Coach Verbal Aggression: A Case Study Examining Effects on Athlete Motivation and Perceptions of Coach Credibility

Joseph P. Mazer, Katie Barnes, Alexia Grevious, and Caroline Boger
Clemson University, USA

Team sports have become a vital informal learning setting in which athletes are taught, motivated, and mentored by their coaches. This experimental study examined the effects of coach verbal aggression on athlete motivation and perceptions of coach credibility. Results revealed that athletes exposed to a verbally aggressive coach were significantly less motivated and perceived the coach as less credible than athletes who were exposed to a coach who used an affirming style. With respect to credibility, athletes perceived a verbally aggressive coach as significantly less competent, trustworthy, and caring than a coach who used an affirming style. Implications and areas for future research are discussed. Case-study questions are presented for discussion by scholars and students.

Keywords: coach–athlete relationships, aggressive communication, affirming style

Compelling data suggest that 90% of American youth participate in at least one organized team sport before they complete high school (Salva, 2004). In these sports, vital interpersonal interactions often lead to vibrant informal learning settings in which athletes are taught, motivated, and mentored by their coaches. In fact, Kassing et al. (2004) argued that interpersonal interactions between teammates, between parents and their young athletes, and between coaches and athletes often characterize the context of sport. Kassing et al. noted that communication defines and shapes the context and experience of sport. In many ways, the meaning and value of sport experiences are derived from the communication that transpires in this context and how this communication affects athletes’ motivation and coaches’ credibility. Motivated athletes tend to report higher levels of satisfaction and exert greater effort in sport (Dwyer & Fischer, 1990; Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986). Coaches who are perceived by athletes as credible are able to positively influence athletes and promote an environment in which learning can occur (Turman, 2003a).

Turman (2008) found that coach immediacy behaviors lead athletes to experience greater satisfaction and team cohesion. Research also suggests a positive association between coaches’ reward and expert power use and athletes’ satisfaction.
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(Turman, 2006). Turman and Schrodt (2004) found that coaches’ positive feedback and autocratic leadership were positively related to athletes’ affective learning. Although decades of research have explored how positive communication behaviors on the part of coaches can lead to positive outcomes on the part of athletes, the context of competitive sport—without question—is prone to hostile communication acts of aggression between players, coaches, fans, referees, and parents (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). These forms of communication on the part of coaches can negatively affect athletes’ motivation and their perceptions of coaches’ credibility and warrant further investigation.

Aggressive communication consists of four message behaviors—assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness—through which a sender attempts to influence a receiver (Infante, 1987). Given that argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are the primary forms through which aggressive communication has been examined (Infante & Rancer, 1996), substantial research on these constructs exists in the communication literature (Myers, 2003; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006; Schrodt & Finn, 2010). Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are often conceptualized in contrast to one another, with argumentativeness being a generally constructive trait and verbal aggression being destructive (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). Infante and Rancer (1982) discuss argumentativeness as a trait that “predisposes the individual in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues and to attack verbally the positions which other people take on these issues” (p. 72). Argumentativeness, constructive as it may be to decision making and to a speaker’s individuality, may be perceived as threatening unless accompanied by other communication behaviors (Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988; Infante & Gorden, 1989).

Norton’s (1983) explication of an affirming communicator style emphasizes how attentive, friendly, and relaxed behaviors—along with low verbal aggression—can be a necessary complement to more active and aggressive communication behaviors (Infante & Gorden, 1991). Despite a limited focus on the relationship between an affirming coaching style and positive benefits for athletes, research suggests that an affirming style may be advantageous. In fact, Infante and Gorden (1989) found that argumentative superiors who used an affirming style were able to engage in more aggressive forms of communication and realize positive rather than negative outcomes.

Verbal aggressiveness, on the other hand, is a destructive communication trait that involves attacking another person’s self-concept to intentionally hurt the receiver (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Individuals who are the target of verbally aggressive messages often feel embarrassed, inadequate, and depressed (Infante, 1995). Verbally aggressive messages lead to negative relationship outcomes, and, if they are regularly directed toward one person, they may constitute psychological abuse (Infante & Rancer, 1996). In the classroom context, students report lower motivation, satisfaction, and affect and a more hostile learning environment when they perceive verbal aggression on the part of their teachers (Myers & Knox, 2000; Myers & Rocca, 2001). Students also consider verbally aggressive teachers as less credible than instructors who avoid destructive communication in the classroom (Myers, 2001). In the organizational context, Infante and Gorden (1987) found that superiors who were perceived as high in verbal aggressiveness and low in argumentativeness were viewed as inattentive and unfriendly. They concluded
that the destructive nature of verbal aggression, when displayed by a supervisor, can create an organizational climate that leads to low employee satisfaction and greater damage to the subordinate’s self-concept. In essence, research has yet to identify how verbal aggression might be related to positive relationship outcomes.

