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Coach communication across competition phases: effects on athlete psychology and performance—a systematic review

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive literature review, spanning from 2020 to 2026, explores the profound impact of coach communication on athletes' psychological states and performance across the three temporal phases of competition: pre-competition, in-competition, and post-competition. Utilizing the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and drawing from the Scopus database, the review meticulously analyzed 50 high-quality studies to bridge the gap between sport psychology, coaching science, and communication research. The thematic analysis revealed that verbal and non-verbal communication, precise and timely feedback, confirmation messages, and structure-giving strategies are consistently linked to enhanced athlete self-esteem, perceived capability, and drive, while effectively reducing competition-related anxiety. Moreover, overall communication quality directly influences team cohesion and objective performance outcomes. However, the effectiveness of these interactions varies depending on critical contextual factors, such as the specific stage of competition, the athlete's developmental level, the type of sport, and the strength of the coach-athlete partnership. Notably, post-competition feedback emerged as a vital component for athlete learning and burnout prevention. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings extend both general communication theory and the relation-inferred self-efficacy framework into competitive sports contexts. Practically, the review provides an evidence-based foundation for coaches to fine-tune the content and timing of their messaging according to the exact competition phase. Finally, the authors recommend that future research prioritize longitudinal study designs, cross-cultural comparisons, and standardized measurement tools to better establish causal relationships in sports communication.



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Introduction

Few would quarrel that sport has become the heart of modern life where its multiple roles from health promotion, identity making, economic generating, to raising national prestige, all at the same time make it so much more than a game. In this wider environment, the link between coaches and players has often been highlighted as the leading partnership for molding young athletes and for achieving sports success. Coaches are much more than tacticians and trainers; they are communicators for whom the way they speak, their voice, the

way they choose to say something, and their body language are crucial in shaping what athletes feel when they are under pressure, fail or make a breakthrough. Coach communication has therefore long been examined through established psychological frameworks such as confirmation theory (Cranmer et al., 2020) and relation-inferred self-efficacy (McMullen et al., 2020), rather than as a recently emerging area of interest, and empirical evidence already links inadequate phase-specific communication to elevated athlete burnout risk (Atkinson et al., 2025).

Sometimes, coach communication itself becomes a narrow but important issue within a larger context. The way coaching dialogue is tailored to different time-based stages of competition before, during, and after is especially important as different psychological pressures are imposed on the athletes at each stage. Pre-competition coaching is to adjust the player's activation, confidence, and concentration whereas during the match, coaching should be quick and delivered in high-stakes and noisy environments. And after the game, a good coach must show the player the lessons to be learned from the outcome, winning or losing as it may be, without letting the player feel discouraged or lose self-esteem. If the coach is unable to keep pace with these changing demands of communication then he or she runs the risk of sabotaging the very results that they aim to achieve. To address this gap directly, the present review adopts a systematic literature review design following the PRISMA 2020 guideline, drawing on peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus between 2020 and 2026 that report coach-initiated communication together with an athlete or player population and a psychological or performance outcome, as detailed further in the Method section.

A lot of the past studies have individually looked at the various aspects of this relationship. Research has looked into the impact of coach confirmation on student-athlete self-confidence and cohesion (Cranmer et al., 2020), explored the personal experiences of Olympic-level athletes as they communicate with their coaches (Kim & Park, 2020), and examined elite team-sport coaches' beliefs about providing, getting feedback, and evaluating verbal feedback (Mason et al., 2020). Additionally, some researchers have found a connection between power-based communication strategies and how they affect student-athlete learning outcomes and win percentage at the team level (Rey et al., 2022) as well as how coaching behaviors overall are related to psychological factors like relation-inferred self-efficacy (McMullen et al., 2020). Taken together, the research clearly shows that coach communication is a factor in athletic performance; rather, it is the vehicle for building psychological states.

Scholarship from the last few years has started identifying some new trends in methods for coach-athlete interaction using technological tools. Coach-player communication through GPS-mediated augmented feedback is one such case (Weakley et al. 2020), or even real-time feedback systems that support learning and motivation processes among young sports (He & Wei, 2025). Artificial-intelligence-augmented coaching platforms that address the athlete's mental health concerns (Chakraborty et al., 2026), is an excellent example how the method of coach communication delivery changes over time. Meanwhile, we see similar things happening in taekwondo coaching. Baykan et al. (2026) show how AI technology is being used to improve the interaction between the athlete and the coach. Moreover, Fu & Fu (2020), designed distributed IoT-based simulators that can help athletes mentally, Neupert et al., (2025), focused on behavior-change interventions to increase elite athletes' participation with monitoring systems. Bernaciková et al., (2022), introduced mobile applications that are intended to prevent chronic fatigue, through detecting alertness level, and educating athlete about it. Gupta & Singhal used gamified experiential training (2025), methods to sport psychology practitioners indicate, that environment of communication around competition is turning out to be much, multi-layered, and sophisticated through technologies than earlier studies predicted.

In addition, a noticeable shortfall is that the majority of the research work in this area has not really concentrated on how competitive activities are structured in terms of time. The current evidence base is very scattered. In fact, it seems that coach communication is either treated as a rather homogeneous thing, or as a study of a certain moment (for example, Weakley et al. 2020 study the post-competition feedback), or Nicol & Allen (2025 study the structure-giving pre-competition behavior) neither of which is connected back to a broader understanding of how communicative demands and effects differ across the competitive cycle. This fragmented state of research results in both coach trainers and researchers being unable to make conclusions about when specific communication approaches are most effective.

