

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

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This study sought to gain a better understanding of the communication behaviors between coaches and male and female athletes. Four focus groups (male coach and male athletes, male coach and female athlete, female coach and male athletes, and female coach and female athletes) were used to assess athletes' perceptions of their past coaches' communication behavior compared to their preferred coach communication behaviors. Coding of the focus groups revealed that although females prefer to talk to their coaches about topics related to running, they also wanted to talk about more personal topics. However, for females to talk about personal topics they needed to feel comfortable with their coaches, which was dependent on the coaches' characteristics. Conversely, males desired to talk to their coaches about more serious topics, such as their training and competition, as well as other professional runners' training and competition. Although males desired to more often talk about serious topics, they also recognized there were times

when joking around and being less serious with their coaches was appropriate and necessary. In short, men preferred to talk 'shop' more than women did. Based on these results, suggestions for coaches are discussed.

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Perceived and Preferred Coach Communication Behaviors of Cross-
Country Athletes According to Gender

By
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Michelle L. Childs, Author

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Perceived and Preferred Coach Communication Techniques of Cross-Country Collegiate Runners According to Gender

As a former female NCAA cross-country runner, I have had the pleasure of working with two coaches throughout my college athletic career, each of whom employed distinctively different communication techniques and leadership styles. What topics I talked to each coach about and how we talked about the topics, differed dramatically between the two coaches. For example, one coach communicated authoritatively (commanding, self-confident, and rarely negotiated) and our conversations evolved solely around my training schedule and upcoming or previous races. Conversely, the other coach communicated democratically (concerned about my opinions, and open to negotiation) and our conversations rarely focused on the physical element of the sport; instead, our conversations concentrated on the emotional elements of the sport; how I was feeling physically and emotionally and what was going on in my life outside of running.

Both coaches that I have experienced were both athletically successful coaches in their own right, and as stated earlier, each employed different communication techniques to motivate and instruct their female athletes. Since each employed different communication techniques I thought it would be interesting to investigate whether cross-country runners have certain coaching communication preferences and whether their preferences differ according to the gender of the athlete. My personal experience and the literature suggest that males and females prefer different communication techniques from their coaches and coaches are more effective when they communicate differently to their athletes according to their gender. If males and females prefer different coach communication techniques and athlete's preferences are unmet, performance may be negatively influenced. However, if coaching communication preferences are met, it would positively influence performance (Beam, 2004; Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai et al., 1989; Neil & Kirb 1979; Terry, 1984; and Terry et al., 1984, and Sherman, 2000).

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Researching athletes' coaching communication preferences is important because according to Chelladurai's (1984) Multidimensional Model of Leadership, when athletes' preferences are congruent with the actual behaviors of the coach and the required behaviors of the coach for the situation, then athletes will be satisfied and athletic performance will be optimal. Numerous studies have investigated athlete preferences and perceptions (Andrew, 2009; Beam, Serwathka, & Wilson, 2004; Black and Weiss, 1992; Chelladurai, 1984; Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai, Haggerty, & Baxter, 1989; d'Arripe-Longuevill, 1998; Haselwood, Joyner, Burke, Geyerman, Czech, Munkasu & Zwald, 2005; Jambor, 1997; Karreman, Dorsch, & Reimer, 2009; Neil & Kirby; 1979; Reimer & Chelladurai, 1995; Schliesman, 1989; Sherman, Fuller, and Speed, 2000; Terry, 1984; Terry & Howe, 1984; and Vargas-Tonsing, Myers, & Feltz, 2004), which can have a impact on athlete satisfaction and consequently athletic performance.

In addition, Tannen (2001), author and scholar of communication gender differences, argues that men and women have different views of the world and, in turn, have different communication patterns. More specifically, Tannen (2001) claims that since men view the world as a hierarchy, their conversations are negotiations in which they try to jockey to obtain the upper hand. Conversely, women view the world as a web or network that allows them to use conversations as a method to obtain intimacy and friendship with one other. Males and females also differ in how they use conversation, the way they communicate with each other, how they wish to be communicated with, and the kinds of topics they talk about (Ivy & Buckland, 2004).

Intuitively, the differences between what men and women communicate about and how they communicate goals could also transition into the athletic domain. It is possible that because men and women are known to differ in what they want to communicate about and how they want to communicate, these differences may translate to men's and women's athletic lives, ultimately influencing their performance and making it critical to examine how gender influences athletes' preferences of coaching communication styles.

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Thus, for this reason, studying athletes' coaching communication preferences is especially relevant. Given the extreme competitive nature of college athletics in general and the increasingly competitive nature of female athletes specifically, it is important to identify strategies that could be used in conjunction with other techniques to increase the performance or competitiveness of both female and male cross-country teams.

I have chosen to study cross-country runners for a variety of reasons, chief of which is cross-country coaches often coach both male and female cross-country teams at the same time. Identification of the preferences of the athletes according to gender would allow coaches to more effectively communicate with each team by employing gender preferences, if in fact, they exist.

Coaches are in their coaching positions because they are considered to be highly knowledgeable in their sport. Sometimes they are even experts. When coaches wish to share their athletic knowledge with their athletes, they strive to be effective in the sense that they want their athletes to understand the message they are giving them. However, gender communication research suggests that males and females differ in their perceptions of what effective communication entails (Ivy & Buckland, 2004; Tannen, 2001). Therefore, for coaches to be effective communicators, they must tailor their messages to each gender.

If relationships are found between gender of the athlete and their desired coaching communication preference, the data found will be useful for both applied and research purposes. Coaches will be able to put the data into practice by employing the desired communication technique according to gender. In turn, by employing the preferred communication technique to each gender it is possible that athletes will be more receptive to what the coaches have to say, which could have an impact on their athletic performance.

In terms of research, the data from the present study will be useful for researchers in sport communication and leadership behavior. If relationships are found in this qualitative study, it will help support existing quantitative research. It

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also will encourage researchers to investigate additional preferred communication techniques that lie outside of the existing research.

Next, I review the relevant literature along four dimensions: a) coach and athlete communication in sports, b) coach and athlete gendered communication in sports, c) athletes' preference of coaching communication style and finally, d) gendered differences regarding coaching communication preferences.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature on the communication of athletes and coaches is diverse. In this review, some general research findings about communication are highlighted according to the following: coach-athlete communication, gendered coach-athlete communication, athletes' preferences regarding coach communication, and gendered-specific preferred communication, reviewing how gender affects communication and communication preferences. The literature review closes with some background on the sport of cross-country running.

2.1 Coach-Athlete Communication

Effective communication is a crucial part of any relationship, including the coach-athlete relationship. Effective communication between individuals, that is matching the message sent with the message received, is extremely important when striving to be understood in all contexts (Burke, 1997), including athletic contexts. Specifically, athletes across a range of sports benefit from a coach that is honest, a good listener, able to ask effective questions, able to develop a good rapport, promotes alternative views of similar situations, uses the proper terminology, and establishes a trusting relationship (Burke, 1997). In addition, Smith (1979) argues that in order to effectively communicate with their athletes, coaches should focus on communicating positive reinforcement and encouragement, corrective and technical

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instruction, as well as decreasing the amount of verbal punishment and negative regimental behavior.

Similar to Smith (1979), Barnett, Smoll & Smith (1992) studied youth sport athletes and found that effective coaches should focus their verbal and non-verbal communication towards both the athletes' athletic and non-athletic endeavors. Because coaches can have such an impact on the personal well-being and development of their athletes outside of the sports context, they need to communicate with their athletes about more than just how to perform athletically. For instance, when looking at the relationships between Olympic medalists and their coaches, Jowett and Cockerill (2003) found that satisfied and successful athletes reported that they felt personally close to their coaches. Researchers found that in the eyes of the medalists, successful coaches provided technical instruction in a nurturing and motivational way while also offering social support and taking interest in the athletes' personal lives. That same study also found that if the coaches lacked the ability to give social support, compliment the athlete, and provide knowledgeable instruction in a positive way, athletes' physical performance and psychological well-being suffered. Therefore, this study along with others, demonstrated that it is important for coaches to not only communicate with their athletes but to do so in a positive and supportive manner (Jowett, & Cockerill, 2003; Kavussanu, Boardley, Jutkiewicz, Vincent & Ring, 2008). Greater trust, respect, and care, often referred to as "soft" qualities, demonstrate that coaches seem interested in both the personal and athletic lives of their athletes (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Coaches can improve their coaching techniques by using open communication through formal and informal conversations. Formal conversation for example, may take place in the coaches' office and conversations may focus strictly on training and competition. Conversely, informal conversations may take place pre or post practice and may focus on general interpersonal topics regarding the personal lives of the athletes. In turn, open communication (i.e. informal conversations) often encouraged athletes to be honest and gives athletes the impression that their coach cares and is interested in their personal well-being.

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According to Jowett & Cockerill (2003) this cyclic process demonstrates that in order to effectively communicate with their athletes, coaches need to pay close attention to *what* they are communicating with their athletes as well as *how* they are communicating to them. This also highlights the need to fulfill both of the foregoing aspects in order to develop effective coaching techniques (Kavussanu, Boardley, Jutkiewicz, Vincent & Ring, 2008).

2.2 Gendered Coach-Athlete Communication

Although it is clear that some scholars (DeBoers, 2004; Ivy & Buckland, 2004; Tannen, 2001; Osborne, 2003) argue that communication behaviors do differ between males and females, (e.g. women use conversations to build relationships, whereas men use conversations to negotiate) and athletes in general require certain communication techniques and behaviors from their coaches, there have been mixed messages regarding whether or not communication differences exist between sexes (Canary & Hause, 1993; DeBoer, 2007; Ivy & Bucklund, 2004; Newman, Groom, Handelman & Pennebaker, 2008; Sullivan, 2004; and Tannen, 2001). It is unclear whether or not specifically gender plays a role in effective communication between coaches and female or males athletes (Canary & Hause, 1993; Newman, Groom, Handelman & Pennebaben, 2008 and Sullivan, 2004). It is possible that athletes may require more similar communication techniques regardless of gender due to their common athletic interests, goals, and endeavors. Despite the potential commonalities, however, coaches will be most effective if their communication techniques and behaviors coincide with the desired techniques and behaviors of their male and female athletes (Chelladurai, 1978, 1984; Sullivan, 2004).

Author and experienced coach, Kathleen DeBoers argues in her book published in 2004, that male and female athletes require distinctly different communication techniques in order to reach their athletic potential. Furthermore, she states that because males and females are psychologically different, they view their athletic teams and competition differently, they are motivated by different incentives, and they need to work on different skills during practice. Similar to what

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gender communication research has demonstrated, DeBoers (2004) also states that females view their world as a web of connections and use their time with their teammates to talk and bond through conversations. Therefore, athletics for women are both social and competitive. Females want to be pushed physically in practice and competition, but they also want a structured environment in which they can socialize with their teammates (Osborne, 2003).

Females' view of the world as interconnected and related causes them to carry their athletic world into their personal world. Accordingly, a friend is a friend to females in all situations. As a result, if conflict occurs between a female athlete and their coach or another athlete on the playing field, it could easily translate into their personal world. Therefore, to be an effective coach to females, it is particularly important that coaches enforce positive correction and instruction on the playing field for both good and poor performances; and, that they teach their female athletes appropriate coping strategies (Anshel, Porter, & Quek, 1998; Bristow, 2007; Knights & Giuliano, 2003; Silby, & Smith, 2000). Moreover, according to Frey, Czech, Kent & Johnson (2006) and Kavussanu, Boardley, Jutkiewicz, Vincent & Ring (2008) female athletes believe that good coaches must display respect and communicate positively to them regarding knowledge of the sport. When coaches display this type of communication it can enhance female athlete's athletic performance.