Athletes, in many ways, are like students or subordinates—they are placed in subordinate roles and expected to defer to authority. Like students and subordinates, athletes tend to react negatively toward verbal aggression from their coaches (Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008). Research suggests that athletes are more satisfied when coaches offer positive (Dwyer & Fischer, 1990) and rewarding feedback and social support (Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986). Kassing and Infante (1999) found that athletes were less satisfied and displayed poorer sportsmanship behaviors when their coaches were verbally and physically aggressive. Martin, Rocca, Cayanus, and Weber (2009) found that coaches’ use of positive behavior-alteration techniques was positively associated with athletes’ affect and motivation, while negative behavior-alteration techniques led athletes to report decreases in their affect and motivation.

Motivated athletes tend to apply themselves and persist at tasks that further their performance, whereas unmotivated athletes might make poor choices and often fail to persist in competition. Although some of the differences in athletes’ motivation can be attributed to differences in the individual athletes, distinctions must also be attributed to their reactions to circumstances and processes at work in the sport environment. Factors in the sport such as the coach or teammates can affect athletes’ motivation. Given that coaches may use verbal aggression in an attempt to alter athletes’ behaviors and overall performance in a competitive sport, a coach’s use of verbal aggression might have a negative effect on athlete motivation. Alternatively, coaches who exhibit an affirming style through attentive and friendly communication behaviors can lead athletes to greater motivation in competitive sport. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**H1**: Athletes would report lower levels of motivation when exposed to verbally aggressive coaches than when exposed to coaches who use an affirming style.

Credibility refers to a receiver’s perception of the degree to which a source is perceived as believable (McCroskey, 1992). McCroskey and Teven (1999) argue that credibility is the degree to which receivers perceive the source’s level of competence, trustworthiness, and caring. Competence refers to the extent to which a source is perceived to know what he or she is talking about, whereas trustworthiness is the degree to which the source is perceived as honest. Caring refers to the extent to which the source is perceived to have the receivers’ best interests in mind.

Verbal aggression on the part of a speaker often leads receivers to report negative perceptions of the speaker’s credibility. In fact, research suggests an inverse association between teacher verbal aggressiveness and students’ perceived understanding and teacher credibility (Edwards & Myers, 2007; Schrodt, 2003). Myers (2001) reported that students tend to view verbally aggressive teachers as low in credibility, while Kassing and Infante (1999) found a similar relationship between coaches’ verbal and physical aggression and male athletes’ perceptions of coach character, competence, and friendliness. Therefore, it stands to reason that athletes might perceive verbally aggressive coaches as low in credibility. On the other hand, coaches who use an affirming style might be perceived as more credible in the eyes of athletes. Thus, the following hypothesis was posited:
**H2**: Athletes would report lower levels of perceived credibility when exposed to verbally aggressive coaches than when exposed to coaches who use an affirming style.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 130 undergraduate student-athletes (50 first-year students, 32 sophomores, 25 juniors, 21 seniors, 2 no reports) at a large southeastern university. The sample consisted of 71 men and 57 women with an average age of 19.81 years (range 18–26 years, $SD = 1.38$). The racial/ethnic distribution was 70% White, 29% African American, and 1% Hispanic. The majority of the participants reported playing multiple sports throughout their lives ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.69$)—including football, basketball, baseball, softball, soccer, and swimming—for an average of 12.26 years ($SD = 4.07$).

**Procedures**

All procedures were approved through the university’s institutional review board. Coach verbal aggression was manipulated in narratives across two experimental groups (verbally aggressive coach, affirming-style coach) on a research questionnaire (see Appendix). Profanity, screaming, and condescending language were included in the verbally aggressive narrative, and calm, supportive, and concerned language was featured in the affirming-style narrative. To initially assess the effectiveness of the verbal aggression and affirming-style manipulation (Edwards & Myers, 2007), a panel of athletes was asked to examine the narratives and suggest changes. Slight adjustments were made based on their comments. Equal numbers of surveys from each experimental condition were intermixed in a stack (Survey 1, Survey 2, Survey 1, Survey 2, etc.) to randomly assign participants to each group. Participants were recruited from general education courses and the university’s athletics office. After reading an informed-consent form, participants were given a survey and instructed that the coach’s communication (narrative) occurred after an important play in competition. After reading the narrative, participants were asked to develop an impression of the coach and keep the coach in mind as they completed the survey. Writing the instructions and narratives in this way provided participants the opportunity to focus solely on the coach’s communication behavior as they completed the various measures (Mazer & Hunt, 2008).

