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# **Coach-Athlete Communication within a National Alpine Ski Team**

© Diane Mary Culver

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**I dedicate this thesis to the four generations of my family  
who continue to teach me how to learn.**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of process of communication between coaches and athletes. Considered a critical element of the coaching-learning process, communication has rarely been studied as it occurs in the field and has nearly always been examined from the point of view of the coach. Yet in every model of communication the sender and the receiver are considered equally important thus this study investigated both the coaches' and the athletes' perceptions of the communication process using a qualitative approach. The participants were six female members of a junior national ski team, aged 17 to 19 years old, and their two male coaches. Semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and journals were used to collect information, both in action and retrospectively. The first interviews, conducted just before the beginning of the competitive season, established that both coaches and athletes believed in open, two-way communication. Subsequent observation revealed that despite their philosophy, once the competitive season began, the coaches and athletes had trouble at times interacting according to this philosophy. In an effort to deepen understanding concerning the process of communication it was decided to analyze some of these problem interactions, with the use of a model of communication proposed for coaching. Issues that emerged from the data included; how coaches and athletes in this transitional period between youth sport and mature elite athletics share the roles of initiator and receiver, injury recovery, pressure to perform, power differentials, and the participants views of the importance of a positive atmosphere, hard work, and fun. Practical suggestions for the education of coaches and implications for sport psychology consultants are presented

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**Coach-Athlete Communication within a National Alpine Ski Team**

**Diane M. Culver**

**“It takes two to speak the truth... one to speak and another to hear”.**

**H.D.Thoreau**

**(Nakamura, 1996, p. 103)**

Communication is a social behavior whereby human beings maintain contact with their environment through interactions. A central theme of psychology, communication can be defined as the “transmission and the exchange of information conveying meaning between two or more people” (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981, p. 115-116). Yet, despite the fact that it has been 30 years since we heard Neil Armstrong’s famous words from the moon’s surface, an incredible feat of communication technology, there are still many occasions when individuals do not understand each other. Now recognized as a universal linking process, communication is vital to nearly all human endeavors.

Communication is acknowledged as a critical piece in the puzzle that is the art and science of coaching: “There is probably no single element of coaching more important than communication” (Spink, 1991, p. 37). Coaches need good communication skills in order to give technical and tactical instructions, manage their teams, interact with parents and administrators, and provide psychological support to their athletes. While effective communication is recognized as central to successful coaching, the actual process of communication as it occurs in action, has been rarely studied in athletic settings (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981; Spink, 1991). Bloom (1996) studied expert coaches and found that the ability to communicate effectively was one of their distinguishing characteristics and he noted: “Learning when to communicate with players is an intangible art, a skill that

separates the competent coach from the great one. It takes years to learn to distinguish the best communication style for each player” (p. 165). He noted also that expert coaches recognize the value of listening to their athletes. However, Spink (1991) stated that despite most coaches acknowledging that communication is important, very little information is available to help coaches develop their communication skills.

Furthermore, if it takes two to communicate, as Thoreau said: What about the role of the athlete in the communication process? Athletes also play a critical role in this vital part of the coaching-learning experience. Indeed, Horne and Carron (1985) noted that both athletes and coaches are involved in facilitating or hindering coach-athlete compatibility. A survey of the literature, however, suggests that the athletes are often the forgotten partners in communication studies of coaching. Investigations which include the roles that athletes play as receivers and senders of messages are essential to a full understanding of the coaching-learning process. Clearly, studying the communication process involves looking at both the perspectives of the coaches and the athletes. This study examines the coach-athlete communication process by attempting to view it from the perspectives of both coaches and athletes.

## Review of the Literature

### Coach-Athlete Communication

In the sport domain, past studies have analyzed the communication process in several ways. One such way to observe how coaches communicate was by recording their behaviors while they were in interaction with their athletes. A number of studies, beginning with Tharp and Gallimore’s (1976) observation of celebrated basketball coach John Wooden, analyzed coaching behaviors finding evidence of “instructional”, and

“praise” and “scold” behaviors. This approach led to the development of various systematic observation tools among which the Arizona State University Observation Instrument (ASUOI) by Lacy and Darst (1984) is the most popular.

Trudel and Gilbert (1996) conducted a review of studies on coaches’ behaviors and retrieved 111 documents (master’s theses, doctoral theses, congress proceedings, and articles in refereed journals). Twenty-eight of these were articles published in refereed journals; 16 of these focused on coaches’ behaviors during training, 5 looked at behaviors during competition, and the remaining studies analyzed behaviors both in training and competing contexts.

Regarding the training sessions, Trudel and Côté (1996) summarized coach-athlete communication, from the athlete’s perspective, by using a story of how an athlete might describe his or her experience at the end of a training session. This average young ice hockey player estimated that he or she listened to instructions 6% of the time, practiced the prescribed skills 31% of the time, waited in line 23% of the time, and spent the rest of the time picking up equipment and getting into line. The athlete supposed that the coach was observing him 11% of the session and giving him feedback about 4% of the time, but for more than half of the training period the coach was neither watching nor speaking to him or her.

During competitions, coaches’ behaviors vary considerably from sport to sport. In skiing the coach is situated in one place, viewing only a section of the athlete’s run, whereas in ice hockey the coach is present for the whole game. Trudel, Côté, and Bernard (1996) observed youth ice hockey coaches during games and found that over 50% of the time they were involved in “observation” without communicating, while only

11% of the time was spent on “instructional” behaviors. The rest of the interactions were mainly “organizing”, “directing”, and “stimulating”. When they were engaged in communicating most of the communication was directed at players in action. The researchers also found that these coaches seemed to act as a one-man show, attempting to control all the action, without listening. Another study of youth ice hockey coaches examined one aspect of messages sent by the coach: The pedagogical content interventions, that is the content of a coach’s verbal instructions during actual coaching (Seaborn, Trudel, & Gilbert, 1998). This study used systematic observation and semi-structured interviews to look at: “What” was the content of instruction? “When” was the instruction given? And “How” was the instruction communicated to the players. It was found that the coaches concentrated on team tactics, conducting most of their interventions while the players were in action or in transition, using feedback or instruction to convey the message.

Other studies have asked coaches and athletes what makes an effective coach, through retrospective methods such as interviews and questionnaires ( Bloom, Schinke, & Salmela, 1997; Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Salmela, 1996). A recent example of this type is the Bloom, Schinke and Salmela study in which they interviewed expert basketball coaches and traced how the coaches’ changed their communication styles as they developed through their coaching careers from club coaches to international elite coaches. The results were linked to four stages of coaching development and it was seen how the coaches moved from a more autocratic style with younger athletes to a two-way communication style with elite international athletes.

In order for effective communication to occur, there has to be congruence between the message sent and that which is perceived by the receiver. There has to be a degree of mutual sharing and understanding (Yukelson, 1998). Youth athletes' perceptions of coaches' instructions and behaviors might vary because each participant carries different baggage of past experiences, knowledge, self-efficacy and other beliefs, into the experience. In addition, athletes' perceptions may differ from the intentions of the coach. Both Anshel (1990), and Horne and Carron (1985) reported differences between the perceptions of coaches and athletes of each others' communication. Laker (1993) found in physical education classes that the differences might be greater with messages regarding social and affective issues as opposed to those pertaining to the technical or tactical component of sport. Unfortunately, there are very few studies in sport that present results on social and affective aspects.

### Coaching Women

A search for studies relating to the coaching of women results in a very low yield. Sport is still mainly a man's world, particularly when we look at the world of competitive sports. Also, most of the limited number of books on coaching women were written by and for coaches of American high school and college sports. Moreover, there are more studies concerned with women and the profession of coaching than with the coaching of women.

The American government legislated Title IX in 1972, decreeing that females should have equal opportunities as males in sport. Ironically, this has led to a sharp decrease in the number of women administering and coaching in women's sport programs at colleges in the United States. Acosta and Carpenter (1994) analyzed this data for trends starting

before the passing of Title IX in 1972 and they found that the percent of women's intercollegiate programs administered by women dropped from 90% in 1972 to 17% in 1992. Similarly, the number of women's sports being coached by women has also dropped dramatically, with 76% of all new coaching positions created between 1978 and 1992 were held by men. Knoppers (1994) concludes, "In other words coaching is a male-dominated profession and the skewness of the gender ratio is increasing" (p. 119). This creates problems that go beyond the technical aspects of coaching in the sense that there are very few female role models for women athletes or women coaches. Coaches are viewed as having power, thus young women participating in sports live in a world in which men are perceived as holding the power (Knoppers, 1994). This scenario, at least, somewhat explains the larger number of studies on the subject of women in coaching than those about the coaching of women.

Neal (1978), in the second edition of her text on coaching women, devotes very little space to the psychological aspects of good coaching. In the chapter "Characteristics of a Good Coach", she devotes one page to understanding psychological factors and two sentences to the ability to communicate. Despite this dearth of information, there is evidence that there are important issues specific to coaching women.

In the last decade, there has surfaced a line of research based on the relational health and development of women (Baker-Webber, 1999). The traditional model of development in which the individual strives to become a separate self, is based on the premise that this "separation is a major developmental task for boys because they are raised, for the most part, by female caregivers" (Lenskyj, 1990). The object relation theory, as it is known, states that men need to establish a separate, masculine identity.

The relational model is based on the theory that females seem to follow a pattern of relational development in which the sense of self is primarily developed according to the female's connections with others, and only secondarily concerned with differentiation.

This concept helps explain evidence that women need to have feedback information contextualized, in order for them to connect. For coaches, this means that they need to explain how what they are instructing fits into the big picture (Kilty, 1999). Coaches of women also need to acknowledge the individual athlete and their skills, to focus on the female athlete's strengths, confirming that they believe in the athlete's potential and ability. Due to these differences, it is possible that men coaching women might present some particular challenges. Despite these issues, a review of 2020 articles in five mainstream physical education journals revealed that less than 3% considered gender as a key construct (Chepyator-Thomson, Templeton, Spencer, You, & St. Pierre, 1998).

The difference between males and females can be even more important during adolescence. A meta-analysis of 65 studies involving more than 9000 people to determine gender differences in such factors as personality, moral reasoning, "maturity of thought" and other characteristics throughout adolescence and adulthood found that adolescence is the time of greatest psychological disparity between the sexes (Cohn, 1991). This is due in a large part to the fact that girls mature earlier than boys.

#### Adolescents in Sport: Athletes in Transition to a National Team

Adolescence can be defined as "The period of development between puberty (a biological event) and adulthood (a social event)" (Wade & Tavris, 1993, p.509). The idea that adulthood is a social event implies that acceptance as an adult is a fuzzy issue that depends upon the norms of the sociocultural system within which the adolescent is

operating. In Western society over the last century, the period of accepted adolescence has been extended to up to a decade. One hundred years ago, a 16 year old was widely considered an adult. Today many youths are still dependent well into their mid-twenties and during this extended time they face the psychological challenge of finding their possible selves, making the ride through adolescence a bumpy one for many. How will this affect those adolescents that partake in sport at the elite level?

The age of elite performers varies from sport to sport and can in rare instances fall at the beginning of adolescence (e.g., girl gymnasts), more commonly in the middle of adolescence (e.g., female swimmers, some skiers) and still more frequently at the end of the adolescent period (e.g., most skiers, most team sports, track and field, golf, and most tennis players). Thus in most sports, the transition to the elite will coincide with some period of adolescence.

Despite this, the adolescent age group seems to have been largely neglected in sport-related research (Allen & Howe, 1998). There are not, to our knowledge, longitudinal studies that have looked particularly at the transition, i. e., the adolescent phase in the practice of sport. However there are arguments suggesting that this is a particular and critical moment in the practice of sport. Firstly, drop-out rates are high and adolescents have been identified as a group “at risk” due to their declining participation in physical activity (Sallis & Patrick, 1996). Coaches need to know what adolescents are looking for in their athletic experience. One study of the pre-adolescent and adolescent female ice hockey players found that the social aspect of fun and friendship was a very important influence on participation, and that “conflict from other interests” represented a threat to continued participation (Boyd, Trudel, & Donohue, 1997).

Secondly, the changing role of the coach over this period is worth investigating (Figure 1). As indicated in the study of youth ice hockey coaches (Trudel, Côté, & Bernard; 1996), the role of the coach at this level seems to involve taking control of the learning opportunities. Woodman (1993) said that at the beginning or junior level “the coach’s role is to ensure that the participant is provided with a practice and competition environment that ensures sequential development and mastery of basic skills as well as fun and participation” (p. 3). In regard to young athletes, it seems that coaches tend to control the training environment and the communication process.

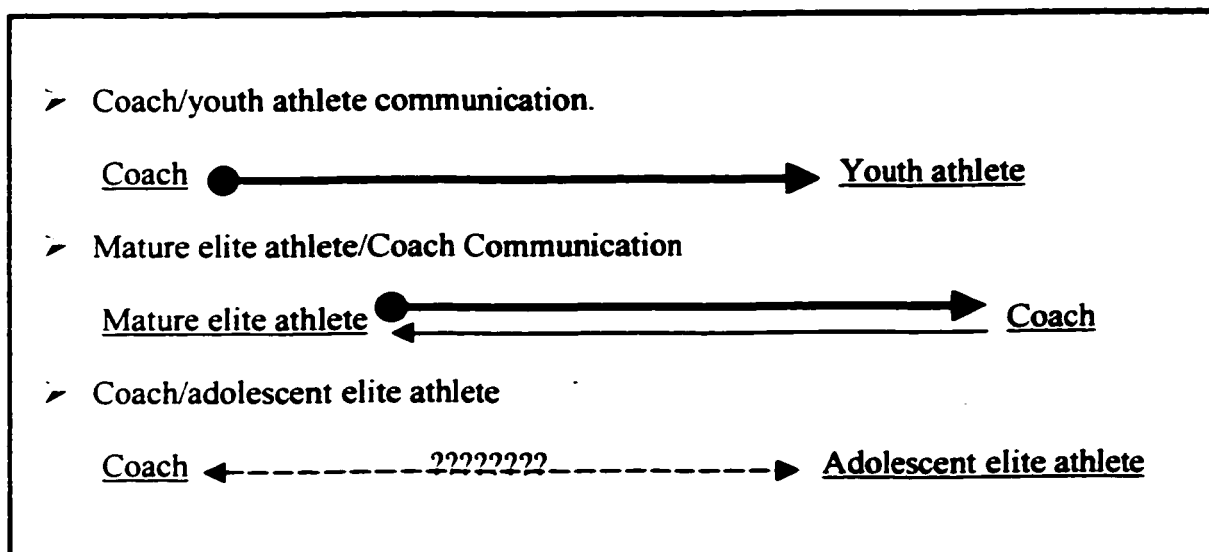


Figure 1: Suggested Flow of Information.

With elite athletes, the coach might have the athletes more involved in their preparation. Many coaches of elite athletes believe that part of the coach’s role is to share theoretical knowledge with the athlete in order to accelerate his or her development. It is suggested that this sharing of information makes athletes more coachable, and “makes communication between athlete and coach much more effective because the athletes have a better understanding of why they are being asked to do certain things in

training” (Woodman, 1993, p. 4). Howe (1993) went further in determining the role of the athletes by saying: “Athletes have shown a desire to be involved in decision making without having the process delegated to them entirely” (p. 41). Howe stated that while as yet untested in the research literature, the athlete’s communication skills are also likely to be important in this process and he recommends investigating assertive behavior and effective listening skills on the part of athletes.

If the flow of information is used as an indication of the roles played by coaches of various levels of athletes, we might see the coach as the initiator of most messages at the youth sport level. At the adult elite level we might expect to see the athlete initiating more messages (Bloom, 1985). It is likely that the flow of information between adolescent elite athletes will be less stable. Due to individual differences in maturity and past experiences, the athletes will be more or less assertive, and more or less skilled at communicating. In addition, coaches may also experience some need to adjust if they are unaccustomed to working with adolescents. This period of transition is one in which we might expect there to be problems in the coach-athlete communication process.

The traditional role of the coach being the dominant actor in this process is challenged by recent work in the fields of education and physical education. Effective communication requires the participation of both communicators, it is a two-way process. The study of interpersonal communication must be dyadic. That is, the emphasis must be on the relationships between the communication components, rather than focusing on one-person characteristics (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981). To fully understand this process researchers need to consider the perspectives of the coaches and the athletes while they are interacting in the natural setting.

### The Communication Process

Regarding the psychology of communication and coaching effectiveness, Fuoss and Troppmann (1981) presented a model for effective communication (Figure 2). They defined a process as a course of action involving a series of changes or events directed towards accomplishing some goal. The specific process is effective communication for coaching, and the goal is the achievement of performance. Since this model will be used to analyze the coach-athlete communication process in this study, the different components of the model are presented and explained.

Communicators: senders and receivers. Both the sender and the receiver are communicators in an effective communication process since the receiver must communicate through feedback to show that the message has been understood. Therefore, both the sender and the receiver are involved in encoding and decoding messages. Effective communication can be hindered by different types of interference during the decoding phase. This potential interference may have internal or external sources relative to the decoder, which could be either environmental noise or other factors exterior to the decoder. Much more complex, interior interference may be a person's thoughts or feelings, which can impair the decoder's ability to skillfully interpret the message as it is transmitted (Spink, 1991). As indicated above, Fuoss and Troppmann (1981) claimed that "Many of the key determinants of communication involve the relationships between source and receiver characteristics" (p. 131). Thus due to the dyadic nature of communication, the relationship between the coach and the athletes is very important.