On the other hand, men's hierarchical view of the world causes them to be constantly competitive in athletic competition and practice and spend their time with their teammates forming alliances and negotiating for the upper hand, rather than socializing. Also, men are able to clearly separate their athletic and personal worlds (DeBoer, 2004). Therefore, if men experience physical or verbal conflict on the playing field, there is little to no conflict once the game is complete, and those that fought can become or remain friends after the game. For this reason, coaches of males can confront their male athletes during practice or games and feel confident they will not take this conflict off the playing field..

Finally, reasons for participation differ between men and women. Women rate being fair, having a close team, and obtaining personal achievement as some of

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the most important reasons why they participate in sports. In contrast, men value their public image, having a good game, and competing in championship as some of the reasons why they participate in sports (Maclean & Hamm, 2008). Because of this, coaches may need to modify their communication behavior with females by providing social support and positive encouragement implies (Bristow, 2007; Frey, Czech, Kent & Johnson, 2006; Silby & Smith, 2000; Maclean & Hamm, 2008; Vealy, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 1998), coaches also may need to modify their communication behavior with males, communicating with them autocratically, especially in tough competitive situations.

To summarize, although some researchers suggest there are no differences between men and women in terms of communication behaviors and preferences, many suggest there are. On the basis of this latter group, my goal is to determine what cross-country male and female athletes think.

2.3 Models of Athletes' Preferences Regarding Coach Communication

Two models of leadership behavior have been used to examine leadership behaviors in sports: a) the Multidimensional Model of Leadership (Chelladurai, 1984), and b) the Model of Adult Leadership Behaviors in Sport (Smoll & Smith, 1984). Each is important because each has been widely used to explain leadership behaviors in sport research. Chelladurai's (1984) Multidimensional Model of Leadership suggests that in order for successful athletic performance and satisfaction to occur three things need to be aligned: the required leadership behaviors for a particular situation, the actual leadership or perceived leadership behaviors, and the preferred leadership behaviors of the athlete. For example, if an athlete had a personal situation in which they needed to talk to someone, they desired to talk to their coach about their problem, and the coach was able to provide social support for their athlete, this would be an example of congruence between leadership behavior required for the situation, perceived/actual leadership behavior and desired leadership behavior. The second model, Smoll and Smith's (1984) Model of Adult Leadership Behavior in Sport suggests that athlete's perception and recall of their coach's behavior mediates the relationship between

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actual coach behavior and the athlete's evaluative reactions. In short, they suggest athlete satisfaction, and consequently, successful athletic performance occurs when athlete's positive perception of coaching behavior aligns with the actual leadership behavior exhibited by the coach. For example, when an athlete perceives their coach to exhibit behaviors that are favorable, their reactions will be positive; however, if an athlete perceives their coach to exhibit unfavorable behaviors, the athlete's reactions will be negative.

Using the Multidimensional Model of Leadership, Chelladurai (1984) examined the relationship between preferred and perceived leadership behaviors and its influence on the satisfaction of the athlete. In his research, he developed five leadership behavior categories: training and instruction, democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, social support, and positive feedback. He found that if athletes perceived their coach to be displaying the leadership behaviors, it positively influenced the athlete's satisfaction with their coaches' leadership behavior. In a subsequent study Reimer & Chelladurai (1995) also found that if athlete's perceived their coaches to communicate to their athletes information regarding training and instruction and gave positive feedback, satisfaction increased for players on a football team. Similarly, Schliesman (1987) found that athletes were satisfied both when coaches displayed democratic behaviors and when coaches displayed social support, training and instruction and positive feedback.

2.4 Gender-Specific Preferred Communication

Neil & Kirby (1979) found that leadership behavior preferences differ according to gender. Researchers discovered that males prefer the coach to draw a definite line between themselves and the team, while women prefer to have approachable or interpersonal coaches where lines are more flexible or blurred. Similarly, researching college level athletes, Beam, Serwatka and Wilson (2004) also found that females preferred coaches to consider the situation (i.e. consider time, environment, and individual goals and goal achievement methods), training and instruction and athlete participating in the coach-athlete decision making process.

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Although some research suggests male and female coaching behavior preference is more similar than different (Sherman et al., 2000), other suggest, athlete preference can differ according to the gender of the athlete. Consequently, coaches may need to implement certain required or desired coaching behaviors in order to be congruent with preferences according to gender of the athlete (Beam, et al.; Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai, Haggerty & Arnott, 1989 and Neil & Kirby, 1979). Thus, knowledge about athletes' preferences and perceptions of actual leadership behavior on part of the coaches may be useful.

Chelladurai & Arnott (1985) studied preferred coach leadership decision styles when encountering a problem situation. The leadership behaviors studied were: a) autocratic style (i.e., the coach makes decisions based on the information available at the time), b) consulting style (i.e., the coach shares the problem with select athletes and receives suggestions on how to solve the problem, then makes a decision), c) participative style (i.e., the coach and the team make a joint decision), and d) delegation style (i.e., the coach delegates the decision to select players and implements their decision). From this study, results demonstrated that females prefer a participation style, whereas males prefer an autocratic coaching style. Both genders rejected the delegative style. Chelladurai, Haggerty & Arnott (1989) also found in a similar study that females more often preferred a participation coaching style. Futhermore, Chelledurai et al. (1989) found that under a certain circumstances when high quality decisions are required, both males and females preferred autocratic behavior. This data demonstrated that the preferred communication style of athletes is not always solely based on gender. At times, it can depend on the situation. This literature suggests that gender is not the only factor making a difference in how athletes prefer to be coached. The situation might also dictate the athletes' communication preferences.

2.5 Collegiate Cross-Country as an Individual and Elite Sport

Some studies have found that preferred leadership behavior could differ according to whether the sport is independent (individual) or interdependent

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(team) (Terry, 1984 and Terry & Howe, 1984). Although no differences were found between genders, Terry & Howe (1984) found that independent sport athletes, such as cross-country athletes, prefer a more democratic leadership style and a less autocratic leadership style. In another study, Terry (1984) investigated preferred coaching behaviors of males and females at an elite university level. Again, no differences between gender and preferred leadership behavior emerged, but athletes who competed in an individual elite sport preferred more democratic and social support behaviors, and less training and autocratic behaviors. Interestingly, when comparing Terry (1984) and Terry & Howe (1984), athletes that were considered elite at the university level preferred more democratic and social support behaviors and less rewarding behaviors than athletes that were not considered elite. Therefore, communication preferences may differ according to competition level.

2.6 Research Question

Thus, based on previous research the following research question is proposed:

RQ: Do male and female cross-country athletes differ in their coaching communication preference?

Chapter 3

Methodology

This qualitative study explores differences between the coach-athlete communication preference of male and female cross-country athletes with both male and female coaches. The research question of the present study, which asks if male and female cross-country athletes differ in their coaching communication preferences, lends itself to qualitative methods because it offers many advantages for accomplishing the research goals. Next, I'll describe the rationale for the data collection, the respondents, the interview protocol, and finally analysis and procedures I'll use for analyzing the data .

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3.1 Rationale

Qualitative research, and in particular focus groups will be used to answer the research question. Qualitative research methods and focus groups specifically are useful and most appropriate for answering this research question because a) it allows researchers to investigate the research question broadly, and thereby exploring areas related to the research topic, but not necessarily devised initially by the researcher, b) it allows for an in-depth exploration of the research questions, and c) it stimulates social interaction, which encourages participants to share what they know and the process by which they came to know, and why variables are related and how they are related.

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the research question, which is especially important if the topic has yet to be fully explored, which can be beneficial for laying for framework for future quantitative studies (Brennen, 1992). Data produced from qualitative research is based on participants' experiences and explanations, and instead of investigating the strength of the variables in the research question, it investigates why those two variables are related and how the variables became related (Barbour, 2008). This is especially relevant to the present research question because by investigating qualitatively, coaches can understand what influences athlete's preferences, which can assist coaches when trying to implement athlete preferences into their everyday practice.

Social interaction is also another important aspect of qualitative research, and in particular focus groups. Heiskanen, Jarvela, Pulliainen, Saastamoinen, and Timonen (2008) demonstrated that focus groups are unique because they create data based on social interaction; individuals share their thoughts and opinions with one another and encourage others to share. Such social interaction will allow and encourage athletes to share their experiences, thoughts, and ideas of which coaching communication techniques they prefer and why they prefer them (David, 2004). Positively, the social interaction of focus groups also allows participants to feel more comfortable during data collection. More specifically, focus groups encourage

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individuals that are less likely to talk one-on-one with researchers because they are in company of individuals that are similar and familiar to them. Therefore, qualitative research is the most appropriate for answering the present research question.

3.2 Respondents

The sport of cross-country and the athletes who participate in it were selected for a variety of reasons: my personal experience in the sport, the proximity of school to Oregon State and the sex of athletes and coach. My own experience at the collegiate level in cross-country has provided a valuable lens for examining the communication that exists between coaches and athletes. This insider perspective allowed respondents to speak using authentic running language without hesitating to translate. I also believe my experience allowed participants to feel greater comfort with me, which may have resulted in the disclosure of information that might not have otherwise emerged. A convenience sample was used because the gender of the athletes' coaches and the coaches willingness to participate in the study. This technique allowed me access to the correct mix of respondents who were willing to participate in my research. Two teams, one male and one female with a male coach and two teams, one male and one female with a female coach were selected to participate. These four groups allowed for equal representation of males and female coaches as well as representative of members of both male and female cross-country teams. The respondents in the present study are male and female collegiate (Division I and III) cross-country runners from institutions located in the states of Oregon and Washington. Participants' ages ranged from 18-23 and also ranged in their athletic ability and experience. In total, there were 23 athletes, 11 of which were males.

3.3 Measurement Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used for data collection in each focus group. Semi-structured interview questions allow for a moderate directed conversation

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during the interview without restricting the flow of conversation. Such structure also gives respondents freedom to initiate or develop relevant topics or issues that may not have been initially provided by the researcher. The wording of the interview questions were designed through thorough investigation of the necessary sport experiences to make sure that the questions allowed for exploration of the research topic and as a result, I am confident it encouraged participants to share their thoughts and opinions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Where needed, follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to expand on their comments and to share more specific examples of their experiences. Follow-up questions also were used to clarify what the participants were saying. Probes helped direct respondents' conversation so that it remained consistent with the research topic. See Appendix (6) for a complete list of focus group questions.

3.3 Data Collection

Cross-country head coaches from NCAA institutions from the states of Oregon and Washington were contacted via email and were asked for permission to perform research with their athletes. Athletes were then contacted via email or in person by their coaches and were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. Coaches also contacted the athletes and provided a letter via email or in person that explained the study and possible questions they might have had. Once the coaches gave permission for their athletes to participate in the study a time and location that was set for the focus group.