Second, there is a theoretical and methodological limitation regarding the field. Most works depend on limited and specific qualitative samples from sports such as interviews with top trainers (Liu et al., 2022), or shooting competitors (Kim & Park, 2020). On one hand, the detail richness and, context-specificity in these cases is quite attractive, but, on the other hand the sport-type and competitive-level generality of the findings is limited. As to the quantitative research, often, their measurement of communication constructs is based on instruments that haven't been originally validated for competitive contexts, and very rarely they differentiate between the forms of communication such as verbal, nonverbal, and mediated (Ryou et al., 2026). Lastly, the systematic reviews covering some connected topics, e.g., "psychological assessment in coach selection" (Díaz-

Rodríguez & Ayuso-Blanco, 2024) didn't go for a specific synthesis of communication research evidence across competition phases thus, leaving a major methodological and thematic gap that this review tries to bridge.

The reasons why we decided to do a systematic review are two. On the one hand, mental health of athletes and burnout have been identified as key issues that have to do with the immediate practice. There is research lately showing that coach communication styles have positive effects in mitigating burnout among high school athletes (Atkinson et al., 2025). Moreover, there are studies in which coaching behaviors and athlete burnout have been related by means of structural equation modeling and neural network analysis (Chen et al., 2026). On the other hand, as the range of communication methods increases fast, from body language training programs (Niering et al., 2026) to humorous communication as a tool for relationships (Merdan & Çağlar, 2025), a compilation of findings, obtained by searching systematically, that is recent and reliable will not only be timely but also very helpful in guiding the practice of coaches, development of athlete well-being policies, as well as planning of future studies.

Building on the identified deficits, this work aims at responding to three research questions. The first one deals with the types and styles of coach communication across the phases of a competition and how coach communication correlates with the psychological states of athletes.

RQ1: *Different types of coaches' communication (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, feedback-based, and relational) were reported to be present in pre-competition, during-competition, and post-competition stages. Furthermore, the study investigated if and how these communication forms are related to athletes' psychological states such as anxiety, motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy. Which communication types do coaches use in which stages, and to which psychological states are these communication types linked?*

The question adds value by bringing forth a phase-differentiated map of communication forms in the coach behavior narrative which has not been consistently articulated in prior storytelling.

The second research issue looks at the outcomes that are related to the performers, exploring in what way communication leads to better performance both for the athletes and for the team as a whole.

RQ2: *Is there a relationship between coach communication and the performance of individuals and teams in terms of competition results decision-making, and execution of skills? It seems that the communication of coach plays a role in how players perform individually, and as a team, including the types of competition decision-making they make, how effectively they execute skills, and the results the players achieve in the competition.*

This question was asked so that by addressing it the review could go deeper than just psychological mediators and look also at which communication strategies are useful, performance-wise

The third research question examines the contextual and moderating factors that shape these relationships.

RQ3: *How much does coach communication's Impact on athletes' psychological states and performance fluctuate depending on: phase of competition individual athlete features sport type level of competition coach-athlete relationship quality?*

In sum, the combination of these three questions defines the novelty of the paper through a clear and explicit time framing plus an effort at synthesizing the different, quickly expanding sources of evidentiary material in a manner that would be not only methodologically clear but also one that can inform both future research and practical coaching work.

Method

This review adhered to a systematic, repeatable process that was not only in accordance with the best practices of systematic review methods but also was the PRISMA 2020, as will be described in the following paragraphs.

Research Design and Framework

Systematic literature review (SLR) design was adopted as the most effective one. It offers transparency, reproducibility and minimizes bias while merging a large and heterogeneous set of evidence. This is consistent with the ground rules set by Tranfield et al. (2003) for evidence-informed management reviews and by Liberati et al. (2009) who laid down the rules of reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. An SLR is different from an ordinary narrative review because it describes criteria for selecting studies, search strategies and methods for filtering studies before hand that is not only selective reporting is being prevented but also readers get clear idea of synthesis reliability and authenticity. The study followed the PRISMA 2020 guideline (Page et al., 2021) throughout as the primary reporting format, applying its flow diagram reasoning to describe all the stages from

identifying the records, then narrowing down by screening, assessing their suitability, and finally including them in the review.

Search Strategy

A Boolean search string which was in a very organized manner was made in order to find the areas where all of the factors: coach communication, competition timing, athlete psychological states, and performance outcomes overlapped. Searching was limited to paper titles, abstracts, and keywords via the use of field codes (TITLE-ABS-KEY). Moreover, a truncation (*) symbol was put in place to ensure that key words (e.g., communicat* would stand for: communication, communicating, communicative) were caught even if they presented different morphological forms of the same words.

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("coach*" AND ("communicat*" OR "feedback" OR "instruction*")) AND ("athlete*" OR "player*" OR "sport*") AND ("psycholog*" OR "anxiety" OR "confidence" OR "motivation" OR "performance"))

No further subject-topic or localization limiters were used at the database-query stage; rather, all kinds of restrictions were made visibly during the eligibility-screening phase described in Section 3.4, so that it would be possible to have a complete picture or an audit trail of the retrieved pool. The justification for database selection, the publication-date range, the single-reviewer screening protocol used in place of formal inter-rater reliability statistics, and the data extraction procedure are each reported in full in the following subsections (Database and Information Sources; Eligibility Criteria; Study Selection Process; Data Extraction Procedure) to support reproducibility of the search and selection process.

Database and Information Sources

This review relied on Scopus as the only bibliographic database, because of its extensive multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed sport science, sport psychology, and coaching articles, and because of its structured and exportable metadata fields (author names, affiliations, abstracts, keywords, and digital object identifiers). The search was made and the resulting metadata exported on 03/09/2026. No additional databases were searched; it is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 5.5.