Context

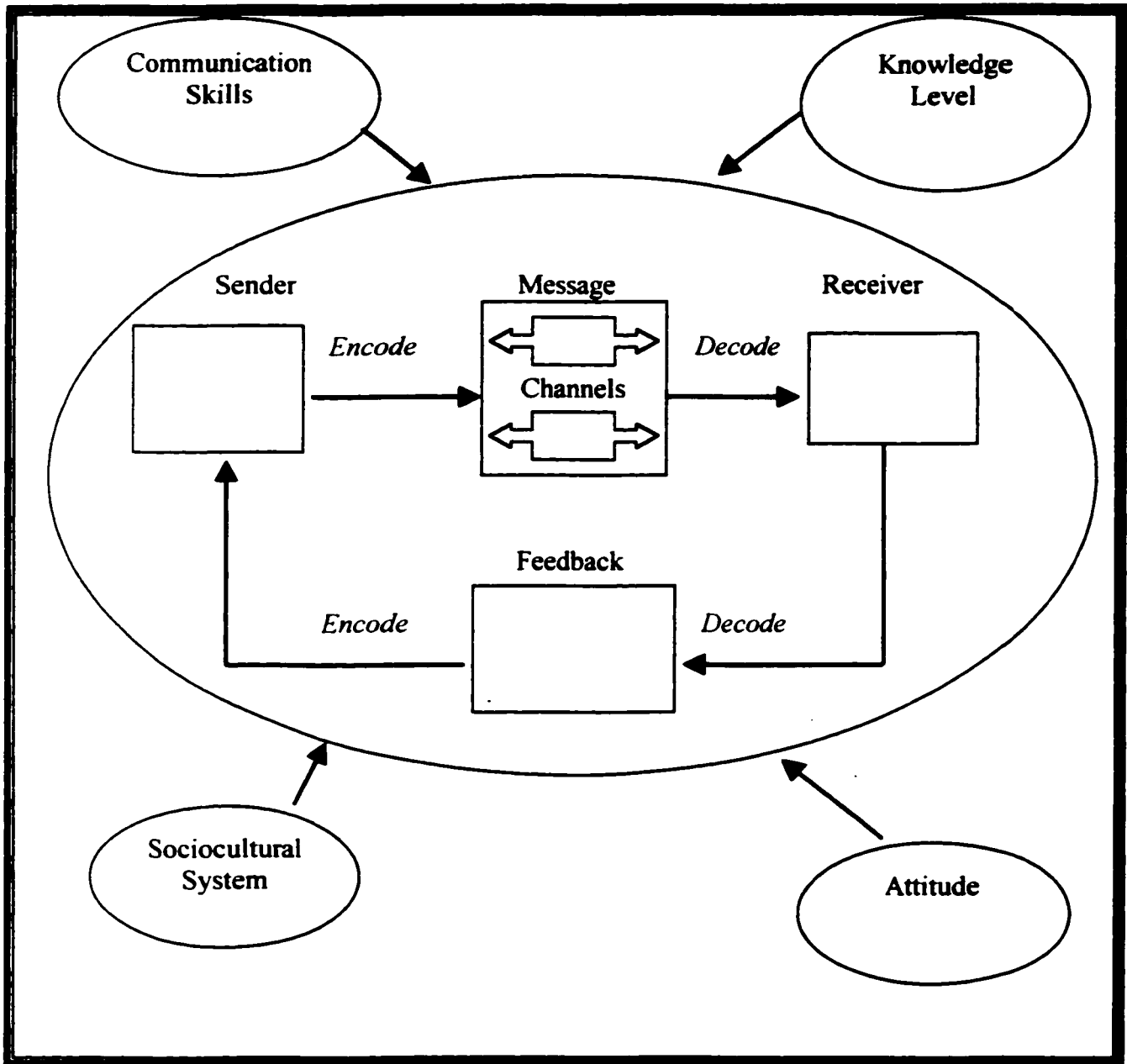


Figure 2: Model of the Two-Way Circular Communication Process

(Adapted from Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981).

**Message.** Three important elements must be considered regarding the actual product of the encoder. The first is the code, or system of symbols used to represent the message. Every code has a set of elements and procedures for putting these together in a manner that the decoder will be able to render meaningful. The second element, the content of the message refers to the material that the sender chooses to include. Finally, the sender also makes decisions regarding the third element, the treatment of the message when selecting the code and the content. For example, a ski coach treats a message in a particular way by selecting the language of communication, whether or not non-verbal cues will be involved, how technical the content will be, and what tone of delivery to use.

**Channel.** The channel used to transmit the message is “a means of access” (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981, p. 134). In effect, a channel is a mode of encoding and decoding messages employing one or more of the five senses. As will be seen, radios are used extensively in the sport of skiing. The use of this channel limits the transmission of messages to the purely verbal dimension.

**Feedback.** Feedback makes it possible for the sender to know if the message was received the way in which it was intended. The reaction of the receiver is the feedback, and this feedback provides the check of effective communication. If the receiver reacts in a way that is incongruent with the intentions or expectations of the sender, the sender must reassess and make decisions regarding the next message. Both parties in the communication process are interdependent since the receiver’s response provides the sender with feedback that subsequently affects the reaction of the original source. An athlete that looks blankly at a coach after the coach has corrected the athlete sends feedback to the coach: The athlete has not understood the coach and the message should

be delivered a second time, using another strategy. In addition to the five components, there are four factors within the communicator, whether sending or receiving, that influence effective communication.

Communication skills. The five verbal communication skills can be broken down into two encoding skills (writing and speaking), two decoding skills (reading and listening), and one skill essential to both encoding and decoding (thought). Coaches often use other forms of encoding skills besides verbal ones such as gesturing and drawing. At times, coaches may not even be aware of the influences of these non-verbal messages. Weaknesses in communication skills can also take different forms. For example, coaches might give a standard motivational pep talk to all their athletes prior to competition, without ever listening to the effects; that is, without checking with the athletes as to the effects of this type of communication.

Attitude. A person's attitude influences communication, whether one is sending or receiving a message. Both one's attitude towards oneself and towards the receiver have an impact. In addition, the communicator's attitudes towards the subject matter also affect the manner in which she or he treats the message. For example, one of the challenges of a snow sport is coping with unfavorable weather conditions. An athlete's attitude towards the weather can have over-riding influence on communication, at times putting a negative slant on the whole process.

Knowledge level. The communicator's knowledge level of the subject matter has an important effect on how the message is construed. As well, it is important that the sender of a message has a good idea of the receiver's knowledge level. For example, if an athlete does not understand certain technical principles, there is no point in the coach

found on these principles. The coach must have a good read of the athlete's level of knowledge and must possess the pedagogical skills to tailor feedback to that level.

Sociocultural system. The well-known expression "No man is an island" holds true for all human communication because of how we are made up: "The identity of an individual is... a social commodity whose value and constitution fluctuates in the reality of the socially lived experience" (Schempp, 1998). Each individual has a collective element of their identity, comprised of characteristics shared with other members of their group (Taylor, 1997). The group, in turn, functions within a sociocultural system. Thus neither sender nor receiver communicates as a free agent. Instead, both will always be influenced by their position in the sociocultural system. Sport behavior, just as all human behavior, does not take place in a value-free vacuum (Krane, 1994). This means that in order for a coach and athlete to communicate effectively, they must understand the cultural context in which they interact. As Fuoss and Troppmann (1981) expressed it: Each must know "the cultural beliefs and values that are dominant for those involved, the forms of behavior deemed acceptable or unacceptable, in short, the operating philosophy" (p. 129). The culture within which the athletes and coaches in this study operate is one that has been in existence for over 50 years. It has become a corporate culture, with obligations to sponsors feeding an objective to perform at world class levels. Younger athletes in the sport look up to the team, and selection to the team is often a primary goal.

### Research Questions

As we have seen, communication is important in coaching and there are some gaps in the literature. There are very few studies that have examined the coach-athlete

communication process in the natural setting. Those that exist have primarily looked at the behavior of coaches. Furthermore, in spite of the evidence that points to important gender differences, particularly during adolescence, there is a lack of studies about the communication process between coaches and adolescent athletes, and particularly between coaches and female athletes.

Thus, the purpose of this research was to better understand the communication process between the coaches and adolescent female athletes of a junior national ski team by exploring certain types of communication problems, and the roles played by the participants. The two principle questions were as follows.

1. What are the perceptions of the coaches and the athletes of an effective communication process at the start of the competitive season?
2. When communication problems arise, what are the influences that limit the effectiveness of the process?

In replying to these questions the roles played by the partners will be discussed in the communication process, the types of messages involved, and how all the components of the communication process interact to arrive at the end product.

## Methods

### Design: Why a Qualitative Case Study?

Martens (1987) suggested, ten years ago, that researchers in sport psychology should use new methods, and “not limit our search for the understanding of human behavior in sport to those things we can study using orthodox science. We should be able to ask any question, raise any problem” (p. 47) and if so doing “we would find greater emphasis on case studies, clinical reports, and other introspective methods of acquiring knowledge.

Also we would expect to see many more field studies in which the investigator integrated his or her tacit knowledge with the behaviors of those observed” (p. 52).

Smith (1988) specifically suggested the case study approach as one that “can provide important insights into processes underlying athletic behavior, and can promote the development of interventions that improve performance and enhance the psychological well-being of participants” ( p. 2). Smith went further stating “the case study strategy is invaluable when the investigator is asking a “how” or “why” question about a set of contemporary events over which he or she had little or no control” (p. 2).

Considering the nature of the research problem which was the desire to study coach-athlete communication, in action, during the competitive season, a case study using qualitative methods was deemed appropriate. The coaches and their athletes were the case, their team being a “bounded system” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). The questions asking how the participants saw ideal communication at the start of the season, and why these ideals were not always realized once the season began, fit Smith’s (1988) suggested use of the case strategy.

The choice to conduct a qualitative study was rooted in several factors. The first consideration was my personal experience as an athlete and a coach which led me to believe that certain types of questions needed to be asked if the process of coach-athlete communication was to be understood in an in-depth sense. Being very familiar with the nature of the context I was acutely aware that it was both varied and fluid. In order to study the process through which athletes and their coaches meet the challenges of communicating required a flexible approach. Creswell (1998) remarked that despite multiple different approaches, which he calls traditions, there is agreement that all

qualitative research does have certain common characteristics: It is undertaken in a natural setting, where the researcher is the instrument of data collection, the data is inductively analyzed, the focus is on the meaning of the participants, and the process described is alive and rich in language. It is worth noting here Creswell's definition of qualitative research, as it describes so well the approach thought most appropriate to address this problem.

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15).

An essential feature of qualitative research is its inductive approach. The effort to better understand a complex problem of human behavior was well-served by this approach. The problem in this case was communication. Explaining how the intent of one person's message was perceived by another person indeed required a holistic approach that took into consideration the many variables that may only have emerged as the analysis proceeded. While some of the information was retrospective, it was only so over a short term; that is, between the researcher's contact times with the participants over a seven-month season. The analysis was grounded in specific issues and events that emerged from the interviews and the interactions of the participants.

### Participants

Two coaches and six female members of the junior national ski team made up the case in this study. Dave (all names are pseudonyms) was the head coach and Charles, Dave's assistant. Both coaches were about 30 years old and had experience competing in this sport. Charles was himself once a member of the junior national team. Dave worked several years at the club level coaching children, and two years as an assistant coach with

the men's national team. At the moment of the study it was his first season as a woman's coach. Charles had nearly always worked with girls or women, following a normal progression starting at the club level with children and working up to the provincial level where he had coached for the three seasons previous to becoming Dave's assistant. Both coaches were bilingual. The team was made up of six women, 17 to 19 years of age. Two of the women had been on the junior national ski team for one or more previous seasons and were coming back from injuries. The other four were experiencing their first year on the team. The athletes came from across Canada, some being anglophones and others francophones. Some of the athletes had had many coaching changes over the years while others had only a few.

#### The Instrument: What this Researcher Brings to the Study

Since the researcher is the research instrument in qualitative inquiry, it is appropriate that I provide some information concerning my background; what personal experiences I bring into the research process. Traditionally this experience has been treated as bias, the effects of which were undesirable. This traditionally led researchers to engage in concerted efforts to minimize these effects. More recently, the place of researcher subjectivity has been debated and several authors have argued that this "experiential data" (Strauss, 1987) should not be ignored. Maxwell (1996) says: "Separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (1996, p. 28). In the field of sport psychology, Martens (1987) lamented the fact that this "tacit knowledge" has no place in the traditional scientific method. He gives the example of sport psychology researchers who also do applied work through which they gain valuable knowledge. This knowledge, he

concludes should be combined with evidence gathered in the field. Thus I present my background not as bias but as a form of “tacit knowledge”. I am following the advice given by Strauss: “Mine your experience, there is potential gold there!” (1987, p. 11).

My experience in this field stretches across all aspects of participation in skiing, an individual sport, from the club to the top international level as an athlete and a coach. In addition, I have been involved in the training of coaches. As an athlete, I experienced frustration with the strategy of the national ski team, especially regarding psychological aspects, and selection issues. As a coach, I was also frustrated by the lack of knowledge in the field and the difficulty of gaining real knowledge. Over time, I learned that I had to do this through individual searching and experience. Many of my frustrations were caused by poor communication. Thus my experiences led me to a desire to improve the conditions that athletes face, especially coach-athlete communication, in an effort to optimize the positive benefits from their sporting life.

The following are some of my assumptions, values, and feelings. They are grounded in my experience, and contribute to the argument of this study. I believe that there is a better way, than the one that I experienced, to address the needs of coaches and athletes. Taking more of an athlete’s perspective will lead to a gain in knowledge regarding communication. It is also my philosophy that the athlete’s well being should be the primary concern of the coach and administration (for a more complete view of my philosophy see my concept map: Appendix A). Considering the Western democratic nature of our society, I also subscribe to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which recommends an autonomy-supportive climate to promote psychologically healthy individuals.

I firmly believe that the development of mental training skills does enhance performance and can help athletes have a more positive experience. However, I feel that this effect will be greater if the athlete's needs are addressed by the program in which they operate. In particular, a better understanding of the complex issue of coach-athlete communication that considers both the view points of the athletes and the coaches will, I believe, enhance both the experiences of those involved and their performance.

#### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data collection phases of this study are outlined in Figure 3. The techniques used were audio taped semi-structured interviews, observation and recorded field notes, and the use of journals. Two interviews were conducted with each participant with the exception of one athlete who was put on injury status indefinitely before the season began. Only one interview was conducted with this participant. In total, 16 days were spent in the field observing training sessions and four competitions. During these times, I stayed with the team, providing me continuous access to the participants and their daily activities. Each athlete and coach was given a journal and asked to keep a note of important incidents in the teaching-learning process to be used as a reminder during the second interviews. In fact, only four of the athletes said they used the journals. Several of the athletes sent some of their entries to me via e-mail. These entries proved to be very rich and provided me with data that was alive and very much "in the moment" of the athletes' experiences.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that one of the pivotal characteristics of the qualitative interview as a data gathering tool is that they are conversations, hence the importance of my background since I am a partner in the conversation. Different than ordinary

conversations, interviews are directed by the interviewer who encourages interviewees to elaborate, give examples, and clarify statements in an effort to get what Geetz (1973) labelled “thick description” of the participants experience.

Period During Season of Data Collection	Pre-competitive Season	Competitive Season		
	End of Off-Season (November)	1/3 into Competitive season (New Year)	Throughout season (October to April)	National Championships (late March)
Methods of Data Collection	-1 <sup>st</sup> interviews -Observation (training)	-Observation (training and competition)	-Journals -E-mail -Telephone contact	-2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews -Observation (training and competition)

Figure 3: Data Collection Phases and Methods.

One of the guiding themes of successful qualitative interviewing is that it requires an understanding of the particular culture (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As indicated in the section on the research instrument, my experiential knowledge of the sub-culture in this case is expansive. This permitted me to by-pass the steps that would be needed to figure out the rules of the sub-culture, but it also presented a challenge to remain truly open to hear what the interviewees were reporting.

Due to the inductive nature of the study, it was our intention to get at the participants' viewpoints without leading them, therefore the precise purpose of the research was not revealed to the participants until the second interview. All participants were initially informed that the study was about the teaching-learning process and that we

were interested in getting the perspectives of both the coaches and athletes. All participants signed a consent form outlining the research purpose and procedures (Appendix B).

The first interviews in this study were semi-structured, that is, I introduced the topic and guided the interview by asking specific questions (see Appendix C). After the first interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, a copy of each participant's interview was given to them with the instructions to check if there was anything that needed to be added or changed. During this time a second observation period took place. Following this the first stage of analysis began. All the first interviews and the field notes were sorted into major themes, using the NUD.IST (QSR, 1997) software program to manage the data. This categorizing or "fracturing" (Strauss, 1987, p. 29) is composed of the sorting of data into broader themes and issues. It has the effect of de-contextualizing the data. Thus at the end of this first stage of the analysis, without having coded all the data, the major themes had been sign-posted (Kelle, 1995). Sign-posts refer to a referential coding function, in which the purpose is not to condense all the information into precise factual coding, but to be sure that there is enough information in the coding to allow an interpretive analysis to follow. These sign-posts presented an overview of the major issues and problems that the coaches and athletes either had experienced or that they might experience.

The effort to understand communication as it occurs in action requires that the issues be examined within the context in which the participants are interacting. Thus the next step of the analysis was contextualizing: Understanding the data in context. That is: "Look for relationships that connect statements and events within a context into a

coherent whole” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 79). This contextualizing step took the categories from the previous step and resituated them within the context, recovering the ties that were lost in the categorizing analysis. Maxwell (1996) said: “The two strategies need one another to provide a well-rounded account” (p. 79).

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended the use of matrices to help in the analysis of data. They say that using matrix displays requires that you think about your research questions and which parts of your data will be needed to answer them; that you review all your information; and that it helps to focus the data in an organized manner. Thus the sign-posting step resulted in four areas of analysis (see Appendix D). Using these as a guide the data was analyzed for interactions and information that supported these areas. The result of this analysis was a series of matrices that established a specific referent, the evidence needed to clarify the interaction or issue, and the likely source of that evidence. These are the matrices were used as the interview guides for the second interviews (Appendix E).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) remarked that many interviews have both more and less structured parts. This was the case in this instance, particularly during the second interviews that were used to fill in gaps in the evidence and clarified certain general themes of the communication between the coaches and the athletes. In the true itinerant manner of qualitative research, the next round of data collection was directed by these first stages of analysis.

The final stage of the analysis involved using the model described above to help explain the process of communication as it was documented in the data. In this stage

specific interactions or situations were analyzed and certain factors that may have caused problems in the communication process were put forward.

### Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as the quality of an investigation that render it noteworthy to audiences. They developed four criteria to be used in place of the traditional criteria which were deemed inappropriate for qualitative inquiry. These criteria were: Credibility and transferability (parallel to internal and external validity), dependability (parallel to reliability) and confirmability (parallel to objectivity). They also recommended various strategies to be used to meet the criteria. Mason (1996) suggested a different approach to demonstrate these issues. Rather than specifying a number of strategies, it was recommended that as the researcher, “you revisit those difficult questions which you asked yourself about linking research questions, methodology and methods, when you designed your research.” (p. 147). It was suggested that you must convince others by showing the logic that permitted you to reach those decisions. I believe that the trustworthiness of this study is the result of a combination of these two approaches. The following is a list of the efforts I have made to ensure trustworthiness.

1. I conducted a pilot project to test both the methods of the study and the concepts.
2. The process of peer review was an integral part of each step of the research process.
3. The approach used to design the study and write the proposal (Maxwell, 1996) was specifically recommended for qualitative inquiry. It required that I review carefully all aspects of the design and the logic behind it. As a result of this

process I examined my personal, practical, and research purposes, as well as my experiential knowledge. These exercises introduced me to the process of reflexivity in research. The on-going act of reflecting on my biases, theoretical predispositions, and preferences has, I believe, helped to ensure the validity of this account.

