

## A Roundtable With College Strength and Conditioning Coaches: Working With Sport Coaches

**Andy Gillham**

Ludus Consulting, LLC

**Michael Doscher**

Valdosta State University

**Jim Krumpus**

University of Arizona

**Michelle Martin Diltz**

University of Alabama

**Nate Moe**

South Dakota State University

**Shepard Allen**

College of the Holy Cross

**Reese Bridgeman**

Bellhaven University

Strength and conditioning coaches are routinely considered key members of the team working to prepare athletes for sport competitions. This has led to substantial confusion over the roles of strength and conditioning coaches and their working relationship with sport coaches. For example, when detailing their job tasks strength and conditioning coaches have described ineffective and stressful relationships with the sport coaches with whom they work. The purpose of this paper is to present information from college strength and conditioning coaches specific to their working relationship with sport coaches. Fulltime strength and conditioning coaches representing all National Collegiate Athletic Association divisions in the United States responded to a series of 10 questions. The respondents provided a variety of examples detailing their experiences working with sport coaches and provided advice both for strength and conditioning and sport coaches to improve the working relationship for the betterment of the athletes.

**Keywords:** coach-athlete relationship, mentorship, professional development

Team cohesion is an often researched topic across sport. The general focus of that research though is on athletes (e.g., [Cope, Eys, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2010](#)) and to a lesser extent among the coaching staff (e.g., [Martin, 2002](#)). Absent in those pieces is the relationship between the sport coaching staff and the strength and conditioning coaching (SCC) staff. Much in the same way that athletes can detract from a team's performance due to cohesion-related factors, poor working relationships among sport coach and strength and conditioning coaches can also reduce team performance.

Massey and Vincent (2013) examined the experiences of female SCC and participants reported their job was moderately or highly stressful, and sport coaches were specifically mentioned as a prominent source of stress. Laskowski and Ebben (2016), again with female SCC, found the top three disadvantages to being a strength and conditioning coach were long hours, poor pay, and sport coach issues. When the sport coaching staff and the SCC staff are not working well together, the athletes will get caught in the middle. Once the athletes are placed in the middle of the two groups of coaches the challenge of collaborating for improved team

---

Andy Gillham owns and operates Ludus Consulting, LLC, Sioux Falls, SD. Michael Doscher is with Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA. Jim Krumpus is with the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. Michelle Martin Diltz is with the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL. Nate Moe is with South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD. Shepard Allen is with College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA. Reese Bridgeman is with Bellhaven University, Jackson, MS. Address author correspondence to Andy Gillham at [drgillham@gmail.com](mailto:drgillham@gmail.com).

performances will increase. One complicating factor in considering the collaboration between sport coaches and SCC is that the role of SCC within sport teams is still unclear (Radcliffe, Comfort, & Fawcett, 2013). It is not even clear if SCC should be viewed more through the lens of an assistant coach on each of the sport coaching staffs they work with, or more of a head coach of the training facility.

Reid, Stewart, and Thorne (2004) pointed out that the use of multidisciplinary teams is more common outside of sport (e.g., a team of a nurse, doctor, and social worker) than within sport. The increases in funding in general, as well as greater acceptance of strength and conditioning specifically, have combined to create a situation where multidisciplinary staffs are more viable. Despite that reality, Reid et al. (2004) pointed out that most sport organizations have yet to avail themselves of research and lessons learned in other contexts outside of sport (e.g., healthcare). Martel (2015) provided an in-depth explanation of how USA Hockey's American Developmental Model (ADM) came to fruition. When the ADM project group was considering best practices from across the globe one of their findings was the prevalence of SCC, even at the lower club levels, prompting a recommendation as part of the ADM for USA clubs to better utilize SCC as part of a multidisciplinary team. Gustaffson, Holmberg, and Hasmen (2008) highlighted an example of where a multidisciplinary team was successful to the degree that an athlete achieved a record breaking performance.

While multidisciplinary teams are becoming more common (e.g., Ferrar et al., 2018), there are underlying mechanisms that highlight the potential sources for conflict between sport and SCC coaching staffs. One example has to do with a discussion regarding athlete physiological variables, training stimuli, and training plans. A recent examination of how sport coaches get feedback on their own performance showed coaches receive feedback in a rather haphazard, abstract, and in some cases fairly random fashion (Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2017). That means when the SCC approaches the sport coach with concerns over athlete training or physical preparation for competition, this feedback may be met with resistance from the sport coach for no other reason than the sport coach is simply unaccustomed to receiving any feedback. Another possibility is that because most sport coaches typically had to serve as, at least, an impromptu SCC for their team at some point during their coaching career (Martinez, 2004) they may believe they are factually-correct and qualified to serve as an SCC.

While sport coaches may have served as an SCC at some point in their career, sport coaches are rarely trained sufficiently in resistance training principles to be effective in that role (McGladrey, Hannon, Faigenbaum, Shultz, & Shaw, 2014) which means the SCC is likely to be upset and frustrated that the sport coach will not listen and attend to the feedback given. McGladrey, Hannon, Faigenbaum, Shultz, and Shaw (2014) constructed a written test assessing knowledge of resistance training. In their study, the passing score for the test was set at 75%. They gave the test to 427 participants that were high school sport coaches, high school physical education teachers, or undergraduate students with a physical education teacher education major. Out of the 427 participants, the mean score across all groups was only 58%, well below passing. The highest scoring demographic group was the physical education teachers that were actively teaching resistance training as part of the curriculum, and even that group achieved only a 62% score on the test. What was perhaps most problematic is that the lowest scores were those related to keeping athletes safe during training (McGladrey et al., 2014). Safety is a consistent concern for SCC (NSCA, 2017) and it is not difficult to

picture conflict arising from sport coaches requesting activities that SCCs deem unsafe. The combination of sport coaches feeling attacked resulting from SCC feedback and SCC feeling they are being pressed into unsafe training practices is entirely plausible and demonstrates the challenge of building cohesion across the types of coaches.

The collaborations, or lack thereof, between sport and SCC coaching staffs has implications for novice and experienced coaches across both groups of coaches. This is also fertile ground both for researchers and practitioners. Researchers are always in search of new questions to better explain what leads to performance excellence and the overwhelming majority of research regarding coaches has focused on sport coaches (Gallo & DeMarco, 2008), leaving a gap regarding strength and conditioning coaches generally and a specific line of inquiry could be developed by considering the collaboration between SCC and sport coaches. Moreover, as coaching scientists (e.g., Gould, 2016) have repeatedly called for better partnerships between researchers and coaches, the interplay between SCC and sport coaches highlights an opportunity for a trusted other to play a significant role in coach development for both groups of coaches. The concept of a trusted other serving as an advisor to a coach was advanced by Lauer, Driska, and Cowburn (2016). This type of an intervention could be part of a mentoring situation or even as part of a community of practice (CoP). It is noteworthy that there are examples of mentorship and CoP within both sport coaches (Garner & Hill, 2017; McQuade, Davis, & Nash, 2015) and strength and conditioning coaches (Gillham, Doscher, Schofield, Dalrymple, & Bird, 2015; Murray, Zakrajsek, & Gearity, 2014) that provide guidance for researchers and coach developers.

