on performance, effort etc.; team culture; perceptions of coach priorities; desire to continue playing rugby beyond secondary school; and opportunities to add further comments they deemed relevant. Focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Transcripts were analyzed by the first author using NVivo10 and thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages and were peer reviewed, or peer debriefed, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by two experienced qualitative researchers (co-authors two and three), following recommendations by Creswell and Poth (2018), to enhance data trustworthiness. Interview transcripts were read and re-read to obtain familiarity with the data and then initial themes were coded and numbered for as many potential themes as possible. Initially, data was coded descriptively based on the transcriptions. Codes were then grouped into broader potential themes with data collated under relevant themes. Larger codes were cross-referenced with each other to identify common threads. Regular meetings between the primary researcher and co-authors were held to discuss how the codes related to each other and review and refine the main themes. The main themes were discussed until consensus was reached and theme names were determined. Finally, an anonymized preliminary findings report was produced and distributed to participants. The main themes, supplemented by the most pertinent data extracts, were then presented, described, and analyzed.

Qualitative researchers typically engage in reflexivity, due to their influence on the design, implementation, interpretation, and presentation of the study's findings (Mansfield,

2016). At the time of this study, the primary author was a coach development officer at a regional rugby organization. Co-authors two, three, and four are youth sport and youth development researchers and sport coaches and/or athlete-development practitioners. We have concerns over the perceived professionalization of youth sport in New Zealand; therefore, discussions addressing our views and the importance of being objective throughout this study were conducted. Until now, youth perspectives of their sport experiences and the coaching environment in New Zealand, particularly in rugby, were unclear. Using a qualitative descriptive approach enabled us to represent participants' perspectives in their own words, while minimizing interpretive bias (Sandelowski, 2000).

Results

Data analysis identified four dominant themes: 'brotherhood'; coach control; power dynamics; and expectations.

Brotherhood

Participants used the term "brotherhood" throughout the focus groups to represent the importance and value of relationships formed between athletes. Participants identified brotherhood as an aspect of rugby they loved. Participants noted that playing with friends was special and provided a sense of connection and enjoyment, which enhanced the bond between them. When describing the team environment, participants used terms such as "down for the pack" and "a brotherhood", suggesting strong unity and connection between the players. Participants described what brotherhood meant to them, for example, "brotherhood comes from each other, we rely on each other to help us through the game to play for each other." Another participant said, "the connection players have with each other is something they feel they can rely on that supports them on the field".

Brotherhood was related more to the culture generated by the players for the players. There was some evidence during preseason activities that coaches fostered brotherhood through their actions and behaviors. One participant said, "we went on a one-week camp together in the first-term holidays. We all bonded there, which is cool". During these camps, participants noted coaches facilitated discussions that allowed athletes to determine team values.

Coach Control

All participants reported that coaches exhibited controlling behaviors. Three sub-themes were identified under the coach control theme: (1) control over players' participation in other sports; (2) control of trainings and games; and (3) control over players' self-expression.

Control over Players' Participation in Other Sports

Participants mentioned coaches prohibited them from playing other winter sports, as they conflicted with rugby commitments. In relation to playing other winter sports, participants responded, "I would, but I can't [due to the rugby coach disallowing it]" and "we have to prioritize 1st XV [rugby], or we wouldn't [be allowed to] play". One participant who was forced to prioritize playing rugby over basketball stated, "I didn't like it [being prevented from playing basketball], because I like basketball. I was always told [by the coach] to be at 1st XV training, [but] I wanted to train in basketball as well". Participants mentioned wanting to be allowed to play other sports during the rugby season. One participant said, "give us the chance to play more sports than the one, instead of having to prioritize rugby".

Control of Trainings and Games

All participants commented that coaches planned training-session content with minimal player input: for example, "not much [player input], not at all". Participants also reported that coaches decided on-field plays, as suggested by the following comments, "yeah, it's the coaches [who decide], they're always telling us what to do" and "we can come up with moves [on-field plays], but it still has to go through [be approved by] the coaching staff".