4. The sampling decision was based on the selection of a reputational case whose participants were likely to provide data suitable to answer the research questions.
5. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim by myself, and sent to the participants for member checking.
6. My background as a skier and coach has given me credibility and entry to the group and helped in the establishment a good research relationship.
7. These same advantages could constitute a validity threat in the sense that I am known by some in the context, but I have tried to address this by explicitly choosing a coach that I did not know, and whose athletes did not know me.
8. The process of data collection and analysis was conducted in such a way that interpretation could be checked or clarified with the participants.

## **Results**

The first part of this section sets the stage for the subsequent parts and presents the views of the coaches and athletes regarding their philosophy of effective communication and the importance of attitude.

### **Before the Competitive Season**

The pre-competition season is the off-season and includes summer training camps, both on-snow and dry-land for fitness, as well as one or two pre-season camps in the fall.

The first interviews with the coaches and the athletes were conducted during the last pre-season camp, just before the start of the competitive season. At this point, the coaches and the athletes expressed various opinions regarding good communication.

Coaches' perspective. Both coaches expressed a similar philosophy that viewed the coaching process as an interactive one. They also expected the athletes to work hard.

Here is how the two coaches discussed their approach.

I guess my coaching philosophy is, it is somewhat of an interactive deal with the athletes. I really see it as a two-way deal I guess you could say. You know I need a lot of effort from them and they get a lot of effort from me... And a lot of that is sort of a lot of interactive dialogue between us. I don't so much see coaching as a "do this, do that", I see it as a, you know the coach is the guidance but there is a lot of open dialogue to get the direction that you want... . But sort of maintain that sort of guidance as the person in charge, and when there are issues when the direction is unclear, then that's where that coach really needs to step in and say, "Okay, this is where we are and this is where we want to go, and these are the steps we need to take. Let's talk about it."  
(Dave, interview 1)

... that's my philosophy, don't put it too complicated. Also try to put them in a situation that they can learn, not only by telling them what to do... Dave and I, we've got the same philosophy too. We're pretty much going with the same ideas, and so it is easy for us to understand each other, so we don't interfere too much. We're saying the same things so... (Charles, interview 1)

They also seemed to appreciate when an athlete was able to initiate the interaction.

... she's the kind of girl that not afraid to tell me, "I think what you are telling me is a bunch of crap!" That kind of thing, you know. She is really fairly honest and direct with us and you know I like that. I like to know when it is not working, and I kind of wish that more of the girls were like that. You know a little bit more blunt and honest about things, would save everybody a lot of time and you could be more productive in a shorter amount of time... With her, we don't waste time, trying to figure each other out, we just talk and she just sort of talks like a 28-year-old, she doesn't talk like an 18-year-old. At the same time she's the kind of girl that really balance the work with the fun. (Dave, interview 1)

The athletes' perspective. The athletes, when asked what sort of approach they thought worked best for them, expressed that they liked an open, interactive relationship with their coaches. These athletes, still teenagers, also remarked on the importance of mixing fun with work.

Tu sais comme là cette année, Dave et puis Charles sont toujours comme directement au point... They make it fun. Comme c'est bizarre à dire, mais des fois je regarde d'autres équipes, comme l'équipe X, et puis eux autres, ils n'ont pas l'air d'avoir du fun. [...] J'aime ça parce que Dave, il est strict mais, on est capable d'avoir du fun en ski.  
(Athlete S, interview 1)

... but, it has got to be a two-way thing going on... But a big part of it for me is also having a lot of fun. 'Cause, I don't know, I kind of decided this year, I like, you never know how long you are going to get to ski. You can always be injured. You have got to make the best of every year and enjoy it and we're pretty lucky to go where we get to go, so I don't want anyone or anybody to get in my way of enjoying it. And I think that is also like the coaches have got to know. I like working hard and I have no problem with that, but you have got to enjoy it too. I improve usually lots when I'm having fun, even thinking less about my skiing.  
(Athlete R, interview 1)

... avec mon ancien coach, il montrait comment skier peut être du fun, comment je peux avoir du fun là dedans... J'ai besoin que ça soit du fun, et puis quand on est fatigué de skier dans le parcours, il nous amenait 'Venez-vous en, on va aller faire des bosses', on allait skier, et puis, il nous a aussi beaucoup entraîné en ski libre. Je trouve que c'est très important, de pas nous coacher tout le temps dans les parcours.  
(Athlete M, interview 1)

The coaches and the athletes matched on their idea of good communication: It must be two-way. On another point, that is the context within which the communication should take place, they differed somewhat. The coaches emphasized that they wanted the athletes to work hard. The athletes expected to work hard but they emphasized that it must be fun. Thus at this point in the season, before the competitions began, the coaches and the athletes seemed to match each other's perceptions of an ideal approach regarding

the communication process. Their ideal followed the model for effective communications: A two-way process (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981). However, if we took a moment to look at the factors that influence the communicators in the communication process (see Figure 2), we saw that while some of these factors, might have favoured effective communications, there was some evidence that communication might be hindered by certain other factors.

Communication skills. Several comments made during ordinary conversation with coaches and athletes outside of this team, pointed to the perception that Dave was going to need good communication skills in order to be an effective coach for this team. For example, when I was introduced as a person doing a study with this particular team, a few of these other coaches made comments such as: “There’s a lot to study with that team” or “That team will make a good psychological study”. There seemed to be a sense that the team represented a coaching challenge that was not necessarily technically based. Over the previous several years this team had had a number of coaching changes, which no doubt contributed to this perception. A male athlete, when he heard what I was doing, said about Dave, who had been a men’s coach for the previous two years, “Dave should be a good girl’s coach”.

I told Dave that several people had said that he was a good girls’ coach and asked him if he had any idea why they might have said that. He said that he did not really know, but that he tried to talk to the girls and make them feel heard. This represents his acknowledgement that the communication process is viewed as a priority for him with this group. (Researcher’s notes).

While the coach's comments indicated that Athlete S might possess the necessary skills for direct communication, many other comments by coaches and athletes during the interviews just prior to the competitive season suggested that some athletes might not yet have adequate communication skills. Athlete R described herself as being shy and finding it "hard to go up and say, tell them all that's going on" (Athlete R, interview 1) and another athlete was described as being very timid, both by herself and the coaches.

Knowledge level. Traditionally the summer camps are used to do extensive technical work. Since both coaches were new to this team, even though Charles had recently worked with three of the athletes at the provincial level, the off-season was also used as a time to develop relationships between the coaches and the athletes. In the model, this would equate to increasing each communicators' knowledge level of the other. In discussing his approach at the end of the pre-competition season, Dave said:

... a lot of it for me is really getting to know the athletes I'm working with individual personalities, and sort of developing a strategy out for getting the most out of each one of them... It's really sort of a dynamic changing discussion all the time and it sort of revolves around all the aspects as far as technique and tactics, and psychology and physical preparation and stuff like that. But I find that you really need to spend time to learn your athletes and get to know who they are and what they sort of stand for, and what they want to get out of the deal, and adjust your coaching to each person I guess... (Dave, interview 1)

When, however, Dave was asked at the end of the pre-competition season what point he was at in getting to know his athletes he said:

I'd say at about 50% right now, and the only reason that I'd say that is that I have figured them out pretty much to their maximum capacity in training I just haven't seen them race. You know and racing is sort of 50% of the deal. So I know them pretty well and how they react day to day and in their training, and fitness, and what works on the hill and what doesn't, you know our discussions have opened up quite well. We can interact pretty well and tell each other exactly what we want. I just haven't had them in a racing environment yet. (Dave, interview 1)

In fact, as we soon saw, not knowing his athletes in the competitive situation became a factor that negatively influenced the communication process.

Attitude. As indicated above in the discussion of ‘coaching philosophy’, the athletes and the coaches began the season with generally compatible or congruent ideas regarding the coaching-learning process. With the exception of one athlete, that had only been able to train for a very few days during the off-season, due to a series of medical problems, Dave’s attitudes to the athletes were very positive.

“Athlete C knows technique pretty well. She’s pretty coachable, will do what you want on the hill...

“Athlete T needs really simple cues. She understands technique, but she gets over-loaded really easily, as far as feedback goes and we needs to keep it really simple and short.

“Athlete S: Technically great, just sort of another person that I have a lot of technical discussion with on how we can make her faster.

“Athlete E: Came to us skiing fairly weakly, but really the kind of girl that you want on the team, you know, a lot of energy, a lot of positive energy. Strong physically, strong mentally, and pretty much ready to do almost anything to get on that team and perform... she’s a coachable girl in that way, so we were able to make some pretty good changes.

(Dave, interview 1)

All the athletes expressed positive views towards the coaches at the end of the pre-competition season. A number of the athletes mentioned that a very important feature of their coaches up to that point in the season was that they displayed a positive attitude in the feedback communication that they gave to their athletes.

I think that coaches have to be very good at communicating with their athletes, and in a positive way. I mean everybody learns in different ways, but for me I learn best when coaches are positive. I mean they don’t have to be saying good things all the time, because that is never going to happen like that. But, when

they are positive, or you can really talk to them and... I mean they shouldn't have to know about your personal life, but you can be able to talk to them and you are not scared to up to the top of the hill. You are not, "Oh, no, so-and so is going to kill me" and you shouldn't have to feel bad if you have a bad run... I think it is even more important to have a coach like Dave and Charles are great, 'cause, they don't, they understand that you are not going to have a good day everyday. (Athlete R, interview 1)

Another athlete spoke of the effects upon her of previous coaches.

My coaches were like "What are you doing? This isn't skiing, like this is crap!" I just... I can't be negative. I can't have people around me be negative, like coaches and stuff, I need them to believe in me. (Athlete P, interview 1)

Therefore while coaches and athletes were clear on the importance of having a positive attitude, the influence of personal attitudes on actual interactions was not evident in the data collected in the first interviews. Not until the competitive season began, and actual interactions were observed, or recorded in journals, did we see attitudes directly affecting communication.

Sociocultural system. The sport of skiing has a relatively long history in this country. The national championships have been contested for well over half a century. While Canada is not considered one of the strongest nations in this sport, we have had a considerable number of Olympic and World Championship victories, as well as World Cup wins, particularly by women. In fact, the popularity of ski racing took off after Nancy Greene won the overall World Cup the first two seasons it was awarded, in 1967 and 1968. Since this time there has developed a structured system to bring young athletes up through the clubs, zones, and divisions to the national level.

The national organization sets the criteria to make the various levels of the national team. World rankings in the four disciplines, slalom (SL), giant slalom (GS), super G (SG), and downhill (DH) are used as objective criteria. Thus the teams are composed of

athletes within certain ranges of the world rankings. Exceptions are made for athletes that have been injured, and for junior national team athletes. If not enough athletes meet the junior team criteria, the next athletes in line might be asked to join the team as this is viewed as a development team.

The “team” is big business, with major corporate sponsorships. But fund raising is still a major necessity, and families do not put athletes on the team without years of huge expenses. All these factors, along with the distinctive lifestyle of ski racing, contribute to a distinctive sub-culture.

An integral part of this sociocultural system is the image that goes with being a team member. Young athletes spend years admiring national team members and dreaming of one day wearing the national team uniform. When some of these athletes are selected to the Junior National Team and wear the uniform for the first time, the data showed that this clearly adds to the pressure experienced by many of these athletes to perform well.

Here is how one junior team athlete and one coach described the situation:

**And that was going really well, then as soon as I got onto the junior team the next year, it was like everything just totally crashed, like I had, I felt like I had so much pressure on me. You get the uniform, right, like it's the national team uniform, and I just was so afraid of what other people thought. And you know, you're on the national team, now you have to do well, like you have to be beating people by five seconds, there's no excuse. And I just really, I don't think I was mentally ready to be there yet. Like physically everything, training-wise I was at that level, but mentally, I think that I was far from it. (Athlete P, interview 1)**

**You know it's a big thing for them, just to be in the national team, you know the pressure from everywhere... Now they are in the system, they're full-time in the system, I think it's going to be a little harder for them to deal with that. (Charles, interview 1)**

Having discussed the situation as it appeared to be at the start of the competitive season, we will now go on to examine the communication process during the competitive season.

### The Competitive Season

As the competitive season unfolded, the data indicated that when the pressure mounted, it became more difficult for effective communication to occur. The next section will explore certain interactions regarding events or issues that took place between the coaches and the athletes. An analysis of each interaction is drawn up according to the model for effective communication (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981).

However, as the analysis on this part of the data commenced, it was evident that pressure external to the immediate context influenced communication between the coaches and the athletes. We decided to add external pressure as a fifth factor to the model because the literature suggests that it has also presented a problem in other sports (Bernard, 1998). The job of a coach is incredibly complex even in normal times, but the work-load on the coaches of this team increased mid-season, due to budget cuts and the laying off of some staff. At the same time, Dave was being questioned from above: Results are important for an organization that depends largely on sponsorship. These incidents increased the pressure felt by the coaches and subsequently the team, as well as putting time constraints on many aspects of the coach-athlete relationship. Here is what Dave's assistant said: "Well he [Dave] put a little bit of pressure on me because of all these discussions that he had with administration, and he always shared that with me." (Charles, interview 2)

As demonstrated by several of the incidents, the ability of the coaches and athletes to communicate effectively was hindered by these external pressures.

Incident # 1: “Silence is not golden?”. The athlete was feeling the pressure to perform and expressed a total lack of communication with the coach. This is an athlete described in the first interviews by both coaches and herself as being very quiet and timid, especially when it came to communicating. This entry from her journal left no doubt as to the level of her anxiety.

I skied well but was really slow because I almost stopped at the bottom because I couldn't see the next gate. Dave hasn't talked to me yet because I think he is angry. I was having trouble in the training runs the past couple days and today I did everything well and nailed the tough sections. I am in a very depressed mood after today. (Athlete T, e-mail journal)

Speaking in retrospect about the same incident this is what the coach said.

... sometimes when I get really frustrated with somebody's performance, I just I don't even know what to say, and I don't say anything, and it is probably not a great thing. I don't know... she really struggled there, and that's when we sort of hit our low in the confidence. I think she needed a lot of support there, but I was in a position where I was so frustrated and at that point I was under incredible pressure from above. Why things weren't going well and you know it was just... A lot of stress there. Stress on me and coming from me probably. There was so much frustration that I couldn't say anything. That's something that I need to work on, is figure out a way to constructively deal with frustration like that, because I mean, I don't know how, right now. I don't know how to do it well. The way I do it is not the right way. I just haven't figured out a way to do it... But no she didn't tell me that she thought that I was angry. For sure she would have thought that I was angry because I was, I wasn't angry at her, I was frustrated at... I was angry, no I wasn't really angry I was frustrated that we couldn't get what we wanted out of that deal, and it just wasn't working. I was frustrated because of that, plus that was on a weight bar about 100 lbs. The other 400 lbs. were coming from other places. That had nothing to do with her and it's not her fault, you know but it affected me a lot. (Dave, interview 2)

By listening to the coach's point of view, we see that he is under tremendous pressure from the organization to produce results with his team. While he stated that he was never really angry with this athlete, he was frustrated with her performance. He was

aware of the probable transfer to the athletes of the pressure he was experiencing. He acknowledged his lack of skills in managing this particular communication process.

By listening to the athlete's point of view, we see that the coach's silent message meant that he was angry with her. She felt that she did really well under the difficult weather conditions and she did not understand why he does not recognize this. The incident left her feeling very low.

Here is what happened in this interaction (shown in Figure 4). Dave was frustrated and did not know how to communicate [1] so he decided against sending a verbal message [2]. Even though he sent no verbal message, the athlete perceived the silence as a message and decoded it as Dave being angry with her [3] which was only partially true. The coach was frustrated because of the low performance which was confounded by pressure from above [5]. Due to the athlete's low communication skills [6], she was unable to go to the coach and discuss this issue. Her confidence(self-perception), which was low to begin with, was negatively influenced [7].

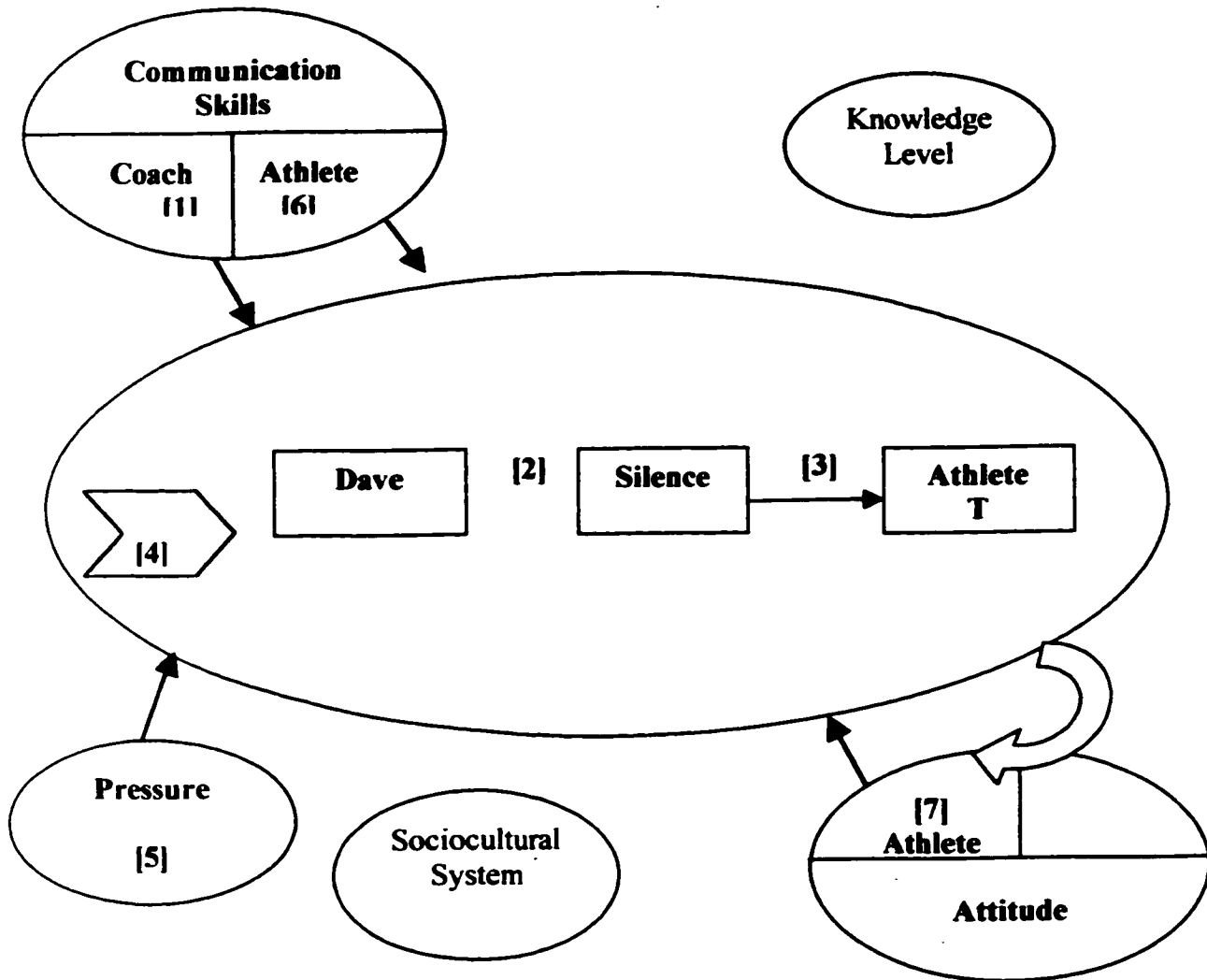



Figure 4: "Silence is not golden?"