The purpose of the project reported on in this paper was to pose questions to SCC's across multiple National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) divisions specifically about their experiences working with sport coaches. While the context of NCCA is largely unique to the USA, the breadth of experiences included across the different competitive levels of NCAA as it relates to sport coaches and SCC is wide-ranging. For example, some strength and conditioning coaches work predominantly with one team while others must oversee as many as 12. Some SCC staffs consist of interns, graduate assistants, fulltime assistants, and head strength and conditioning coaches while others have only a head SCC and graduate assistants. It is hoped that readers can find parallels to their own experiences and their own backgrounds even if those do not include any affiliation within the NCAA context.

## Project Methods

Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2003) described sport coaches as working in a world of 'structured improvisation'. The implication is that there are some general guidelines and yet those plans are essentially expected to change. Conversely, strength and conditioning coaches are taught to plan an athlete's training program in yearly cycles (Haff, 2016). It is interesting though to note that more experienced SCC (e.g., Szedlak, Smith, Day, & Greenless, 2015) point out that much of their success came from the 'softer skills' and that they recognize the need to be more flexible and adapt to current situations the longer they coach. Interestingly, SCC have also commented that their professional development had to include activities focused on managing relationships with athletes, coaches, and administrators while simultaneously moving away from programming-based professional development activities (Tod, Bond, & Levallee, 2012). Those topics helped inform the creation of a

series of 10 questions that were asked of fulltime employed collegiate level strength and conditioning coaches.

## Question Development

The open-ended questions were developed specifically for this project and stemmed from previous research and follows the same format found in the literature (e.g., Gillham et al., 2015, 2017; Gillham, Schofield, Doscher, Dalrymple, & Kenn, 2016). In addition to seeking descriptive answers, questions were also asked with a focus on solutions and advice the participants wanted to share. Multiple sources (e.g., Duehring & Ebben, 2010; Hartshorn, Read, Bishop, & Turner, 2016; Laskowski & Ebben, 2016) cite conflicts between sport and strength and conditioning coaches and thus the first two questions solicited descriptions of the challenging aspects of sport and SCC coach collaborations and if the SCC could identify any demographic characteristics of sport coaches that seemed to result in more difficult working relationships. The third and fourth questions were an opportunity for the participants to share strategies they have employed unsuccessfully (i.e., the third question) and successfully (i.e., the fourth question) in an attempt to improve the working relationship between the sport and strength and conditioning staffs. Athletic administrators have also drawn the ire of SCC in previous research (e.g., Massey, Schwind, Andrews, & Maneval, 2009; Massey & Vincent, 2013) which prompted the fifth question about administrators mediating disputes between sport and strength and conditioning coaches. One consistent member of sport team staffs is the certified athletic trainer (ATC) and the importance of this relationship has been considered previously (Wagner, Greener, & Petersen, 2011). This led to the sixth question asking if ATCs play any role in disputes between sport coaches and SCC. Being a role model for athletes has been cited as important to SCC (Szedlak et al., 2015) and it seems reasonable to expect that SCC should also want to model appropriate professional relationships with the sport coaches as part of that role model status. Thus, it seemed relevant to ask about any conflicts between sport and strength and conditioning coaches that created conflict for the athletes. Questions eight and nine targeted advice for other SCC in the case of newly hired sport coaches (i.e., question eight) and for novice SCC in working with sport coaches (i.e., question nine). Finally, the last question was based on Rathwell, Bloom, and Loughead's (2014) comment that research on assistant coaches is relatively sparse. Whether SCC are considered assistant coaches on the sport coach staff or not, there are assistant-level strength and conditioning coaches within the staff making inquiring about the different levels of SCC worthwhile.

## Sample Recruitment

The first author relied on his professional network to solicit SCC that would serve as participants. The sample was restricted to fulltime employed NCAA collegiate-level SCC and was intended to span not just multiple NCAA divisions but also coaches who have served as head and assistant level SCC, worked with a variety of sports, included SCC with administrative responsibilities, and both sexes. Individual coaches needed to have worked as a SCC for at least five years and had to agree to provide typed responses to the questions and acknowledge their contribution by including their name in any publication of the material. Six coaches met all individual and group-level requirements and responded to the series of 10 questions. The coaches, their titles, and the schools and NCAA division represented are: (a) Reese Bridgeman, Director of Athletic Performance,

Bellhaven University – Division III; (b) Michael Doscher, Head Speed and Strength and Conditioning Coach, Valdosta State University – Division II; (c) Shepard Allen, Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach, College of the Holy Cross – Division I, Non-Power 5; (d) Nate Moe, Assistant Athletic Director for Strength and Conditioning, South Dakota State University – Division I, Non-Power 5; (e) Michelle Martin-Diltz, Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach, University of Alabama – Division I, Power 5, and (f) Jim Krumpos, University of Arizona, Associate Athletic Director, Director of Performance Enhancement – Division I, Power 5.

## Data Generation

All SCC were contacted independently and asked to respond to the series of 10 questions. A short paragraph explaining the reasoning behind the project as well as the specific eligibility requirements was included. Each coach also responded to at least one round of follow-up and/or clarification questions via email. The first author made minor editing changes (i.e., mechanics and style, not content) but the following sections are to be taken as the individual coach's complete transcriptions of their responses to the questions. The questions were distributed at the end of summer (i.e., generally a low-stress time for SCC) and coaches were given three weeks to reflect on the questions and compile their responses. Additionally, each SCC was contacted again after the project was complete but prior to submission for publication to confirm the respondent was satisfied with his or her responses.

### Reese Bridgeman, Director of Athletic Performance, Bellhaven University

#### Question (Q): What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?

I have served as a strength coach at every level there is in college athletics and I think that relationships with sport coaches have a lot to do with their experiences, or lack thereof, with strength coaches in the past. I also served as a collegiate football and track coach earlier in my career and I think my sport coaching experience helps me to see things from the sport coach's perspective. Every time I start a new position, or a new sport coach is hired, the process of developing trust starts. The sport coach has to develop trust in the SCC and the strength coach has to show that he or she can be trusted. Being loyal and supporting each other's philosophies through consistent communication will build that trust.

#### Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?

Usually head sport coaches that have come from situations where they served as their own SCC have strong opinions about what they want done with their athletes. Once they develop trust in the SCC working their sport they usually appreciate being able to focus more on sport specific skill development, recruiting, and administrative tasks and not having to spend time with the strength program for their athletes. Problems can arise when the new sport coach has had a great relationship with a previous SCC that they want you to adopt that strength coach's program and philosophy.

#### Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well.

There has been a time or two, early in my career, when I tried to handle a player discipline issue without consulting with the head coach as much as he might have liked. These situations highlighted the importance of clear and direct communication with head sport coaches. You may not always agree but you are not being paid to tell sport coaches only what they want to hear.

**Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship.**

I have had a couple of job interviews where a sport coach explained how he had run his program with the previous SCC and I had to explain that if I was hired I would ask his opinions and discuss an annual plan with him, but I would be running the training programs and making the final decisions in the weight room. Obviously, you need to make sure to have the support of athletic administration (AD) before you make that kind of statement. After I was hired we had no problems with our relationship. Again, I think most of these issues come down to trust.

**Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

I try to handle any situation that might come up between the sport coach and me face to face, not through email or text, or even over the phone. My experience has been that the more people, especially administrators, that get involved in a disagreement related to the strength and conditioning program the less likely there will be a favorable outcome for the SCC. I think this is due to the fact that few people, even within the athletic department, understand the working environment of SCC. The most challenging situations can be dealing with the conflicts that result from situations where one SCC works with multiple teams using the same facility. My experience has been that administrators are usually more supportive with Olympic sports and less with football and basketball. I do believe that administrators develop some empathy with support staff who work with multiple sports. The strength staff is part support staff and part coaching staff which gives us a unique perspective.

**Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

There have been times when working with the sports medicine staff has helped in trying to get cooperation from administrators. Sports medicine, as a profession, has the ear of ADs as it relates to athlete health and legal liability. When administrators see the two departments working together to accomplish a goal relating to athlete health they develop more trust in us. I think one of the most important professional relationships for a SCC to develop is with the sports medicine staff.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

Sport coaches are so close to the athletes on their team, in their position group, or that they have recruited that they have a hard time keeping their opinions from the athletes. If you have a sport coach, even an assistant, that is not supportive of the SCC your days of working with that program are numbered. The athletes are always the ones that suffer most in this situation. It is a rare thing to find a sport coach that will support what the SCC is doing with the athletes even when he or she does not agree with the training program. Strong support from the sport coach makes the job of the SCC much easier. The relationship between the SCC and the sport coach has a tremendous amount to do with the relationship between the SCC and the athletes.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

I set up a one-on-one meeting with the sport coach and try to get to know his or her background as it relates to strength and conditioning. I specifically ask about coaching philosophies, types of training she or he prefers or dislikes, and I tell them what we have done with the sport in the past. I go to that meeting with an annual plan prepared. I try to reassure the sport coach that the strength staff is there to assist in the transition in any way that we can. I usually go

to that meeting prepared to discuss the individual work habits and test results of the returning members of that coach's new team.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

Be organized and prepared in your first meeting because most new coaches are ready to hit the ground running. Know why you do everything in your program. Do not insult the intelligence of the sport coach by trying to impress him or her with your scientific knowledge. Most coaches do not care about the science; they care about results that lead to winning games. Be flexible enough to handle some change within the training program. Stick up for what you believe in because you cannot run someone else's training programs, but pick your battles carefully. If you approach the relationship with a no compromise 'my way or the highway' attitude you may not be employed for long. Stay off social media as much as possible and edit the content on your accounts regularly.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

If the issue is between the sport coach and my assistant I want that assistant to try to handle the situation themselves. This is an educational experience for the assistant SCC. If either my assistant or the sport coach does not feel the situation is getting resolved then I become more involved in the process.

**Michael Doscher, Head Speed and Strength and Conditioning Coach, Valdosta State University****Q: What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?**

The most challenging part of working with sport coaches is fighting for the importance of training time and communicating the importance of it, especially to assistant coaches. Sport coaches live in their own world and think that whatever they and the athlete have to do should supersede all else. This gets worse with poor communication. For example, sport coaches rarely understand that SCC have other teams to work with and that makes our day usually already full. Athletes, or sport coaches, that are seeking make-up sessions or additional meetings with SCC can be difficult to accommodate simply due to the SCC's already full schedule. Another frequent issue is players getting run-down from practice and then not having any energy left to train effectively or safely, which is a huge problem.

**Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?**

It has nothing to do with the sport and everything do with the sport coach. Sport coaches with more experience that have become set in their ways, coaches that have never valued strength and conditioning, and those that have been very successful are the coaches that require more time to convince and just communicate with. Working with assistant sport coaches can be just as difficult, or worse. Graduate assistant (GA) coaches and first-time head coaches are hard to deal with because they are too eager to show that they have authority and are sport coaches while you are 'just' a SCC. The challenge does not usually get resolved until those coaches receive guidance on their role.

**Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well.**

The biggest mistake I ever made was when I just got into the field and thought I knew everything and that I was more intelligent than everyone else at my university regarding strength and

conditioning. I came from a big D-I school to a small D-II school so I knew it all. I was over confident. It was difficult, but I got humbled in some areas because I did not listen and communicate properly as a professional.

**Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship**

One time I had success was with tennis after years of the sport coach demanding the athletes to not lift heavy or frequently. Eventually, our staff slowly convinced the athletes and sport coaches to trust us. Now the tennis team lifts in our facility more than ever. They still are not to ideal frequency and intensity levels, but it is much better than it has ever been. It sounds so simple, but athletes are not going to get in better condition without coming to train; sport practices are just not enough. In the tennis example, the SCC specifically targeted building better relationships with the tennis athletes and the assistant tennis coaches and that led to eventually convincing the head tennis coach.

**Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

The role our AD has towards the conflict of SCC and sport coaches is that we better work it out ourselves and that the head sport coach will ultimately have the final say. The odd part is that administration will also send the message that anything that has to do with strength and conditioning has to run through the SCC. I believe this is a reaction to new NCAA rules stemming from negative athlete health consequences (e.g., athlete deaths and instances of Rhabdomyolysis). The administration has been supporting the strength and conditioning program and staff more of late.

**Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

The ATC gets highly involved with athletes that have pre-screening problems, with weather disturbances, and with injury and return-to-training protocols. Most of the problems that accrue are communication problems between the ATC and the SCC. Too often the ATC relies on the athlete to tell the SCC coach what restrictions the athletic trainer has imposed. Of course athletes take advantage of that sometimes and will relay a message beneficial to the athlete (i.e., too many or too few restrictions depending on the personality of the athlete). There is also a bit of a concern just based on the underlying premise of the two professions: the ATCs are always mindful of a 'do no harm' motto and the SCC must physiologically stress the athlete in order to prompt training adaptations.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

Usually the athletes get yanked out of the weight room in that situation. The sport coach tells the athletes they must listen to his or her instructions over what the SCC staff says. Of course the athletes, the SCC staff, and the program all suffer in that situation and it usually comes from an overly egotistical sport coach or a lack of communication. The AD then has to step in and resolve the situation, but the athlete still saw the conflict and often loses confidence in both the sport coach and the SCC. The worst of that situation is the loss of trust for the SCC staff from the athlete and it obviously becomes more difficult, at least in the short-term, to work with that sport coach. One time the head sport coach did not want the athletes doing certain lifts and intensity percentages despite it all being based on accepted science. Instead he wanted the athletes to max out at the 1-repetition-maximum level without the proper training to build them to that level safely prior to testing. After a big discussion he just said he was going to pull the players out of the weight room, which he did. The players were confused

and lost trust in the training process because they were told by the coach we were training them incorrectly. When they did come back to the weight room they were hesitant to train with us and it became uncomfortable for everyone because they would train and then go ask the ATC if the training program was appropriate and then relay all of that back to the sport coaches. The athletes knew they could manipulate the situation to get what they wanted and get out of lifting altogether sometimes.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

We meet as soon as the sport coach gets settled. Then the strength and conditioning staff listens to the sport coach's philosophy and what he or she has done in the past. We then show what we have done and how we have trained their sport in the past. Then the merging of our two philosophies starts and we discuss until the point we both agree with next steps. I always try to highlight the similarities and agreements before hammering out differences. I am most concerned with what is best for the athletes on the roster now and how we can grow the program to what we envision. It has to be a give and take during this discussion. If the sport coach is fully committed to something, even if it is not going to maximize effectiveness, but it will not really hurt the athlete then the SCC should just give in. But the safety of the athletes must always be considered.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

My advice is to look at working with sport coaches as though it is a marriage or a business negotiation. Put your ego aside and do what is best for the program and safest for the athletes in that program. Educate those around you, learn to listen, and be sure you are always learning more yourself. Sports coaches have been around a lot of other SCC. They might provide valuable input, particularly when the SCC has not worked much with that sport. At the end of the day it is about getting the athletes to perform at the highest level to maximize chances for the athletes, teams, and programs to be successful.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

In my opinion it is not about control, it is about educating your staff to perform the best they can and grow as young professionals. It is the head SCC's responsibility to educate the SCC staff in all areas of actually being a strength and conditioning coach, and that goes well beyond simple sets and reps. I always talk to my staff about being ready for their next position. A head SCC's job is to prepare the intern to be a GA, the GA to be a full time assistant, and the assistant to be a head SCC.