Eligibility Criteria

In the selection of included and excluded studies, Table 0 presents criteria together with the number of records rejected per criterion during title/abstract filtering stage.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English-language publications only	Non-English-language publications (n = 8 excluded)
Document type	Journal article; Review	Conference paper, book chapter, short survey, or retracted publication (n = 12 excluded)
Publication period	2020-2026 (search date: September 3, 2026)	Publications outside this range
Subject area	Sport psychology, coaching science, sport and exercise science, communication in sport	Unrelated disciplines with no coaching or athlete-communication focus
Topical relevance	Explicit reference to coach-initiated communication AND an athlete/player population AND a psychological or performance outcome (n = 113 excluded at this step)	Tangential or incidental mention of coaching without a communication or outcome focus
Traceability	Digital object identifier (DOI) verifiable in the Scopus export	Record lacking a verifiable DOI (n = 1 excluded)

Study Selection Process

The study selection was carried out in three sequential phases. At the first phase, the 184 records retrieved from Scopus were checked if they met the eligibility criteria at the structural level (language and document type). In the second phase, the remaining records were checked with regards to their titles and abstracts on the basis of the topical relevance. That necessitated to make reference, explicitly, to communications by coaches, a population of athletes or players and psychological or performance-related outcomes. Thirdly, for the remaining records, the full metadata (including the abstract, keywords, and available indicators for full-text content) have been assessed. The only records that did not have a verifiable digital object identifier has been excluded at this stage to ensure traceability of the evidence base. Since this synthesis has been performed by a single-reviewer and using AI, the screening decisions have been made by applying a documented, rule-based relevance protocol

(the co-occurrence of keywords in the title/abstract related to coach, communication, and athlete/sports areas) rather than making use of two independent reviewers. This protocol and its threshold are transparently reported so the replication can be done and also methodological weaknesses of this section are highlighted in Section 5.5.

Quality Assessment — FICO Framework

Studies that included in the review, were systematically assessed using the FICO model. The tool comprises four facets: Focus (the extent to which the research question was clearly related to coach communication), Information (the adequacy and transparency in reporting the methodology and the study sample), Context (the extent the sporting, cultural, and competitive circumstances of the study are consistent and relevant with the review topic), and Outcome (if the reported psychological or performance results are clear and relevant). Each category was scored from 1 (low) to 3 (high) of a three point scale of adequacy. Only the papers which have at least three out of four FICO components rated in the 'moderate/high' categories were considered; however, no study in this review was found below the set criteria although limitations on the 'Information' facet are highlighted in one section with respect to qualitative studies (sample size reporting).

Data Extraction Procedure

From each selected paper, the following pieces of data were obtained whenever possible from the source metadata: names of authors and year of publication, country of affiliation of either the corresponding author or first author, journal/information source title, study type (derived mainly from title and abstract contents, for example, qualitative interviewing, cross-sectional survey, experimental/interventional), population and sports setting, construct(s) in communication studied, and the main psychological or performance results as stated in the abstract.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

This exercise, a descriptive bibliometric profiling, was undertaken on the exported CSV metadata of the review corpus in order to provide its characteristics: distribution by year of publication, distribution by country (based on the first listed affiliation of each record), document-type distribution, authors-keyword frequency. This profiling was done manually; no specific program was installed like Bibliometrix and VOSviewer; instead, frequency analysis was done through code and exported manually to accompany Figures 1 and 2 and provide background information for the thematic synthesis.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The authors combined information from different studies by using a method called thematic synthesis that was roughly in line with Thomas and Harden's paper from 2008. It had three main stages: first, they marked out in detail the types of communication, phases of competition, and outcomes that were mentioned in the abstract. Second, they grouped these code elements into themes that described the content. And third, by directly referring only to our three research questions, they created analytical themes. Through several iterations, we made sure that the themes reflected what was actually stated in the metadata of the original data points and that nobody inferred or extrapolated what the original documents did not explicitly mention.

Reporting and Documentation

This article was systematically reviewed and described according to PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J.), (Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S.... Moher, D, 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram in Section 4 records the count of records that have passed identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases. (<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>).

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Figure 0 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram documenting the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of records for this review.

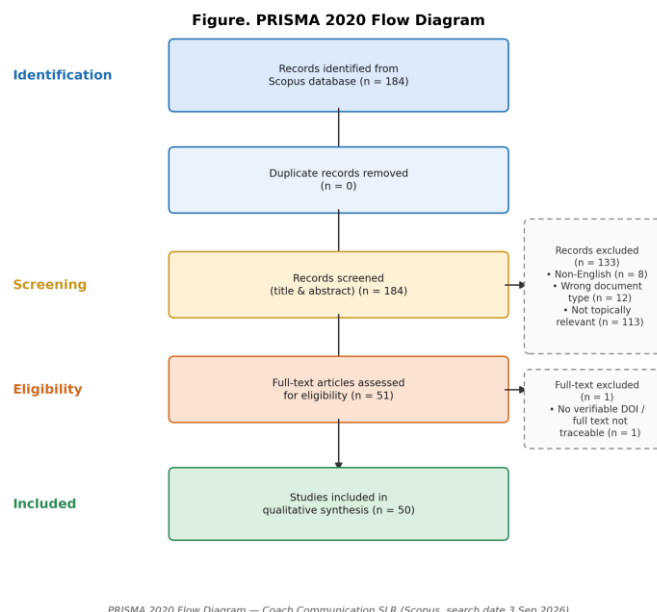


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram (Identification → Screening → Eligibility → Included).