(Note format for all figures regarding incidents: The chevron (  ) indicates initiator of the message, when appropriate.)

**Incident #2: “When silence means neglect”. Several months after the incident “Silence is not golden” the coach and two athletes were involved in another situation in which the coach’s silence once again posed a problem for the athletes.**

**In mid-season Athletes T (from “Silence is not golden?”) and R spent two weeks training alone with Dave. Following this training camp they went to a few competitions together. Then these two athletes went to some races with their provincial teams and Dave took another group of athletes to the World Juniors. This incident happened when the two athletes rejoined Dave and the other athletes. Dave had been travelling for several days and arrived at the competition where this incident arose tired and over-worked. With twice as many athletes as usual to look after, he was stretched to the limit in terms of time to do everything. Athletes T and R were worried because the coach was not talking to them. They thought he might have lost confidence or interest in them. They wanted to understand Dave’s behavior but were unsure how to approach the problem. The athletes asked if they could discuss this concern with me and we went over the problem and their options. They decided to talk to Dave. This is how Athlete R discussed communicating with the coach. (Note researcher’s words are capitalized throughout).**

**I’m fine for any other mental stuff, it’s just asking for stuff that I have problems with. Because I don’t want to be a pain... But I think talking, whenever you have a problem, I think, it’s my belief that you got to go and be really demanding and just say, “Listen, what’s up?” Even if they’re going to be really mad or angry after. It usually makes things better.**

**YOU FIND IT REALLY HARD TO DO THOUGH?**

**As far as something like that? Oh yeah! But if it’s something else, like skis or whatever, I have no problem. But asking for more help, or...**

**EMOTIONAL SUPPORT OR OTHER KINDS OF SUPPORT?**

**Yeah, that’s hard. I think that’s hard for everybody.**

**BUT IT IS PRETTY IMPORTANT?**

**Yeah, it is! I think I'm going to have to get a little bit more demanding about that stuff for next year anyway. But it's been really good. This is the only time I've ever had a problem the whole season, so I think that is pretty impressive. And now that he is aware of it, it's already been better. (Athlete R, interview 2)**

**The coach said:**

**They were frustrated because we didn't see each other for two weeks... You know, we spent that whole month of February together, with just myself and those two really, and it was really intense, I could follow them every run and this and that, and they got a lot of attention. And it was good, you know in that respect but from another angle they got spoilt from that, because now you know we are short staffed. We have 15 girls here and the first couple of days there were only Charles and myself. So there are a lot of things going on where we have to cover a lot of things, you know not just them. They didn't really react to that very well. They thought that they were getting left out of things and not really knowing what's going on. They felt that us not talking to them as much meant losing a lot of confidence in them and that we didn't care any more. You know that kind of stuff, and that to me shows that their self-confidence, you know, that there's an issue there for sure. But I reassured them that that wasn't the case, and we have to just keep working on time to cover off every thing that we need to cover you know with the short staff. I had to try and explain that to them. And they were good after that. (Dave, interview 2)**

**The initial interference came from the external pressures on the coach, the athletes' position in the sociocultural system, and their attitude. Communication was restored when the athletes took their concerns to the coach who explained his situation and apologized. The athletes and the coach then set out a plan to get back on track.**

**In this case (see Figure 5), Dave just did not have time to communicate with the athletes [1] because of the pressure put on him to take care of many athletes at the time [2]. The athletes had previously had the chance to work very closely with Dave and had developed certain expectations of him. These high expectations were now challenged in this new context [3]. Athlete R knew that it is important to communicate but she believed that in a ski team it is all right to ask advice about technical or tactical matters but maybe**

not for other types of help [4]. This is why the two athletes asked the advice of a consultant (the researcher in this case) who suggested that they talk with the coaches [5].

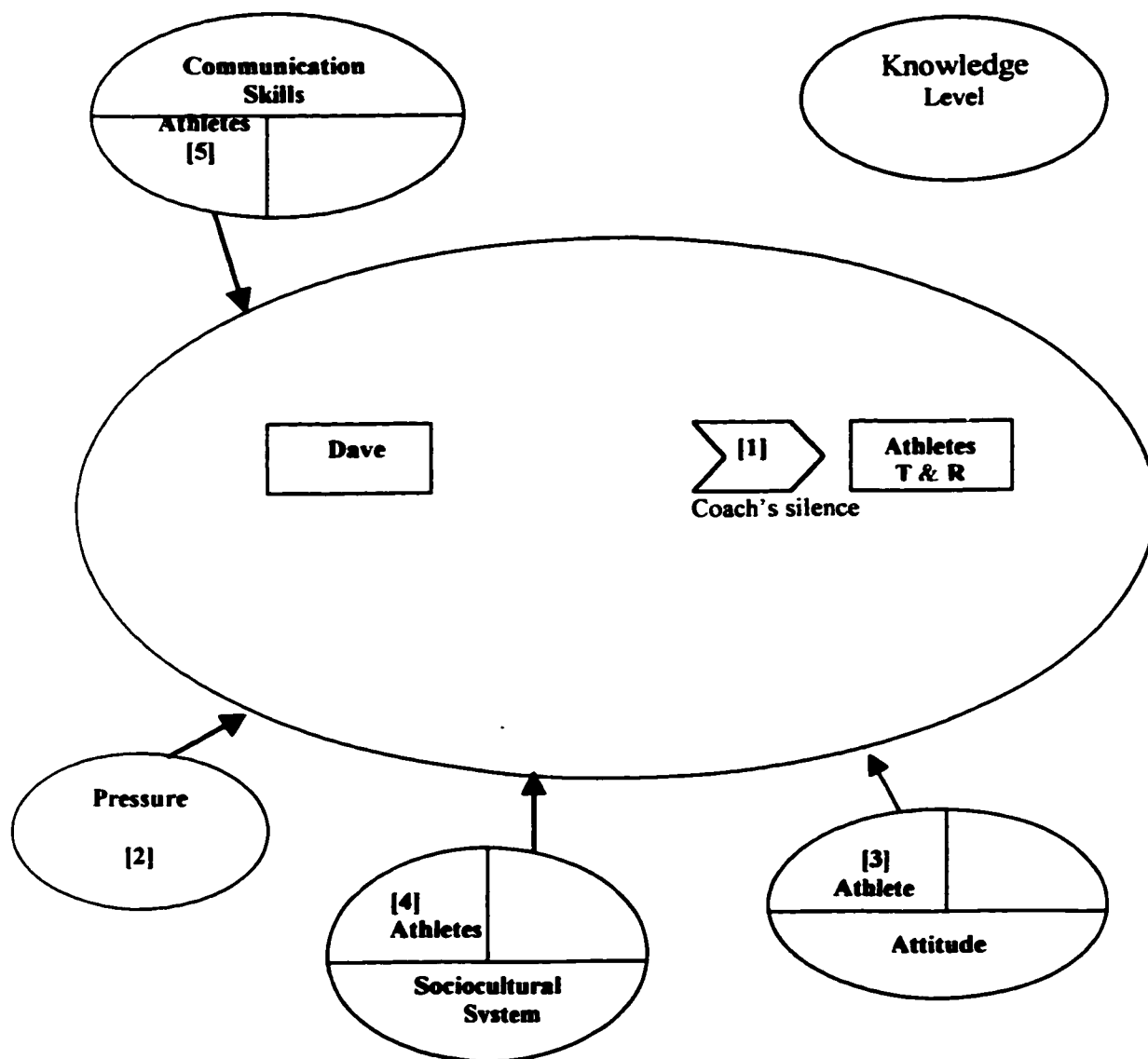


Figure 5: "When silence means neglect"

**Incident #3: “Where were you coach?”** This incident involved the same athlete described above by Dave at the end of the pre-season as being very straight-forward and having good communication skills. “With her, we don’t waste time, trying to figure each other out, we just talk and she just sort of talks like a 28-year-old, she doesn’t talk like an 18-year-old” (Dave, interview 1). The referent at that point was mostly technical, having to do with summer training. Later the coach praised her maturity in taking responsibility for her recovery from injury. However, the different context of the competitive season altered communication between Athlete S and her coaches.

Due to the high speed there is considerable danger involved in the DH event. Therefore DH is special in that the athletes are required to complete training runs of the course before the race. Normal procedure requires that the team inspects the course together establishing names for the various turns, bumps and sections. This code is used in the communication about the course and the feedback that the athletes receive on their training runs. Each coach takes a section of the course and remains there to give athletes feedback on their training runs.

During the preparation for one DH race, after two training runs, Charles was astounded when Athlete S asked him where his section was. He commented shortly after this race:

Downhill, she thinks it a waste of time ... Here it’s a really simple course, for a good technical skier like her it should be easy to get in there... She was 20<sup>th</sup> yesterday and she seemed happy about it. She doesn’t do DH much, but she thinks it’s a waste of time, and she doesn’t want to put in the effort... She’s never in the ski room either to ask for help. All the girls are coming in and saying, “Do you need any help?” (Charles, interview 2).

When the athlete was asked if she thought that she was getting the necessary information from the coaches, she said that she preferred to ask another athlete saying,

... elle [l'autre athlète] l'a descendu and she's good at it. Tu sais les coaches ils voient, mais ils ne le sentent pas... Ils me disent tout un report sur leur section, mais en plus ils ont tellement de filles à voir qu'ils ne peuvent pas être précis sur tout le monde. En plus moi, cette semaine, ils me disent, ils me parlent cinq minutes and that's it. Moi ça ne me dérange pas sauf que... J'aime mieux qu'ils se concentrent sur les filles qui sont capables de gagner, tu sais comme sur Athlete T. Ça ne me dérange pas là. Je sais qu'ils vont se concentrer sur moi en géant et puis en slalom. Ça ne me dérange pas. (Athlete S, interview 2).

The athlete, perceived the coaches' behavior as a comment on her potential in this event.

Bien c'est comme ça que je le vois et c'est comme ça que mes coaches ils me disaient de le voir. And that's fine with me... C'est sûr que j'aurais aimé ça d'en faire plus cette année, c'était le but, mais je me suis blessée. J'étais supposée faire sept SG et puis quatre DH... Puis finalement je me suis blessée, mais j'aurais aimé ça en faire. Je l'aurais pris de SG à SG et DH à DH, mais là j'arrive au Canadiens puis je ne peux pas me dire que je vais être bonne puis que je vais battre tout le monde. Il faut que j'apprenne. (Athlete S, interview 2).

Athlete S (Figure 6) asked a question to Charles [1] who did not answer and turned away [2] because to him the question meant [3] that she did not care about the process. In fact, the athlete did not think that the coaches are the best people to provide information [4]. Charles, on his part, did not think highly of the athlete [5] because she appeared nonchalant which goes against the sociocultural norm of working hard [6]. There was a discrepancy between what the athlete thought the coaches expected from her, and what in fact they did expect from her. This was an indication that the performance goals for this athlete were not knowledge that was shared between the coaches and the athlete [7].

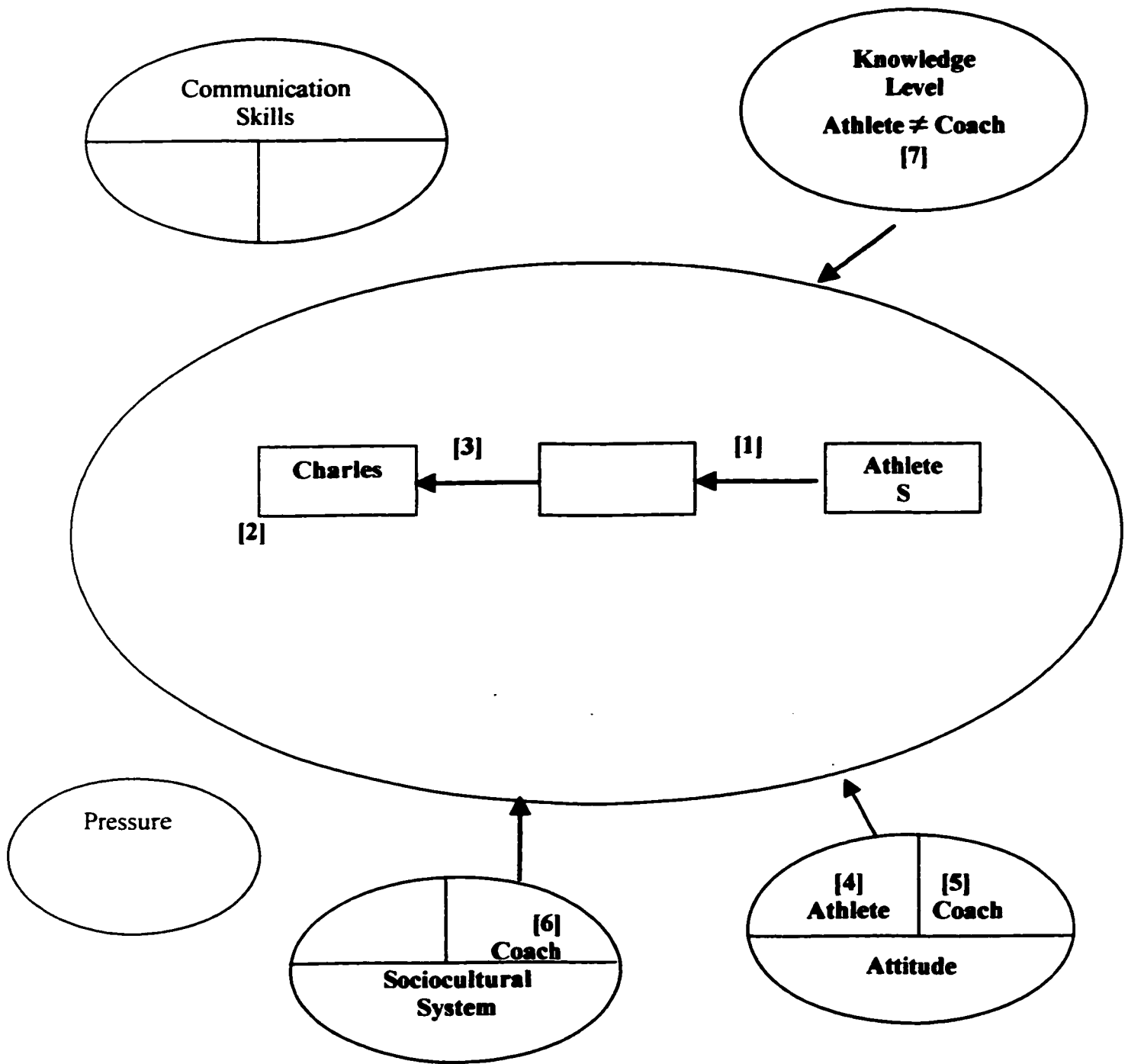


Figure 6: "Where were you coach?"

**Incident # 4: “Smarten up!” or “They are over-protective!”**. During the training week prior to a major competition, the coaches admonished some of the athletes for going out and having a beer. In reference to two of these athletes, here is what the coach said:

We kind of sat down with them because they went out the night before. And she [Athlete S] is not here at all, this event she thinks it a waste of time, and then she's not going to do it. And then she was with Athlete C. Athlete C had a lot to lose here, and a lot to win. She's rooming with her and Athlete C got in the same pattern. We sat down with Athlete C and said, “You can't get into her pattern” because she was going to lose big time. And then sure enough, Athlete C didn't perform in the event. (Charles, interview 2)

I spoke with Athlete C after this event and she said that she was tired of this type of event and wished that she had done less of it during her season. She had not expressed this to the coaches. Her season had taken some unforeseen turns and she had done more of this event than originally planned, as well as spending much of the season with another team.

In reference to this incident Athlete S said:

Ils sont over-protectifs. Là, Dave c'est un coach des gars, ça fait qu'il est moins pire. He's okay. Il nous laisse plus faire qu'est-ce qu'on veut, et puis il plus comme, tu sais il ne nous prend pas comme des bébés, les petites filles, il faut faire attention là. Il agit normalement avec nous autres. Là Charles il est mieux depuis qu'il est avec Dave. Tu sais comme exemple, ils ne vont pas, comme l'année dernière on était tous les gars et les filles dans un hôtel. Nous on voulait aller downtown pour whatever, pour aller voir d'autres équipes. Les filles n'avaient pas le droit d'y aller, mais les gars avaient le droit d'y aller. Pourquoi, parce que pour les filles c'était trop dangereux, or whatever. Mais là cette année c'est mieux, sauf que... Comme l'autre soir on est allée boire une bière, tu en as entendu parler. Puis il y avait d'autres gars qui étaient là aussi. Les gars, eux autres, ça ne dérangeaient pas, mais les filles ça dérangeaient. Même mes parents sont ici, et je suis allée en boire une bière avec eux autres hier, it doesn't matter. Mes parents sont là aussi. Les autres ont plus d'autorité sur moi que mes coaches, personnellement. Si j'avais été un gars, ça aurait jamais... it would have been okay. (Athlete S, interview 2)

An analysis of this incident is presented in Figure 7. The coach told the athletes to “smarten up!” [1]. He felt the athletes going out for a beer demonstrated a lack of effort

in their preparation, and went right against the work ethic of the sociocultural system[3]. But he also indicated that his attitude was different for these two athletes because his expectations were not the same for the two [2]. He felt that one had a lot to lose in the event while the other did not. The athletes they felt that the coaches were over-protective and should let the athletes decide if it was appropriate for them to go out [4].