**Shepard Allen, Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach, College of the Holy Cross**

**Q: What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?**

The greatest challenge I face deals with communication. Coaches communicate across different mediums, different tones, and with different agendas. It is through communication that the SCC is to understand what the cultural values and performance goals are for each coaching staff. Through a clear understanding of the desired culture and performance goals, SCCs can then find their role within, or in support of, the sport coaching staff. This can be done through developing a relationship with the coaches and

athletes. I currently have great relationships with a majority of the coaches I work with. This developed over time and my role with each program has changed as those relationships have changed. I have had many experiences where communication has been a challenge, whether it be working with someone who is disrespectful, working with someone who is a poor communicator, working with people whose values do not align with yours, or working with coaches who have no clear vision for their program. My struggles with sport coaches usually stem from poor communication.

**Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?**

I have had success and failures with every demographic imaginable. The most challenging obstacle that I have had to overcome is the personality trait of entitlement, or athletes that are allergic to hard work. In my experience this obstacle is easily strengthened or averted through recruiting. I regularly encourage coaches to recruit a hard worker with less talent over the lazy athlete with more talent. Talent and skill will develop, but it is tough to teach someone to be a hard worker. Obviously, there are exceptions to this rule on both sides. You need to have enough talent to compete, but you also need to have high character to be willing to grind and get better.

**Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well**

When I first arrived to my current job I was sent a passive aggressive and demeaning email from a sports coach, whom I had never met. I showed the email to my supervisor. I first asked if I had misread the context and tone of the email. I then had to set boundaries for how I would like to be communicated with. My supervisor reviewed my response and we sent it off. Not soon after I was called and berated over the phone by the same sport coach. I kept calm and reiterated that I would not be communicated with in that manner. This method did not improve our communication immediately. However, there has been steady improvement and communication has become better. Setting boundaries was helpful. By creating clear boundaries, you can choose when and how to engage. This can be done by limiting interactions mostly to e-mails and only engaging if the setting is appropriate (e.g., staff meeting).

**Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship.**

With the story just mentioned I learned how to co-coach with this individual and their staff. By no means was the relationship ideal but we learned how to limit poor interactions and create a functioning work relationship. Over the years of working with each other there has been a general respect gained. While we all have areas of weakness it is important to see and acknowledge the strengths we bring to the table. Through being aware of our own strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing them in the people we work with, we can better engage one another and build respect.

**Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

We have policies for dealing with issues at an administrative level. I have never had issues with sport coaches or athletes get to this point so I cannot comment of their effectiveness. One of our policies is that teams are required to lift both in and out of season with 100% attendance. A failure to do so by any individual on any team can result in expulsion of the whole team for one year. This policy has never been fully implemented, but the clear support from the AD ensures that all of our teams use the facility as it is intended and prevents coaches from creating special circumstances for individuals.

**Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

I am fortunate to have never been in a conflict with a coach where an ATC has needed to get involved. We have good ATCs that are easy to communicate with. In addition, the ATCs are the liaison between our sports doctors and the athletes and coaches, so I know my role is to follow their lead. By knowing my role within the framework of our athletic department, I can ensure that my job responsibilities are executed. In my experience, when I or others are not clear on their roles, or try to fill other roles within the department, tasks are not completed properly or at all. Once you find your role, embrace it, take ownership of it, and get it done! It is important to know that your role might evolve or change over time. It is ok to ask for clarification from a supervisor in defining your role.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

Unfortunately, just like in a bad marriage, when a coaching staff is in flux it is the kids (i.e., athletes) who suffer. Many times, the athletes will be receiving different messages from the sport and SCC coaching staff members. This can lead to confusion, resentment, and eventually a loss of respect. Once a coach loses the respect of the athletes it is a steep, slippery slope to climb. In my experience, once respect for an SCC is lost, losing a job often comes next.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

I sit down and discuss the direction of the program immediately. I have learned to be more of a listener in our first meeting and to ask the coaches what information they would like me to share. In that first meeting it is important to listen and start seeing how to mold yourself into their culture. Being an active listener does not mean I am not prepared. I typically have a clear image of where I would like to move the team from a training standpoint. I will attend these meetings with my coaching philosophy and an annual plan for the next year, but I will only continue in that direction if the sport coach feels it is best.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

Be overly prepared and listen first before asking questions. Share how you can enhance the sport coach's culture and help to meet their program objectives. Shape your programs to meet their needs and explicitly ask if your plan meshes with the coach's desires as well as seeking if there are other things the coach is looking for. Finally, take ownership for everything that you are involved in. If it happened under your watch, it is your responsibility.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

I would give assistants and GAs full autonomy until it becomes an issue that requires a head coach's assistance. Admittedly, this line is fluid and changes depending on the context. Some people need more day-to-day guidance and some need to learn from failure. The line becomes firmer when the team begins to suffer. I want my assistants to learn from their own decisions, but when those decisions are having a negative impact on a team and their performance, then a supervisor needs to step in. That being said I would encourage assistants to regularly communicate with me how their programs are going and if there are any issues to ensure that we are not blindsided by anything as a staff. Once again, communication is the center piece of a high functioning work environment.

## **Nate Moe, Assistant Athletic Director for Strength and Conditioning, South Dakota State University**

### **Q: What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?**

The most challenging part of working with a sport coach is developing trust. Many sport coaches are experienced in their particular sport but may not have a lot of understanding of proper training principles when it comes to strength and conditioning. I have found some sport coaches believe their success came from controlling all aspects that surround their program. Once they adopt that belief, they then try to do this in the area of the training program, too. If the sport coach and SCC do not have a previously established relationship this can encourage the sport coach to revert to a previous SCC or a previous training program. Also, with all the information on training out there on the internet, 'fancy' or 'sexy' training tools advertised on TV, or even just new twists on exercises a sport coach can come to believe what his team is doing for training is old and outdated. Moreover, the traditional lifts can cause the SCC to be perceived as a 'meathead' or attempting to make athletes into powerlifters which can quickly diminish trust in the relationship. There has been some lack of professionalism in the strength and conditioning world that has contributed to this lack of trust from sport coaches. This lack of professionalism in strength and conditioning and the fact that most sport coaches now have some experience strength training as an athlete and their sport coaches used to also serve as SCC can lead to a sense that anyone can be a SCC which leads to sport coaches infringing into the SCC's area of expertise.

### **Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?**

I think often times young sport coaches can be full speed ahead and that can lead to challenges in the SCC and sport coach relationship. Football coaches are a challenging group because they typically have substantial experience training. Also there are so many football assistant coaches that can lead to too many opinions in the room; and we know what happens when there are too many cooks in the kitchen. It is also common for wrestling and track and field coaches to push for designing and implementing their own strength and conditioning program.

### **Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well.**

Sarcasm and getting mad and frustrated certainly do not work. I had a good relationship with our baseball coach and I was allowed to design and implement the strength and conditioning program. At a small school with a small staff, sometimes assistant sport coaches are GAs and are often young and inexperienced. One year our baseball coach hired a GA pitching coach and suddenly everything we were doing in the weight room was wrong. I had several discussions with the head baseball coach in a way that I thought was productive and positive. Later, the coach came back to me and changed his mind on what we had agreed upon stating he felt I pressured him to agree. He had specific exercises that he was now concerned with that were never an issue before. I was frustrated with his reversal of our discussion and attempted to illustrate that there is some amount of danger with everything we do and there are no 100% safe exercises. I tried to illustrate the absurdity of this by being absurd myself and using sarcasm. This completely backfired as he became upset and did not see the point I was attempting to make and

simply saw me as uncaring. This damaged our relationship for the next year.

