

# Olympics 2024: How dark personality traits may affect relationship between coaches and athletes

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The coach-athlete relationship is key to achieving greatness in elite sports. And at the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the

margins between success and failure will be tiny.

Our [new research](#) offers insights on how the dark triad [personality traits](#) (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy), which tend to be more prevalent among athletes, might damage the [relationship](#) between coach and athlete, affecting their performance.

Studies have shown that athletes with a stronger relationship with their coach [perform better](#). Elite athletes tend to be more [satisfied with their own performance](#) when they have a good relationship with their coach, too. They also report [higher levels of intrinsic motivation for sport](#), where they are motivated by enjoyment and excitement. This kind of motivation is associated with increased persistence and better well-being.

[Coaches](#) and [athletes](#) also report higher personal well-being when their relationship is better.

Personality traits play a powerful role in the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches and athletes are [more committed to each other](#) when they are disciplined, reliable and high in conscientiousness.

[A 2014 study](#) of Chinese coach-athlete relationships found that when coaches and athletes had sociable, talkative and outgoing personality traits, it benefited their relationship. Being irritable, self-conscious or anxious had a negative effect.

[Our research](#) published in 2022 found that elite swimmers and their coaches could identify the role that their own, and their partner's personality traits played in their relationship. We found actual personality traits did not seem to matter as much as an awareness of how the coach's personality affected the relationship.

In some partnerships, the athletes valued similarities in their

personalities, while others felt that their differences helped "balance each other."

The study also found that both the coach and athlete understood that the interpersonal relationship was important for performance.

We've recently expanded our research to explore the role of dark triad personality traits in the coach-athlete relationship. These traits are often thought of negatively due to their association with being ruthless (narcissism), manipulative (Machiavellianism) or lacking empathy (psychopathy).

[Athletes report](#) higher levels of these traits than non-athletes. Studies that include both athlete and coach samples tend to find they have broadly similar levels of dark triad traits.

Athletes competing in individual sports are more likely to report dark triad traits than those in team sports. However, some studies seem to show dark triad traits may affect performance even for [team sports](#) professionals. For instance, a 2022 UK study found [basketball players](#) high in the dark triad traits [performed better in a free-throw task](#) than those with lower levels.

Our new study examined how levels of these traits in both coaches and their athletes were linked to the quality of their relationship. When coaches had higher narcissism, they reported less cooperative behavior towards their athlete. In other words, they may have been less responsive to the needs of their athlete.

The relationship was better for athletes and coaches when they had different levels of narcissism—supporting the adage that "opposites attract." Athlete-coach pairs with mismatched narcissism felt closer to each other, with higher levels of trust.

Athletes high in psychopathy—associated with being ruthless—were less committed to and had less respect for their coach. Coaches high in this trait had lower levels of closeness, commitment and leadership.

Machiavellianism was also linked with relationship quality. Coaches high in this trait—associated with manipulating and exploiting others—reported less cooperative behavior in their relationship. In addition, athletes with high levels of Machiavellianism were less committed, felt more distant and were less willing to do their best for their coach.

Our study shows that while dark triad traits may lead to higher performance in elite sports, they may undermine the quality of the relationship between coach and athlete.

We only looked at this in a snapshot of time. It may be that over time the negative aspects of these traits impede the relationships, which lead to long-term performance. Within the study, coaches and athletes reported broadly similar levels of the dark triad traits to each other.

## **Building strong relationships**

Our research adds [to the understanding](#) of how coaches and athletes can build strong relationships to aid their performance. However, it isn't our view that coaches and athletes with high levels of dark triad traits cannot have relationships that satisfy their needs and lead to high performance.

But we would offer a couple of recommendations.

First, the [personality](#) traits of both coach and athlete should be considered at the beginning of the relationship. For example, pairing an athlete high in narcissism to a [coach](#) with much lower levels of this trait could lead to a positive relationship. They should also seek the support

of a sport psychologist, to help coaches and athletes understand who their partner is and how to get the best out of them.

When you're watching the Olympics this summer, remember there is a team behind the new records and the crushing defeats. As the dark triad research shows, people's relationships with their team can have deep power over their performance.

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