Prior to participating in each focus group, each respondent was provided with a recruitment letter and an informed consent document. The latter was reviewed with subjects at the beginning of the focus group, and time was allotted for questions. If the cross-country athletes agreed to participate in the study, each signed the consent document and the focus group was conducted. Coaches arranged the meeting place for the focus groups. The focus groups took place on the campus of the students' institution and in all cases, took place in an athletic building, in either a classroom or meeting room. The focus group sessions lasted from thirty-five

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to sixty minutes each. The size of the focus groups ranged from 5-8 participants in each group. Only one was conducted at each site.

The focus groups were equally represented according to gender and participation was offered to all athletes regardless of age, race, or ability level. Participants in the study represented their athletic team's demographics, as the majority of athletes were American Caucasians.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this study, four focus groups were conducted using video and audio. The audio portion of the data set was transcribed and subsequently coded. Next, I will describe the transcription procedure, then I will describe the coding procedure.

3.4.1 Transcription.

The data from each focus group was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible from the audio and/or video recordings. I completed the transcription after each focus group, which allowed me to become very familiar with the data. In addition to subtracting the 'ums' and 'likes', other irrelevant material was taken out. For example, when athletes talked about a different sport other than cross-country and their experiences with that coach, the data was excluded. Also, specific names of coaches were taken out and replaced with the generic term 'coach.' If athletes talked about irrelevant topics such as, the politics within the athletic coaching profession, that too was removed from the transcription process.

3.4.2 Coding.

Following transcription, coding was used to search for relationships within the text. Auerback and Silverstien (2003) define coding as, " a procedure for organizing the text of the transcripts, and discovering patterns within that organizational structure" (pg. 31). No transcription software was used. Each focus group was coded the same way: the name of the school and gender was written in the header, each participant in the group was given a number and that number was used to represent the words they said in the focus group. The questions I asked were labeled with the letter 'Q' with the question written thereafter, and only verbal

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communication was transcribed. To perform comparison by gender, female data was grouped and analyzed together, separately from male data. Repeating ideas were grouped into more general themes (i.e. training and instruction, personal relationships, feedback, etc.). Themes that represented the transcription content accurately was used while, at the same time, being easily understood and straightforward. During analysis, orphans were included. Including orphans allows for a deeper understanding of the research question because all relevant comments are important regardless of whether or not all participants agreed or if repeating ideas occurred. Narratives, a way of telling participants' stories in their own words, were also used in the coding process (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003) to support themes. They often supported participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions regarding each theme. For example, once the theme training and instruction was developed, particular narratives that best represented the theme was used to describe, play out, or demonstrate the theme in the participants' own words.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

The research question asked was, do female and male cross-country athletes differ in their coaching communication preferences? Results indicated that females and males do differ in certain coach communication preferences, but are also similar in certain coach communication preferences. First I will discuss female results, then I will discuss male results, and finally I will compare the similarities and differences between coach-athlete communication preferences according to gender.

4.1 Female Results

Females indicated that they all talked to their coaches about running often, especially if they did not have a strong interpersonal relationship with their coaches. However, they desired to talk to them about other topics, including academic performance and personal problems. The data seems to suggest, however, that broadening the range of topics outside of talking about running is dependent on

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several factors, the most significant of which is the development of a personal coach-athlete relationship.

Although females desired to have a personal relation with their coaches most often, they also recognized that there were times when a more professional relationship was necessary. Optimally, females desired a coach that could maintain the balance between communicating interpersonally and professionally. Females reported that developing a personal relationship came easier (a) if they knew the coach outside of their sport (i.e. through a friend or family member) and, (b) if they spent a significant amount of time with their coaches outside of regular practice (i.e. traveling or training camp). Other relevant factors included the characteristics of the coach as well as the athlete. In particular, athlete and coach characteristics influenced the content of the coach-athlete conversations. Athlete characteristics included, the maturity of the athlete, how much information that athlete shared about themselves with their coaches, and the athletes' personal comfort with disclosing personal information to their coaches. Conversely, coach characteristics included, personality and maturity level, knowledge of the sport and experience in their field, coaches' encouragement of athletes regarding openness of honesty, and coaches' effectiveness at knowing when to push the athlete athletically and when to not. Females also recognized the importance of feedback and how it can influence the coach-athlete relationship and athletic performance of the athletes. Next, I will discuss these results in more detail, and supporting these general observations with words from the athletes themselves.

4.1.1 Training and Instruction.

- I. All athletes talked to their coaches about training and instruction, however, when a personal relationship between coach and athlete was absent, females reported only talking about this topic with their coaches.
 - a. All females mentioned they talked about this topic often; they had formal meetings to discuss their performances, goals, and competitions, and they have informal conversations about training and instruction usually immediately prior or post practice. Participant

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two reported that she “strictly talked about running and cross-country” with her coach. As previously stated, in some cases, females reported only talking about training and instruction with their coaches if they did not feel comfortable talking about other topics with them. The same athlete reported wanting to talk about more topics with her coach and she thought “it is a bit weird when all you can talk about is running [with your coach] because it can be summed up in thirty seconds”. This demonstrates that some females desire to talk about more topics with their coach other than training and instruction, but in some cases female athletes only felt comfortable talking to them about this topic.

4.1.2 Academics.

- II. Some female athletes reported talking about academics with their coaches, but only if they were having trouble and needed their coaches’ help.
 - a. One athlete reported talking to her coach about academics because she was struggling with a class and she was also having trouble figuring out her academic class schedule. She talked to her coach about her academic problems because she needed assistance from her coach and wanted his/her advice on how to handle the academic problems she was having.

4.1.3 Coach-athlete relationship development: Personal.

- III. When a personal relationship between the coach and athlete are present, females feel comfortable enough to talk to their coaches about personal problems. Having a personal relationship with their coaches was also influenced by the sport of cross-country and influences the quality of workouts during practice.
 - a. Female athletes also reported talking about their personal problems with their coaches, but only if they felt comfortable enough. Some females stated that they talked about personal issues with their coaches because they believed that it affected their running and their

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coach should know. Other females reported talking about personal issues with their coaches because they felt comfortable with their coach, trusted him/her, and needed someone to talk to. Participant ten stated:

i)P10: When I was in high school my senior year, my Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer... and my coach was someone who I could go and talk to about that. And a week later my teammate's Mom relapsed in her breast cancer. And my coach, we had a relationship where I felt comfortable enough to share everything in regard to that. [My coach] knew everything I was going through.

This shows that being comfortable with one's coach plays a big role in whether or not female cross-country athlete felt they can talk to their coach about personal issues and in this case, the athlete felt she could talk to her coach about what was going on in her personal life because the coach allowed her to feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics.

b. The athletes also recognized that the sport itself also plays a role in whether or not athletes develop a personal relationship with their coach and feel comfortable disclosing personal information with their coaches. One athlete argues that the one-on-one interaction that individual athletes have with their coach in the sport of cross-country running can influence how personal their interaction is. For example, participant eight states:

i) P8: Cross-country is definitely more of an individual sport compared to basketball or soccer. So, I feel like that personal relationship is more necessary in a sport like this. Each person is running their own events, they are running their own times. Having a coach recognize this is a big deal... having that more personal one-on-one relationship is more vital.

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From this it is clear that cross-country as a predominately individual sport can play a role in the development of the coach-athlete relationship. Because it is common for individual coach-athlete interaction in the sport of cross-country, having a personal relationship with coaches is important because each athlete may have different goals and may further pursue them differently.

- c. Female athletes also reported that their relationship with their coaches and the degree of comfort talking about personal issues or problems with their coaches influenced the quality of their communication in athletic contexts (i.e. during practice or races). In turn, the quality of communication during practice potentially could influence the quality of their workouts in practice and could, in turn, influence performance on race day. Females also reported that the nature of the coach-athlete relationship influenced the physical element of the sport of cross-country during practice or races. One athlete describes how athletes' races could be positively affected if the coach and athlete had an interpersonal relationship. Participant nine stated that if she had a close relationship with her coach, "[she] is doing [the race] for myself, but [she] am also doing it for the coach". Not only are races immediately influenced, but workouts during practice, which could influence the outcome of races, are also affected by the relationship between the coach and the athlete. Participant ten stated what she thinks would happen in practice if an athlete does not have a personal relationship with their coach:

i) P10: You end up doing something you don't want to, or shouldn't be doing and you end up being injured because of it. Or you aren't being honest... my coach is going to be mad at me for running too fast so I am going to lie and say I ran [a certain] time, or the reverse of that, the coach is going to be mad because I ran too slow. [The coach-athlete] relationship truly affects how much you tell them, this hurts or doesn't hurt, or I ran it this way or I didn't.

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This demonstrates that if the coach and athlete do not have a trusting interpersonal relationship, the athlete may feel inclined to lie to their coaches because they do not feel comfortable telling the truth or they are afraid of the coaches' reactions.

4.1.4 Coach-athlete relationship development: Professional.

- IV. Female cross-country athletes also prefer to develop a professional relationship with their coaches.
 - a. Participant two stated explicitly that coaches “have to be professional”. Athletes expressed various definitions of being professional, including, coaches need to react appropriately when problems arose and need to react as an authority figure when athletes sought advice for their athletic and non-athletic related problems. Finally, even if the coach and athlete had a friendly and personal relationship, athletes suggested coaches still need to look professional in order to portray their authority to their athletes and onlookers.

4.1.5 Balance between personal and professional.

- V. Females strongly suggested coaches create a balance between being personal and professional, and that one of these components is not enough for coaching communication effectiveness. Females wanted this balance to also correspond to how the coach and athlete communicate; females wanted coaches that were able to communicate to them as friends would, but also as authority figures would. They recognized that if this balance was not maintained, there would be negative consequences for the coach-athlete relationship.
 - a. Female athletes expressed their desires to maintain a personal relationship with their coach and they also suggested that coaches maintain a professional aura by acting and looking professional. Participant seven expressed this desire by stating, “friends can talk, but there is still a way that if you are friendly with your coach and it is

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a friendly relationship certain things still have certain boundaries”.

One athlete continues on this idea of setting certain boundaries.

Participant six describes these boundaries:

i) P6: A line is drawn [by the coach] and [the athlete] need[s] to know where that line is. No needs to be no... there needs to be a line, and it needs to be understood by the athlete. And certain things, this is acceptable and this is not acceptable... there is some times where [the coach] need[s] to discipline, and [the coach] need[s] to [have] authority, but at the same time [the coach] can have time for fun.

This demonstrates that optimally, the female athletes believe that coaches need to have a balance between being personal with their athletes and being professional. They stated that coaches need to be able to draw the line between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and further that the athlete also needs to understand where this line is so they can act appropriately. According to these females, coaches should attempt to get to know their athletes on a personal level, getting to know them outside of their sport assists in this process, and coaches need to also remain professional; they need to act appropriately and mature in particular situations and they also need to dress more professionally than their athletes.

b. The female cross-country athletes also preferred coaches that communicated to them like one of their friends would, while at the same time communicating as an authority figure. Participant seven said that she “saw [her] coach as an authority figure”, while at the same time “he was like a father figure and when [she] talked to him, it was more leaning towards a friend conversation”. Participant nine also communicated to her coach like she would a friend and said that she “could talk to [coaches] on more of a friend level”. One female found that communicating this way allowed her to feel comfortable to call her coach at any time and she knew her coach would be able to

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help her with any personal or athletic problem she might have had.