### **Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship.**

When I began my first fulltime job our tennis coach told me he did not want to do any Olympic lift variations. He was not mean about it he simply put those parameters on me. As a new coach I agreed and found other exercises to attempt to accomplish the same purpose. Our tennis coach would come in and ride the bike for his own workout. This was before smart phones and hand held entertainment devices, so he would ask if we had anything to read. The only thing I had in the weight room was strength and conditioning journals. I would give him one that he could peruse. I worked within his framework to train and build rapport with his athletes. Near the end of the first year he actually approached me and said he thought his team needed to do a little more explosive training. I told him I agreed and that I had just the thing to utilize. By showing him I cared about his team and establishing a relationship I was able to persuade him to allow me to use the Olympic lift variations with his team. Through the use of the journals he was able to educate himself and it became his idea instead of this young strength coach shoving it down his throat.

### **Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

In my experience if an AD has to get involved it is generally not good. They have worked as a mediator in discussions that I have been involved in. Generally, they simply want to keep the peace. Because of the money and power that is given to the sport coach, ADs will generally favor their position. I am not convinced that is on purpose though as I think they believe they are attempting to get everyone to work together and just want things to go away and be settled. A sport coach can demand something, even though there is no scientific reason for it, or treat the SCC poorly and it is perceived as them 'just wanting what is best for their team'. With one new sport coach I had instructed my staff to give him what he wants for a training program for the team. I knew there might be a few concerns but we wanted to wait until after the season as to not be a distraction. The sport coach told his starters they did not have to come in at the team lift time, without communicating with the SCC. He also had a separate workout written on a note pad that he instructed his starters to perform instead of the workout prescribed by the SCC. The SCC did not know about this alternative workout until one SCC attempted to instruct one of the athletes and was informed by the athlete of the separate workout. I then requested a meeting and asked that the AD be involved. The sport coach went into several complaints and then proceeded to say that a wrestler should not lift overhead and describe body positions where wrestlers need to be strong. I was dumbfounded because one of the positions described was with arms outstretched overhead. Expecting that was obvious to the AD, I was totally floored when the administrator's response was 'well, that is good to know because as an administrator I would not know that they should not lift overhead.' No progress was made as the administrator just pushed the dialogue onward to settle things.

### **Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

I have been blessed to work with professional and supportive sports medicine personnel. The ATCs I have worked with have understood what we SCC are asking our athletes to do and that we must push them to properly prepare and protect them from the extreme demands of practice and competition.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

Generally sport coaches have stronger bonds, as they recruited the athletes and spend more time with them traveling and in meetings so it can undermine the credibility of the SCC coach. If a position coach does not like an exercise or wants the SCC to be a 'hype' guy it can trickle down to the athletes and damage their relationship with the SCC. Athletes are quick to notice disagreements. I have seen an assistant sport coach who did not believe his players should squat to parallel or that they should not squat over 225 lbs. in-season. That leads to decreased effort by athletes when training. The athletes can also feel trapped. They have put their trust in the position coach and they know that he controls playing time so they are likely to favor the opinion of the position coach. There are many football coaches that want a 'hype' guy or a glorified cheerleader in the SCC position. Because sport coaches want this, it creates an environment where SCC can believe that is the way to behave which may help that SCC keep that job but also undermines the profession of strength and conditioning coaches across the field. Hype takes priority over concern for technique and that is a huge safety problem. When there is a lot of fake energy the athletes simply tune out technique coaching, if it is happening at all, because it is more fun to just yell and scream and reinforce the hype coach's behavior. Then, like a drug they need more and more to get the same effect; this is where you see SCCs breaking flaming boards on their backs or running shirtless or refusing to put on a jacket when it is snowing, generally making themselves the center of attention.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

I attempt to meet with the new sport coach as soon as is reasonable when they are hired. I am proactive about reaching out and introducing myself and staff. I attempt to communicate that we are interested in helping them be successful and that we would like to meet, but we understand how busy a transition period can be for a new coach. That way we are allowing them to fit the initial meeting into their schedule of moving their family, hiring a staff, and recruiting while showing we want to help. When we are able to hold our initial meeting, I attempt to find out their expectations of us and provide them a context of our department concerning our standards and expectations so there are no surprises.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

The best advice I can give a novice SCC is to be proactive in communicating with sport coaches. It can be hard when you are busy, but try to find ways to interact with those coaches as much as possible. Conduct yourself in a professional manner and do your best to develop a relationship with the sport coach. This is an area that I believe I could, and should, have done a better job. As a task oriented, shy introvert I have put too much emphasis on what I need to get done next instead of further developing relationships. Your work needs to be done but I think showing an interest in the sport you are working with and learning the language of the coach can go a long way to establishing rapport.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

I like to give my assistants and GAs a lot of control over all aspects of the training program, including communication with the sport coach. I believe the best way to learn is by doing so allowing my staff to handle the communication they have the opportunity to grow as professionals. I am involved in the initial meeting with a sport coach and a new GA SCC. This allows me to facilitate the

initial meeting, show the new GA how to conduct a meeting with a sport coach, and ease their concerns over the early interaction with a coach they are not familiar with. This also communicates with the sport coach that I am involved (i.e., I am not just the football guy) and am assisting the new coach. After that, I allow my staff to conduct regular communication with the sport coach which allows them to build a relationship and demonstrate their professionalism. I will consult with the sport coach in receiving feedback about my assistants after the competition year is completed. Additionally, I will allow my assistants to provide feedback on the sport coach when we are asked for feedback from the athletic administration.

**Michelle Martin-Diltz, Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach, University of Alabama**

**Q: What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?**

The three most challenging aspects of working with a sport coaching staff are the lack of consistent communication, getting the 'blame' for injuries, and their desire to change the training plan without a rationale. The lack of communication throughout the school year can lead to a multitude of issues. With too little feedback on the direction of the athletes or team the SCC can feel isolated. Not knowing the progress and practice designs of the sport coaches can also lead to overtraining and overuse injuries that could be prevented if there was more communication. Getting the blame for all injuries is rough to handle as well. Most of the time I am not at practice or at staff meetings so when the ATC presents injury updates, the sport coach's first question is 'what did they do in the weight room that hurt them'? Even if the injury happened on the field or on the athlete's own time, the initial blame falls to time spent training. This creates tension between the two coaching staffs while also putting the ATC in the middle. Sport coaches demanding the SCC make changes to the training program mid-cycle or mid-season due to some random website, what a friend is doing at another school, or because the athletes complained just creates additional problems and is frustrating. These three challenges can be prevented by establishing regular, structured, and open communication between the coaching staffs and the ATC.

**Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?**

All sport coaches have their own quirks that can routinely be challenging, but working with the women's basketball athletes and coaches were the most challenging. I experienced a coach that desired the SCC to run everything during the summer and vacation months. During this time, I was expected to set standards for the upcoming basketball season, but when the season and practice time came around the athletes were allowed to be disrespectful to the strength staff and interns, show up when they wanted to, and do what they wanted to in the weight room. The coach allowed them to behave as they wanted instead of work within the standards that were set, all the while telling me we were expected to set a high standard for the upcoming season. The athletes were not prepared for the practices or the games and had a high rate of injury as well as a season with few wins. We were not disciplined enough to do the things the right way. One year later the basketball coach went a different direction with a new strength coach. We never were able to establish a good working relationship.

**Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well**

I have learned that ignoring the problem, complaining about it to others, and just hoping that it will go away most definitely do not

work! I have mostly had great relationships with all the sport coaches that I have worked under, but I have definitely had some challenging scenarios that I tried to ignore and pretend they were not bothering me. There was a time that I tried to ignore the fact that the coach continued to change the lift schedule and not communicate it with me beforehand. After the first couple of times that it happened I told myself to just ignore it and the coaches just forgot to tell me. It continued more and it just got worse. After a couple of months, I was fed up and set up a meeting with the coaching staff. We discussed the issue and had some great dialogue. We now can talk things out and the coach rarely changes the times of schedule without me knowing.

**Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship**

As a brand-new SCC, I was assigned to work with the women's basketball team. The head coach had also just been hired and had already gone through two other SCC before I was hired. The basketball coach was not excited about having a brand-new SCC and had a program that was to be run to the letter. Internally I struggled with this since some the training was not congruent with my own beliefs on how to train athletes, but I ran the program by the letter, was prompt, efficient and earned the coach's trust over the first summer of training. Coach soon became one of my favorite coaches to work under because even though she was demanding, the communication and trust between us were there.

**Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

Fortunately, I have not had to experience this. I really do not know what role the AD would have.

**Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

Having a great relationship with the ATCs is a must for a SCC. I have been lucky to work with some talented ATCs that were good people too. Having an athletic trainer that you can cooperate with and that has your back is a great asset. They are the ones that will have the most direct communication with the sport coaching staff and that present the injury list during meetings. If they believe in you and believe in the program that you are running, then they will be in your corner supporting you.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

When the sport coach and the SCC are in a disagreement it affects the trust of both coaching staffs as well as the level of trust the athletes have. The athletes do not know who to trust or listen to and this creates friction on and off the field of play. It can also create a space where the athletes play both sides against each other. For example, one coach that I have worked with for many years does not have strong faith in weight training. That coaching staff feels that it is only for the off-season and should not be utilized during the season, especially not during the post-season. We obviously do not agree on this matter, but the athletes know we do not agree which makes this a recurring problem. We continue to train during season and throughout post-season, but the sport coach makes it difficult to have complete buy-in from the athletes. Daily the sport coach asks seemingly innocuous questions during practice (e.g., How was weights?, What did you do today?, Are you tired?, How sore are you?, Are you moving okay?). The athletes then have an open ear to complain to about the training program which typically results in modifications to the training program for the athletes that complain the most and loudest.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

When a new sport coach is hired setting up a meeting with the new coach is the first step. Before that meeting takes place the SCC needs to research and know about the new coach's background (e.g., Where did they come from?, What is their reputation?, How long have they been coaching?, Who are their mentors?, Who was their last SCC?). Reaching out to the previous SCC is always wise to get a feel for the coach's training style so you can be fully prepared for the meeting. During the meeting come in with objectives that you would like to discuss: (a) your own coaching philosophy, (b) particular exercises you have had success utilizing for the specific sport, (c) exercises you do not feel are appropriate, are dangerous, or otherwise avoidable, (d) ask about the sport coach's expectations of the strength staff, and (e) the SCC's role in meetings, practices, competitions, and while traveling.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

When working with sport coaches know going in that it is not your team. It is their team and you are there to support, elevate, and push their team to the top. Your ego does not fit into the conversation and there are always different ways to get to the top. Do not go in with your plan, your way, your favorite lifts and refuse to alter or adjust them to fit within the sport coach's plan for their team. You should however be educated about the sport, know the lingo of the specific sport, and have a template for the training program also while having an open mind to truly listen to the coach's wishes.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

As a fulltime assistant SCC for 13 years I have had full control of my programs, communication with sport coaching staffs, and ATCs. Only if there are disagreements that cannot be handled should a head or director SCC step in to help work through the issues. There are times when I wished the director or head SCC had stepped in, especially when determining the weight room schedules. We have a large weight room that is utilized by most all of the teams with eight SCC all trying to accommodate individual sport coach's time requests. This is a huge challenge when the director does not step in and establish the parameters. The sport coaches can feel that they are not getting what they want or that their SCC is not trying as well as creating tension between the different SCCs on staff.

**Jim Krumpos, University of Arizona, Associate AD, Director of Performance Enhancement**

**Q: What is the most challenging part of working with a sport coach? Why?**

The most challenging part is their lack of understanding of exercise physiology, kinesiology, training principles, or biomechanics. Yet they are often 'judge and jury' on when athletes train and what exercises and type of conditioning they want done. Due to the lack of knowledge, they tend to break the athletes down in practice to the point that they just do not have enough energy or neuro capability to train effectively with the SCC. Furthermore, they never want the athletes to be sore or tired from workouts and they constantly take away from our training time in favor of additional practice time. Often we get athletes in to train that are already low on energy substrates, neurologically fatigued, worn down, and that cannot train effectively all while being given little

time to train them, told not to make them sore, and then we are held accountable for their physical development.

**Q: Are there any sport coach demographic variables that are consistently challenging to work with?**

The younger head sport coaches are usually more difficult. They tend to micromanage more. One sport coach came in and observed the first day of workouts. He watched every kid, every set, and every repetition. Throughout the training session he kept asking me why an athlete stopped after his prescribed reps. I told him because that was the prescribed dose for the day (i.e., the athlete completed the sets and reps on the workout card). The sport coach was adamant the athletes had more in the tank and was demanding I push them harder. I continued to train the group within the appropriate parameters I had programmed for the session. It was early in their off-season and I did not want them lifting to failure. Later that week, we had a meeting and he wanted detailed explanations for every training variable within that session as well as the yearly plan workout-by-workout. In that meeting I bombarded him with information and gave him every detail of our off-season plan, and the 'why' and 'how'. We never had to have that meeting again and the sport coach backed off attending sessions and questioning what we were doing to train the athletes.

**Q: Describe an example where something you tried to help the relationship did not work well.**

What does not work well is digging your heels in and not being flexible. When the SCC becomes more stubborn, the sport coach responds in-kind and nobody wins. There was a basketball coach I worked with that demanded the players be able to run a sub-5:30 mile. I gently pushed back explaining how that did not fit the physiological demands of basketball. It did not matter. The coach was adamant they had to run a mile. I decided to play by his rules and that I was going to get the athletes to meet his mile performance standard in the shortest amount of time possible. We spent the next few weeks with that as the training focus and by the end of August all the athletes had met the required standard. I spent the rest of the season training them as I believed was right and gathering information on why running the mile was not appropriate. After the season when it came time for that discussion between the basketball coach and me, my research was not needed. I had called a meeting to discuss the mile and brought all my documents and was ready to dig my heels in and fight to not have to get the athletes to run the mile again. As soon as I brought the subject up, the coach interrupted and said you are the expert and use whatever conditioning test you think is best. I believe because I gave in initially, did as he asked, and then moved on to building the relationship with the athletes and the coach that the next year he gave me the autonomy to train the athletes the way I wanted to.