Participants described how coaches positioned themselves on the sideline during games to give instructions, such as lineout plays. For example,

> *[There were] a couple [of support staff] on the side, [including] our manager and assistant. Our backs' coaches are usually on the side communicating to the boys [players], and they have the mics [microphones], the walkie talkies, and stuff. During the game, if they see something [they want to change], they'll communicate it, then the guys on the side will just shout to the boys and tell us what we need to do.*

Participants expressed that they would like some say in on- and off-field decision making, but coaches often overruled athletes' decisions. For example, in rugby, players usually decide which option to take when awarded a penalty, but according to one player,

> *In our semi-final last year, there was five minutes to go [and the referee called a penalty], and we chose to take a [penalty] kick. The whole team I think, at least the forwards, really wanted to kick for touch [the sideline]. They [the coaches] sort of just ran on [brought out] the [kicking] tee [to attempt a penalty goal]…and we [the players] didn't have a [say in the] decision…we weren't allowed to change the [coaches'] decision.*

Control over Players' Self-expression

Participants said they felt unable to play naturally and express themselves due to coaches' control. Words such as "robotic" were used to describe their in-game feelings. One participant stated, "we just are doing [following] the game plan…everyone is just doing what they are told".

Participants claimed that in-game errors also led to coaches intervening and restricting player freedom. For example, "they [coaches] give us freedom to a certain extent, but…[if] everyone played wrong [made errors], they take that freedom from us". However, this was not what players wanted. One participant had the following to say, "on game day, I think coaches need to stop screaming from the sideline and telling us what to do; just let us play". Participants noted having greater freedom to express themselves in junior grades. According to one participant, "the only fun I had was in the Under-14s [age-restricted rugby team]. That's it".

Power Dynamics

Participants reported that a clear power dynamic existed between players and coaches. Participants admitted ignoring coaches' in-game directions at times, instead implementing plays they preferred, which was highlighted by one participant's comment,

> *We've overcalled [overruled] them [the coaches] a couple of times when we felt confident in some stuff [plays]. The biggest call out [players overruling coaches' decisions] I remember was our [school removed] game. We got a penalty right in front of the sticks [goal post] and they [the coaches] were bringing the [kicking] tee on...someone told them to 'f#### off' and we took a scrum [instead]. They were pissed [angry] that we took it [the scrum].*

Some players admitted to missing school to avoid training, deliberately under-performing at training, and not informing coaches when implementing plays, as they believed 'physical' punishment (harder physical training) would ensue. Participants said that disputing coaches' decisions was pointless, for example, "we [players] kind of didn't know how to react [to the coaches]. It was one thing to tell them [that the player's disagreed with coaches' decisions], but then they steered away [ignored the players' opinions] from it [anyway]…[so] we didn't really want to ask again". Some participants mentioned challenging coaches' decisions, as suggested by the following comment,

> *We still do [have conversations with coaches] so they know [our opinions]. In the end, the coaches end up winning [making decisions]. We've just wasted a couple of minutes explaining why we shouldn't [use particular plays], or what moves [plays] work, or like challenging [the coaches], but in the end, it's an obvious loss [unsuccessful].*

Expectations

Within this theme, three key sub-themes were identified: (1) expectations of performance; (2) expectations to play through injury; and (3) expectations of commitment.

Expectations of Performance

Participants stated that coaches had high athlete-performance expectations. Participants said the following, "sometimes they [coaches] have too high expectations on us…they think we can do more than what we're asked to do" and "yep, I think that['s] why the boys are scared [to make errors]…they have a lot of expectation [from coaches]".

Participants acknowledged that coaches' expectations often prevented them from performing at their best and diminished their enjoyment, and fear of failing to reach coaches' expectations created performance anxiety. According to one participant, "Once the mistake's made [it creates] self-doubt. They [players] don't brush it off…they hold onto their mistake…once they're nervous, they do another mistake…[and] another mistake…it all adds up. It's frustrating and then they crumble [perform poorly]".

Participants claimed the 1st XV rugby environment was "very serious" and "different" compared to lower grades. One participant said, "yeah, that's [lower grades] where everyone [the players] got to express themselves…everyone was equal. As you're young, you sort of enjoy sports...but as you [be]come older, it's [about] commitment [to the team], it's all about commitment".