Results and Discussions

Study Selection Results

From the initial 184 records obtained in the Scopus search, no duplicates were found, so all 184 records were sent for title and abstract screening without prior removal. At this stage, 133 records that were not suitable were eliminated: 8 as they were published in languages other than English, 12 for being a document type other than a journal article or review (e.g., book chapters, conference papers, a short survey, and one retracted article), 113 for being unrelated to coach-initiated communication, athlete populations, or psychological/performance outcomes. The screening result therefore led to 51 records to be read for full-text eligibility. At the full-text stage, one record had to be excluded since it did not have a verifiable digital object identifier and therefore could not be reliably traced or cited, resulting in 50 studies that were finally included in the qualitative synthesis. These numbers are consistent throughout the Abstract, Methods, and Results sections and are shown in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram in Section 4.

Descriptive Characteristics

Table 1 outlines ten typical papers chosen among a wide range of studies that dealt with different topics in sports communication research. The purpose of the selection is to show how communication is used by different individuals for the accomplishment of sports goals in the contexts, and different countries of competitions, and the phases of sports competitions. It is also to capture the variation in study designs. The ten studies were purposively selected, rather than randomly or exhaustively sampled, to jointly represent every communication construct, competition phase, study design, and geographic context identified across the complete set of 50 included studies; the thematic synthesis reported in the following subsections draws on all 50 studies, not only the ten illustrative cases shown here.

Table 1. Summary of 10 Representative Included Studies

Title	Author(s), Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
Communicating under pressure: coach-athlete communication structures and creative decision-making	Zhang & Chen, 2026	China	Cluster-randomized experiment	Directive, dialogic, and constraint-based minimal communication protocols differentially shaped players' creative decision-making during small-sided games, with more dialogic exchange linked to greater solution diversity.

Title	Author(s), Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
Pedagogical dynamics of language use in coach-athlete orchestration	Ryou et al., 2026	United Kingdom	Qualitative/discourse analysis	Applying Wittgenstein's language-game philosophy, coaches' language choices were shown to guide athletes toward shared 'aspect-seeing,' linking everyday coaching talk to skill perception and understanding.
Communication strategies for coaches to limit burnout for high school athletes	Atkinson et al., 2025	United States	Conceptual/applied review	Specific, performance-congruent feedback, interpersonal relationship-building communication, and autonomy-supportive language were proposed as strategies to reduce burnout risk in adolescent athletes.
Sport knowledge: effects of Division I coach communication on student-athlete learning indicators	Rey et al., 2022	United States	Cross-sectional survey	Coaches' use of prosocial power bases (expert, referent, reward) in communication was associated with greater affective and cognitive learning and higher state motivation among student-athletes.
Communication for the win: task benefits of coach confirmation in collegiate athletics	Cranmer et al., 2020	United States	Cross-sectional survey	Coach confirmation behaviors, especially challenge-based confirmation, were associated with greater athlete self-confidence and team cohesion, which in turn related to team winning.
"Coach really knew what I needed": effective communication acts among Korean Olympic archers	Kim & Park, 2020	South Korea	Qualitative interview study	In-depth interviews with Olympic archers revealed that coach communication shaped self-awareness, self-confidence, and anxiety management during training and competitive psychological crises.
Optimizing verbal communication in the instruction of weightlifting to novice athletes	Laakso, 2021	United Kingdom	Conceptual/applied review	Drawing on OPTIMAL motor-learning theory, autonomy-supportive, externally focused verbal instruction was linked to enhanced athlete self-efficacy and motor-skill acquisition.
Sports coaches' knowledge and beliefs about the provision, reception, and evaluation of verbal feedback	Mason et al., 2020	Australia	Qualitative interview study	Elite team-sport coaches described feedback as a tool for improving performance, building confidence, and helping athletes self-monitor, with distinct beliefs about timing and delivery.
"How am I going, coach?": effect of augmented feedback during small-sided games	Weakley et al., 2020	Australia	Randomized crossover experiment	Real-time performance feedback during small-sided games produced small-to-trivial changes in locomotor and physiological responses, with athlete-reported perceptual effects noted.
Coach humour styles and athlete commitment: a relational mediation model	Merdan & Çağlar, 2025	Turkey	Cross-sectional survey	Athletes' perceptions of affiliative coach humour were associated with stronger coach-athlete relationship quality and motivational commitment, while

Title	Author(s), Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
				aggressive humour undermined relational safety.

Table 2 categorizes the ten major research works according to the theme and the outcome stated in the paper with a view to showing how communication constructs fit with the psychological and performance outcome categories of the review.

Table 2. Study Classification by Theme and Method

Author(s)	Year	Country	Design	Theme/Focus	Intervention	Outcome
Zhang & Chen, 2026	2026	China	Experimental	In-competition communication structure	Communication protocol manipulation	Creative decision-making
Ryou et al., 2026	2026	United Kingdom	Qualitative	Language/discourse in coaching	Discourse analysis	Shared perception/understanding
Atkinson et al., 2025	2025	United States	Conceptual	Burnout-focused communication	Feedback + relational communication	Reduced burnout risk
Rey et al., 2022	2022	United States	Survey	Power-based instructional communication	Coach power bases	Learning + motivation
Cranmer et al., 2020	2020	United States	Survey	Confirmation communication	Coach confirmation	Self-confidence + cohesion
Kim & Park, 2020	2020	South Korea	Qualitative	Relational/psychological communication	Interview-derived themes	Self-confidence + anxiety management
Laakso, 2021	2021	United Kingdom	Conceptual	Instructional/verbal communication	OPTIMAL theory application	Self-efficacy + motor learning
Mason et al., 2020	2020	Australia	Qualitative	Post-training/competition feedback	Coach belief interviews	Confidence + self-monitoring
Weakley et al., 2020	2020	Australia	Experimental	In-competition augmented feedback	GPS-based feedback	Perceptual + physiological response
Merdan & Çağlar, 2025	2025	Turkey	Survey	Relational/humour communication	Humour style measurement	Relationship quality + commitment