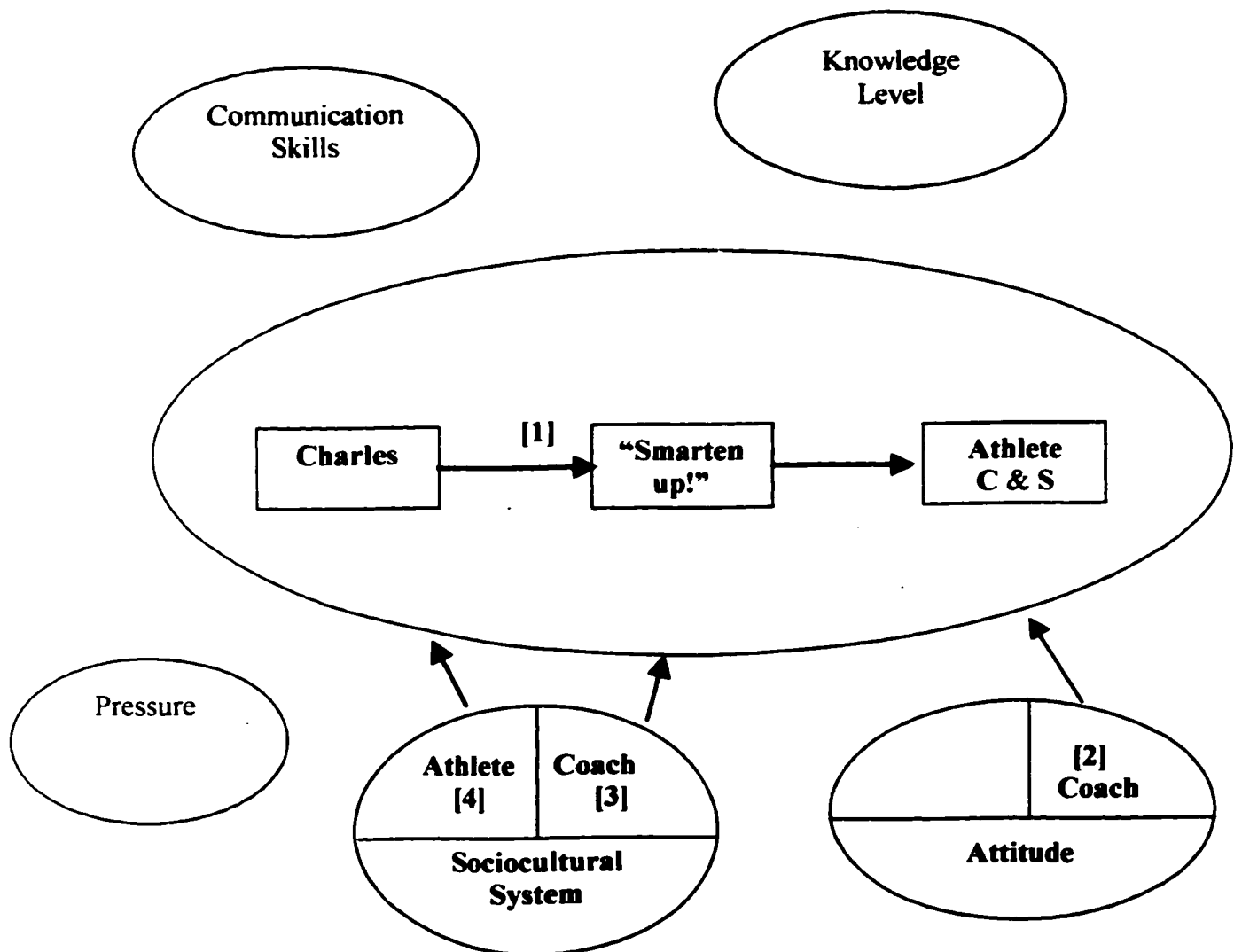


Figure 7: "Smarten up!" or "They are over-protective!"

**Incident # 5: “When the coach’s advice is ignored!”** Radios are a channel used in skiing everyday for coach-athlete communication. Whether during training or competition, coaches use radios to provide athletes information regarding the task and the conditions of the course. In fact, radio communication has so long been established as a regular tool that it appears little thought has been given to how best to use this tool for effective communication. The following example of a coach providing important information to the athlete, just prior to her competition, demonstrated a critical communication gap.

Charles, after seeing the first racers run the bottom section of the race course where he was standing, told each of his athletes, over the radio, that it wasn’t so turny and that they just had to be quick from edge to edge.

In the chalet after the run, Athlete T said to Charles, as if she had not heard his comment on the radio, “The course wasn’t as turny as I thought on the bottom” to which Charles made no reply. After she finished with him, I asked her if she remembered what Charles had said on the radio about the course. She remembered one thing he had said but not the part about the course being straighter than it had looked. Athlete T then told me that she didn’t like to listen to too much information on the radio just before her start.

I decided that this was worth further investigation. I spoke to Dave about the radio information given at the start, and he said that the older, more experienced girls seemed better able to get the information that they needed from the coaches’ comments. This matched with what Athletes T and R said about themselves. Athlete T said that her experience was that some coaches will say any sort of thing and that this had led her to a point where she did not like hearing too much. Athlete R said that she wanted the

coaches to keep it simple since too much thinking does not help her perform well. Trust was a factor here, it seemed, as well as the athlete's past experiences. It should be noted that these girls had not yet had many races as team members.

Since pre-start radio communication is such a crucial link in the coaching-learning process, I asked these two athletes what they thought it would take to change their idea of how to run a course, just before the start, based on what the coach might say on the radio. They thought about it for a while; then Athlete R said: "Well this probably sounds kind of stupid but I think I would alter my thoughts about the course if the coach said something like, 'All these girls are running this too round down here, you can just let them go straighter' " (Researcher's notes).

Both athletes agreed that hearing what the other racers were doing gave them more confidence in the remark. They said that this was probably because they knew that the other girls were running the course at the same speed that they would be, so that gave them more confidence to change their perception of the line. This is very interesting because it shows how a subtle difference in how a coach makes a remark can really affect in what manner the message is received by the athletes. It also relates to Athlete S in the incident above. She sought course information from another athlete rather than from the coach, believing that the other athlete knew better than the coaches did how it felt to run the course.

The coach (Figure 8) sent the message (the course report) over the radio [1]. The athletes did not receive the message [2]. The athletes did not share their past experiences with the coach [3] and the coach did not check for understanding [4]. However, Athlete T later commented to Charles concerning the course, indicating that she had not heard the

coach's advice on the radio [5]. The athletes' attitude regarding pre-race radio comments by coaches made them wary [6].

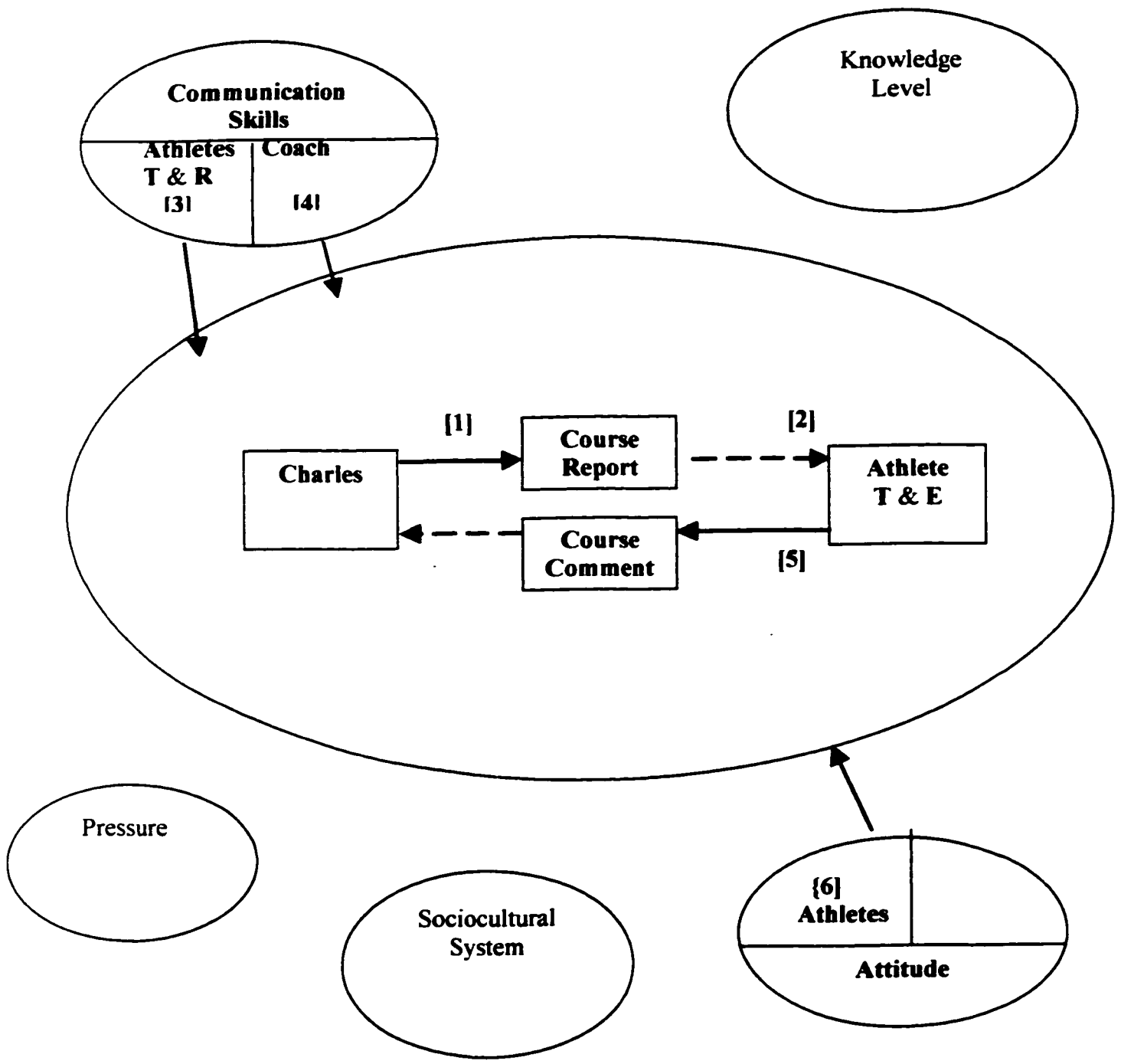


Figure 8: "When the coach's advice is ignored!"

Checking for understanding and sharing are skills of communication. During the actual communication process, if not during the radio communication, at least during the debriefing after the run, the coach should check with the athlete for feedback to see if she has understood his message.

Despite this incident it does not appear that the issue was specifically addressed during the following part of the season. When I briefed Charles on this whole issue during his second interview, he was surprised at how subtle the nuance was. When I asked the athletes whether they had adjusted to the radio communication over the season, it did not appear that the issue had been directly addressed. Athlete R said: "I think I have adjusted myself in the fact that I usually do a better inspection". (Athlete R, interview 2)

Asked if she ever discussed the radio communication with the coaches, after the incident in January, Athlete T said that she had not done so. When further asked her if she thought that she had made better use of that information as the season progressed she said:

I guess I use it more, but then I try to get more opinions too to see if it's just that person or if it's true to everybody... Well like I'll ask my teammates, or the person at the top, or listen to the course report more than once or something.  
(Athlete T, interview 2)

Both of these athletes seem to have made some accommodations to try and get better use of the information, but neither has directly attacked the problem by discussing it with the coaches. When I asked Athlete T if she thought that trust had something to do with how she used that information she said:

Yeah, or maybe confidence... Well like confidence. Like knowing that it is a straight gate that I should go straight and not set it up. Like have confidence in

the coaches, that they know what they are talking about (laughs). Or that I could trust myself to do it. (Athlete T, interview 2)

This type of radio communication is a vital element of this culture and is confirmed by an older female athlete, who is competing on the top world circuit. She also gives support to the notion that some coaches will have a detrimental effect on the trust of the athletes by giving inappropriate information.

I think that the most important thing for a coach to be able to do at the start is to make the athlete feel that they can do it. I think there are a lot of coaches out there that I've witnessed and watched, and I'm a Level Three coach also. I took my levels, so I know, like I've seen a lot of coaching going on. There are a lot of coaches that get on the radio and say, "Okay, the course is good, but you come into the first section, there's that red gate, you know, you want to be up on your ski, and through the gate, and then ooh it gets really tight around the delay. Coming onto the delay just be really quick and forward." Sometimes there's just way too much information given. And you're just... So many athletes just go, "Oh my God, the red gate, the blue gate, that gate, the delay..." and just sit there and tense up. Whereas I think, what works for me and I've witnessed other women too, is that you know if the course gets on the radio and he's like, "The course is running awesome!" even if it's crappy, we are going to find that out once we get on there. You know what I mean, it shouldn't change your approach. If you are starting 50<sup>th</sup>, you know there are going to be ruts. But for a coach to reinforce that, "Okay, it's rough down here" we don't need to know that. I don't need to know that. "The course is running good. You know you are running 50<sup>th</sup>, it's a little choppy, something along those lines. But there is no problem". You always back it up with a positive reinforcement. Like if you say, "It is rough but the girls are having no problem through this section" then that works. (Athlete B, interview)

The following two scenarios, rather than specific interactions, are on-going issues. Just as the preceding incidents, they involved important aspects of the coaching-learning process and will thus be analyzed for communication problems.

On-going issue # 1: "What happened to the coachable athlete?" Athletes R came to the team after the initial selection to fill one of the spots left when three athletes retired.

She was weak technically at the start but made incredible progress during the two summer camps. The words of Dave after the last pre-season camp were:

... she improved a lot with us that second camp, she took a lot of work, but she's a coachable girl in that way, so we were able to make some pretty good changes and then get her going in the right direction... Basically every run they do all year is on video-tape, and to watch her at the beginning of the second camp and some of the runs she had at the last camp. It is just unbelievable. You won't even recognize who she is. You know if I could have five or six Athlete R's on the team, that would be just unbelievable. (Dave, interview 1)

However, a few months later, after the start of the season, the same coach was clearly frustrated with her performance. The following are quotations from my field notes during a training session prior to a race series.

Athlete R seems fine but Dave is very frustrated and says that she is taking criticism very badly, is very sensitive and starts to cry easily. Dave was trying to give her technical info to help her skiing but felt that he was not getting anywhere. He said that she always has to (*that's the way he said it*) work harder, have an extra run, and she said that she was working really hard. I asked Dave what his plan was with Athlete R. He said he didn't know, he sighed. "I don't really know what to do with her". I decided to remind him of what he said about Athlete R in his first interview "If I could have seven Athlete R's, I'd be really happy". He replied "Yeah, that was during training and she was doing really well".

In fact, she [Athlete R] repeated feeling a lot of pressure to perform at the races before Christmas because she had been selected to the team. Charles and I discussed this yesterday, and he confirmed that he was aware that she must have been feeling this pressure. (Researcher's notes, reference to Athlete R)

This athlete said, "At first I felt a lot of pressure but that wasn't from them, it was my own wanting to do well." She also said that she had never gone over her goals with the coach and commented:

I think the only thing is that doing goals would have reassured me that sometimes it's just good to know that you are on the same wavelength and that you know what's going on... and maybe that pressure I was putting on myself would have been avoided. (Athlete R, interview 2)

In this issue, the coach was the initiator of on-going messages (see Figure 9) and the issue was the athlete's performance [1]. The sociocultural system was affecting the athlete as she put pressure on herself to live up to the status of being named to the team [2]. In addition neither the coach nor the athlete appeared clear concerning appropriate goals for her [3]. The athlete's confidence was low [4] and her emotional feedback [5] added to the coach's frustration concerning her performance, changing his attitude toward her [6].

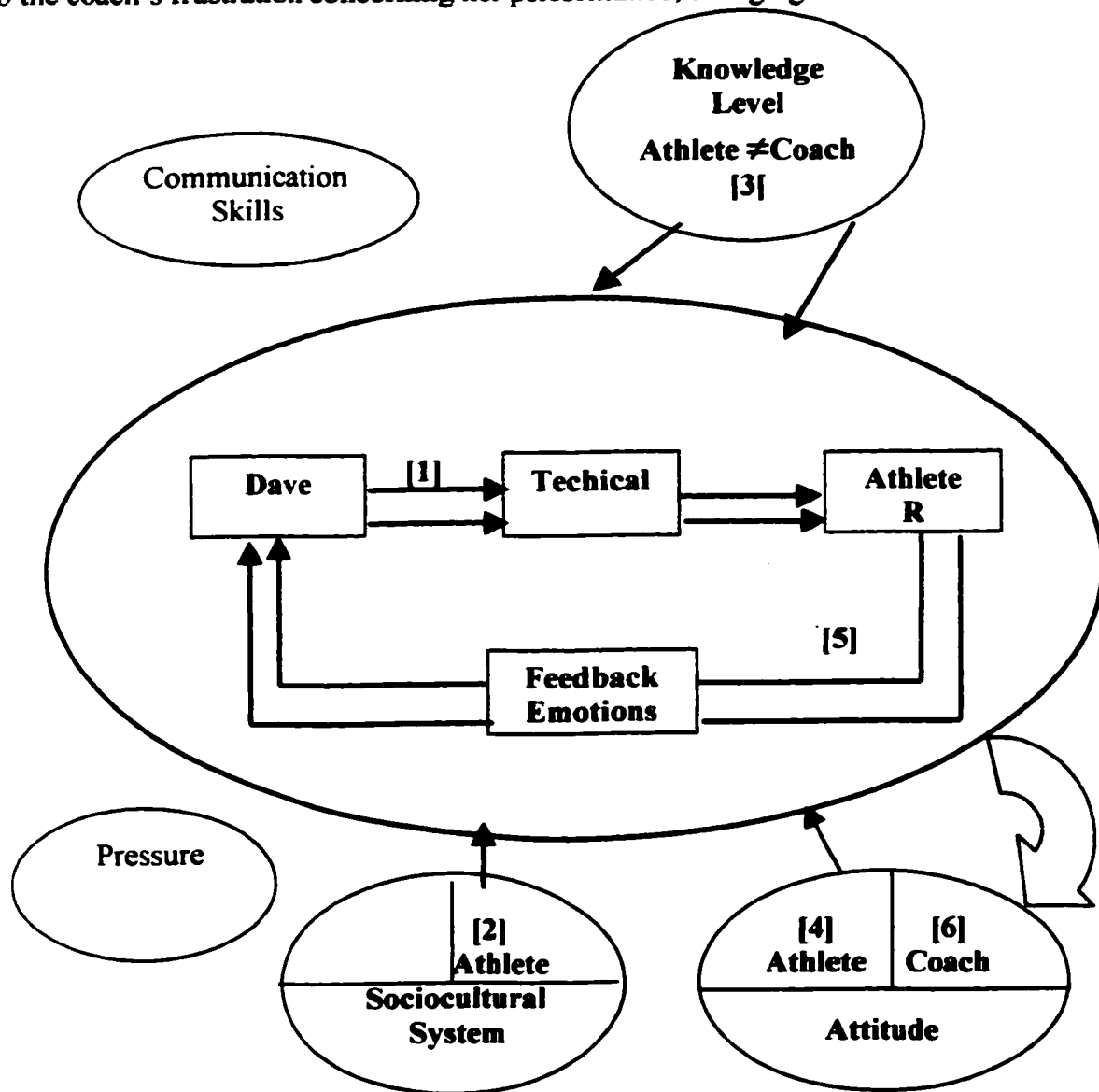


Figure 9: "What happened to the coachable athlete?"

