

eBook

The Most Valuable Couplet



Lessons on the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in CrossFit

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The background of the page is a blurred photograph of a gym. In the foreground, a barbell with black weights is visible. One of the weights has the word 'LYCAN' and the number '45' printed on it. The barbell is resting on a light-colored floor. In the background, there are metal racks and other gym equipment, all out of focus.

MODULE 1

A Brief Introduction

CrossFit was designed to challenge our traditional understanding of exercise training and optimize human performance in a novel way. By performing constantly varied, functional movements at high intensity over broad time domains, the programming aims to prepare individuals for the unknown and the unknowable, no matter the context.¹

At the highest level of the sport, CrossFit athletes specialize in not specializing. They can do it all - and well.

However, one knowable element of CrossFit is that you do not do it alone.

In a time when social media is such a pillar of how we communicate and absorb information, we do not have to look far to catch glimpses into the dynamics of coaches and athletes in CrossFit. These posts can offer us some insight into lessons learned or milestones the duo has reached.



Two-time CrossFit Games athlete, Feeroozeh Saghafi, took to Instagram to commemorate moments in her journey, recognizing the role of her coach in the previous six months when the post was made:

“You bring the confidence and fire I was missing as a competitor! And you still find ways to constantly pull the best out of me!! Outside the training walls you’ve become one of our greatest friends and person I trust wholeheartedly. I am so proud of US and what we continue to achieve. I wouldn’t be where I am at without ya, coach!”²

Behind the ups and the downs, the accolades, the banter, and the hard work, what makes this connection so unique?

MODULE 2

Foundations First: What is the coach-athlete relationship?



At its core, the coach-athlete relationship (CAR) is about the bond between the individuals who make up the relationship.³ Like any relationship, it can be complex. Still, we can simplify it by considering two defining features.

Shared Dependence

- ✓ The relationship is mutually important and valued by both individuals
- ✓ Athletes and coaches both need each other to develop and succeed

Feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are integrated

- ✓ Based on their interdependence, athletes' and coaches' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours mutually influence each other



Shared dependence

Just as athletes need coaches to help master muscle-ups, assisting athletes to achieve their goals contributes to a coach's professional development and sense of fulfillment.

To illustrate the **integration of athletes' and coaches' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours**, consider the following example:

An athlete's training results and perception of their progress shape how the coach views the athlete's trajectory toward their goals. This perspective subsequently impacts the programming the coach provides. Conversely, when a coach shows an athlete their belief and confidence in the athlete, it can encourage the athlete to recognize their progress and potentially lead the athlete to feel more empowered to tackle their weaknesses.

In essence, neither the athlete nor the coach is at the heart of the CAR; they both are.³⁻⁵

MODULE 3

Whiteboard Brief: The 3+1 Cs Model



The effectiveness of the CAR is defined by the presence of four key relational dimensions. These four factors can easily be remembered as the 3+1 Cs model of CARs. Let's review the four Cs that *drive* the CAR.³⁻⁶

The 3+1 Cs Model³⁻⁶



Closeness

Feelings

The emotional bond between the coach and the athlete. Some feelings that can gauge closeness are trust, honesty, support, and a general liking of each other.

Thoughts

The intent or desire to maintain the CAR over time. In an effective CAR, both individuals persist in pursuing overarching goals, even amid difficulties, in the short and long term.



Commitment



Complementarity

Behaviours

As the name suggests, both individuals' behaviour should complement each other. This construct considers how cooperative, collaborative, comfortable, and supportive the relationship is.