Participants noted that pressure from coaches' expectations affected their playing experiences. One participant had the following to say, "yeah it [coaches' expectations] ruins it [playing experience] for heaps [of players]. Some boys [players] didn't want to play anymore because of how they were being treated". Consequently, some players confirmed they contemplated quitting the team.

Participants noted that coaches highlighted player errors, but offered minimal praise for good performances, which left players feeling confused over coaches' perceptions of them. For example, "the coaches are the first ones to give you an earful [be addressed by the coaches] if something goes wrong, but sometimes they're the last ones to give you a compliment. So, you're pretty unsure where you're standing from their perspective." One participant had the following to say regarding failure to achieve coaches' expectations, "you're going to get an earful. You're going to get yelled at".

Expectations to Play Through Injury

Participants mentioned feeling that coaches expected players to put the game first before their health, resulting in them feeling pressured to play through injury, particularly when coaches deemed injuries insignificant, as evident in the following comment,

> *There are some injuries where like the coaches will like accept it [acknowledge its seriousness], but some where the coaches just don't want to listen. So kinda [sic] have to like suck it up and do it [play regardless]. [If you have] got a little niggle [minor injury] and the physio tells you don't train for a week…then you approach a coach [to inform them about being unable to train] and he gives you the evils [disapproving look]. So personally, you're like, I'm gonna [sic] have to train.*

Another participant stated,

> *Last year, I like got injured like pretty bad. I tore a ligament in my foot and then [after I said I was unable to play, the coach] said that I was scared to play. We were versing [school removed] the next week and…I already versed them last year and we won. I was like, just annoyed…and he was trying to say I wasn't injured, but I went for an MRI and I tore a ligament in my foot. Then they [the coaches] were trying to get me to play, but I couldn't run.*

Consequently, the participant expressed losing desire to continue playing for the team and coach. The participant stated, "yeah [I do] not want to play, well [I do] not want to play here". The participant mentioned wanting to continue playing rugby in a different environment.

Expectations of Commitment

All participants mentioned feeling training volumes were too high and, consequently, struggling to cope with training demands. Comments included, "exhausting, you've got school and trainings in the morning and after school, and then have like homework. Then you don't feel like doing it and then get to school and get in trouble" and "yeah, it's pretty hard…we train every day of the week, except Friday…just trying to get to every training, it's pretty hard, especially in the mornings. Some of us find it hard to wake up [on time]".

Some participants asserted that training in the morning affected their schooling, for example, "morning training is kind of negative. It causes us [the players] to be tired during classes and fall asleep at times when the training is too intense in the morning". One participant noted training after school was also challenging, they said, "Knowing you've got training after school [is mentally challenging]. It's pretty hard to get through school when you're already tired and you know you've got hours of training after school…you have to mentally tell yourself to turn up [be prepared]".

A number of participants said they believed coaches' training expectations, which included attending all trainings, were typical for 1st XV rugby players; therefore, they accepted them. However, participants also mentioned feeling that coaches overreacted to players missing training sessions. For example, one participant stated, "just because we don't turn up to one training…doesn't mean our commitment's not there…but when we're not there for one training, they make it [appear] like we've missed the whole week [of training sessions]". Participants said they were in favor of reduced training volume, such as having one training per day, rather than two.

Discussion

The finding that brotherhood created a more supportive team environment and strengthened player bonds aligns with previous research that coaches' autonomy-supportive behavior can support athletes' need for relatedness (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009; Reinboth et al., 2004). During the preseason, coaches displayed autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), such as allowing players to determine team values, which fostered feelings of brotherhood between players and enhanced player enjoyment. However, preseason aside, there was little evidence of coaches supporting player autonomy (Alvarez et al., 2009).