Similarly, participant eight stated:

- i) I have had coaches where it was like friendship, you could talk to them about whatever, but those coaches knew you so well... if something seemed off, [coach] would just say... are you okay, is everything okay? Having someone notice that much and having being able to talk to them as a friend, and also being able to talk to them as an authority figure as well.

This demonstrates that these female cross country runners wanted a balance between communicating with their coach as friends would, but they also recognized that they wanted their coach to remain as an authority figure and communicate to them also as an authority figure. Although the females stated they enjoyed being friendly with their coaches, they also recognized that risks were involved in becoming and communication like friends would.

- c. Female athletes also reported that there were consequences if coaches were not able to communicate to their athletes in a friendly manner and in an authoritative manner. One athlete mentioned that it is good to be friends with your coach, but sometimes when there is confrontation and the coach wants to be harder on their athletes or when the athletes do something the coach doesn't agree with it "can turn off the whole relationship. There has to be a balance". This athlete points out that coaches need to maintain the balance between communicating in an friendly manner with their athletes and while also communication as an authority figure because if the coach and athlete develop a relationship that strictly reflects a personal relationship it can be difficult for coaches to confront that athlete or be hard on them because the female can take it personally, hindering the coach-athlete relationship.

4.1.6 Strengthening the coach-athlete relationship.

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VI. Females reported that developing and strengthening the personal relationship with their coaches came easy if they knew their coach outside of their sport (i.e. through a friend or family member) or if they had spent a significant amount of time with them outside of cross-country practices (i.e. traveling together to and from a race or training camp).

- a. Many females reported that if their coach knew other family members (i.e. coaching a past sibling prior to coaching them) it was easier to develop a personal relationship with their coach because they had topics to talk about other than their sport. One female stated that she knew her coach on a personal level because he knew her family. Participant eleven stated, “my sister is two years older than me and ran cross-country too, so when I was a junior and senior [the coach] was always asking how my sister was doing...[the coach] knew my parents and my little brother, he knew us”. Similarly, participant three stated that since the coach knew her family, it was easier to develop a personal relationship with her coach, and easier to talk about topics other than running.

- i) P3: I think that [the coach] knowing me in context with my family helped develop a good relationship [with my coach] ... I felt comfortable going to [coach] and telling him like I am having the worst day eve, my Mom did this, my Sister did this, and I felt like I could do that because he knew my background and knew me better.

For females, knowing their coaches outside of the athlete context helped strengthen their relationship with their coaches.

- b. Another opportunity for the coach to get to know their athletes better, and the athletes to get to know their coach better is when they travel for athletic related reasons, such as going to a race outside of town or

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attending a training camp pre-season. Participant four stated that by traveling with coaches the athletes gets “to know [their coach] on a more personal level”, making it easier to talk to them about various topics, even running. Another female athlete demonstrates that spending time with their coach outside of practice allows them to get to know their coach better. Participant eight believes:

- i) P8: Travel plays a role... you see the coach in a different light so you have to become more of a family when you do that, [the coaches] are more of a role model and guide you along, tell you what you are doing and give you room assignments. Then you are in the vans or the cars for a long period of time and jokes come out and you hear more personal stories. I feel the things you talk about [when traveling] get talked about and open up for things to get talked about later on.

Another female also expressed this same idea; spending time with their coach outside of the sport makes them more comfortable with them, allowing them to develop a more personal relationship with them, which encourages both parties to talk to each other more about personal problems or issues. Participant ten stated that by knowing her coach outside of her sport she would “interact with [the coach] a lot differently because of the basis at which I knew [the coach] and how often I would see [the coach]. [Coach] would be more of a Mom to our team... there was more to relate upon, and that relationship totally changed what you felt comfortable saying, on and off the field”. These female athletes have demonstrated that by developing a personal relationship with their coach it allows them to talk about additional topics (i.e. personal issues) other than training and instruction (i.e. running). The athletes stated that if the coach makes an effort to get to know them on a personal level, such as by interacting and getting to know their families, and by spending time

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with them outside of practice, it would make it easier to develop a personal relationship with their coaches.

4.1.7 Athlete characteristics.

VII. Athlete characteristics also play a role in strengthening the coach athlete relationship.

- a. Females recognized that they have to be mature to develop a good working relationship with their coaches. Essentially, both the athlete and the coach need to act responsible, dress appropriately, and deal with conflict in a professional manner. Although the athlete demands a lot from their coach, they also recognize that the coach-athlete relationship is a two-way street; both groups of individuals need to work at the relationship. Participant nine recognized this and stated, “the coach is a person themselves and [its important] to ask them how they are doing and care about them... and recognize that maybe she or he is having a bad day...you have to open up to them as they do to you”. Consequently, female athletes recognize that they too are responsible for developing and building the coach-athlete relationship.
- b. Females also believed that it was their responsibility to also share personal information with their coaches so that coaches too would feel comfortable sharing similar information about themselves. For example, participant five stated, “if you showed emotion in front of [coach], like if you were upset about something, he showed that he cared for us, not only as his runner, but as a person”. This data demonstrates that athletes recognize that they too can attempt to deepen their relationship with their coaches.
- c. Although several athletes reported that they felt comfortable talking to their coach about personal problems, some athletes reported not feeling comfortable regardless of whether or not the coach was fulfilling their coach-athlete preferences. The athletes that did feel

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comfortable talking about personal problems reported that they only felt comfortable talking to certain coaches because those coaches had certain characteristics (i.e. maturity, have running and coaching experience) allowed them to feel comfortable. Only some of their past coaches had these characteristics; therefore, these females reported not feeling comfortable talking to about personal issues and topics to some of their coaches. Females also recognized that the coach is not solely responsible for whether or not athletes feel comfortable talking to their coach, but the athlete also influences this relationship. Certain athletes do not feel comfortable talking to their coach about various topics, even if the coach implements all the suggested tactics mentioned previously. For example, participant six reports:

i) P6: I don't like to talk to my coach about personal things that are doing on in my life... I wasn't one to share a lot of things with my coach, so I don't even know if my high school coach who I had to four years knew about the things that were going on in my life, unless they were affecting my performance. Like if I was having a bad day I would tell them if it affected my running, but otherwise, if I was having a bad day and it wasn't affecting my running at all, I didn't tell them. I didn't feel like I needed to. So, it wasn't like [the coach] was uncomfortable person to be around, I just kept some things personal.

This female demonstrates that although some females prefer to disclose personal information with their coaches, not all females feel personally comfortable doing this, even if the coach themselves perform the necessary characteristics that encourage female athletes to discuss personal information with them.

4.1.8 Coach characteristics

VIII. Coach characteristics also influenced the discussions between coach and athlete. Females reported that their coaches personality and maturity level,

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cross-country knowledge and experience, how much the coaches encourage their athletes to be open and honest, and if the coach knew when to athletically push vs. hold back their athletes affected how comfortable they felt talking to their coaches about topic other their running.

- a. One of the prerequisites that encourage female cross-country runners to feel comfortable talking with their coach about topics other than training and instruction (running) is dependent on the coaches' personality. One female explicitly stated that talking to a coach about personal issues "depends a lot on the personality type, it depends on the person". Similarly, participant seven stated:

i) P7: I think it is dependent on who the coach is. With my high school coach... it was not only a coaching relationship... he is almost a father figure. I would talk to him about things outside of running, like personal issues, health issues. Where I have had coaches where I can only talk to them about running, or an injury, so I really think it depends on who the coach is and the way they choose to interact with you".

- b. Females also reported that maturity level of the coach also plays a large role in whether or not they felt comfortable sharing personal information with them. A proper maturity level for the coaches age allowed female cross-country runners to trust their coach more and feel more confident that coaches will understand them and assist them more accurately with their problems. Participant nine expresses her thoughts on the role that coach maturity plays in whether on not she felt comfortable talking to her coaches about personal issues:

i) P9: I think the maturity level [of the coach] plays a big role. Like if you have a coach that is more older or more experienced, they just carry themselves with more maturity... you feel you can talk to [coaches] about more important issues, and you feel like you aren't being judged, or [what you say] isn't going to be told to someone else...if you have a coach that is not so mature, then

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things can get to be misconstrued or told to people that don't really need to know, and I think that affects [the athlete].

For these female athletes, talking about personal issues with their coach was dependent on certain coach characteristics; the coach needed to have a certain personality and the coach needed to display a maturity that reflected their age and authority.

- c. Female athletes also reported that their coaches' athletic knowledge and their coaching and running experience also influenced their relationship with their coach. Females stated that their coaches' coaching experience was important because they believed it allowed the coaches to handle the athletes' athletic and personal issues more effectively. Participant four stressed her opinion that the coach also needs running experience in order to effectively communicate to athletes on training and instruction and other topics such as personal issues. She states that:
 - i) P4: If the coach has had the experience of running, ran in high-school, ran in college, they know the different aspects of it, what works and what doesn't work. But if you are having a coach that doesn't have that running experience, they don't know it first hand and they are teaching something they haven't experienced. And that makes it a lot more difficult for the athlete.

For female athletes, it was important for their coach to have to coaching a running experience because they believed it allowed the coach to better understand what the athletes were going through both physically and emotionally in their sport because the athletes felt like the coach could relate to any problems they had more fully and in turn, react appropriately.

- d. Female reported that coaches should make athletes feel like they can be open and honest with coaches during workouts. Athletes stated that it is especially important for the coaches to be open to their

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athletes and coaches and encourage their athletes prior to the workout to let them know if something is wrong with them so that the coach can tailor the workout for the specific athletes that are having trouble. Although the athletes stated that the coach needs to initiate this trust during practice and workouts, they also recognized that as athletes they also play a role in this trust relationship during practice and workouts. They thought it was important for the athlete to be honest with their coach, especially if they are in pain or feel they will harm themselves further if they continue practicing.

- e. Females also stated that sometimes they need their coach to not only stop them during practice in times where they think the athlete might hurt themselves, but that it is important for the coach to notice the times where the athlete needs encouragement and needs to be pushed during practice. Participant seven stated:

- i) P7: Sometimes you get tired in a workout and you just feel like you can't finish and sometimes that coach just needs to have that relationship to know that you can do this, this isn't going to hurt you anymore, this is going to help you and this is just a roadblock that you need to push through. And if the coach doesn't have the relationship with their athletes to know that, often times ... [coaches] can become complacent with the fact that oh [the athletes] are not okay with this, then the athlete misses out on the last little bit of the workout that they actually needed.

This demonstrates that if female cross-country runners have a personal relationship with their coach, the coach is more capable of knowing when to push their athletes during practice and when to have them back off. The athlete can benefit from developing a personal relationship with their coaches because they will be pushed hard when appropriate and they will be told to back off when appropriate, preventing potential injuries or setback.

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4.1.9 Feedback

IX. Female cross-country athletes also stated their preference for immediate and accurate feedback, especially following workouts and races. Participant one stated, “feedback is good, even if the coach is disappointed, [coach should] give some sort of feedback”. Females stated they wanted feedback from their coaches because they sought approval and they wanted to be acknowledged, even if they had a disappointing race. Participant seven expresses this concept:

- i) P7: No matter how much we try to avoid it, all of us seek approval in some way or another. And you can get that from your coach... If you can get [the coaches] approval that you tried hard, your effort was there and you are motivated, and you can get that in more of a personal verbal communication... that can mean so much more. That can improve your performance by knowing that someone thinks you are trying and want you to succeed. I think those conversations and that type of feedback you don't get if you don't have a deep relationship with your coach.