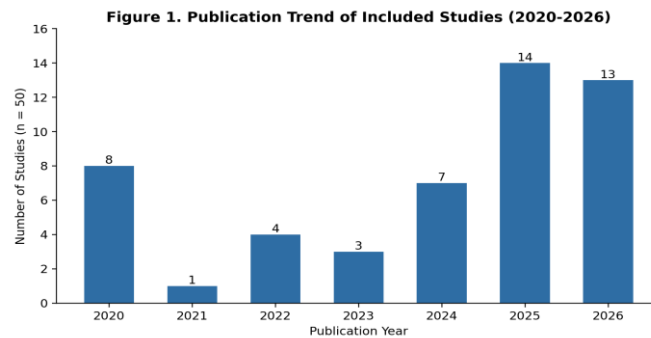


Figure 1. Publication Trend of Included Studies by Year (n = 50).

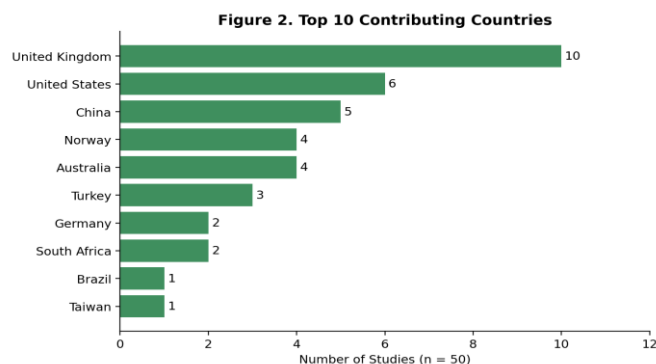


Figure 2. Top 10 Contributing Countries Among Included Studies (n = 50).

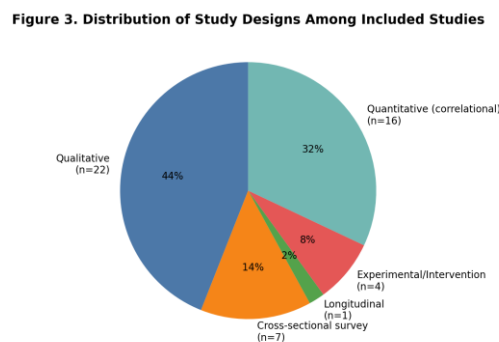


Figure 3. Distribution of Study Designs Among Included Studies (n = 50).

Thematic Synthesis

Findings for RQ1

Coach communication, as identified across the 50 studies examined, comprises a wide range of components like verbal instruction, nonverbal signals, feedback, confirmation, and relational messages through, e.g., humouring or supporting an athlete. Mostly, they looked at verbal feedback as an integral part of coach-athlete communication where feedback was described as a tool for building athlete confidence, enhancing performance, and encouraging self-monitoring on a regular basis, according to one of the coaches Mason et al., 2020). Also, coaches' instructional communication inspired by the notion of motor learning, which includes autonomy/supportive and externals/focus verbal cues, was shown to be responsible for increased self-efficacy and greater skill of the novices learning technically complicated tasks like weightlifting (Laakso, 2021). In addition, through wearable devices providing real-time and technologically driven feedback, this communication has become augmented. The GPS-based feedback delivery during small-sided games changed the athletes' locomotion and perception responses as Weakley et al., 2020, have shown, and similar real-time feedback systems have been found to also motivate and improve motor learning with childrens athletes (He & Wei, 2025).

The nonverbal and paraverbal aspects of communication were not as prevalent but still meaningful in the papers reviewed. Besides the study on the relationship of a combination of mental health and performance

aspects of adolescents and body-language training intervention (Niering et al., 2026), other literature that discussed how coaches' everyday language choices based on Wittgenstein's language-game philosophy can steer athletes towards a shared perceptual understanding of the skills, thus making language not just a neutral medium was also cited (Ryou et al., 2026). The study of relational communication like coach confirmation (i.e., blending acceptance and challenge messages) and how they relate with athletes' self-confidence and team coherence was presented by Cranmer et al. (2020). On the contrary, aggressive humour, as opposed to affiliative coach humour, which was found out to lead better relation qualities and motivational engagement, results in weaker relational safety, according to Merdan & Çağlar (2025).

In regard to emotional reactions, the literature most consistently pointed out that coach communication was connected with athlete self-confidence, self-efficacy, performance-related anxiety, and athlete burnout. Olympic archers mentioned how their coach communication greatly affected them in terms of their self-awareness, confidence, and their anxiety management not only in training but also when facing psychological crises in competitions (Kim & Park, 2020). Communication-oriented methods such as performance-specific and congruent feedback and developing interpersonal relationships were considered to be useful ways to reduce athlete burnout for adolescent athletes (Atkinson et al., 2025). Furthermore, Chen et al. (2026) in an integrated structural equation and neural network Chinese athlete athlete burnout coaching behavior athlete self-efficacy and perceived athletic ability were significantly correlated by an integrated structural equation and neural network model among Chinese athletes. Moreover, the studies by Hassmån et al. (2023), linking athlete burnout to perfectionism both from objective and subjective perspective of sport settings, reinforce the idea that coach communications play major roles and also show other psychological pathways for coach communications. Related psychological constructs are, for example, coach expectations effects on self-efficacy and perceived athletic ability were studied by Chen (2026). Difference between coaches' leadership style and athlete outcomes is one of the possible reasons by way of coaches' advice which influences athletes' learning motor skills (Schröder, 2025).