**Q: Describe an example where you were able to significantly improve the relationship**

I have found that often they are adversarial because of a previous SCC. Each sport coach and SCC relationship is unique. The key is for the SCC to listen and implement what the sport coach wants, as long as it is safe, even if it is not ideal training for the athletes. If the SCC can do that for a season or two, the sport coach will trust in your ability to make adjustments. Once they trust and respect what you are able to do, they are more apt to listen and implement what you want to do. In some cases they actually just give you full control because they know and respect you and can now spend the time they used to devote to monitoring the SCC or the athletes' training on something else. I always know my big objectives for training for each particular group of athletes I work with. When a sport coach asks for something added or subtracted

from my plan, I consider if I can still meet my objectives while adhering to the sport coach's priorities too. We as SCC must keep the sport coaches happy or we are likely out of a job. If the coach does not want the athletes to do a barbell back squat that should be fine. We SCCs need to be smart enough to substitute a different exercise to accomplish our training objectives.

**Q: How do ADs get involved in disagreements between SCC and sport coaches?**

This varies greatly between schools. I would say rarely does it get to the point that they are involved. Often they take the side of the sport coach on most matters. The SCC must have the mindset that ultimately you work for the sport coach. ADs do not want to hear complaints from the sport coach about strength and conditioning. It gets worse if the team loses more games. That combination of complaints about strength and conditioning and a pile of losses often means the SCC is going to be out of a job. ADs view SCC as support staff, and as such, easily replaceable. Conversely, they view the head sport coach as much more challenging to replace. Most of the time ADs do not have the expertise to comment on disagreements between SCC and sport coaches so they just side with the sport coach.

**Q: Does the ATC get involved also? If so, why and when and has it helped or hurt the situation overall?**

I have seen the ATC get involved in support of both the sport coach and the SCC. I feel it is imperative for the SCC to have a great relationship with the ATC. The ATC ultimately has the most power and makes the final call on if an athlete can participate or if an activity is acceptable or not. If the ATC does not like the SCC, or understand how you are training the athletes, or questions what you are doing, it will be difficult to get the sport coach's support. Conversely, if the ATCs appreciate and respect what you are doing, they can often help with the sport coach if there is a disagreement. The ideal situation is when the ATC steps up during meetings with sport coaches. For example, an athlete gets hurt during practice and the sport coach instantly blames the SCC. The ATC can be nearby and mediate that sport coach's frustrations right away by pointing out there were no exercises in the training program this week that would have caused that injury or the athlete did not even train that day, so we need to consider what happened during practice. The ATC can and should be the SCC's biggest ally.

**Q: When the SCC and sport coach staff disagree, what effects have you seen on the athletes?**

Ideally both staffs are professional enough that the athletes are not aware there is an issue. I would recommend never allowing the athletes to know about a disagreement with the sport coach, which is great way to get fired. If the athletes know that there is disagreement between the staff it will affect their belief in the training program and maybe even both coaching staffs. SCCs need to go into full-on information lockdown. Simply do not discuss what is going on near the athletes. Anything you say to the athletes or around them will get back to the sport coach. You do not want to be answering to the sport coach about a comment or criticism about him he heard through the rumor mill that came from you.

**Q: What steps do you take when a new sport coach is hired?**

The first steps are to genuinely listen to, care about, and understand what the coach wants and then ensure the coach you will get that done. I always make sure I explicitly tell them 'I work for you'. I do not aggressively question their ideas or thoughts about what they want done physically. I also generally do not object to things they might want (e.g., time changes, schedule changes, or extra workouts). I try to be around practice and see how

the coach interacts with the athletes, make sure they know I am invested in the program, and am here to help them succeed. Yes that all takes time, but that is just part of the process. It is what must be done as part of the profession.

**Q: What advice can you offer to novice SCC specifically about working with sport coaches?**

Put your ego aside and listen. If you want to have some longevity in this industry you better be flexible and work with the sport coaches, not battle them. There are too many stories of SCCs getting a good job, moving their family, and then arguing with everyone at the new school. Too many SCCs dig their heels in and take stands on stuff that are just not important enough to fight about. When working with sport coaches do not take everything so personally, the stress will literally kill you and that approach will destroy your career. SCCs are generally viewed as expendable so highlighting disagreements and pushing boundaries will just get you fired quicker.

**Q: How much responsibility should head SCC give to assistants or graduate assistants to communicate with the sport coaches they work with? When is it appropriate for the head SCC to step in?**

Full time assistants should have full control in dealing with their sport coaches. The head SCC should only intervene when truly necessary. They should step in only when a solution cannot be reached, or when they feel the SCC coach is not doing a good job. GAs and interns should have very little communication with the sport coach unless they are the ones responsible for designing and implementing the programs for that coach. This does change at different competitive levels though.

## Summary of Best Practices

- Communication and building trust is critical to the working relationship. Building trust may require the SCC to be flexible and does include listening to the sport coach's objectives and concerns regarding athlete training. One way to do this is to be mindful of whether the coach's request can be accomplished while the SCC still adheres to his or her own coaching values and coaching philosophy. Additionally, communication means not hiding or pretending problems do not exist.
- Be careful what is said to athletes about any potential conflict with sport coaches. SCC need to remember that sport coaches are the ones that decide playing time and positions for athletes on the team. A broad-based professional best practice is to not talk about colleagues behind their backs, and this is more critical when considering the athletes that can get caught between sport coaches and SCC. It should be expected that any derogatory comments about the sport coach within earshot of the athletes will get back to the sport coach thus not making those types of comments in the first place is best practice.
- It is important to drop any assumptions when beginning to work with a sport coach. There is not a set of demographics that inherently means the collaboration will be problematic. One recommendation when starting to work with a new sport coach is to reach out to previous SCC who worked with the sport coach. Coaching effectiveness is about context which means every job, and the people involved, is unique and should start independently from each other. This highlights the best practice of SCC reaching out to sport coaches proactively and treating each sport coach with a clean slate from which to build a collaboration upon.

- It is important for SCC to develop strong working relationships with ATC. The ATCs are the staff member with the most similar education background to the SCC so rely on that shared history and utilize the ATCs to double-check your physiology and training program when possible. Be open and transparent with ATCs about your training plan to establish trustworthiness. Remembering that ATCs often serve as intermediaries to team physicians as well as sports coaches highlights how they can be a great asset to an SCC.
- SCCs need to know and be able to describe their own coaching philosophy. This is a best practice for both sport and SCC coaches. All respondents described the importance of an initial meeting with new sport coaches as important to establishing a productive collaboration. Part of that meeting should include a discussion surrounding coaching philosophies. Start with the commonalities and work up to the divergences. In order for that to be successful, best practice is for all coaches to formally write down their coaching philosophy and review it, at least annually.

## Conclusion

While perhaps overly simplistic, much can be gained by strength and conditioning coaches by simply behaving as professionals. This includes having a coaching philosophy and actively reaching out to sport coaches as soon as is feasible. Being sarcastic, ignoring problems, hiding things from sport coaches, being arrogant, and refusing to be flexible are all unprofessional and particularly ill-advised when trying to build a collaboration with sport coaches. Simply put, best practice for developing a successful collaboration between SCC and sport coaches is for both groups of coaches to behave as professionals while accepting the responsibility to guide and keep the athletes under their care safe.

## Author Biographies

Andy Gillham owns and operates Ludus Consulting LLC and focuses on performance enhancement for his clients. More specifically, he works primarily with coaches and athletic administrators on improving systematic coach evaluation and providing targeted coach development opportunities. His Ph.D. is in education with a major of sport and exercise psychology from the University of Idaho. He is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist through the National Strength and Conditioning Association and a Certified Mental Performance Consultant through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology.