On-going incident #2: “When are you coming back Despite a sports science approach to physical training, the team incurred many injuries. In fact, not one of the six athletes went uninjured over the course of the season, and two never even competed. Communication surrounding these injuries, in particular the athlete’s return to team participation, was often problematic. As indicated by the comments below, athletes seemed to feel pressure to return before they were perhaps ready. It is worth noting that while an athlete may be perceived by medical staff and coaches as physically ready, they may not be mentally prepared to re-enter the arena in which they incurred the injury. As well, athletes that have missed summer training due to injury have a difficult time feeling prepared to meet the challenge of the competitive season. One athlete explained this clearly.

It is weird to come back here and for everyone to be knowing each other, like friends because I’m usually the first person to do that. And it’s weird for me to come back here, and it is so different. Like I haven’t skied yet, I don’t know what to expect. And it is just like an uncomfortable situation right now because I don’t know when I’m coming back skiing... I don’t want to be forced, at all. Like I want the coaches to say, “You know, make up your mind, when you can ski you can ski. It’s the doctor’s decision. That’s going to be the best thing, because it is confidence for me that is huge. If I feel my knee strong then I’ll be able to go out there and ski like 100%. Whereas if I know that I have a lot of improvement to do I can’t go out there and be like “Um, I wonder if me knee will blow this turn?” Because I am not strong enough... So it is a little difficult. But I don’t think it’ll be a big deal because we have talked a lot over the phone, like he knows what to expect, he knows I’m not going to come back until I am ready... Like I don’t know why they’re pressing. I mean it is their job to want me out there skiing and to coach me and everything, but it’s my body. Like I’m the one who would be sitting in a chair probably crying, regretting the whole thing if I’d gone back a couple of months early. This is eight months in my life that I usually dedicate to skiing that are blown. Like it is no one else’s problem but mine. (Athlete P, interview 1)

The athlete said that it is normal for the coaches to want to get on with the job of coaching, but it is likely that external pressures for a performing team influenced the

coach's communication in this area too. The coach, however, expressed his thoughts on athlete recovery in general and stated that this athlete avoided communication with him regarding both of her injuries this season. It appeared that the coach's and the athlete's knowledge level was also a factor in this case. At the beginning of the season, the coach and the athlete had spoken on the telephone, but only once in person. There had been no time for them to establish knowledge of each other in the team environment. In addition, the coach's comments implied that some other athletes might be further along on the continuum in terms of achieving autonomy during this transition period of being on the junior national team. The coach seemed to appreciate this.

I think that a lot of these athletes who have injuries, they need to take a lot more initiative and more responsibility to be in touch, and to be proactive in their recovery, and not be spoon-fed a recovery. You know I think we do a lot for them on and off the hill and I think they have amazing resources to use, but they need to use those resources... And I think that especially with younger athletes a lot of times they just don't do that. You know for instance Athlete S, [also on this team] she was really good in her recovery. She, we worked on some physio with our team, best team physios in Toronto to work on her. They solved the problem and it was mostly Athlete S that took the initiative to do that. Some athletes are better at it than others. I think that with Athlete P we had an unfortunate thing with that leg in January. Two days before she was about to start racing. It's been a similar kind of situation as when she was injured with her knee. We never hear from her, all of a sudden we hear that she wants to go skiing, hasn't talked to anybody and then I'm the bad guy because I haven't communicated, right, but I've left a thousand messages for her to call me. It seems so simple, just pick up the phone and make a phone call. (Dave, interview 2)

This instance, in which the referent was the timing of athlete's return to the sport and competition, might be analyzed as follows (Figure 10). The coach had tried to remain in contact with the athlete and provide support for her recovery process [1]. The athlete did not return his telephone calls [2]. The coach believed that athletes have to take responsibility themselves in the process [3]. The athlete wanted to be the one in control of

her return, but had trouble asserting herself [4]. The athlete felt pressure from the team to return. This perceived pressure came from the coach's telephone calls and the "Be tough" norm of the sociocultural system [5]. The main problem seemed to come from knowledge level [6] because the coach and athlete were largely unacquainted.

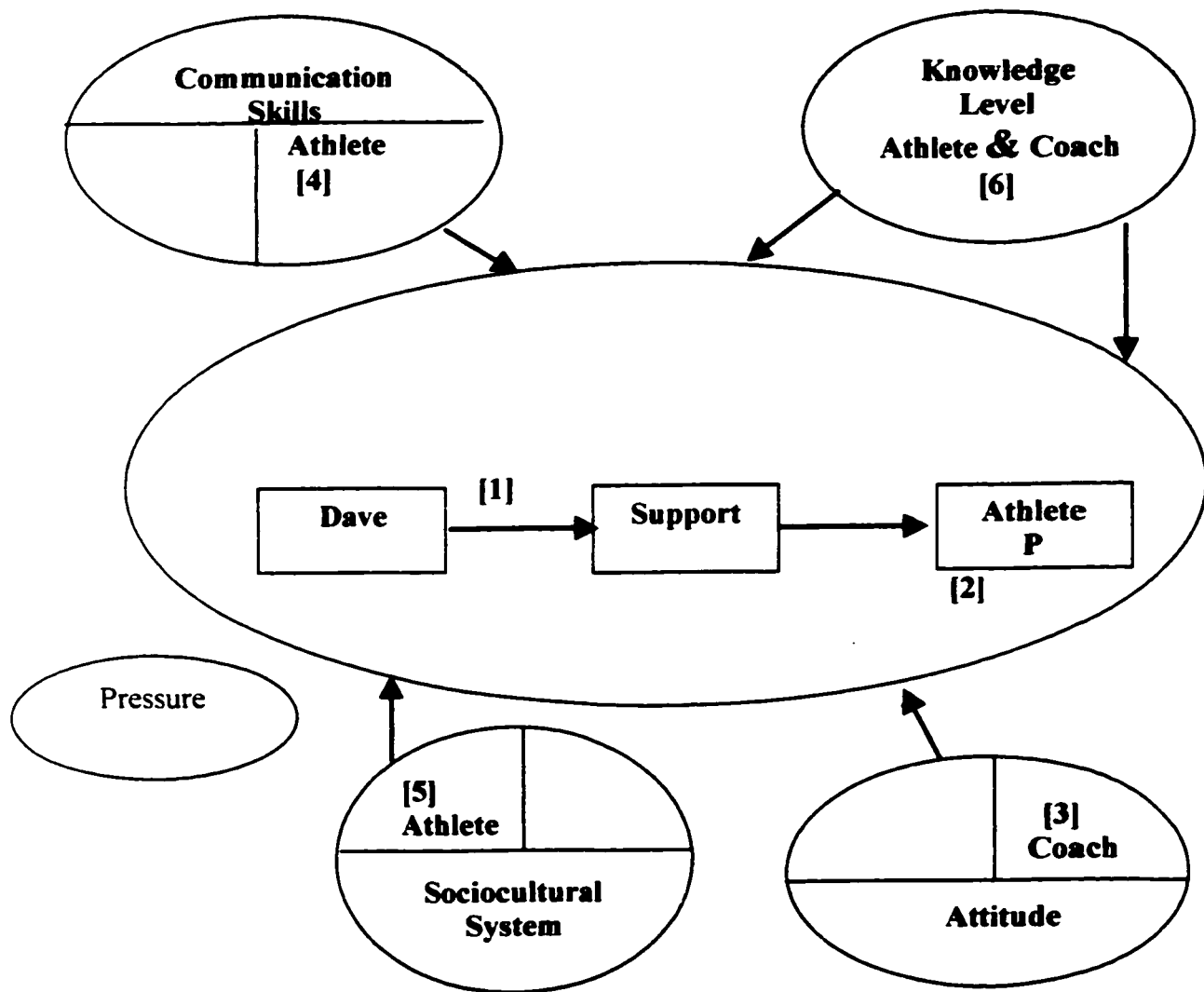


Figure 10: "When are you coming back?"

Another athlete also battled with the return to the sport. She tells how she went back too early and confirms the difficulty some athletes have in asserting themselves.

**Je le savais qu'en allant au premier camp je n'étais pas prête, tu sais. J'aurais du m'écouter en partant et dire non, je ne peux pas le faire. Après ça j'ai réalisé qu'il fallait que je pense à moi, et puis que c'était moi qui connaissais ma douleur et puis comment j'avais mal, et puis là quand ça arrive comme ça, je sais quand dire aux coaches «Non, ça, je ne peux pas le faire ». Je m'écoute moi-même là. (Athlete M, interview 1)**

### **Looking Beyond the Factors**

The model for effective coaching (Fuoss & Troppmann, 1981) provides a framework for analyzing the factors that may influence communication. We have seen how individual characteristics such as communication skills, attitude, and knowledge level can account for miscommunication. Similarly and often in conjunction with these characteristics, the sociocultural system also confounds communication. The two previous sections have discussed, first, the participants' views regarding good communication, at the start of the competitive season, and second, various interactions that occurred during the season. The analysis of these interactions led to the emergence of certain specific variables. One question relates to the roles played by the participants in the communication process. In the proposal for this study, I suggested that this team, being a junior national team, might represent a period of transition for the coaches and the athletes in terms of developing athlete autonomy and changing roles. In the next section I will address the issue of these roles by looking at who initiates these various types of messages, depending on the nature of the referent, either technical, tactical, or psychological.

**Roles and growth during the transition period.** When asked if they thought coach-athlete communication had changed over the season the participants all agreed that it had. Charles pointed particularly to the less experienced athletes.

**Ah yeah, definitely! Especially with the young ones: Athletes T and R. As I said, lately with these two athletes, it's more open. I don't know, just friendlier communication. With Athlete C it had always been good.**  
(Charles, interview 2)

The other coach said, "I mean they've come to me with smaller things but that was the biggest. So definitely they are making progress in being able to come to us in that sense."

(Dave, interview 2)

**One of these younger athletes described the change.**

**It might have gotten a little bit better because you know them and you have an understanding. That just goes with time... Yeah. All the little things you learn. But it takes time to learn what their reaction is going to be in certain situations, and the same for you... (Athlete R, interview 2)**

The second one, Athlete T agreed that she would not have approached the coaches with the problem of feeling neglected at the start of the season. Athlete R gives us an idea of how she has adapted to a certain kind of coach communication.

**And sometimes ... if you have a bad run a coach will start kind of going off, and saying, "You didn't do this right, you didn't do this right"... then I say, "Okay. This is not going to help me. There is no way it's going to, because it will just make me mad. So I just listen, but don't listen (laughs)... Or walk away, whatever you have to do, because I've learned now you have to do only what's going to help you. Even if it's going to offend somebody. Because, just because he's mad... I mean of course when you have a bad run, you are not going to be happy with yourself anyway. The damage is already done. So I just don't listen to him when he says that. (Athlete R, interview 2)**

**This young athlete has learned to ignore certain kinds of communication that she believes to be unhelpful. A first year World Cup athlete, Blanca, describes below how she dealt with a difficult season in terms of communication with her coach. Both of these examples demonstrate how athletes adapt by opting out of the communication process; in**

the first case by blocking out certain messages and in the second case by deciding not to send certain feedback.

... you know like he'd say something that I didn't agree with, but when you are alone and you are going to have to deal with this person 24 hours a day, you don't really want to fight with them over these points... You just want to keep things running as smoothly as possible because you don't want to start a major argument with the person that you are going to eat dinner with. (Athlete B, interview late season)

In view of the proposition that successful athletes move towards autonomy as they develop, I asked the above quoted athlete who was competing in her first season on the World Cup if she thought that her communication with coaches, regarding the three referents, had changed over the last three of four years since she first made the national team. She said:

Definitely technical has changed. It is not as much technical anymore it is leaning towards more tactical, in that department between technical and tactical. Because technical you know, three years ago I was still developing my technique, now you know I am refining it and the tactics on the course. I look at some of these junior girls, and they have the technical skills, but the only thing that is keeping them from beating me is that I have the experience of how to race a course.

Mentally for sure it is tougher now, because before you had coaches and other athletes and you did it together as a team as you are growing up. Your coaches were there to help you, almost help raise you. You know when you are 16, 17 you really rely on them, whereas now I have to figure a lot of mental things out for myself, in my head. I have to look at myself and say, "Okay, this is what I did wrong today mentally, this is what I did right today mentally and decipher between the two. Umm, but I also need a coach that reinforces that positive.

The further up you go the more you start to realize what you need... Instead of just what is given to you and you accept. I mean it is hard now, I am still trying to discover myself and what I need. And it is really hard for me to put my foot down and say this is what I need and to be 100% sure in my head, that that's really what I need... You know what I mean? Like I am still somewhere in between teenager and adult. Somewhere between like Athlete R and say a mature World Cup athlete, you know what I mean?... (Athlete B, interview late season)

Who initiates the messages? When the participants were asked about who initiated the messages according to the different referents (technical, tactical, and psychological) there were some individual differences, but the younger athletes seemed to feel that the coach was the initiator in more messages concerning technique and tactics. Messages concerning psychological issues seemed to be a problem in terms of who actually initiated them. The coach felt that these other messages should be addressed first by the athletes, but certainly the younger athletes found this very difficult to do. He did however confirm that at least the two younger athletes had made progress in that regard. Here is the coach's view on this matter:

I think it is individual, but I think there are trends as far as technical, versus tactical versus psychological, emotional that sort of thing. I'll give you an example, technical for sure there is open dialogue but it's more initiated by me. I'd say it's sort of like a 70/30 or 60/40 split, me 60% and them 40%... A lot of times they need me to take the first step, in the technical stuff and then we talk. I'll say something about this and then they'll answer in their own way, how they felt and then we can start talking about it, just so we establish a connection there. It's certainly not one-way me saying this, this, this, you know I think I need to initiate but they interact. Tactically it's more of a 50/50 thing because I can't ski down the hill for them, I need to know what they see, so when we talk about tactics, I can give them my perspective but I can't give them the perspective of skiing down the hill so it's more 50/50... The tactical... The other thing is I guess, the personal, psychological, emotional thing, where I think that it swings more to them. Because I can see something is wrong, but I really don't know what it could be, and I don't feel like pushing and prying, you know? ... that's what I've told them. "If something is up you have to tell me, because I focus on what I am trying to do here, and it's easy for me to run off and sort of put my blinders on, and not really pay attention to what's happening there, emotionally or personally. If they have a problem they need to tell me and you know that's why I think yesterday was a good break through, because they need to feel comfortable enough to come to me with that stuff. And they have been, you know I think they have been holding some things in where they could have opened up, and stuff, but they need to come more to me and I think they need to initiate and then we can talk. I don't know if that is right or wrong but that's how I feel about it... I just am not a sport psychologist, I'm not a pro in that area and I try, you know I'd like for them to be able to take the first step in those things.

**BASED ON WHAT YOU SAID, THEIR COMING TO TALK TO YOU YESTERDAY WAS A CHANGE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE SEASON, OR EARLIER IN THE SEASON, IN THE SENSE THAT THEY TOOK THE INITIATIVE TO COME AND COMMUNICATE?**

Yeah.

(Dave, interview 2)

These comments from the two least experienced, self-described shy athletes, confirm that the coaches speak to them most readily about technical and tactical matters, and do not initiate concerning psychological issues.

In the technical, I'd say like 60/40, coaches to athletes.

Tactical I'd say 80/20. Because that is something they kind of have to tell you, especially on the course.

**OKAY, NOW WE GET TO THAT OTHER STUFF THAT YOU FIND IS HARD TO TELL THEM ABOUT, BUT THAT THEY DON'T INITIATE?**

Right. They don't initiate anything, so it's all us (laughs), but that's hard for me. (Athlete R, interview 2).

The other athlete also expressed trouble communicating these issues.

**DO YOU FEEL THAT IT IS EASIER TO TALK ABOUT TECHNICAL ISSUES THAN IT IS TO TALK ABOUT EMOTIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES?**

Umm, I guess technical. Just because I'm emotional I guess.

(Athlete T, interview 2)

It is interesting to see how past experiences, in this case previous coaching, affected the ability of an athlete to move towards autonomy. Athlete S recounted how she was taught to think for herself in the coaching process, and in so doing she confirmed Dave's description of her (see above on 'coaching philosophy') as much more like a mature athlete in terms of how he communicated with her in the teaching process. She also mentioned her mother tongue, French, as a factor influencing which coach she was more likely to turn to when discussing psychological issues.

... c'est sur que moi il me parle souvent de technique. Mais il trouve que, like he lets me go on my own, avec ça. Tactique il commence à m'en parler plus, parce que c'est plus là dedans que je vais travailler. Puis psychologique (elle rit) il ne m'en parle pas... quand ça va pas, c'est sur que je vais le dire. Puis j'en parle, peut-être moins à Dave, peut-être plus à Charles. Peut-être parce qu'il parle plus français, et je suis plus confortable avec, ça fait trois ans que je suis avec. Peut-être plus Charles, mais c'est rare que ça ne va pas que... puis généralement quand ça va pas, je le dit toute suite... Mais on doit parler peut-être tactique le plus. Psychologique, it's just if I need it I'll go and see them. Ça c'est une chose que Andrew m'a montré, comment me coacher toute seule. Quand je descend de toujours me concentrer et puis de toujours penser qu'est ce que je fais. Ça fait que j'arrive en bas d'une run et je sais qu'est ce que j'ai fait de mal ou je sais qu'est ce que j'ai fait de mauvais. Avec Dave I just tell him and he agrees or he disagrees puis il me dit qu'est ce qu'il pense. Puis il me laisse aller là. (Athlete S, interview 2)

Finally, the athlete with the most experience on this team was Athlete C. Dave described her by saying: "the quiet leader of the group... The girls look up to her, she has the best rankings on the team." (Dave, interview 1). She felt that she is half-and-half with the coaches in terms of being the initiator of all types of messages. She was in this sense somewhere between the younger athletes and the World Cup athlete. (Athlete C, telephone communication). Thus there did appear to be a general progression in term of the roles that the athletes played in the communication process with their coaches.

Gender. In this world of sport that is still largely a male world, it appeared as if the sociocultural system encouraged the women to model themselves after the "Be tough" male ideal, but at the same time, did not allow them the same social freedom. The coaches either did not want to deal with the emotional aspects of coaching women or they did not have the skills to do so. Yet the same coaches that encouraged the athletes to take responsibility and move towards autonomy regarding training and managing recovery from injury did not seem altogether ready to give the women autonomy in other, mainly social areas. (Athlete C confirmed this, personal telephone communication). It should be

noted that the athletes on this team felt that their coaches were more progressive on this issue than other coaches they had had. Even at the World Cup level the gender and power issue presents a problem.

I still sometimes think that people know what's better for me... Sometimes you are dealing with people that you are trying to communicate that to, who are your elders, who are higher up in society, who are male, who are... You know, I sit there and I go into meetings with the program director and it is so hard. It's tough for me because he very easily intimidates me and talks me down just because his position and my position... And so there is struggle there too. But I came to the bottom line this year and said, "I want to be happy with what I am doing and I want to enjoy what I do". (Athlete B, late season interview)

This more experienced athlete echoed the younger athletes when she said that she wants to be happy and enjoy her involvement in the sport. This is an important issue for these women athletes, and one that seemed to be influenced by a positive coaching approach.