This female demonstrates that having a personal relationship with your coach can also affect the type, accuracy, and time of the feedback the athlete gets after workouts and races. These athletes showed that they do want feedback, regardless of their athletic outcome, and it can also have an affect on the athlete's athletic performance in practice and in competition.

For females, a personal relationship with their coaches was strong desired. Having this personal relationship was beneficial because it allowed for greater frequency of communication between female athletes and communication, and it allowed for coaches and athletes to talk about more personal topics. However, females stressed the importance of also communicating to their coaches in a more professional manner during certain, more critical times. Moreover, females also reported certain coach and athlete characteristics that would assist in the coach-athlete relationship development that would allow parties to communicate more

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effectively. Next, I will discuss male's preferences for coach communication characteristics.

4.2 Male Results

Males indicated that they talked to their coaches about running often, talking to them about their own running as well as other professional elite runners' training and competitions or the more 'serious' topics related to their sport. However, the data suggests that males wanted to talk and joke around about less serious topics. However, certain coach characteristics influence whether or not males actual talk about less serious topics with their coaches. Unlike females, males desired to establish first and foremost a professional a) team atmosphere and b) relationship with their coaches. Despite this, males also recognized a need for a more relaxed and personal environment once the professional atmosphere was established.

In short, since developing a personal relationship usually take time, and since college athletes usually have their coaches for only four years, coaches can try to get to know their athletes better and develop a personal relationship quickly if they a) know their athletes outside of the sport and b) spend a significant amount of time with athletes outside of their sport. Recognizing the need for both a professional and personal relationship with their coaches, males wanted coaches to effectively balance both roles.

Males also desired certain coach characteristics. Males wanted coaches to a) have a certain personality and, b) to have genuine interest in the athletes' well-being. Males also expressed the large role that trust plays in the coach-athlete relationship. They believed that a) the athlete should trust their coaches and, b) coaches should trust their athletes. However, once the athletes and coaches have fully invested their trust in the other party and if training or competition is still not going well, males argued that there should be room for negotiation about how to make athletic performance better. Feedback also played a large role for males. In fact, it was so important that if males did not receive feedback from their coaches, they suggested that athletes initiate discussion with their coaches to obtain it.

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4.2.1 Training and instruction.

- I. Training and Instruction - Men reported talking about their own training and instruction (running) as well as other runners' running with their coaches.
 - a. Men talked about their own running and their desire to compete at a high level, but they also wanted to talk about those already running at a high level professionally and competing in World Championship races. One athlete had a coach that used to be on a World Championship team and they talked about the coaches' experience on the team and what she learned from it that could potentially assist him in upcoming races and to further into his running career. Participant eight also enjoyed talking to their coach about "national running and World Championships...and about people that are really good at running", and that he talked to his coach "about any athlete...world records...and getting to a higher level". Participant eight also expressed that it was "always nice to talk to someone about what is higher or bigger than you and what you want to achieve. It is a way to talk about goals without actually saying my goal is to run [a certain time]... talking about people that are faster". This demonstrates that some males not only wanted to talk about their own running in order to improve, but they wanted to talk about other runners that were running at a higher and more competitive level than they were currently at. Perhaps, as one athlete mentioned, talking to his coach about other runners was a way for males to talk to their coaches about their own personal athletic goals, without explicitly stating their goals are similar to those that are some of the best in the world.

4.2.2 Academics.

- II. Academics - Males only talked about academics with their coaches if they were struggling academically.
 - a) Males reported talking to their coaches about their own academic problems. Participant seven stated, "last quarter I wasn't doing so well in school, so I would talk to [coach] about that, just where I was coming

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from and [coach] has had some similar experiences, and it was nice to know you have someone to talk to [about academics]”. This athlete used his coach to help him talk to teachers and advisors regarding his classes and grades. Although a strong athletic academic advisement program usually exists in college and university athletic departments, the coach can help the athlete get in touch with the necessary people that can provide needed tutors or other academic assistance.

4.2.3 Coach-athlete relationship development: Professional.

- III. Primary – Males reported they wanted to talk to their coaches professional, and they wanted their coach and athletic atmosphere to be professional.
- a. Males expressed the topics they talked to their coaches in college were generally more of a serious nature and more often related to running than in high-school. Males wanted a coach that would set a serious tone and would talk about running in a serious light. Male athletes used the word serious in such a way that it expressed their desire to remain professional and goal-oriented. Participant ten mentioned that because he is in college “you want to be more serious. I don’t want people on the team joking around like you would in high-school...I don’t want my coach to be joking around, I want it to be all serious, go to school and run”.
 - b. The coaches also need to act more professional at the college/university level than at the high-school level. Participant nine expressed this by stating, “When I came to college, I was expecting serious business. I feel like ... as the level [of competition] goes up, like at a D1 school, you have to have the seriousness backed with the training, you are competing at a high level, we are all so serious”. Participant one mentioned that since he was in college, the coach-athlete relationship was more professional, and coaches acted and carried themselves in a professional manner and professionalism in the sport occurs “even at division three, you have to see it like that, you can’t see it as fun or recreation, I am going to get PE [physical education] or college credit. At the college level you need to

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have that work ethic, and if coaches don't treat it as a workplace, you aren't going to work". Another male also expressed that not only is the serious component present in their athletic atmosphere, but they prefer a coach to act more serious towards them. Participant nine expressed this by stating, "at this level, if I had a choice I would definitely prefer someone that is more serious rather than joking around all the time".

- c. The coach also needs to manage the team in a more professional manner. Participant eight thinks that it might be easier for the coach to manage the team if there is a more serious atmosphere because being more serious "almost demands respect... to be successful at this time, you need to be serious most of the time". Males also expressed their concern for coaches to establishing a serious tone immediately. Participant nine mentioned, "if [coaches] act serious... you can show your athletes a business type program. It makes your athletes think you know what you are talking about". He also thought that the coach needs to first act serious with their athletes before they let loose and joke around because then athletes will respect their coaches more and there will be more respect for the athletic program. This data has demonstrated that having a serious team, coach, and sport atmosphere is important to them and they believe that at a college level it is necessary in order to athletically succeed.

4.2.4 Coach-athlete relationship development: Personal

- IV. Males recognized that there is also a personal or fun component in the relationship between coach and athlete.
 - a. Males desired a personal relationship to come about once a more serious relationship has been established. Participant six stated that once a serious tone or atmosphere is established, there should be time for joking around and letting loose, and there is a time to "lighten up" or "open up". Males expressed that there are certain times to be profession (i.e. during practice) and certain times to joke around (i.e.

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after practice). Males wanted to be able to joke with their coaches because it would allow them to feel more comfortable and they believed being comfortable allowed them to perform better athletically.

- b. Like females, males too reported that they wanted a coach that was concerned about their personal well-being and cared for them outside of their sport. One male agreed that the coach needs to be serious, but also recognized there is more to just being serious and having a serious relationship. Participant nine stated, “you need to have a serious coach, but I feel like if that is all you have, if you don’t have a coach that cares ... about things other than running, like school, then you lose a lot of the personal relationship, and that is really important”. Participant three recognized that if the relationship is too serious “you can’t have a conversation with them... this is really detrimental to your career. If you can’t connect with [coach] at all, I don’t think you can run well under them. I think you are missing an aspect of your training”. This aspect, as the men described, is key to improving their athletic performance. Obtaining this extra aspect of training could occur, as participant five stated, if “a coach knows you, cares for you, and wants you do to well, rather than just running well for the team”. He “feels like [coaches] have to be serious but they have to... care for their athletes in order to be successful”. Not only does a personal coach-athlete relationship influence training, but according to another athlete, the relationship also influences races. Participant four stated that, Personally, “you come to the point when you are out there racing and it isn’t just for yourself, [it is for] your coaches as well”. Participant five suggested that:

- i) P5: When you run for someone you don’t know, and run for someone you do know, you are going to run a lot better for someone you do know. When there is someone that is your friend, and what

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you do reflects upon them, you want to do well for them because they are your friend and you don't want them to look bad, so you want to do your best, so they look like they are doing their best. When you have the relationship with the [coach] you understand, they are doing this for a reason, and you do the workout the way you want you to do the workout because you know their ideas and that is when you improve the most.

- c. Although males athletes expressed their desire to get to know their coaches on a more personal level. Like females, males also recognized that the coach should set appropriate boundaries, but males also recognized that there are certain things that are acceptable to talk about and certain things that are not acceptable to talk about. They called this distinction "a line" and athletes and coaches both "knew where the line was, when it was time to do our work and when it was our time to joke around". Participant two further explained this "line" by stating "there are certain things you talk to certain people about and there are certain things you don't talk to certain people about, and you know when it is time to be professional and do your work, and when it is time to say a couple of joke sand relax". This demonstrates that both females and males recognize that the development of a personal coach-athlete relationship can benefit the athlete; males believe they will benefit athletically, and female believe they will benefit interpersonally.

4.2.5 Balance between personal and professional.

- V. Males recognized that optimally, coaches should have the ability to switch from being professional to being personal/fun.
 - a. Males prefer a coach that has the ability to act serious in certain situations and be able to joke around in others. Participant seven stated, "you can't be strict all the time, you also have to have the ability to throw in a joke or something". One male reported that he

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had a coach that had the ability to share jokes with their athletes, but when a more serious tone was required, the coach also had the ability to be more serious with their athletes. Participant eleven reflected on all of his past coaches and stated:

- i) P11: The main thing with all of my coaches is that I had a fun relationship with my coaches, but when it is time to get serious, it is very easy to get serious. It was all there, I could mess around, when you need to buckle down you buckle down, and you are okay with that and they are okay with that.

This demonstrates that although males heavily emphasize they would prefer a coach to be serious the majority of time, they also stated that there is a time for a more relaxed atmosphere where jokes are allowed and encouraged and that there certain times when a more serious atmosphere was preferred and when a more relaxing atmosphere was preferred.

4.2.6 Strengthening the coach-athlete relationship

VI. Men reported that joking or having less serious conversations came easier if the athlete knew the coach outside of the sport of cross-country or if they spent a significant amount of time with their coaches outside of practice.

- a. Men reported that knowing their coach outside of their sport allowed them to feel more comfortable talking to them about various topics. Participant nine reported that because “my coach [was also] my friend’s Mom, I would go to his house sometimes and my coach would be there and [my friend and I] would just do goofy things”.

Participant seven stated:

- i) Knowing my [high-school] coach outside of running made it so that, we kinda already had a relationship before we have a coach-athlete relationship, so obviously there were times where it was really serious but you could goof around with [coach]. Not knowing my [college] coach, not having a prior relationship, it is different, there isn’t as much [of a]

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personal relationship... it is more of a serious business type relationship.

- a. Males also reported that spending time with their coach outside of their sport allowed them to be more comfortable talking to them about various topics. Another athlete mentioned that when the team has pre-race dinners together with their coaches, the athletes got to know their coach personally because they spent time with them outside of practice, which still maintaining the coach-athlete relationship. This demonstrates that as an athlete is able to know their coach outside of the sport of cross-country they feel comfortable enough with them that they can joke around at times and also be serious about the sport at other times. In addition to knowing your coach outside of the sport, males also reported that spending time outside of practice with their coaches allowed them to see their coaches in a different way and allowed them to feel more comfortable with them. Males also talked about camp (going away with the team prior to the season to train in a different environment) and how it influenced their coach-athlete relationship. Males mentioned that at camp, they were able to joke around with their teammates and coaches, rather than being serious about the upcoming season.