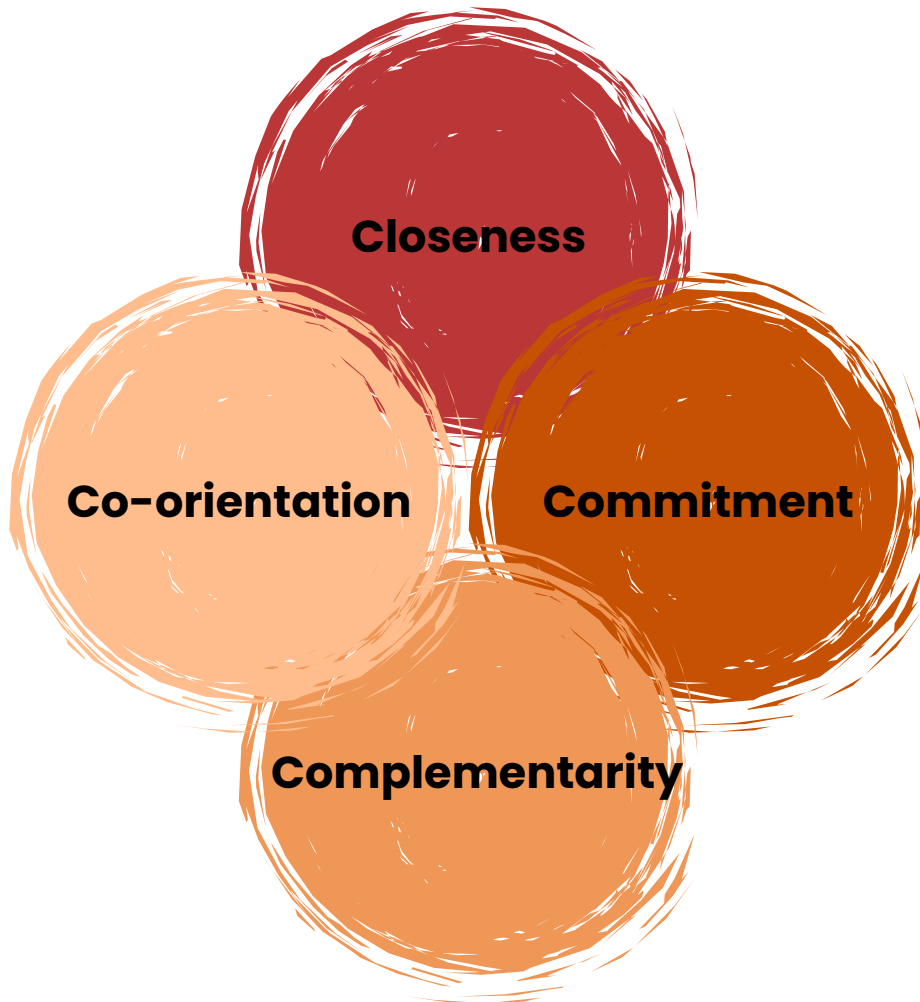
Are we on the same page?

This construct considers shared knowledge, understanding, and perceptions. Your perspective and what you perceive the other person's perspective to be matter. For example, an athlete should have the perspective "I trust my coach," and "My coach trusts me."



Co-orientation

The 3+1 Cs Model³⁻⁶



As with any relationship, the CAR ebbs, flows, and changes over time. Still, those with high levels of **closeness**, **commitment**, **complementarity**, and **co-orientation** tend to have more effective working relationships.

So, what value does an effective CAR bring to athletes?

MODULE 4

The Leaderboard

The Value of the Coach-Athlete Relationship



Coaches and athletes experience more satisfaction with training and performance in CARs characterized by high levels of closeness, commitment and complementarity.⁷

The experience of satisfaction may be especially important for a sport as unpredictable as CrossFit, where an athlete's feelings about their performance may be a more meaningful gauge of a successful outcome. Still, the quality of the CAR has been shown to play a role in fostering athletes' confidence in their team⁸ and cohesiveness (i.e., commitment to and liking of group members),⁹ which also indirectly contributes to athletes' satisfaction and perceptions of performance.

With a growing focus on athlete wellness, it is especially valuable to consider how the CAR can contribute to outcomes beyond performance. Specifically, research on athletes from various sports has shown that the CAR can contribute to athletes' overall well-being.¹⁰ Moreover, CARs characterized by closeness, commitment, complementarity, and a psychologically safe environment (i.e., feeling valued and safe to share thoughts and concerns, ask questions, and make mistakes without being shamed) have been shown to elicit athletes' perception of flourishing (i.e., experiencing positive emotions and relationships, engagement, and meaning).¹¹

Though CrossFit is not an Olympic sport (yet), when interviewed, Olympic coaches and national performance directors have also recognized coaches' pivotal role in supporting athletes' performance and well-being.¹²



Taken together, a high-quality CAR has a meaningful effect on performance and well-being.

Given this, let's consider how to enhance the quality of your CAR to keep *driving* forward.

MODULE 5

Skill Development: Fostering the Coach- Athlete Relationship



Given the interdependent nature of the CAR, both individuals will need to actively contribute to enhancing the quality of the bond. Fortunately, there are many strategies that coaches and athletes can use to collaborate in maintaining and improving **closeness**, **commitment**, and **complementarity** in the CAR.¹³

Keep in mind...

No one knows the relationship you and your athlete have better than the two of you. The tactics you use to foster this relationship should be aligned with what is most appropriate for your current bond, and the context in which the relationship exists.



In what follows, we review one strategy for how coaches may consider fostering closeness, commitment, and complementarity in the CAR.

However, we invite you to reflect on the worksheet in this eBook's appendix to brainstorm strategies that will be most meaningful for your relationship with your athlete.

Let's start with **closeness**.