After discovering some athletes were covertly participating in other sports, coaches displayed controlling behaviors consistent with some of the controlling motivation strategies outlined by Bartholomew et al. (2009), including: influencing how many sports athletes participate in; excessive personal control by imposing values and opinions; surveillance; and over intrusiveness. Furthermore, being "snitched on" by a coach, as reported by one participant, may have violated player-coach trust, which, potentially, impacted 'closeness', an important aspect of coach-athlete relationships and, in turn, their self-determination (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Olympiou et al., 2008).

Controlling and instructional coach behaviors reduce player responsibility for their own performance (Hodge et al., 2014). It is possible that rugby's historical and cultural significance in New Zealand, as reflected by the importance of secondary school 1st XV male rugby competitions, may add external pressure on coaches to win, which, potentially, leads to controlling coach behaviors, as described by participants in this study (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). New Zealand Rugby's talent development system's structure may also impact coach behaviors. Selection of regional (New Zealand Super Rugby franchises) and national representative programs begins at age 17, and the secondary school 1st XV rugby competition is key for talent identification. These elite performance talent-identification programs may influence coaches and schools to increase "investment" in their top teams and players through higher training loads and discouraging participation in other sports. Furthermore, winning at this level is a marketing tool for schools, as increased media coverage highlights sporting success.

It would be relatively easy to be critical of some of the controlling behaviors by coaches that were reported in this study. However, it is important to note that coach behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. As noted by Côté and colleagues through their work on the Personal

Assets Framework, there are three inter-relating dimensions that impact athletes' experiences, namely, appropriate settings, quality social dynamics, and personal engagement (Côté, 2014, 2016; Côté et al., 2020). Coaching represents one relationship that contributes to quality social dynamics, but the behaviors exhibited by coaches are, in turn, influenced by the 'appropriate' settings. Interestingly, although coaches clearly attempted to control athletes' game-time decisions, they appeared to have mixed results in this regard.

In the present study, power was primarily directed from coaches towards players. Power dynamics are inherent features of social interactions (Giddens, 1984), whereby individuals are embroiled in a web of power operating within exchanges between individuals, groups, and institutions (Foucault, 1980). However, within any social network or relationship there is potential for resistance (Foucault, 1988), as evidenced in this study by athletes resisting coach power by not attending school and deliberately underperforming at training. Other authors have reported similar findings in studies on professional youth footballers (Cushion & Jones, 2006) and rowers (Purdy et al., 2008). In this study, participants used strong language when resisting coach directions to, potentially, prevent being overruled and demonstrate how power can be challenged through language (Giddens, 1984). We concur with earlier research that highlights the complexity of the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches' effectiveness rests on what their athletes learn, and how they develop and perform; however, "coaches can never gain absolute predictive control over their charges' learning and actions, let alone read their minds or feel their emotions" (Jones & Wallace, 2005, p. 120).

The effectiveness of a coach is influenced by the type of feedback they give to their athletes. Feedback provides information to athletes regarding their performance in relation to coach expectations (Carpentier & Mageau, 2016). The quality and nature of coaches' feedback reported in this study may account for why participants perceived coach expectations as too high. Change-orientated feedback is given when performance is inadequate and requires behavior modification. However, change-orientated feedback can be delivered in an autonomy-supportive way that enhances athlete motivation, well-being, and self-esteem, and enables greater satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, 2016). Utilizing an autonomy-supportive approach to change-oriented feedback would have, potentially, helped participants in this study feel more positive about the coaching environment.

Participants' acknowledgement that athlete enjoyment was higher in lower-grade secondary school competitions highlights that secondary school 1st XV rugby players may experience increased pressure due to the seriousness of rugby at that level. Athletes were encouraged by external agencies such as coaches and schools to commit fully to rugby, and, ultimately, felt compelled to comply, which impacted other areas of their lives. The level of importance placed on secondary school 1st XV rugby by schools themselves, and the expectations placed on the team's performances to enhance the images of these schools appears to feed into the expectations of what is in effect a professionalized version of sport at secondary school level. In this regard, it is perhaps unsurprising that coaches exhibit performance-driven controlling behaviors.