Coaching women and being positive. Dave was an assistant men's coach for the previous two seasons, working with older athletes, mostly well into their twenties. Thus he had to make adjustments for coaching younger athletes as well as females. When I asked him if he found it quite different being with the females than with the males he said:

Yeah. A lot of this, quite a bit of this coddling kind of attitude, where you have to... I think that emotionally that they're more fragile, at least that they show that they're more emotionally fragile. Guys sort of don't really, they don't talk about that stuff and they don't... Don't really show it. You know and they need a lot of reassurance and building of self-confidence it seems to me, especially the younger ones who haven't had a lot of success yet. So that in itself, you have to I guess spend more time reassuring and building confidence... The other thing with girls, you have to be really careful what you say. They are really sensitive to everything. Or what you don't say, as we've talked about, you know... You know, silence can be deadly, and be careful, a lot of things, they don't say anything about it, when you've said something, but you know that it comes back to haunt you later, or do well for you later... they remember everything, they

never forget anything you say... I think guys are a little less like that, they're less like that. They are a little less sensitive to what you say. You can be a little tough and rougher with them and you don't have really bite your tongue all the time with guys. It's more like water just beads off, it doesn't soak into the material.  
(Dave, interview2)

The women athletes stressed the importance of the coaches taking a positive approach. On the whole the coaches of the junior team were positive in their style of coaching. Still the comments of Athlete R above concerning how she adapted by blocking out negative feedback, demonstrated that this was an issue. Another athlete said, regarding an earlier coaching change, "things were so much better then, like I understood skiing more, he was positive, and then I started to tell him what I wanted" (Athlete P, interview 1). These words describe clearly the progression of an athlete who felt that when the coach was more positive, she was more able to participate openly in the communication process. In this next comment Athlete R actually pointed out the confidence-communication relationship.

YOU SEEM TO HAVE MADE THE RELATIONSHIP THAT WHEN YOU ARE COMMUNICATING WELL WITH THE COACHES, YOUR CONFIDENCE IS HIGHER?

Yeah, definitely! That's really key. Definitely... Because you start to go with assumptions when you are not communicating well. Even if they're not true, which is really bad. That's really, really key. (Athlete R, interview 2)

Blanca, the older World Cup athlete supported the opinions of the younger athletes.

But as I said before at the level that I am racing at now, at World Cup, it's not a lot of technical coaching that you really need, it's a lot of motivational coaching, for myself personally, and I think a lot of other women especially. Umm, it's not a lot for a coach to tell you how to turn right and left, it's more you need a lot of emotional support, motivational support. You have to really believe that they believe in you... That coaches positively, as opposed to negatively. I am definitely 100% a positive worker. I need to know, "Okay Blanca that was good,

now to improve that do this” and then I get up and I feel confident about myself when I get out of the start gate again. (Athlete B, interview, late season)

Good times and bad times. Closely related to the connection between the coach being positive, the communication improving and the athlete’s confidence increasing, is the issue of what happens when the athlete is going through a period of poor performances.

... I think a coach has to stick with you in the good times and the bad times, and some coaches they are just think like... Of course they are going to be like “Come on” when you are skiing well it’s all, I mean you know how it is, like it is all good. But I think it is even more important to have a coach like Dave and Charles are great, ‘cause, they don’t, they understand that you are not going to have a good day everyday. And that is when you really need a coach, is to get you through the bad times because the faster you can do that the better you are going to be. And it has happened a lot. I mean, it has happened a lot. I mean, I have had really good coaches, but it happens all the time. You hear someone say, “Oh my coach won’t talk to me today because I’m skiing bad”. And that really doesn’t solve anything. I think that is like a *big* problem. Or, and I think that is when coaches have to work with you the most, because when things are going wrong, they have to help you fix them. And maybe coaches don’t know how to fix them, but at least they have to work with you and you have to feel their support. But I think that the coaches that have been the best for me are the ones that can help me on the bad days, to get through them, and overcome those days. Because I think that more you can overcome those days the better skier you are going to be, because you will know how to deal with them and overcome them. When things are going really bad, you believe that they won’t stick with you through thick and thin, but they always did... In those times I find it really hard to tell coaches only about that stuff, “Listen, I need more support here”. Like that is the hardest thing that I have to say. (Athlete R, interview 1)

#### Accuracy of the Findings According to Dave

When the results were written up I was able to meet with the coach, Dave and have him read through the entire results. Before he started I felt it important to point out that if the purpose of a study were to examine the communication process with the practical intent of eventually improving it, it would necessary to look at the problems that occurred. Thus, I continued, the focus of the results section that he was about to read was

on some of the problems that resulted in the communication cycle being broken. This focus, I assured him, should not give the impression that the general state of coach-athlete communication within his team was problematic. Indeed, there were relatively few communication problems observed and the athletes felt that the communication situation on the team was positive. With that proviso, Dave read through the findings.

While he was reading it he commented on “On-Going Issue #1”, remarking that he had tried to remind himself to sit down with the athlete and go through her goals, but that the season had just caught up on them and it had never happened. He said that he was planning to make it a point not to let that occur in the next season. When finished he asked for one small change in the wording of one of his quotations and then said that it was very good. He said that having only read his own two interview transcripts prior to reading the document, he found it very interesting to read the other participants points of view.

At that point I asked him if it was all clear to him and he replied that there was no problem. Then I asked what he felt he had retained from the reading. He said that reading through the analysis of the interactions was amazing, and added: “It’s like having a video of your self working, but better because you get to see it from the other people’s view too”. We talked further and arrived at this analogy: The reading of the incidents was akin to having a mirror of his work that allowed him to see behind each other individual’s words, helping to explain why communication did not always go as well as it might.

## Discussion

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the results obtained, six points will be discussed. Firstly, we will make a judgement on the case studied. When conducting a study on one case, the researcher is taking a risk because he or she will not know until later in the study how much the participants are willing to contribute, and be open to discuss with detail the issues brought up by the researcher. An evaluation by the researcher on the capacity of the team to assume the role of 'participant' will assist the reader to make a first judgement on the quality of the research. The perspectives of the coaches and the athletes at the start of the competitive season will be remarked upon for the second point. This will be followed by a discussion of the roles played by the coaches and the athletes in the communication process once the competitions began. The fourth point will address the topic of being a female adolescent on a team coached by males. The next section examines the importance, to the athletes, of a positive atmosphere. The sixth point will attempt to situate within the literature an important aspect in the life of an athlete: injury. All the athletes in this study were at one point during the season injured and this topic appeared as one of the issues. The final part of the discussion will argue the pertinence of using the model of Fuoss and Troppmann (1981) for the analysis of the communication process.

### The Case

Given that the present study was realized with only one sport team, it is necessary to raise an important nuance concerning the type of case study. Stake (1995) deciphered between an intrinsic case study, which is carried out because the researcher has some intrinsic interest, and an instrumental case study that is undertaken to gain understanding

about something other than the actual case. The principal objective of this research was not to study this ski team but to better understand the communication process as occurs in an elite sporting milieu. An individual trusted by the researcher, with a good knowledge of the coaches and the system was asked to recommend a team. That person suggested the junior women's team. A women's team coached by two males presented another component of the issue of women in sport, as well as, the context of coaching adolescent athletes.

Beyond a recommendation, there are criteria that have been suggested for the selection of participants. Rubin and Rubin (1995) maintain that the people you are going to interview should fulfil three requirements. They should be knowledgeable about the cultural arena or experience being studied; they must be willing to talk; and if various perspectives are thought to be at work in the context, they should represent a range of points of view.

The participants in our study met these criteria. Evidence from the beginning of the season, suggests that others in the field thought the head coach, Dave, was a suitable person to work with this team; a team perceived by other coaches to have had a difficult history. He had worked several years in the team office before becoming an assistant with the men's team for the two previous seasons. Charles was an ex-junior team athlete who had raced professionally before turning to coaching; first at the club level, then three years with a provincial team. The two coaches had relatively little coaching experience at this level, but their experience suggests that they should have had sufficient knowledge of the ski racing sub-culture. It might be assumed that with their relatively limited

experience at the international level, these coaches were selected to coach this team on the basis of their interpersonal aptitudes.

The criterion “openness on the part of the participants” was very much in evidence during the study. The coaches presented me to the athletes and made access to the team very available, including during training sessions, meetings, and competitions. Dave kept me in touch and facilitated arrangements for travel and accommodation, making it possible for me to be with the team for a maximum number of hours each day. The openness of the participants demonstrated a high level of trust. The coach and several of the athletes initiated communications with me, often by e-mail or telephone.

It is important to underline that this team is not atypical in the sense that there were not a lot of problems, and the problems encountered are probably of the same general nature as those that most coaches and athletes might face during a season. In support of this point, I present for a second time, a comment by one of the athletes concerning her interactions with Dave:

... it's been really good. This is the only time I've ever had a problem the whole season, so I think that is pretty impressive. And now that he is aware of it, it's already been better. (Athlete R, interview 2)

### The Perspectives

The focus of the off-season was, as is typical, a lot of technical work and the establishment of coach-athlete relationships. It was a period during which the coaches and athletes were in a “train-to-train” mode. As the off-season ended, the perspectives of the coaches and the athletes on effective communication were the same as those promoted by numerous authors and coaching education programs (CAC, 1989; Martens, 1997; Nakamura, 1996; Orlick, 1986). That is, both the coaches and the athletes in this

study believed that communication should be positive and interactive, just as recommended by these authors. With the start of the competitive season, a discrepancy began to appear between these perspectives and what was really happening. The problems raised herein show that during competitions, coaches sometimes stray from their philosophy of good communication. Dave in particular experienced frustrations, mostly due to external pressures such as the pressure to have his athletes perform, and staff cuts. Added to this were the stresses of a long competitive season, in this case from mid-November until early April with only a few days off. Dale & Weinberg, (1990) reviewed burnout in sport and described coaches as prime candidates for burnout due to the environment within which they function, which includes the normal stressors of those in the helping professions as well as additional stressors such as high pressure to perform, and the variety of roles they are required to fulfill. Wilson and Bird (1984) found that Canadian coaches who were full time, were having a losing season, and had a high number of contact hours with their athletes, experienced higher levels of burnout. Dave, as the competitive season progressed, was exposed to all of the above determinants of burnout, and demonstrated symptoms of burnout including exhaustion and lowered desire to do one's job well (Vernacchia, 1992). Yukelson (1998) related that burnout can have an adverse affect on coaches' capacity to transmit and receive messages. The incident "When silence means neglect" is an example of the coach, Dave, being so overwhelmed by stresses that he was not even aware that his lack of communication was affecting the athletes.

The difference between what might be predicted according to stated perspectives and what actually occurs has been highlighted by Strong (1992). He reported that youth

sport coaches, in post-season interviews, rated sportsmanship as the most important reason for youths to play football, and winning as the least important reason. This declared philosophy was almost directly the opposite of their observed coaching in actual practices and games. Another study noted that coaches can behave differently during training sessions compared to during competitions (Wandzilak, Ansorge, & Potter, 1988). This might be explained by the nature of the coaching task, which is different for training sessions than for competitions. During practice the coach has the opportunity to plan drills and exercises, whereas a competition environment often requires that the coach adapt to various situations (Gilbert, Trudel, & Haughian, 1999). At the beginning of the competitive season, Dave commented on his knowledge of the athletes. He stated:

I have figured them out pretty much to their maximum capacity in training I just haven't seen them race. You know and racing is sort of 50% of the deal. So I know them pretty well and how they react day to day and in their training, and fitness, and what works on the hill and what doesn't, you know our discussions have opened up quite well. We can interact pretty well and tell each other exactly what we want. I just haven't had them in a racing environment yet. (Dave, interview 1).

These comments indicated that he understood that there are significant differences between the training and the competitive environment. In the sport of skiing these differences are accentuated because for the duration of the competitive season, nearly all training that takes place does so within the competitive environment, that is it takes the form of a few runs or a half day of training after or between competitions. The competitive skiing season means long months on the road, moving from one competition site to another. There are almost never times during this season when the coach can plan a training session in the same manner as is possible during the off-season. Coaches and teams have to adapt to the conditions that are available and make the best use of the time

and terrain allotted to them for short training periods in between races. Thus the differences between the training environment and the competing environment are significant.

Another probable explanation for coaches changing their behavior is the importance they accord to winning. Strong (1992) remarked, “when winning became the most important reason for playing, the other purposes – learning skills, discipline, sportsmanship, and having fun – were not seriously pursued” (p. 325). Furthermore, Chaumeton and Duda (1988) found that coaches of elite teams put more weight on the importance of winning than coaches of non-elite teams.

The coaches of this elite team, in particular Dave, suffered not only from the effects of a long, concentrated, working season. There were also times when Dave was under intense pressure from the administration to obtain results. This is not an unknown phenomenon. It has been noted by Bernard (1998) that coaches are often evaluated solely on the performance of their teams. This tends to have the unfortunate effect of tainting their interventions with their athletes. In this case, the effect was so evident that it was decided to add this external pressure to the factors influencing communication. The athletes also expressed that they felt a pressure to perform and live up to their selection to the junior national team. All these variables, the long season, the pressure to perform, the elite level of the team, and the following nuance combined to sabotage the maintenance of good communication once the competitive season began.

The words used by the coaches and the athletes were very similar regarding the importance of having an interactive approach to communication. However, a close reading of the transcripts showed that this communication should, as far as the coaches

were concerned, take place within the parameters of hard work. Their view on hard work is understandable. In his book for coaches Orlick (1986) stated: "Leading Olympic athletes work incredibly hard to achieve the highest level of performance, regardless of sport or country of origin" (p. 1). The athletes, for their part, put greater emphasis on the importance of a positive, agreeable environment in which to work. For example, one athlete said: "I like working hard and I have no problem with that, but you have got to enjoy it too. I improve usually lots when I'm having fun, even thinking less about my skiing" (Athlete R, interview 1).

Other studies such as the one by Wilcox and Trudel (1998) have demonstrated that in competitive sports, the variable "effort of the players" occupies an important place in some coaches' philosophies. Fine's (1987) study found that lack of effort by players was perceived as a serious problem for coaches that were very concerned with winning. In the present study, a milieu where winning is a major concern, Athlete S, in the incident called "Where were you coach?", was perceived by the coach as not having a good work ethic, and this affected the coach's attitude towards her.

On the other hand, the aspect of "fun" or "enjoyment" is considered important to young amateur athletes (Boyd, Trudel, & Donohue, 1997), Olympic athletes (Werthner, 1998), and professional athletes (Barbour, 1994). Thus, even though the coaches and the athletes agree on the elements of effective communication, they have different views concerning the atmosphere in which such effective communication should occur. As mentioned, Strong (1992) found that in youth sport, learning skills and having fun were among various phenomena that were not seriously pursued when winning became the most important reason for participating. It seems likely that this junior national team

might have presented a particular communication challenge. Contributing to this likelihood are the fact that the level and age of the athletes placed them in a transition period in which winning was important; but at the same time learning skills was still very important for the proper development of the athletes, and having fun was viewed by the athletes as an essential element of their continued desire to persist

### Definition of the Roles

Most references to roles in sport psychology literature are in relation to group factors and effective team building. In this study we looked at the respective roles of the coaches and the athletes in the communication process. The types of support that an athlete might need were designated, for the purposes of this study, as technical, tactical, and psychological. It was found that the role of initiator in the communication process varied depending on the referent, or type of support that was being communicated in the message. The maturity of the athlete and her level of performance also influenced whether the coach or the athlete was more likely to initiate the message.

The flow of information from the coach to the athlete is an indication of who is initiating the messages. The expert basketball coaches interviewed by Bloom, Schinke, and Salmela (1997) felt that they had used a more autocratic style of leadership early in their careers when they were coaching younger athletes. Trudel, Côté, and Bernard (1996) found that youth ice hockey coaches acted like a one-man show, controlling most of the action and initiating most of the messages. While it is logical that an athlete of lower skill level will require more instruction, the present study showed that coaches can develop athlete responsibility towards the learning process, even with young athletes. Athlete S recounted that a coach that encouraged his athletes to partake in the learning

process had previously trained her. The apparent result of this coach's work was that Dave remarked that conversing with her about technique was much more like talking to a 28-year-old than to the 18-year-old she is. In terms of the athletes, it is worth looking at Bloom's (1985) study of the development of international-level performance in sport and other domains of expertise. The athletes in this study would be in the third stage of his proposed stages of development, having made a major commitment to reach the top level of performance in skiing. In this stage the role of the coach moves from more directive to more supportive. Within Dave's team, the athletes were at different points within the third stage, and therefore required varying degrees support from the coach.

Coaching literature supports a gradual shift toward athlete autonomy or at least increased responsibility as the athlete moves closer to being a mature elite. Coaches take on more of a supporting role at this stage (Bloom, Schinke, & Salmela, 1997). Some authors are very explicit about empowering the athletes. Clifford and Feezell (1997) stated:

Respect for the potential of young athletes to learn... means making decisions for them... But there is great danger that we will forget the purpose of making these decisions. Education is an inescapably paternalistic undertaking... but it is a paradoxical sort of paternalism... the purpose of this paternalism is to *educate* them (students), that is, to bring them to the point at which they can make responsible decisions for themselves... the ultimate purpose is to help your players grow into autonomous adults. (p. 83-84).

Bloom (1996) reported that coaches at the highest ranks of their profession say the following about letting athletes have their say: "My philosophy is to coach them so they can play without me. I don't want them to become dependent on me. I want them to make decisions on their own" (p. 63).

The ability to delegate responsibility seems to be linked to respect for the athletes, which appears to be a key criterion in the make-up of highly successful coaches (Bloom, 1996; Jackson, 1995; Wooden, 1988). In a survey of Canadian Olympians at the Nagano Games, athletes chose “coaches’ respect for athletes” as a crucial element of good coaching (personal communication, W. Halliwell, September 1998). The following description from a top Canadian athlete typifies an open and respectful relationship with his coach.

It’s very open, very candid. For me it’s a good thing. He is like a coach and a friend too...he gives me a lot of freedom and I’m an athlete that needs a lot of freedom. (Werthner, 1998)

Evidence from other top athletes supports the idea that a high degree of autonomy, and responsibility for learning are integral elements of positive sporting experiences (Orlick & Partington, 1986). There will always be individual differences as to how much autonomy is recommended and the elite athletes in Werthner ‘s (1998) study felt that it was very important that coaches treat every athlete as an individual, designing training and competition schedules to suit their unique needs. As mentioned by Werthner, this is a challenge for national team coaches.