4.2.7 Athlete characteristics

- VII. Like females, males athletes recognized that they themselves play a role in developing the coach-athlete relationship. However, males differed from females in the role they thought they played. Males believed that they should completely trust their coaches training methods while respecting the coaches' decisions.
 - a. Males athletes expressed that they thought athletes should 'buy-in' or trust their coaches training method regardless of their past coaches training or their current success. Males also expressed they wanted their coach to tell them what to do without questioning their training or coaching ability.

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Participant four stated, “you want coaches to tell you what to do, it is nice to have some guidance”. Participant one stated:

i) P1: The whole trust thing, I think athletes are put into a position where they have to trust their coaches, like if you don't buy into their program you fail as an athlete, you can't be successful as an athlete if you don't trust your coach. Once the coach breaks that trust in a way it is over. You can't have a coach if you break the trust of your athletes. For any coach, I think that is the most important thing. Honestly, if you are a coach and you don't know what you are doing, but if your athletes trust you, you are doing something right at least. Maintaining that level of trust is really important.

Participant one also stated:

ii) You have to believe that [coach] knows what he [or she] is going and [coach] knows how to make you a better athlete, and if you are out there second-guessing, then you are hurting yourself and hurting your team. There is no way that I could be a successful athlete or our team could be successful if I didn't believe what my coach was saying. That is the whole thing with trust, like if I was following [coach] to a tee and not getting better, that a different thing, but as an athlete, a responsible athlete, I can't not follow what he is doing

In this sense, males thought it was important that they can trust their coaches to give them the proper direction and that males should not question the coaches' decisions. Without questioning the coaches' guidance, males stated that athletes have to commit themselves to the training they have been given and they have to, as participant eight stated, “think it is going to work. You have to give it a chance, and you have to get used to it”. They called this commitment “buying in” to the coaches training and trusting the coach that is correct by giving

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the coach and their training a chance to work before it is questioned by the athletes.

- b. Males reported that athletes should respect their coaches, even if the coach and athlete do not always get along, the athlete should respect the coach, especially around the rest of the team. Participant nine reported,

i) P9: There are some people that don't respect the coach as much as they should. Some people their personalities don't match with the coach and they talk behind [the coaches'] back and don't respect [the coaches] and sometimes it comes out at practice and stuff. The coach needs to address that.

Males believe that even if athletes do not respect their coaches, coaches need to demand respect from their athletes by not letting any athlete disrespect them, especially in a team setting. Similar to this, another male talked about his team experiences with coach disrespect and how it should be non-existent. Participant ten said:

i) P10: There has been direct disrespect even in team meetings, for no other reason than the fact that they don't like them. It isn't wise or good for the team because other people think they can do what they want, that needs to be squashed. A lot of people have separated the personal and business and they might not like [the coach] as a coach, but they do what they need to do on the track. Whereas some people don't necessarily like them as a person and they let it affect everything else. I feel that is not how it should be done, you should respect your coach, you don't have to like them or be buddy-buddy with them but at least you should be able to separate those two things and get those two things separated, if they need to be separated. We are all here to run well, you can't let your relationship with someone affect your four years here athletically.

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Males feel athletes should respect their coaches and coaches need to make sure that if athletes do not respect them, coaches should manage this conflict and stop the disrespect immediately. Participant five mentioned:

- i) P5: I also feel like the coach really need to I know some people come from high school and ran really well and some people expect to come here and be the best right away so the coach needs to recognize that, and be more assertive. I haven't had any direct experiences with teammates with stuff like that. I feel like it is a coach's job to keep the team together in a way, if there is one person that thinks they are better than everyone, they need to drop them back down to earth. I feel like there is a team in itself without the coach and there is a team with the coach, and I feel like people need to respect each other and if they don't the coach needs to step in.

4.2.8 Coach characteristics.

VIII. Like females, males desired coaches to have certain characteristics. Males wanted coaches to have a certain personality, in particular, they wanted them to be enthusiastic about the sport of cross-country, have personal interest in the athletes' well-being, be open to negotiation about the athletes' training in particular situations, and to also trust their athletes.

Coaches' Personality.

- a. Male comfort with the coach and feeling comfortable enough to joke around with their coaches depended on the coaches' personality. Males reported that enthusiasm was a desirable coach characteristic that allowed them to feel comfortable. Participant eight stated a past coach was "enthusiastic about track and running in general, it was easy to have a conversation with [the coach] about track, and it lead to other conversations that were about sports. She was really

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enthusiastic and she really cared a lot about you, she cared a lot about everyone, and not just the variety athletes”. This athlete reported that to him coaches that were enthusiastic about running and cared for the athlete were coach qualities that allowed him to feel comfortable talking to his past coach. Participant nine also mentioned that “personality really has a lot to do [with feeling comfortable], [coach] was really enthusiastic so it was really easy to go and talk to [coach] if you had problems with school or running and you could just go and talk”. The coaches personality plays a big role in whether or not the athlete feels comfortable to not only talk about running with their coach but also other topic, issues, or concerns.

Personal Interest in Athletes' Well Being.

- b. Males also reported that they felt most comfortable with coaches that had the athletes' best interest in mind, regardless of athletic ability. Participant four reported:
 - i) P4: you need to show concern and interest in every one of your teammates, everyone on your team. I have seen where coaches payed more attention to the varsity athletes, and set aside the JV athletes, they are on the team, but he doesn't treat them the same. In order to be a successful coach, you need to have a trusting relationship with everyone on the team.

Males reported they wanted a coach to treat everyone equal. Treating every athlete equal allowed the males the feel more comfortable with their coach, and created a trusting relationship because the males knew the coaches truly cared about their athletes when they gave equal attention to all athletes, rather than just the high-performance athletes.

Open to Negotiation.

- c. Males reported that they wanted coaches to be open to negotiate

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about their training schedule if they were not athletically performing well. After the athlete has spent a significant amount of time 'buying in' to the coaches training and trusting in the coaches' ability, if the athletic training is not working, the males wanted room to negotiate with their coaches. Participant nine stated "I feel that initially you need to buy into [their coaches training], if it works for you great, but if it doesn't you need to go and talk to your coaches about it. If day one you are already questioning everything and you are talking behind the coaches' back, you aren't going to be that good [at running]". However, participant eleven believe that if you work hard and trust the coaches' training and it does not seem to be working and "if you are going to go in [coaches office] and say like hey this isn't working for me, I feel like your coach should be open enough". Although the males wanted the freedom to talk to their coaches if they do not think the coaches training is working, how they approaches the coach and when they approach the coach regarding this issue was also reported as being important. Participant seven suggested not going to the coach and mentioning how much he was not trusting or enjoying the current training, but instead schedule a long meeting with the coaches and sit down and talk about all of the possibilities of why the training was not working for them and offer suggestions of things they think might work.

Trust Their Athletes.

- d. Males believed that coaches need to trust their athletes. Males reported that since the athlete has trusted in the coach and their training, when a problem does occur (i.e. athletic performance is not improving) and the athlete decides to talk to the coach about it, the coach should trust the athlete as well, and trust that the athlete believes certain training is not working for them, coaches should trust their athletes' suggestions and listen for the athletes' suggestions on

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ways in which they think their athletic performance could improve. Participant three reported, “coaches also have to trust their athletes as well. You tell them that the training or whatever or if your body is not responding well, it isn’t the right way for you, [coaches] have to trust that you know your body well, [coach] has to respond to that and take it into consideration, it is your body and [coach] doesn’t know what is really going on”. A trusting relationship has to work both ways; the athlete first has to trust their coach and that they have an invested interest in them as an athlete, and the coach has to trust the athlete that they are doing everything they can and when something does not work the athlete is being honest.

From this it is clear that although males suggest athletes to trust in their coach, they suggested that if it turns out the training does not seem to be working, then there should be room to negotiate with their coach and come up with alternative solutions that may work for particular athletes.

4.2.9 Feedback

- IX. Feedback – Males reported that they wanted coaches to give feedback regarding their race performances.
 - a. Men desired immediate, accurate, and detailed feedback from their coaches, especially after races. Participant four stated the he preferred feedback to be:
 - i) P4: detailed, honest feedback, but maybe not right after the race because there is too much emotion, whether you have a good race or a bad race, you are in the moment. If you have a good race, you are really excited, if [the coach] tries to talk and give you feedback, you aren’t really going to be paying attention. Same thing, if you have a bad race and you are really frustrated, you won’t really listen. I would like to talk to them after I have cooled off, it could be the same day, but not immediately after the race, after I have had time for me to think

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about the race, and settle down from that, then that's a good time. It could be the same day or the next day.

Males wanted coaches to talk to them before the meet was over when the race is fresh in their minds. Participant six believed that feedback gives "closure at the end of the day, before I go home and have to go to sleep, I like to talk about it, to close it and talk about what we can do differently, or if coach was disappointed and not have to worry about it".

- b. Athletes thought that it was the responsibility of the coach to give immediate feedback after races. Participant three even said "you should never have to wait around to talk to your coach". Meaning, that coaches should immediately come to their athletes and give them feedback after their races, rather than athletes having to find their coaches and talk to them. Also, another male reflected on his past race and how he obtained feedback from this coach. Participant three reported:
 - ii) P3: I didn't know if I should go to her and talk to her or not [after the race], I eventually ended up going to her, it did happen a couple of days later, but it could have happened right after, I feel like something was lost a couple of days later. , And I feel like [the coach] should come and talk to me, that is just how I feel especially after race, there isn't very many people to talk to in that situation.

In this case, this male desired to obtain immediate feedback from his coach after the race, and he also mentioned that if feedback was obtained in a quicker fashion, the feedback would have been stronger and would have made more of an impact.

- e. Males recognized that even if the coach does not have the desirable personality that encourages athletes to talk to them, it is

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important to talk to your coach anyways. Participant eleven stated, “sometimes it may not seem like [coach] wants to talk to you, they may not be that enthusiastic, but you just have to sit down with them”. Males saw that coach-athlete communication was very important regardless of whether or not that athlete felt comfortable talking to their coaches and sometimes that athlete has “to be the instigator for talking” to coaches.

Unlike females, males strongly preferred a professional relationship with their coaches, and occasionally preferred a personal relationship during certain times. Males described certain coach characteristics that strengthened the coach-athlete relationship. These included: coaches demanding respect from their athletes while at the same time caring for the athletes’ personal well-being. For males, trust played a large role in the coach-athlete relationship; males believed that athletes should trust their coaches, and that coaches should trust their athletes. Next, I will compare female and male results, specifically emphasizing their different preferences for coach communication behaviors.

4.3 Comparison of Female and Male Results

Female and male respondents reported similar preferences in terms of (a) academics, (b) strengthening the coach-athlete relationship, and (c) feedback. Both genders reported talking to their coaches about academics, but only if they were having trouble with them and needed the coaches’ advice on how to handle their situation. Both females and males utilized their coaches to help them overcome their academic problems by directing them to the proper resources (i.e connecting athletes with athletic department academic advisors). Both females and males also reported that interpersonal communication (sharing personal information or joking around) with their coaches came easier if they knew their coach outside of their sport if they spent a significant amount of time with them outside of practice. In all

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cases, athletes reported how knowing their coach outside of their sport or spending time with them outside of practice allowed them to get to know their coach better and in turn, strengthened their relationship. A stronger relationship with coaches created higher levels of trust for both the coach and the athlete as well as a foundation to talk about personal topics or topics outside of running. And finally, both females and males reported the importance of immediate and accurate feedback after they have finished an athletic event, either in practice or in a race. Both genders wanted to talk to their coaches to get their thoughts and opinions on their performance, and both also wanted to their coach to come to them after their performance as opposed to the athlete having to find the coach.