Other authors' information is within the paper.

## References

- Cope, C., Eys, M., Schinke, R., & Bosselut, G. (2010). Coaches' perspectives of a negative informal role: The 'Cancer' within sport teams. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 22, 420–436. doi:10.1080/10413200.2010.495327
- Cushion, C.J., Armour, K.M., & Jones, R.L. (2003). Coach education and continuing professional development: Experience and learning to coach. *Quest*, 55, 215–230. doi:10.1080/00336297.2003.10491800
- Duehring, M.D., & Ebben, W.P. (2010). Profile of high school strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 24(2), 538–547. PubMed ID: 20124797 doi:10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181c7c772

- Ferrar, P., Hosea, L., Henson, M., Dubina, N., Krueger, G., Staff, J., & Gilbert, W. (2018). Building high performing coach-athlete relationships: The USOC's National Team Coach Leadership Education Program (NTCLEP). *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 5, 60–70. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2017-0102](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2017-0102)
- Gallo, G.J., & DeMarco Jr., G.M. (2008). Self-Assessment and modification of a Division I strength and conditioning coach's instructional behavior. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 22(4), 1228–1235. PubMed ID: [18545184](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18545184/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0b013e318173dae9](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e318173dae9)
- Garner, P., & Hill, D.M. (2017). Cultivating a community of practice to enable coach development in alpine ski coaches. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 4, 63–75. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2016-0076](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2016-0076)
- Gillham, A., Doscher, M., Fitzgerald, C., Bennett, S., Davis, A., & Banwarth, A. (2017). Strength and conditioning coach evaluation. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 12(5), 635–646. doi:[10.1177/1747954117707484](https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954117707484)
- Gillham, A., Doscher, M., Schofield, G., Dalrymple, D., & Bird, S. (2015). Strength and conditioning roundtable: Working with novice coaches. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 10(5), 985–1000. doi:[10.1260/1747-9541.10.5.985](https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.10.5.985)
- Gillham, A., Schofield, G., Doscher, M., Dalrymple, D., & Kenn, J. (2016). Developing and implementing a coaching philosophy: Guidance from award-winning strength and conditioning coaches. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 3, 54–64. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2015-0007](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2015-0007)
- Gould, D. (2016). Conducting impactful coaching science research: The forgotten role of knowledge integration and dissemination. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 3, 197–203. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2015-0113](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2015-0113)
- Gustaffson, H., Holmberg, H-C, & Hassmen, P. (2008). An elite athletes' recovery from underperformance aided by a multidisciplinary sport science support team. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 8(5), 267–276. doi:[10.1080/17461390802195652](https://doi.org/10.1080/17461390802195652)
- Haff, G.H. (2016). Periodization. In G.H. Haff & N.T. Triplett (Eds.), *Essentials of strength training and conditioning* (4th ed., pp. 583–604). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Hartshom, M.D., Read, P.J., Bishop, C., & Turner, A.N. (2016). Profile of a strength and conditioning coach: Background, duties, and perceptions. *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, 38(6), 89–94. doi:[10.1519/SSC.000000000000255](https://doi.org/10.1519/SSC.000000000000255)
- Laskowski, K.D., & Ebben, W.P. (2016). Profile of women collegiate strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 30(12), 3481–3493. PubMed ID: [27123923](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27123923/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0000000000001471](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0000000000001471)
- Lauer, L., Driska, A., & Cowburn, I. (2016). Sport psychology professionals as trusted advisors in high performance environments. In P.A. Davis (Ed.), *The psychology of effective coaching and management* (pp. 385–407). New York, NY: Nova Science.
- Martel, K. (2015). USA hockey's American development model: Changing the coaching and player development paradigm. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 2, 39–49. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2014-0060a](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2014-0060a)
- Martin, K. (2002). Development and validation of the coaching staff cohesion scale. *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science*, 6(1), 23–42. doi:[10.1207/S15327841MPEE0601\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327841MPEE0601_2)
- Martinez, D.M. (2004). Study of the key determining factors for the NCAA division I head strength and conditioning coach. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 18(1), 5–18. PubMed ID: [14971989](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/14971989/)
- Massey, C.D., Schwind, J.J., Andrews, D.C., & Maneval, M.W. (2009). An analysis of the job of strength and conditioning coach for football at the division II level. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 23(9), 2493–2499. PubMed ID: [19910825](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19910825/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181bbe9b6](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181bbe9b6)
- Massey, C.D., & Vincent, J. (2013). A job analysis of major college female strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 27(7), 2000–2012. PubMed ID: [22990571](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22990571/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0b013e31827361a9](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e31827361a9)
- McGladrey, B.W., Hannon, J.C., Faigenbaum, A.D., Shultz, B.B., & Shaw, J.M. (2014). High school physical educators' and sport coaches' knowledge of resistance training principles and methods. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 28(5), 1433–1442. PubMed ID: [24126894](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24126894/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0000000000000265](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0000000000000265)
- McQuade, S., Davis, L., & Nash, C. (2015). Positioning mentoring as a coach development tool: Recommendations for future practice and research. *Quest*, 67(3), 317–329. doi:[10.1080/00336297.2015.1048810](https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2015.1048810)
- Murray, M.A., Zakrajsek, R.A., & Gearity, B.T. (2014). Developing effective internships in strength and conditioning: A community of practice approach. *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, 36(1), 35–40. doi:[10.1519/SSC.0b013e31828557d7](https://doi.org/10.1519/SSC.0b013e31828557d7)
- Nash, C., Sproule, J., & Horton, P. (2017). Feedback for coaches: Who coaches the coach? *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 12(1), 92–102. doi:[10.1177/1747954116684390](https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954116684390)
- National Strength and Conditioning Association. (2017). NSCA strength and conditioning professional standards and guidelines. *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, 39(6), 1–24. doi:[10.1519/SSC.0000000000000348](https://doi.org/10.1519/SSC.0000000000000348)
- Radcliffe, J. N., Comfort, P., & Fawcett, T. (2013). The perception of psychology and the frequency of psychological strategies used by strength and conditioning practitioners. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 27(4), 1136–1146. PubMed ID: [22706577](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22706577/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0b013e3182606ddc](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e3182606ddc)
- Rathwell, S., Bloom, G.A., & Loughead, T.M. (2014). Head coaches' perceptions on the roles, selection, and development of the assistant coach. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 1, 5–16. doi:[10.1123/iscj.2013-0008](https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2013-0008)
- Reid, C., Stewart, E., & Thorne, G. (2004). Multidisciplinary sport science teams in elite sport: Comprehensive servicing or conflict and confusion? *The Sport Psychologist*, 18, 204–217. doi:[10.1123/tsp.18.2.204](https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.18.2.204)
- Szedlak, C., Smith, M.J., Day, M.C., & Greenless, I.A. (2015). Effective behaviours of strength and conditioning coaches as perceived by athletes. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 10(5), 967–984. doi:[10.1260/1747-9541.10.5.967](https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.10.5.967)
- Tod, D.A., Bond, K.A., & Lavalley, D. (2012). Professional development themes in strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 26(3), 851–860. PubMed ID: [22289692](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22289692/) doi:[10.1519/JSC.0b013e318225eed1](https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e318225eed1)
- Wagner, K., Greener, T., & Petersen, D. (2011). Working with athletic trainers. *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, 33(1), 53–55. doi:[10.1519/SSC.0b013e3182079d6c](https://doi.org/10.1519/SSC.0b013e3182079d6c)