Fostering Closeness^{3-6, 13}

- ✓ *What:* At the heart of **closeness** is a general liking of one another. As such, consider taking time away from the daily grind of training to get to know each other and establish a more personal connection.
- ✓ *How:* Plan to spend even 20–30 minutes together every one or two weeks doing something outside the gym (for example, going for a coffee or a walk). Use this time to talk about your lives outside of training (to the extent both are comfortable with it). Go into these conversations with openness and the intention to listen. You are encouraged to talk about anything *but* CrossFit!
- ✓ *Why:* This is an opportunity to show athletes they can discuss anything with you. It is a chance to build a stronger emotional bond and trust with your athlete while providing an environment where they can disconnect from training.



Building Commitment^{3-6, 13}

- ✓ *What:* In a **committed** CAR, both individuals intend to continue the relationship in pursuit of relevant goals, no matter the challenge. Spending time defining success with your athlete is essential to building commitment.
- ✓ *How:* Outline goals (short- and long-term), what success throughout the season will look like, and what your role will be. Follow up on these goals! Plan to have a goal-setting conversation before the beginning of the season and intentionally schedule follow-ups on these goals throughout the season. In particular, be sure to have goal-setting conversations before significant events in the season to ensure athletes know what success will look like for them regardless of what the leaderboard says.
- ✓ *Why:* Defining the goals you and your athlete will pursue helps elicit a guiding sense of purpose. To be committed to anything in life, we need to know what we are pursuing and, more importantly, why. These conversations are a great starting point for understanding what matters to the athlete and how they can rely on your CAR to succeed.



Ensuring Complementarity^{3-6, 13}

- ✓ *What:* For the CAR to be **complementary**, the behaviours of one another should be cooperative and create a sense of support. Consider how your behaviours will back up the emotional bond you have with your athlete and reflect your desire to maintain the relationship.
- ✓ *How:* Ask for feedback. Resist the urge to think one approach will work for every athlete. Instead, being open to conversations about what is going well and what can be improved can help bolster the comfort you both feel in the relationship and make collaborating easier. The cadence at which you have these conversations will depend upon your athlete, but at the very least, pausing to reflect after competitions is a good place to start.
- ✓ *Why:* Asking for feedback is a meaningful way to show your care, but how you receive this feedback is equally important. This is a great way to ensure your athlete feels heard and can contribute to how the relationship is shaped and what is prioritized moving forward.





Concluding Remarks

As with any skill in CrossFit, it takes time, attention, and effort to establish a strong CAR. But, just as you smiled when bar muscle-ups finally clicked, you will smile when you reap the rewards of a high-quality CAR, and so will your athlete, whether on the podium or not.

Because it's both of you, as a team.

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Skill Development:

CAR Worksheet

The COMPASS model was developed as a framework for organizing different strategies for enhancing and maintaining the CAR.¹³ Below, each component of the COMPASS model is briefly explained with an example. On the next page, you will find a worksheet where you can brainstorm your own strategies for each dimension of the COMPASS model to foster your CAR.

C

Conflict Management: The proactive strategies taken to clarify expectations and avoid conflict and the reactive strategies for cooperatively responding to conflicts when they undoubtedly occur.

Example: Discussing expectations for programming completion at the beginning of the relationship or the start of the season.

O

Openness: Sharing feelings with each other, including a willingness to talk about anything, even topics or issues beyond CrossFit, and ensuring both know how the other feels.

Example: Being open to a two-way conversation about a personal matter you or your athlete are dealing with.

M

Motivation: Demonstrating a desire to maintain the relationship by putting in effort, motivating each other to continue working together, making interactions fun, and showcasing each other's abilities.

Example: Communicating the skills you have as a coach to ensure the athlete is successful.

P

Positivity: A willingness to adapt one's behaviour to meet the other person's needs, act fairly, and understand events outside CrossFit that may impact the individual.

Example: Changing your coaching style to provide more positive reinforcement to suit the athlete's preferences and ensure the CAR is effective.

A

Advice: A readiness to provide opinions on issues the other person is managing, whether about CrossFit or not, and the openness to give and receive feedback positively and constructively.

Example: Reviewing competition or training results through the lens of improving future performance rather than criticizing previous performance.

S

Support: Demonstrating your commitment to the CAR and offering support on sport-related and personal matters.

Example: Helping an athlete navigate a new competition environment (e.g., assisting in the warm-up area, identifying where medical support is if needed).

S

Social Networks: Spending time socializing with each other one-on-one or with mutual friends, away from the gym.

Example: Travelling to a competition together rather than separately.

Skill Development:

CAR Worksheet

Use the space provided to list strategies that will best serve your CAR. Consider collaborating with your athletes by having them fill out the worksheet as well. Share what tools you have both come up with to nurture your bond and try implementing them gradually. Return to this worksheet as needed to continue nurturing your CAR.

C**Conflict Management****O****Openness****M****Motivation****P****Positivity****A****Advice****S****Support****S****Social Networks**

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