There were however, some differences between male and female athlete and the results suggest that males and female differ in their preferences, specifically in terms of (a) training and instruction, (b) primary and secondary coach-athlete relationships, (c) athlete characteristics, and (d) coach characteristics, in which men and women have different explanations.

4.3.1 Training and instruction.

- I. Women and men both reported talking to their coaches about training and instruction (running).
 - a. Women reported talking to their coaches about this topic, especially if they did not have a close interpersonal relationship with them or did not feel comfortable talking to them about any other topic. Whereas, men differed from women on how they talked about training and instruction. Men were more likely to talk to their coach about other professional, world-class runners and their training and racing schedule. Men reported that by talking to coaches about other runners training and racing, it was a way for them to casually talk about their own personal goals with their coaches without explicitly stating them.

4.3.2 Coach-athlete relationship development: Personal and Professional

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- I. Females and males differ in their primary or foundational communication preference and their secondary or subsequent communication preference.
 - a. Women prefer to first develop an interpersonal relationship with their coaches where they talk about personal topics and then they prefer to communicate in a more professional manner in certain situations. Whereas, males wanted to first develop a professional relationship with their coaches and then they prefer to communicate in a personal manner in certain situations. Females reported that in certain situations they wanted a coach to be professional, otherwise they preferred a more personal relationship with their coaches. Although males first wanted to establish professionalism on their team, they also recognized that there were times when it was appropriate to joke around and not be as serious.

4.3.3 Athlete characteristics

- III. Females and males also differed in beliefs about the role of the athletes' characteristics in the coach-athlete relationship.
 - a. Females reported that the athletes play a role in the coach-athlete relationship and how much information gets talked about. Females mentioned that not all athletes feel comfortable talking to their coaches about personal issues, even if the coaches perform all of their communication preferences. Females reported that they also play a role in the strength of the coach-athlete personal relationship if it exists. Whereas, males had a different perspective than females on the role they believed the athlete plays in the coach-athlete relationship. Males suggested that athletes should blindly trust their coaches' training program without questioning their coaches' ability. Males reported that trusting their coaches should come before any personal relationship is established and the coach-athlete relationship (good or bad) should not influence the athletic component of the sport.

4.3.4 Coach characteristics.

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IV. Females and males differed in their perception of the role that the coach plays in the coach-athlete relationship.

- a. Females wanted coaches that were knowledgeable and experienced in the sport of cross-country, mature both in how coaches acted and how they dressed. They wanted coaches to be personable with their athletes and in certain situations to occasionally be professional. Females also wanted coaches that had personal running experience and coaching experience. They believed these characteristics allowed the coaches to relate more to the athletes' own experiences.
- b. Whereas, males wanted their coaches to demand respect from their athletes, to be enthusiastic about the sport of cross-country, and they wanted to coaches that were able to establish a personal relationship with their athletes and occasionally be personable with them. Males strongly emphasized trusting their coaches knowledge and experience and 'buying in' to their coach training. To males, 'buying in' or believing in the coaches training program is essential for success; males reported that if athletes wanted to improve they had to believe that their coach knows how to improve athletes' athletic abilities.

4.4 Female Athlete Suggestions for Coaches

I. Although female athletes have dictated the kinds of attributes, techniques, and characteristics they prefer from their coaches, they also gave suggestions on ways in which coaches could incorporate the athlete preferences into their everyday practices.

4.4.1 Meetings.

- a. Participant three suggested that every athlete should meet with his or her coach every week for about five to ten minutes at a time. She recognized that this could potentially be very time consuming for the coaching staff, but it could also be very helpful. The athlete would get

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the chance to talk to their coach about any topic that is concerning them during that week and meeting weekly could encourage a more personal coach-athlete relationship.

4.4.2 Aligning goals.

- b. Participant eleven stated that it was important for her and her coach to have the same individual and team athletic goals. Aligning goals was really important to her because she felt like she would be able to push harder in practice and her coach would be able to encourage her appropriately.

4.4.3 Treat all athletes the same.

- c. Participant nine recognized that it was important for her coach to treat all athletes the same regardless of gender or ability. She thought that each athlete should be recognized for his or her effort, rather than just for ability. Not only should the coach treat all of the individual athletes the same but if the coach is coaching two teams (male and female) then the coach should also treat both of their teams equally as well.

4.4.4 Sincerity.

- d. Participant six stated that a coach should be sincere to their athletes and that being sincere was “the biggest thing”, and should be given the most importance. She continued talking about sincerity by stating, “you can’t fake it, you know when it is being faked. If [a coach wants] to be interested in my personal life or personal communication... it isn’t going to get you anywhere unless it’s sincere”. Although these female cross-country runners mentioned they desired a coach whom they could disclose personal information to, in order to feel comfortable talking to them about various topics, this particular female athlete recognized that coaches cannot pretend to be

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interested in their athletes' personal life, but they have to be sincere about it.

4.4.5 Consistency.

- e. Participant seven stated coaches should try to be and react with consistency when their athletes communicate information to them. If coaches are consistent athletes can know "how [coaches] handle certain situations, no matter what the situation is". Coaches can be consistent by trying to react to similar situations in a similar fashion. For instance, if a high ability and lower ability athlete needed to stop during practice for whatever reason, the coach needs to react in a similar fashion regardless of gender and ability, or regardless of the state of mind the coach is in.

4.5 Male Suggestions for Coaches

- I. Males gave suggestions on how coaches could incorporate their preferences into their everyday practice.

4.5.1 Meetings.

- a. Having meetings were important to males, participant eleven mentioned this importance of one-on-one meetings by stating:
 - i) P11: One on one meeting are good. We have one on one meetings here; that sometimes they are all about running and think maybe they should be more of a mix. Some people are different than me and they just want the serious aspect, I think communication is a big team; you need to meet pretty frequently so you connect if you like your coach, you know about them and they know how they want to train you.

4.5.2 Pre-season training camp.

- b. Participant ten suggested the team attend a pre-season training camp. He mentioned:
 - i) P10: I like camp, just going away with the team; I think that is a really good part, just more team activities

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or things like that. IT is usually just at the beginning, and not really after, just more team activities can get you to know your teammates and your coaches.

4.5.3 Treat all athletes the same.

- c. Males suggested that coaches should make “everyone feel important, not matter how good or bad they are, as long as they are trying hard. It isn’t like who is trying harder or who is running faster, if everyone is trying hard, then success will come in”.

Participant suggested that coaches:

- i) P6: cannot demand respect, they have to conduct themselves, communication in non-verbal ways that earn respect. You can’t say because I am the coach, you have to listen to me, or look at all the track titles I won so you should trust me. Your credentials don’t mean anything unless your clientele trust you. As far a coach-athlete communication goes, a lot of the communication that takes place is non-verbal, its not the things [coaches] say, it is the workouts he writes, or the way he acts towards you. The way he talks to you as well.

Participant seven suggested:

- ii) P7: no matter how fast or how slow, every runner should be equal. The minute someone else starts holding someone else back, that is when you need to consider positions on the team. Like if you are a back influence, or that time comes when you aren’t working as hard as everyone else any coach should view all of their athletes just as valuable. When you think about it, as a coach, you have a program, and your program is your product and your athletes are your clientele. Slow or fast, if they are buying into your program and show just as much interest.

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4.5.4 Invest in athletes.

- d. Males wanted to know that coaches were emotionally invested in their athletes. Participant three suggested that coaches, “emotionally invest in my performance. When I am running, I think about how much I have worked but also how much I want to succeed for my coach. That is really hard to do in college”. Participant five agreed and stated he wanted coaches to, “show investment in athletes. If you don’t invest mentally, emotionally, and physically in your athletes, they aren’t going to want to do well for you. If you aren’t investing in your and you aren’t investing in them, they could care less”.

Chapter 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate coaching communication preferences from the perspective of both male and female cross-country athletes. Preferences were examined because research has demonstrated that when athlete’s preferences match their perceptions of leadership behavior, athlete satisfaction will occur (Chelladurai, 1984; Reimer & Chelladurai, 1995; Sherman, Fuller & Speed, 2000; Terry & Howe, 1984). Preferences were found asking athletes questions regarding what they talked to their past coaches about, and how they talked to their past coaches, and whether or not they preferred their coach-athlete experienced communication behaviors. Each focus group interview was separated by gender and the data suggests that some athletes’ preferences were distinct by sex and other preferences were shared regardless of whether the athlete was female or male. Next, I will discuss the implications of my findings, some limitations of my work, and what future researchers should do next.

5.1 Implications

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There are four implications associated with my work. Specifically, this data suggests important behaviors that coaches and athletes might engage in to improve the coach-athlete relationship, these include, a) training and instruction, b) academic guidance, c) the development of a personal and professional relationship, and d) constructive feedback.

5.1.1 Training and instruction.

Females and males reported talking to their coaches about training and instruction although for different reasons. Specifically, females reported talking to their coaches about running or training, especially if they did not have a close interpersonal relationship with their coaches or did not feel comfortable talking to them about more personal topics. However, males reported not just talking about their own training and instruction (running), but that of professional, world-class runners. Because of these conversations, it allowed them to learn from others' training and it allowed them to discuss implicitly the goals to their own coaches. This result is consistent with past research that found that from the perspective of athletes successful coaches employed training and instruction behaviors (Jowett & Cockrill, 2003) and athletes' satisfaction increased when training and instruction behavior was perceived (Andrews, 2009; Chelladurai, 1984; Reimer & Chelladurai, 1995; Schliesman, 1987, and Sherman, Fuller & Speed, 2000). Practically speaking, for coaches knowledgeable about the sport of cross-country, talking about training and instruction behaviors is likely to come easy, however, it is important to note that the majority of athletes prefer to talk about additional topics other than running with their coaches.

5.1.2 Academics.

Females and males both reported talking to their coaches about academics, but only if they were having trouble with their grades and needed the coaches' advice or assistance. Specifically, coaches often were able to lead the athletes towards the proper resources and guiding them in the correct direction (i.e. connecting athletes with academic advisors). As a coach, being familiar with the academic athletic resources available can be important for some athletes who may

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seek academic related advice. Arguably, this is especially important at the collegiate level because student-athletes are often juggling the roles of being a high-performance athlete while still performing the roles of a student and if coaches are able to directly or indirectly assist their athletes academically, they may be more likely to be able to juggle these two demanding roles more effectively.

5.1.3 Coach-athlete relationship development: Personal and professional.

Although reporting varying degrees, males and female both reported preferring a personal relationship with their coaches. Females recognized that coaches need to establish a personal and professional relationship, and both the coach and athlete need to know the boundary or defining line between when it is appropriate to communicate interpersonally and when it is appropriate to communicate in a more professional manner. Bristow (2007) suggests that since females tend to merge their personal world into their athletic world, they might require greater emotional support from their coaches than their male peers. For females and coaches to maintain a personal, but also professional relationship with their coaches, they need to develop an appropriate friendly relationship. Also, it is critical that the coach has the ability to switch from personal to professional easily.