**Measurement**

**Motivation.** Athlete motivation was operationalized using Christophel’s (1990) measure of motivation. This measure is composed of 16 bipolar items with seven response options, with higher numbers indicating greater motivation. Sample items include motivated/unmotivated, interested/uninterested, involved/uninvolved, stimulated/not stimulated, and inspired/uninspired. The measure produced an alpha reliability of .89 ($M = 42.39$, $SD = 15.13$).
Credibility. Coach credibility was assessed using Teven and McCroskey’s (1997) measure of credibility. The instrument is composed of 18 seven-point semantic-differential scales, six each for the competence, trustworthiness, and caring dimensions. The measures had alpha reliabilities of .92 for competence \((M = 22.73, SD = 9.38)\), .89 for trustworthiness \((M = 24.25, SD = 9.13)\), and .91 for caring \((M = 22.81, SD = 10.32)\).

Manipulation Check. Participants were asked to evaluate the coach’s communication as displayed in the survey narrative and then respond to four items designed to assess the effectiveness of the independent-variable manipulation. Participants responded using 7-point semantic-differential scales: positive/negative, friendly/not friendly, not aggressive/aggressive, and supportive/unsupportive. The manipulation-check items were reliable \((\alpha = .89, M = 14.74, SD = 6.89)\).

Results

An independent-samples \(t\) test performed on the manipulation check revealed statistically significant differences between conditions, indicating that the manipulation of verbal aggression and affirming style was successful, \(t(127) = –12.24, p < .001, d = 2.14\). Participants in the verbal-aggression group evaluated the coach’s communication more negatively \((M = 10.25, SD = 4.23)\) than did participants in the affirming-style group \((M = 20.42, SD = 5.21)\). See Table 1 for cell means and standard deviations.

H1 predicted that athletes who were presented with a verbally aggressive coach in a scenario would report lower levels of motivation than athletes who were presented with a coach who used an affirming style. An independent-samples \(t\) test revealed a statistically significant difference between verbally aggressive and affirming-style coaches for athlete motivation, \(t(123) = –4.72, p < .001, d = .85\). Athletes exposed to a verbally aggressive coach \((M = 37.15, SD = 13.47)\) reported significantly lower motivation than did athletes exposed to a coach who used an affirming style \((M = 49.05, SD = 14.61)\). Therefore, H1 was supported. See Table 2 for cell means and standard deviations.

H2 posited that athletes who were presented with a verbally aggressive coach in a scenario would perceive the coach as less credible than would athletes who

| Table 1  Descriptive Statistics for Manipulation Check by Experimental Condition |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Statistic         | Verbal aggressiveness | Affirming style |
| \(M\)             | 10.25\(_a\)         | 20.42\(_a\)     |
| \(SD\)            | 4.23               | 5.21            |
| \(n\)             | 66                 | 64              |

Note. Means with a common subscript are significantly different at \(p < .001\).
Independent-samples $t$ tests revealed statistically significant differences between groups on competence, $t(126) = –6.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$; trustworthiness, $t(125) = –8.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.46$; and caring, $t(126) = –9.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.66$. Athletes perceived a verbally aggressive coach as significantly less competent ($M = 18.56$, $SD = 8.77$), trustworthy ($M = 19.50$, $SD = 7.50$), and caring ($M = 17.01$, $SD = 7.91$) than a coach who used an affirming style ($M = 27.93$, $SD = 7.33$; trustworthiness $M = 30.27$, $SD = 7.30$; caring $M = 30.27$, $SD = 8.04$). Therefore, H2 was supported. See Table 2 for cell means and standard deviations.

### Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the effects of coach verbal aggression on athletes’ motivation and their perceptions of coach credibility. The findings suggest that coaches who were represented as highly verbally aggressive when interacting with a student athlete led athletes to experience significantly less motivation and led them to perceive the coach as significantly less credible. The results of this study align with previous research that examined the role of communication in the coach–athlete relationship (Kassing & Infante, 1999; Turman, 2006, 2008). In particular, these findings extend prior research by providing evidence of important causal connections between coach communication behaviors—specifically verbal aggression and affirming style—and athlete outcomes.
Coaches may intend for their aggressive communication to correct athletes’ poor performance during competition and improve their overall effectiveness in the game. However, these communication choices can come at the expense of athletes’ motivation and lead athletes to perceive the coach as less competent, trustworthy, and caring. When coaches yell at their players when they make mistakes, use condescending and profane language, and use other hurtful communication behavior, athletes report that they are less motivated to participate and perceive the verbally aggressive coach as low in credibility. On the other hand, coaches who use an affirming style with calm and supportive language can lead athletes to experience greater motivation and perceive the coach as more competent, trustworthy, and caring. These findings support prior research suggesting that constructive influence strategies are more effective in increasing player motivation (Horn, 2002; Smith, Fry, Ethington, & Li, 2005). Verbal aggression may offer short-term benefits, but such communication has meaningful negative effects on athletes. Although the potential for short- and long-term effects was not explicitly addressed in the current study, future research can seek to examine this possibility.