The finding that early morning training sessions were challenging for participants and negatively impacted their motivation and attention at school is supported by literature on adolescent sleep cycles. For adolescents, normal developmental shifts in their circadian cycle favor late-morning to late-afternoon activities (Minges & Redeker, 2016). The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) has advocated that educational institutions delay school start times for middle and high school students to enable sufficient sleep to be healthy, alert, awake, and ready to learn (Watson et al., 2017). The finding that athletes' rugby

commitments prevented adequate sleep may explain why participants felt their schoolwork was affected, as lack of sleep is associated with poor school performance (Minges & Redeker, 2016; Watson et al., 2017). Typically, New Zealand secondary schools require sport trainings to take place outside of school classroom hours, with coaches primarily responsible for determining training times. By replacing morning trainings with more afternoon/evening trainings, coaches would, potentially, assist players with getting adequate sleep, which could, therefore, lead to improved academic achievement.

The finding that participants felt pressured by coaches to play through injuries is concerning and is consistent with the findings of an earlier New Zealand cross-sport study (Whatman et al., 2018). In the 1st XV rugby context, the medical staff provide recommendations regarding a player's readiness to play; however, the coach and player make the final decision on whether they will play. The more controlling coach behaviors identified by Bartholomew et al. (2009), and evidenced in our study disregard athletes' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives and conflict with autonomy-supportive and athlete-centered coaching behaviors (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Ultimately, the only evidence of autonomy-supportive behaviors discussed by our participants was found in the coaches' actions during the preseason. Once the season began, coach behaviors became more controlling, resulting in the players' non-optimal experiences described in this study.

Conclusions

The findings from this study provided insight into New Zealand's secondary school 1st XV male rugby coaching environment through the players' eyes. A sense of brotherhood between players was valued most by participants, indicating relatedness was an important part of their rugby experience. The findings suggest that, aside from the preseason, coaches used minimal autonomy-supportive behaviors and were largely controlling. Coaches' controlling behaviors led to player dissatisfaction, lack of understanding and choice, and less enjoyment. These findings indicate that current coach behaviors in New Zealand's secondary school 1st XV male rugby environment do not always align with athlete-centered, humanistic approaches.

Recommendations are offered in many coaching-related studies to coaches to enhance their practice (for example, see Martin, 2020). We argue that the onus should be on sport institutions to consider the role of sport for young people, and how it could be constructed in a more person-centered way. We also believe that coach education courses should focus equally on interpersonal dimensions of coaching and technical and tactical aspects. The findings of this study have already been used to inform coach education initiatives within several New Zealand sports.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. As noted by Acocella (2012), there are disadvantages and advantages to focus group research. Other members of a group can potentially influence the way ideas are expressed and inhibit individual perspectives, resulting in individuals providing answers they perceive to be socially desirable and conforming to dominant in-group attitudes and beliefs. However, in a focus group setting, this creates the space for participants to compare opinions, favoring the "production of a plurality of positions and stimulate participants according to a sharing and comparing process" to enable multiple inter-subjective representations (Acocella, 2012, p. 1135). Viewed through a pragmatic lens, this approach in our study enabled multiple perspectives to be captured, and in the case of a team sport, allowed for 'team perspectives' on their coaching environment to be captured.

A further possible limitation is the relatively small number of focus groups, as the top secondary school 1st XV competition this study focused on included 12 teams. Future studies that include additional and/or larger focus groups could assist with achieving data saturation. Schools in today's climate of media attention appear wary of allowing access to students to avoid overloading their schedules. This may partly explain why obtaining school permission to interview students was difficult and why scant research exists in this context. In the future, research comparing and contrasting athletes' perceptions of coaching across all secondary school rugby grades, male and female, in New Zealand may offer further insight into this area. Based on our experiences, the use of focus groups in team sport settings may have advantages over individual interviews. We concur with Nyumba et al. (2018) who found that focus group dynamics can allow issues to be explored in context and in depth, and, potentially, offer greater insights than is possible in multiple individual interviews.

Author Contributions: conceptualization, S.M., C.H., and S.W. methodology, S.M., and S.W. formal analysis, S.M. investigation, S.M. writing-original draft preparation, A.L. writing-review and editing, A.L., S.W., S.M., and C.H. supervision, C.H., and S.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

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