Findings for RQ2

Concerning performance-related results, the included studies showed that coach communication is not only linked to athletes' psychological characteristics (e.g., motivation, emotions) but also to physical, performance-related, results. At Division I level, power-based instructional communication with a particular focus on pro-social power bases, like expert and referent power, showed that they led to higher level of both cognitive and affective learning, increased state motivation, and, in terms of team results, more wins (Rey et al., 2022). In a similar vein, the Communication-Cohesion-Performance path uncovered at the collegiate level implied that a coach's validation boosts an athlete's self-confidence and teammates' harmony, and then it leads to positive team win results (Cranmer et al., 2020).

The structure of in-competition communication may affect fine-grained aspects of performance like decision-making. A cluster-randomized study done among top and lower-level football players in academies showed that three types of minimal communication (directives, dialogues, and constraints) had different effects on players' creativity during small-sided games as revealed by originality of actions and diversity of solutions adopted (Zhang & Chen, 2026). Real-time increased feedback during a small-sided game was also associated with changes in locomotor and physiological responses relevant to training load and by inference, performance readiness (Weakley et al., 2020). On the other hand, real-time feedback systems used at youth-level sports were proved beneficial in terms of enhancing motor learning outcomes (He & Wei, 2025).

The role and function of coaching as an important element in the development of skill level and technical performance of the players is another area of communication discussed. Nicol and Allen in their findings (2025) highlighted that the different ways of giving structure to communication through interaction between professional coaches and players is a mechanism in getting communication to result in skill-related performance. On the other hand, youth soccer research shows that instructional aspects of a match and game-focused coaching communication influence skills engagement by players (O'Brien-Smith et al., 2025). Besides that, Slade and others (2024) have pointed out that communication related to choosing or eliminating performers guided by best practice frameworks, which have emerged at national performance levels has consequences for sport and performance, which makes it also a performance-oriented communicative action, with repercussions for coaches athletes, and also support staff. In fact, the results obtained so far justify the claim that the coach's speech is only one, the nearest to the players' performance factor that acts through the decision process, knowledge acquisition and team-level cohesion and that such speech is in no way limited to a psychological or motivational aspect!

Findings for RQ3

The study results showed that communication effects vary significantly across competition phases. The communication before competition has mainly been associated with psychological readiness and structure-giving, as illustrated by the professional coaches' structural provisions to support and develop players'

competence, before the performers' demands (Nicol & Allen, 2025). Communication has also been characterized by the world-class endurance coaches' behaviors of warning-sign monitoring that lead to communicative actions, taken by them in anticipation of an athlete's possible overtraining or underperformance (Talsnes et al., 2025). On the contrary, the communication during the competition phase has more often been studied using experimental and technological tools, such as providing augmented feedback during small-sided games (Weakley et al., 2020) or modifying the communication structure that influences the real-time decision-making (Zhang & Chen, 2026), which is an indication of the time-pressured and action-oriented quality of this phase. The communication after competition was primarily linked with feedback, the evaluation of it, learning consolidation, and burnout prevention. Coaches' views on the use of feedback after training and competition (Mason et al., 2020) communication strategies explicitly planned to control burnout after several competitive cycles (Atkinson et al., 2025), etc. are examples of these types of communication. However, a communicative phase slightly different from and related to the previous ones occurred around injuries and rehabilitation. Young top athletes who had been going through a physical challenge told about their rehabilitation experience emphasizing that communication with their coach and the support staff made a significant difference in their mental condition to be ready for the competitive events (Ekenros et al., 2023). Thus, it may be useful that the pre-competition, in-competition, and post-competition framework is broadened to include the different channels of communication that accompany injury-related breaks in the competitive cycle.

Athlete characteristics, including physical, mental, and emotional qualities as well as the stage of a child's development, were factors that also influenced the coach communication-outcome association. There were significant differences between the communication needs and effects of junior and youth athletes as indicated from the studies about the effect of talking about the menstrual cycle among female adolescent athletes (Donnelly et al., 2024; Keil et al., 2024; Schulz et al., 2025), as well as in body-language and mental health enhancement programs for adolescent Ju Jutsu athletes through a series of interventions (Niering et al., 2026) vis-à-vis other mature and senior sporting populations like archers (Kim & Park, 2020); Olympic swimmers reflecting on their preferred leadership style (Ferguson & Mason, 2026); and Division I student players (Rey et al., 2022; Cranmer et al., 2020). Athletes whose lives depend on balancing a sport career and other non-sport related work, have been reported to need communication and support that are not completely dealt with in coaching models focusing on a single domain (Colizza et al., 2024). The study on opinions by coach and faculty regarding athlete-student who are successful academically also showed that the coach-communication may reflect qualities that can be utilized in different fields outside sports (Strowd et al., 2022). Additional variation was due to talent-development contexts where coaches' communication was not only a means of conveying technical skills but also a way to maintain the long-term development of the player which was found out of study done with elite female handball players (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020) and in a program for the long-term development of elite netball players (Nolte & Hollander, 2020).