Males also desired to have a coach that was able to switch from professional communication to interpersonal or personal communication easily and effectively. However, unlike females, males desired a coach that communicated in a professional manner most often and foremost, and communicated in an interpersonal manner (talking about personal information) occasionally. Although males reported initially wanting to establish a professional relationship with their coaches, they recognized the importance of developing a more personal relationship with their coaches. Males wanted to know that their coaches cared for their personal-well being, and not just as a runner.

Both genders recognized the importance of developing a personal relationship with their coaches because it allowed for better and more accurate communication both interpersonally and professionally. Similarly, Chelladurai (1984) found that those athletes (male and female) that perceived their coach to

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offer social support were more satisfied with their coaches' communication behavior. Other scholars found similar finding; Riemer and Chelladurai (1995) found that as social support increased, satisfaction increased in football players, and Beam, Serwarthka, and Wilson (2004) found that male and female individual sport athletes preferred coaches to provide social support behaviors. Barnett, Smoll and Smith (1992) also found that coaches that were considered effective from the perspective of the athlete focused their verbal and non-verbal (i.e. showing they care for the athletes' outside of their sport) communication on athlete as well as non-athletic athlete endeavors. However, research found in the present study is not consistent with Sherman (2000) who found that Australian team sport athletes of both genders do not prefer social support behaviors.

These results indicate that coaches may have to communicate differently to males than females, especially initially in the coach-athlete relationship. Since females desire a personal relationship with their coaches in order to disclose personal information to them, it is important that coaches work on establishing this relationship so that the athlete feels comfortable enough to talk to them regarding personal issues that could potentially hinder their athletic performance. Conversely, coaches need to first establish a more professional or business type relationship with their male athletes because males reported that establishing this type of relationship sets the atmosphere or tone and personal relationships can build off of this.

5.1.5 Strengthening coach-athlete communication.

Interestingly, both females and males reported that interpersonal communication (sharing personal information or joking around) with their coaches came easier if they knew their coach outside of their sport (i.e. knowing their coach because other friends or family members knew them), or if they spent a significant amount of time with them outside of practice (i.e. traveling with their coaches at races or spending time with them at pre-season training camp). Both genders reported that getting to know their coach better allowed athletes to get to know their coach better and in turn, strengthened their personal relationship. A stronger

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relationship created higher levels of trust for both the coach and the athlete and created a foundation to talk about personal topics or topics outside of running. These findings are consistent with Burke (1997) who found that athletes across a range of sports (i.e. football, basketball, track and field) preferred coaches that establish a trusting relationship with their athletes. Establishing a trusting relationship where athletes feel confident the information they tell their coaches remains confidential, allows the athletes to feel confident in their training because they trust that their coach acts according to their best interest of their athletes, and it also allows athletes to trust that the information they share with their coaches will not be shared to anyone else. In contrast however, if coaches' break their athletes' trust, it can be hard for athletes to trust their coaches and the training advice they are giving.

Thus, the development of a personal relationship with athletes is preferred by both and males and females and furthermore, this personal relationship is developed by coaches and athletes spending time outside of practice with each other. In short, coaches should make an effort to get to know their athletes outside of the sport they share.

5.1.7 Athlete characteristics.

Donohue, Miller, Crammer, Cross and Covassin (2007) found that student athletes were less satisfied or happy with their coach-athlete relationship when compared to relationships with friends and family. Although many factors could influence how satisfied athletes are with their coach-athlete relationship, it is possible that athletes do not work on their coach-athlete relationship as they do other relationships, especially familiar ties. In other words, the coach-athlete relationship has a predisposition to a hierarchical relationship (i.e. the athlete is "under" the coach). The athlete is working for the coach (which is different from the parent-child relationship) and the athlete is dependent on the coach for knowledge and personal athletic performance. However, as mentioned before, some athletes' prefer a personal relationship with their coaches and having this type of relationship means that both parties must work on it, rather than athletes solely

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relying on the coach to build relationships. Perhaps, a strong and more satisfying relationship can occur between the coach and athlete if both parties worked to develop the relationship.

Interestingly, athletes in the present study recognized that as athletes they also are responsible for the effectiveness and strength of the coach-athlete relationship. Females reported that they should be mature and try to be comfortable talking to their coaches, and suggested that athletes should sincerely talk to their coaches about the coaches' lives and males believed athletes needed to respect their coaches and blindly trust or buy-in to their coaches' training program. These athletes have recognized that it is not only up to the coach to build the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes must play a role as well.

The female athletes recognized that the sport of cross-country itself also influences the coach-athlete relationship. Athletes mentioned that the dominant individual aspect of the sport renders itself to a more personal coach-athlete relationship because athletes need to communicate one-on-one with their coaches regarding personal goals. Because of this, females mentioned that the nature of the sport itself influences the communication that takes place between the coach and athlete and therefore also influenced their relationship. This conclusion is supported by various studies done on athletes' preference for coaches' leadership behavior found that preferences differ according to whether or not the athletes compete individually or as a team (Beam, Serwathka, & Wilson, 2004; Chelladurai, 1984; Terry, 1984; Terry & Howe, 1984).

Although Beam, Serwarth, and Wilson (2004), Terry and Howe (1984), Terry (1984) found no difference between genders in certain coaching characteristic preferences, they did not differ preferences according to whether or not the sport was considered predominately independent or interdependent. They reported that independent sport athletes prefer more democratic coaching behaviors (Beam, Serwarth, & Wilson, 2004; Terry and Howe, 1984; and Terry 1984), social support (Beam, Serwarthka & Wilson, 2004; Terry, 1984) positive feedback, (Beam, Serwarthka & Wilson, 2004 and Chelladurai, 1984) and situation

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consideration (Beam, Serwarthka & Wilson, 2004). All of these findings were supported in the current study. Although coaches wanting to implement athletes' preferences can learn from the implications discussed, but they also need to take into consideration the limitations of the present study.

5.1.6 The coach.

In the present study, both male and female athletes recognized that communication, interpersonal or otherwise, with their coaches depended greatly on whom the coach was and whether or not athletes felt comfortable talking to their coaches. Female and male athletes both recognized that the type or strength of the communication that existed, or whether or not athletes either felt comfortable to share personal information (females) or joke around (males) depends on certain coach characteristics.

Female athletes felt more comfortable sharing personal information with their coaches if their coaches were mature and had a particular personality. Although athletes' were unable to specifically describe their desired personality, they wanted to coach that was mature enough that athletes could speak to them as authority figures, while still maintaining their personal relationship.

Male athletes wanted a coach that was enthusiastic about the sport of cross-country and running in general. Males described sport enthusiasm as being excited about the sport and being happy when their athletes' performance improved regardless of the athletes' ability or running speed. Males also wanted a coach that they could joke around and have fun with, but only if they felt comfortable enough with their coach.

Being comfortable to talk to coaches was a strong determinant in whether or not athletes actually talked to their coaches, regardless of the topic or coach-athlete relationship. In their research, Kenow and Williams (1999) found that when athletes felt more comfortable with their coaches, experienced a decrease in anxiety from their coaches' behavior during competition. Although researchers studied team sport athletes, the concept is still the same; when athletes feel greater comfort

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with their coaches, they stress less about things that are out of their control and they are less likely to withhold information from their coaches because they feel comfortable enough to talk to them about various topics.

5.1.4 Feedback.

Coaches should provide feedback to their athletes because both genders recognized the importance for immediate and accurate feedback. Females and males both reported they desired feedback from their coaches, especially after workouts and races and both genders wanted to talk to their coaches and get their thoughts and opinions on their performance. Both genders also wanted their coach to come to them after their performance rather than the athlete going to their coaches. However, only males recognized that feedback was so important that even if the coach was unable to immediately talk to their athletes after races or workouts, athletes should go to their coaches in order to obtain feedback. Researchers have investigated the importance of feedback following performance, especially when it is paired with questions (Chambers & Vickers, 2006), and when paired with correction (how to make it better) and error (what was incorrect) cues (Tzetzis, Votsis, & Kourtessis, 2008). Thus, it is clear that athletes in the present study recognized the importance of feedback and how it can positively influence not only subsequent athletic performances but also perceptions about coach-athlete communication. Following are some suggestions on how to improve the latter.

5.2 Limitations

There are two limitations that both stem from my position of a novice researcher; focus groups were held on campus either close after or before cross-country practice, and might have been more productive if this was not the case because athletes could have felt that information could perhaps been heard by their coaches, or felt uncomfortable talking about their coaches while still in the premise of the athletic environment.

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I would have also liked to spend more time listening to respondents as a way to encourage even greater social interaction and greater content. Being new to focus groups, I was reluctant to pause too long in early focus groups. If I listened more often, respondents would begin to talk to each other about the topic rather than talking to me.

5.3 Conclusion

Lorimer and Jowett (2010) argue that communication between coach and athlete is crucial for coaches to share knowledge with their athletes about the sport, it sets the tone of the athletic environment, and it influences the interpersonal climate. Coaches are able to use communication to effectively impart athletic knowledge onto their athletes and they also have the ability to communicate in such a way that athletes feel like coaches care for athletes personally. Fulfilling athletes' communication preferences can influence athletic performance and satisfaction in athletes.

According to Chelladurai's (1984) Multidimensional Model of Leadership, it is important for coaches to try to implement their athletes' preferred communication behavior because it positively influences the athletes' satisfaction and in turn positively influences the athletes' performance. In addition to Chelladurai, the athletes in the study also stressed the importance of coaches paying attention to athletes' preferences, regardless of what their preferences were. Although this study showed which preferences these particular respondents preferred, what might be a takeaway from this work is that coaches need to be alert and eager to find out what preferences their athletes have and try to cater their coaching communication preference to their athletes' preferences. Coaches need to pay attention to preferences because for two reasons. Firstly, when coaches are able to match their communication preferences to their athletes' preferred preferences, it can positively improve the athletes' athletic performance, whereas, when coaches are not able to carry out their athletes' preferences, athletic performance can be hindered. Secondly, athletes may be satisfied when they see

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their preferences play out because when they see their coaches display their preferences, it may cause athletes to believe that their coaches care for their personal well-being and care about the process of building athletic performance and satisfying the athletes' preferences rather than just caring about the end result of athletic performance. One athlete said it best when she said, "you can improve your performance by knowing that someone thinks you are trying and want you to succeed".

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. When you talked to any one of your previous coaches, what did you talk about?
 - a. Could you please give a specific example of what you talked about?
 - b. Were you satisfied with that conversation?
 - i. Why or why not?
2. (If respondent was not satisfied) What do you want?
 - a. Why do you want that?
3. Have you every experienced a coach fulfilling this preference? Please describe the experience.
4. How would you envision a coach integrating (their preference) into their current practice?
5. How would you describe the way you and any one of your past coaches have communicated?
6. Can you describe or relate a typical conversation you might have had with him or her?
7. Were you satisfied with the way you communicated?
8. How would you describe the way you and any one of your coaches you have worked with communicate with each other?
9. Please relate or describe how a coach from your past communicated with you.
10. Were you satisfied with the way that your past coaches communicated with you?
 - a. Why or why not?
11. If you could dictate the way you would like a coach to communicate with you, what would you suggest?
 - a. Why?

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