Smoll, Smith, Barnett, and Everett (1993) argued that coaches can be trained to be effective communicators. Coaching and athletic-leadership programs might capitalize on research examining the interpersonal characteristics of the coach–athlete relationship and incorporate necessary training efforts in their programs. Instruction in this area can familiarize coaches with constructive and destructive communication behaviors and teach how such messages can lead to positive and negative effects on athletes. While some may justify the use of verbally aggressive messages for instrumental purposes (i.e., to accomplish a goal; Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996), the current study offers no evidence that points toward positive effects of verbal aggression on athlete outcomes. In fact, coaches who use less verbal aggression and use other constructive communication techniques such as providing positive feedback and offering social support can foster an environment where athletes learn from their coach as a credible leader (Turman, 2001).

Despite the contributions of this study, the results should be interpreted within the limitations imposed by the research design. Indeed, interactions between coaches and athletes are highly contextualized. Variables such as the urgency of the moment, the pace of the game, and the current score can influence the effectiveness and appropriateness of a coach’s communication with a player. In this investigation, participants were asked to develop a perception of a coach from a narrative on the research questionnaire. Even though this experimental method is commonly used in instructional-communication research (Mazer & Hunt, 2008; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006; Teven & Hanson, 2004), it would be interesting to explore athletes’ reactions to actual coaches who use verbal aggression.

While the current study considered only the players’ reactions to the coach’s communication, future research might consider coaches’ perceptions to more fully capture the effects of their verbal aggression on athlete motivation. Without a doubt, the relationship between coach verbal aggression, athlete motivation, and coach credibility may vary based on the sport, sport level (youth sport vs. college competition), and program success. More important, potential mediating variables may influence how athletes perceive the communication behavior of their coach. That is, winning teams may be less affected by a verbally aggressive coach when such behaviors might influence a team’s ability to win. Although the current study
examined a diverse selection of sports and athletes, future research might examine potential differences across a variety of sports and various levels of competition and success to more fully understand the effects of coach verbal aggression on athlete outcomes. The findings also could be further validated through additional data-collection techniques including observations of coach–athlete interactions (Turman, 2005, 2007).

Scholars agree that coaches can and often do play rather influential roles in the lives of their athletes (Black & Weiss, 1992; Millard, 1992; Parrott & Duggan, 1999; Turman, 2003a, 2003b). This consensus confirms the need for additional research that draws important connections between effective coach communication behaviors and athlete motivation, success, and satisfaction. This research can permit scholars, coaches, and athletes to more fully understand how positive coach–athlete relationships can lead to improvements not only in the quality of athletes’ performance during sport participation but also in the quality of many other life experiences.

Case-Study Questions

• Why might coaches use verbal aggression in their communication with athletes?
• What do you think are the most vital components of coach credibility? Competence, trustworthiness, or caring?
• How do the findings of this study contribute to the literature on verbal aggression and affirming style?
• How might scholars best explore the effects of coach communication behavior on athlete outcomes?
• How might a specific credibility component (e.g., caring) compensate for another component (e.g., competence)? In other words, can a coach be perceived as high in caring and low in competence and still be successful?
• What specific verbally aggressive communication behaviors might coaches use to motivate athletes? What behaviors might they avoid?
• What specific communication behaviors might characterize a coach’s affirming style?
• What specific characteristics of the sport context might make verbal aggression acceptable?
• How might a team’s success factor into athletes’ perceptions of a coach’s communication behavior?
• Do you believe that coaches can be trained to be more effective communicators? Why or why not?
• If you were to develop a “best practices” list for coaches’ communication, what communication behaviors would be included?

References


### Appendix: Narratives in Experimental Conditions

**Verbally Aggressive Coach**

“Why the f@#$! would you do that? Did you think that was a good idea? This is the type of $#1t I am talking about! We are down to the wire and you let the entire team down. There is no time for you to be selfish and take matters into your own hands. You’re f@#$!ing incompetent and don’t deserve to be here. Sit your a$$ down! I don’t even want to look at you!”

**Affirming Coach**

“Are you feeling okay? Help me understand why you did that. I feel like this happens a lot. Is there something that I can do to make it easier for you? Things like this seem to happen quite often when we are down to the wire. Sometimes it’s easier to not take a situation like this into your own hands and ask for help instead. If there is something you’re not understanding let’s talk about it later. Have a seat and cool down.”