Besides sport type, also differentiating the communication effects, the competitive level and the nature of the coach-athlete relationship. In technical individual sports like weightlifting (Laakso, 2021), archery (Kim & Park, 2020), and taekwondo (Baykan et al., 2026), a combination of precise instruction and psychological crisis management was common. On the other hand, team sports such as soccer (Zhang & Chen, 2026; O'Brien-Smith et al., 2025), rugby (Solomons et al., 2026; Shattock et al., 2025), and futsal (Carson et al., 2025) primarily focused on the relational and cohesion-communicative aspects. Generally, the overall quality of the coach-athlete relationship was a factor, which regularly moderated outcomes e.g. the dyadic coping processes in coach-athlete relationships (Staff et al., 2020) as well a study extending the coach-athlete relationship framework in South African women's rugby (Solomons et al., 2026), qualitative stories of how the coach-athlete relationship influenced rhythmic gymnast athletic careers within a Brazilian training centre (Brant et al., 2026), and as the mediating role of relationship quality between coach humour style and athlete commitment (Merdan & Çağlar, 2025), altogether indicating that communication effects can only truly understand in light of the wider context they are embedded into.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

In terms of methods, the 50 studies that were finally considered showed a wide mix of different methods but were also a bit of an old vs new type of studies thing. Qualitative interviews and case studies were the most common designs, being seen in studies about elite coach experience (Liu et al., 2024), coach-athlete dyadic coping (Staff et al., 2020), and athletes' reasons for not playing, (Ulas et al., 2025), to name a few, thus showing the continued preference of researchers to rich, context-sensitive accounts of communication from the viewpoint of coaches and athletes. The second group included purely quantitative studies of correlational type (that is, where different variables are related to each other but it is not possible to establish causality) and cross-sectional surveys (a snapshot of the situation of a phenomenon at a given point in time). These methods have been extensively adopted in the area of psychology, such as self-report instruments administered at just a single time point. One such example is how psychological readiness, self-esteem, and similar traits of football players are

interrelated (Kaplánová, 2024), a study using a purely qualitative method would have been much less efficient for getting that data. Also, a coach humor styles study (Merdan & Çağlar, 2025) is another example of where a quantitative method is necessary as we cannot see if the same coach tells different types of jokes every day from the perspective of the athletes. Experimental designs and ones that evaluate the outcome by comparing an intervention and control group (randomized) have been used fewer times, yet they were the ones used more in recent studies, e.g., manipulations of communication structure with cluster-randomized design (Zhang & Chen, 2026), randomized crossover feedback trials (Weakley et al., 2020), and auditory motivational cueing experiments (Rabeh et al., 2026). It seems that there is a methodological change from mostly correlation-causation type designs toward more causal inference-supporting designs. Longitudinal methods were, by far, the least-used category of methods, appearing, for instance, only in a few studies and one of them is the systematic review of psychological assessment in coach selection (Díaz-Rodríguez & Ayuso-Blanco, 2026) which points out, at least in part, a relatively little utilized method but, nevertheless, very useful one for, among others, the purpose of tracking how communication effects unfold during an athlete's career or across several competitions. Another group of papers dealt with applied and community-level coachings, as for instance the study of new coaches and support teams of a Premier League club football-in-the-community programme how the club prepares and evaluates the newbies (Crisp & Brackley, 2023). That paper, and the others like it, serve as examples of how coaching research is not only concerned with elite or high-performance contexts but includes community and development environments as its methodological base.

Interpretation of findings

Coach communication has been found here to be an active and multidimensional channel linking the demands of competition with athletes' inner psychological states and outer performance outcomes. Instead of a single, undifferentiated behavior, communication can apparently take on different forms and serve different purposes according to competition phase from giving structure and preparing psychology before competition, rapidly, often technologically mediated exchange during competition, and evaluative and relationship-sustaining feedback afterward. This phase-varying pattern sheds light on the reason why single-phase or singleconstruct studies in the past have revealed a mixed or discontinuous picture of coach communication effects: each only gets what is true but partial view of a time-dependent process.

Theoretical implications

These findings theoretically complement confirmation theory (Cranmer et al., 2020) and relation-inferred self-efficacy frameworks (McMullen et al., 2020) that place their emphasis in a temporal context which previously was not the case in applications. In light of this the findings of review imply that the confirmation and relational messages may have a different impact in athletes depending largely on whether they are given prior to, during, or after a sport performance and that is how the concepts go from being a static construct to dynamic, a change with the phases concept. Concurrently, the findings related to discourse and language-game (Ryou et al., 2026) dynamics also imply that theories of sport pedagogy related to coaching a guided perception can be strengthened by more integration with communication-science concepts such as message timing and channel. This temporal perspective complements, rather than duplicates, alternative explanatory models such as leadership emergence theory and dynamic systems approaches, which describe how coach-athlete interactions unfold over time but do not explicitly differentiate communicative demands by competition phase; the present synthesis therefore adds a phase-specific layer that these broader frameworks do not, on their own, provide.

Practical implications

From one perspective, the review essentially gives coaches, sport psychologists, and other professionals helping athletes develop their skills an evidence basis for adjusting communication style to the competition phase. In the run-up to the competition, the type of communication that gives a structure to the process and psychologically prepares the athlete would be very beneficial (Nicol & Allen, 2025; Talsnes et al., 2025). In the course of the competition, it seems that short and supportive technologically aided feedback with preservation of athlete autonomy and decision-making is better (Zhang & Chen, 2026; Weakley et al., 2020). Lastly, after the competition, it seems that feedback which is specific, congruent with performance, and provides relational support is necessary for both learning consolidation and burnout prevention (Mason et al., 2020, Atkinson et al., 2025). These findings also suggest that coach education programs might add phase-specific communication training to existing technical and tactical curricula.

Comparison with prior reviews

In contrast to the earlier narrower reviews and conceptual works such as the systematic review on psychological evaluation techniques in coach picking (Díaz-Rodríguez & Ayuso-Blanco, 2026) the current study not only brings to light the whole range of coach selection and coaching behaviors, but it also zeros in on the specific communicative acts that happen during the different stages of competition. This means that the review is actually adding up to existing syntheses rather than just repeating them. At the same time, the temporal dimension that

is being addressed in the review is hardly treated systematically in the wider coaching-effectiveness literature and hence, it is a very relevant one.

Contradictions in the literature

Some contradictions and nuances were present in the studies considered. Although multiple studies highlighted that frequent and precise feedback was very effective (Mason et al., 2020; Rey et al., 2022), experimental findings on enhanced in-competition feedback yielded small to trivial physiological responses although athletes perceived benefits (Weakley et al., 2020), implying that sometimes perceptual measures of effective communication may differ from the physical ones. Also, although affiliative humour was found to produce stronger social and motivational outcomes, aggressive jokes correlated with decreased relational safety within the same conceptual framework (Merdan & Çağlar, 2024), thereby making clear that not all forms of relationally orientated communication lead to consistently positive outcomes and that, for instance, emotional charge and the style of delivery are as important as the intention of communication.

Research gaps

There were at least three major research gaps revealed. To start with, only a few research papers addressed and discussed communication in all three competition phases within a shared framework. This made the field to not be able to decide, for instance, if pre-and post-competition communication would support each other or cancel one another out. Secondly, comparative research on cross-cultural and cross-sport dimensions remains very limited. For the most part, the available research is based in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and East Asian and European countries. Therefore, communication patterns in many other coaching cultures are largely unknown. Thirdly, very few studies used longitudinal designs to follow-up whether the changes in communication from coach to coach have the same effect over an athlete's development or during the course of a season.

Limitations of this review

This review has at least three significant limitations that should be mentioned. First, the search was limited to one database (Scopus) and publications in English language only; hence, some relevant evidence that are indexed elsewhere or published under other languages were excluded. Second, there was an independent dual-reviewer screening with formal inter-rater reliability statistics which is considered gold-standard systematic review practice whereas a single reviewer used documented, rule-based relevance protocol for coding and screening of studies. This automated keyword-based screening also led to at least one borderline inclusion, a clinical prehabilitation protocol for leukaemia patients that by a chance included a sport-derived Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (Saillard et al., 2024) demonstrating a risk associated with keyword-based relevance screening in interdisciplinary works. Finally, due to the restriction of the search, study designs were estimated based on publication titles and abstracts, hence some categorization of study designs and type of outcomes in Figures 1 and 2 have to be taken at face value (indicative) rather than definitive. A further threat to construct validity arises because the pre-, during-, and post-competition phase boundaries were operationalized from publication metadata rather than from primary data, which may not fully capture recall bias in phase-specific self-report studies; external validity is likewise constrained because the included evidence is drawn predominantly from North American, East Asian, and European coaching contexts, limiting generalizability to other coaching cultures.

Future research agenda

From these results, three concrete areas for future study could emerge. Research on the comparison of the type of interaction, the communication style, and the outcome of the three periods of interaction, pre-, in-, and post-competition, could be done on the same sample with the help of standardized and validated communication-assessment instruments. Secondly, it is important to replicate in different cultures key findings, which mainly concern feedback specificity, verification of one's own position in the conversation (confirmation), and relational communication such as joke (humour). This should be done in a variety of coaching cultures besides Western and East Asian ones (which are represented in the data that has been analyzed). As a third direction, future studies should explore longitudinal and intervention-based research based on some early communication experimental work such as manipulating soccer decision-making via communication structure (Zhang & Chen, 2026) and auditory cueing interventions (Rabeh et al., 2026). Such a research design would also be the way to uncover the impacts of coaches' communication on burnout, retention, and long-term performance trajectories.

Summary Answers to the Research Questions

Answering the review's main questions directly: coach communication across different competition stages comprises a variety of intertwined forms, like oral guidance and nonverbal as well as body-language signals, technologically mediated feedback, confirmation, and messages at the relationship level such as humor, and these forms are consistently linked to athletes' self-confidence, self-efficacy, anxiety regulation, and burnout risk. (RQ1) These same communicative behaviors also relate to performance-outcomes such as decision-making

quality, skill development, team solidarity, and the like, competitive results; they work as a proximal mechanism connecting mental readiness to actual performing results. (RQ2) Furthermore, the degree and the type of these relationships change depending on the stage of the competition, the development of the athlete, sport, level of competition, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, thus showing coach communication is not a single one-size-fits-all solution but rather a context-, and stage-sensitive behavior.

Conclusions

This review of the existing literature systematically combined evidence extracted from 50 studies available on Scopus. These studies explored the relationships between communicator behaviours of the athletes' leaders and their psychological readiness and performance across the periods, namely before, during, and after the event. The review revealed that communicator behaviours of coaches can be perceived as a dynamic, phase-sensitive mechanism: communicative acts before the competition support psychological readiness and structure, those during the competition guide real-time decision-making and feedback-driven correction, and those after the competition support learning while affecting long-term outcomes such as burnout. Through various such moments, verbal feedback, nonverbal cues, confirmation, and relational communication such as humor were found to be consistently linked to athletes' self-confidence, self-efficacy, anxiety regulation and motivation, as well as to performance indicators such as decision-making, skill acquisition, cohesion, and competitive results, which relationships were moderated by athlete characteristics, sport type, competitive level, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. This review's main contribution is in the explicit temporal organizing of a previously scattered body of evidence, which researchers and practitioners will be able to take as a roadmap that reveals when and to which extent certain communicator strategies are likely most effective. From a practical standpoint, the conclusions justify the inclusion of phase-specific communication skills training as an integral part of the coach development programmes. The authors note the review must be seen in the framework that it relied only one database, used the language filter of only English papers, and conducted all the screening through one person. Scopus was chosen for its broad multidisciplinary coverage of sport-science and communication journals, but future reviews would benefit from cross-validating this database with sources such as Web of Science or SPORTDiscus, and from dual-reviewer screening with a reported inter-rater reliability statistic (e.g., Cohen's kappa), to strengthen replicability. Research in this area needs to adopt phase-comparative, cross-cultural, and longitudinal studies, using uniform communication measures if it aims to better understand the causal effects of the coach's choice of words and actions.

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