Returning to the definition of roles, individual differences aside, the junior team women in this study felt that the coach initiated at least half or more of the messages pertaining to technique and tactics. The coaches’ and the athletes’ perceptions on this division of initiating matched. When it came to psychological issues, there was less agreement on the respective roles. The athletes found it very difficult to approach the coaches with these problems and the coaches felt that it was not up to them to initiate messages regarding such issues. As a result coach-athlete communication regarding this

whole area of support was a problem. As a society we recognize that these issues are not easy to talk about; thus the existence of a variety of professions centered around the act of counseling. The coaches in this study felt that it was beyond their capacity to deal with “heavy” psychological issues. Nonetheless, the job of coaching does require the effective coach to be able to understand many psychological aspects. One of the attributes of great coaches is that they listen to others (Bloom, 1996).

Interestingly, Egan (1998) sees empathy as an intellectual process. He presents this intellectual process as a communication skill, made up of empathic listening and the ability to communicate this understanding to the other person. Athletes, like anybody else need to feel empathy if they are going to divulge their psychologically related problems, including showing their emotions. As pointed out by the World Cup athlete in this study, this type of support is perhaps the most important requirement for many athletes, especially at the elite levels (Werthner, 1998). This athlete painted a very clear picture of the situation that arose in this context, where athletes and coaches traveled and lived together in hotels most of the year. She said when an athlete is unable to communicate with their coach about difficult subjects these issues are brushed under the carpet because, “You don’t want to start a major argument with the person that you are going to eat dinner with” (Athlete B, interview). Several incidents in this study showed that to avoid communicating about difficult issues led to further problems.

Effective communication depends on mutual sharing and understanding (Orlick, 1986). The word communication comes from the Latin *communico*, which means to share. Furthermore the word respect is from a Latin derivative that includes the idea of “seeing” or “viewing” another person’s value (Egan, 1998). Athletes need to share and

coaches need to show respect and empathy. Sharing requires trust and assertiveness, on the part of the sender, and empathy on the part of the receiver. The women and coaches in this study had some problems with these, especially when the pressures of the competitive season were upon them.

### Female Adolescent Athletes Coached by Males

The heading of this section incorporates three potential power differences; between female and male, adolescents and adults, and athletes and coaches. It was not the intention of this paper to take a feminist approach, and in fact, within this team the only actual incident concerning perceived, gender bias was “Smarten Up or They are Over-protective”. However, one of the athletes, when asked about the coaches initiating messages replied: “Psychologique, (elle rit) je ne pense pas. C’est toujours à propos, ‘Est-ce que tu es dans tes PMS?’ Stupid questions like that. You are like, ‘What the heck?’ (Athlete S, interview 2). When the athletes hear their coaches making comments like this, it is bound to leave them with some questions regarding their coaches’ attitude towards them. On the whole the women did not feel this issue was a problem with their coaches. The two least experienced athletes, when asked if they believed the coaches treated them differently because they are females, answered simply, “No”. Thus gender power differences did not appear as a major issue on this team, and primarily it seemed to be the power differences between adolescents and adults, and especially between athletes and coaches that posed more problems for communication. All these differences are part of the sociocultural system in which the coaches and the athletes interacted. In relation to power differences, the issue of assertiveness will now be discussed.

Several authors have noted the importance of athletes learning to be assertive; to stand up for things that are important to them (Connolly & Rotella, 1991; Howe, 1993). Despite this, Connolly and Rotella also noted that sport psychology consultants working with athletes to help them communicate effectively often fail to prepare athletes with the required skills. Athletes in Bianco's (1996) study agreed that as a newcomer to the team it was harder to challenge coaches and these athletes were inclined to do as they were told. These younger athletes were inclined to feel more pressure, pressure that stemmed from their concern with how they were perceived by the coaches. In fact, Anshel (1990) reported that: "Participants of all ages and levels of expertise feel various degrees of anxiety about the coach's personal feelings about them" (p. 409).

In the present study, there is also clear evidence that the younger athletes have a harder time expressing their concerns, and do not want to appear like complainers to the coaches. According to the literature, people have difficulty being assertive for such reasons as worrying what others will think of them, lack of confidence, vulnerability, and lack of awareness (Connolly & Rotella, 1991; Egan, 1998). Connolly and Rotella found as consultants that some athletes have been socialized to fake honesty in communication so as to appear to "agree" with the coach in order to stay on the coach's good side. This concern with looking good to the coaches surfaced in the incident "When silence means neglect". In the same incident, the coach and the athletes recognized that lack of confidence was an issue for the athletes. The two athletes involved in this incident, Athletes T and R were feeling vulnerable, not having been selected to travel to the World Juniors with the rest of the team. They were also unaware of the demands on their coach because of short staffing and an exhausting schedule. Connolly and Rotella also noted:

“Some athletes tend to think coaches see things (or should see things) the way athletes do... athletes need to see what is important to the coach” (p. 75). It is not surprising that these athletes had trouble asserting themselves, and communicating effectively with their coaches.

Assertiveness is a social behavior that requires time and practice to learn (Yukelson, 1998). Older athletes may learn to be more assertive, but their standing in the prevailing sociocultural system seems to be a factor as well. In the context of this study, as previously mentioned, the team relies on sponsorship dollars, so podium finished are critical to funding. Athletes in the Bianco (1996) study felt that podium athletes held a more secure position within the team and were put under less pressure than were other athletes. Even so, Blanca the 20-year-old top 10 World Cup athlete, expressed how difficult it is for her to assert herself within a system that is run by men; a system in which she felt there are considerable power differences between young female athletes and older male coaches and administrators.

Numerous authors have written about women, culture, and sport (Birrell & Cole, 1994; Lenskyj, 1990; Krane, 1994). As mentioned previously, many of these studies are conducted within the American college sport context. Other research has looked at the empowerment of women through participation in sport, often as a leisure activity. One such study examined the meaning of windsurfing for women (Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). They proposed that women windsurfers shared their identities more with male windsurfers than with non-windersurfing women. This same conclusion might be made for the women skiers in this study. However, that does not change the reality: “Females’ experiences of sports cultures within patriarchal societies is one of constant negotiation of

gendered power relations” (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). The coaches of the junior women’s team were perceived by the athletes as being open-minded on gender issues. Despite this, the patriarchal nature of the sub-culture, e.g., no women coaches, influences the power relations between the athletes and the coaches. When these young women athletes have sensitive issues that they need to discuss with their coaches, they are often afraid to present these problems fearing that their emotions will come out and that this will affect the coaches’ perceptions of them. One (male) ex-national team coach said the “problem” with women athletes is: “They cry when they lose and they cry when they win!” It is still basically a macho, “be tough” world in which open displays of emotion are regarded as a sign of weakness.

Beyond power issues, there are gender differences in the best type of approach for coaches working with female athletes. As previously mentioned, the women on this team felt that their coaches were less gender biased than some previous coaches they had had. Therefore, it is likely that these more subtle issues concerning what works best when coaching women did not surface often. Dave did mention that he made an effort to be careful about the things he said to the women, remarking that they never seemed to forget anything he said. The literature suggests that women place a much greater emphasis on the importance of relationships (Kilty, 1999), which is probably why the women do not forget the coach’s words. Their relationship with the coach is important to them. Even though Charles had been coaching women for three years, he was surprised by the nuance that the athletes said would change how they received his information in the “When the coach’s advice is ignored” incident. The athletes wanted to be informed of the course conditions in terms of what the other women racing were doing. This also fits with a key

difference that has been documented between coaching men and women. Women athletes have shown a preference for information that is contextualized.

### The Importance of a Positive Approach

The importance of being positive is well documented in the coaching literature (CAC, 1989; Martens, 1997; Nakamura, 1996; Orlick, 1986). Smith, Smoll, and Curtis (1979) found that a positive interpersonal climate was conducive to greater athlete satisfaction, and higher self-esteem. The women in this study were adamant about the importance of a coach being positive. They felt they learned better, and performed better in a positive atmosphere. Beyond feedback and other coaching interactions, the women said that it was very important to them to have fun, to enjoy what they were doing. As mentioned above, “enjoyment” is considered important by athletes of all levels. A recent article by d’Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, and Dubois (1998), about the perceived effectiveness of interactions between expert French judo coaches and elite female athletes goes completely against the idea of coaches being positive, open communicators that show respect for their athletes. The coaches in the French study were authoritative and they purposely used different strategies to maintain their authority. These strategies included such behaviors as provoking athletes verbally, showing indifference, and entering into direct conflict with athletes. The athletes displayed strategies that demonstrated compatibility between them and the coaches, regarding effective interactions. Such strategies are totally the opposite of those recommended in North American coaching literature. These differences indicate enormous cultural differences between French judo athletes and Canadian skiers: European versus Canadian and judo versus skiing. The sub-cultures of the two sports and the national cultures are both

factors. Another study of Japanese judo coaches working in Canada found that these coaches had to soften their approach within the Canadian context (Moraes, 1998)

Canadian teenagers are part of mainstream North American culture, and the athletes that compete on the national team in this study come from an environment in which choice is an integral part. They indicated a clear choice to commit themselves to the sport, but not at the expense of having their enjoyment taken away from them. These are the words of one of the athletes.

But a big part of it for me is also having a lot of fun. I kind of decided this year, you never know how long you are going to get to ski. You can always be injured. You have got to make the best of every year and enjoy it and we're pretty lucky to go where we get to go, so I don't want anyone or anybody to get in my way of enjoying it.  
(Athlete R, interview 1)

Scanlan and Lewthwaite's (1986) sport commitment model maintains that commitment is a product of cognitive and affective factors. The cognitive component involves weighing up of the relative desirability of alternative activities. The affective component is sport enjoyment. As declared, the young athletes in this study have choices. They choose to be ski racers, but if their enjoyment of the activity is removed, they indicate they will choose to do something else. The French judo coaches are not concerned if their negative approach scares away the odd athlete. They say that they have plenty more to fill their spot. Apart from the moral and philosophical issues that underlie the recommended North American coaching approach, this country can not afford to chase away its' elite athletes, since we do not have huge numbers of them.

#### Recovery from Injury and the Athlete's Return to the Sport

The high number of injuries sustained by athletes in this sport makes the communication regarding the injuries an important issue. The results of this study

indicate that coach-athlete interactions surrounding the athlete's return to the sport are particularly delicate. The on-going issue "When are you coming back" highlighted the difficulties of these interactions.

Williams, Rotella, and Heyman (1998) have noted that in the last decade the literature on the psychological aspects of injury rehabilitation has gone from being almost non-existent to over 30 published articles and at least two entire books. Traditionally an athlete that was physically fit was considered ready to return to competition. As witnessed by the statements of the injured athletes in this study, this is not always true. Physical fitness does not equate to mental readiness.

Bianco (1996) examined the social support influences on recovery from sport injuries of skiers using a qualitative approach. The context of her study was the same as the present study and her findings are pertinent to the interpretation of the communication between the coach and the injured athletes. The extensive reference to Bianco's study is warranted because the present findings confirm many of those reported in her study. The participants in the earlier study were nearly all Olympians and World Cup skiers, thus they had already passed through the stage of the athletes in the current study.

Bianco (1996) found that the support from coaches was limited and varied according to the relationship between the athlete and the coach. The two athletes most affected by injury in this team were Athletes P and M. Neither of these athletes had an established relationship with Dave since they had missed most or all of the summer training due to their injuries. The athletes in Bianco's study stated that contact from the coach was often perceived as pressure since frequently their relationship with the coach was performance based. This seemed to be the situation in this study. Just as the athletes in the present

study wanted to be the ones in control of the decision to return to the sport, Bianco's participants said that following medical clearance the ultimate decision must be left up to the athlete.

In terms of the athletes feeling pressure to perform, either real or perceived, from the coaches, Bianco (1996) found that this was influenced by two factors: "The athlete's performance record and the team's perception of the athlete's work ethic" (p. 195). Both of these factors surfaced in the present case. In terms of performance record, we saw that the junior team women, who had not yet met the criteria to be a fully funded team member, experienced pressure to return. An athlete from the "C" team, secure in having met the criteria, felt no pressure. It needs to be noted here that junior team members fund part of their expenses, and they have to meet team selection criteria by the time they reach the age of 20, when they become seniors. A senior who has not met the standards is removed from the team. Both of these realities, the money and the need to prove oneself, have the potential to add to the pressure that an injured junior athlete might feel. Although the coaches did not expect the returning athletes to be 100%, the discomfort that the athletes felt concerning their return seems to have stemmed in part from the macho, be tough work ethic that is part of this sub-culture.

The results of the present study confirmed Bianco's results in another aspect: The athletes stressed that their recovery stretched well into the comeback season. Athletes in both studies remarked that missing the summer training was a much greater handicap than previously acknowledged. The "C" team athlete mentioned above explained how difficult the comeback season can be, even without feeling the pressure from coaches.

This year has been tough though because I missed all summer training, and I really noticed that I've missed that. I am missing a lot of consistency in my

skiing. So I think it is going pretty well, I'm pretty happy with what I'm doing, but sometimes it's tough. I get pretty discouraged when I don't do very well and I know I could be... I'm not where I should be, or I could... And I know it's because of my knee and because I've had an injury, but its tough to sort of accept that. I think it has been really good with the coaches. They didn't... I came back and just took it easy on snow. They didn't push me at all. It was almost like I was pushing myself more than they were.  
(Athlete I, "C" team, interview, late season)

Better communication between coaches and returning athletes regarding realistic expectations for the athletes would lay a more solid foundation for a context in which the athletes could feel less pressure.

#### The Pros and Cons of Using Fuoss and Troppmann's Model

The first interviews, realized before the period of competitions, allowed us to discover the philosophy of the coaches and the athletes at that moment in the season. Gradually, as the field notes added to the content of the interviews, it became apparent that a better understanding of the communication process could be achieved by documenting certain incidents and by trying to reconstruct the situations, identifying where the interactions broke down. For this purpose we used the model of Fuoss and Troppmann (1981). We are therefore in a position to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the model.

One advantage is that the model was proposed by and for individuals in the profession of coaching. The examples that Fuoss and Troppmann provided are from the sporting milieu, consequently they are easy to understand. The model is made up of the same basic elements as those in models (e.g., the model of Jakobson, 1963) proposed for general communication theory (Alin, 1996) except for the addition of factors that can interfere with effective communication. In the present study these factors were very useful in the effort to better understand the communication process. Powers (1995)

developed a detailed model of the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline. He placed all communication theory and research in a four-tiered model, the tiers being: Message-centered, communicator-centered, level-centered, and situation-centered. This study, using the Fuoss and Troppmann model to analyze coach-athlete communication, fits within Power's structure. Elements of the message and the communicator were analyzed within the interpersonal relationships between the coaches and the athletes, all within a competitive sport setting.

The biggest disadvantage is that the model has never, to our knowledge, been tested in empirical research. Several drawbacks surfaced during its use in this study. The first of these is the addition of a fifth factor, external pressure. The data compelled us to put this factor in the model, and actually it is apparent that such external pressures as those arising from sponsors, parents, and administration influence many sporting contexts. These pressures infiltrate the immediate context and can alter the communication process between coaches and athletes.

Another disadvantage is the static nature of the model. As presented by Fuoss and Troppmann, it resembles a stop-action photograph that does not have the capacity to conceptualize communication as an interaction that might, in fact, have started at some earlier time. The manner in which the four factors are presented gives the impression that they are fixed. Our study has however demonstrated that during or after an incident, certain factors, such as attitude, can be altered. Rather than considering communication as a still photo, it needs to be considered more like an on-going process, conceptualized perhaps as a spiral. A further disadvantage was the confusion between some of the factors. Does, for example, the issue of language of communication (French versus

English) fall under the coach's communication skills or knowledge level? Or is it a sociocultural issue? The model has to fit to the context and in Canada, that context is bilingual.

### Conclusion

This research set out to better understand the communication process in sport. In an effort to respect the exploratory nature of the research, an inductive approach was favored. The first interviews indicated an accordance between the desire of the coaches on one hand, to provide a training environment in which communication was open and, on the other hand, the wishes of the athletes to be able to talk to their coaches. Observation revealed that this ideal of two-way communication got lost, at times, in the heat of the action. Therefore certain incidents were dissected using the Fuoss and Troppmann (1981) model with the goal of understanding why the process of communication went awry. While certain shortcomings of the model probably limited the analysis to particular aspects of each problem, what this study has achieved is nonetheless much more than research on coach-athlete communication has so far accomplished. This research has raised important issues such as the training of athletes in assertiveness and the education of coaches.

A clinic on coach-athlete communication at the start of the season or during coaching courses will likely not help much as it was only when coaches and athletes were in action that the problems arose, and each problem occurred in a particular context. Instead, a case study approach similar to that used in educating doctors and business people might be envisioned.

Both coaches indicated that they learned a lot from participating in the study, even though the primary objective was not to train the coaches. Sport psychology consultants solicited to resolve communication problems could adopt the methodology used in this study.

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## Appendix A

### Concept Map of Personal Philosophy:

The athlete, the environment, and the road to performance:

#### Introduction.

The goal of my concept map is to illustrate a holistic view of the athlete, within their environment, on a journey that embodies the possibility to experience, through sport, the many factors that influence socialization, development, and personal growth. An important assumption underlying the model is the idea that the sport experience is an opportunity to learn about life and many of its challenges, including the pursuit of excellence, with all the pitfalls along the way.

Researchers and consultants alike have stressed the importance of considering the athlete within the context. Bloom recognized that one has to study the performer within his or her milieu to get a true picture of the factors that affect the acquisition of expertise. Hence, his model describing the characteristics of talented performers covers three stages and includes features of the parents and the teachers of the performer. Bloom's ideas form the basis of Ericsson's approach to the development of expert performance from a much more holistic view than earlier models (Ericsson, 1997).

In order for a model of performance to be broadly applicable, it needs to take into account a very complex set of variables and the interactions between them. This requires an interdisciplinary approach. The authors of an English article on future directions for performance-related sports research also recommend interdisciplinary work that considers the elite athlete as a 'total person' (Burwitz, Moore & Wilkinson, 1994). Sports psychology consultants Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, and Rotella (1997) state that it is important to show "respect for an athlete or coach as a whole person and not just as an athlete or coach" (p. 12). Botterill (19), in discussing his work with a professional hockey team emphasizes that "it is often satisfaction and effectiveness in ... off-ice activities that enable players to start to approach their potential on the ice" (p. 359).

On this basis my concept map shows the athlete facing the challenges of skiing through a course that symbolizes many of the variables that face athletes on their journey toward expertise. The idea for the course comes from a tool often used in the better children's ski schools. The tool is called a terrain garden and offers young skiers various challenges and a lot of fun. While these settings are not directly competitive, I have added a head-to-head slalom to incorporate competition.

The direction of the map has the skier starting at the top, centre, and going down the middle towards the finish. At various spots along the way, the skier is challenged and, depending on the approach, the individual will either follow the left route or the right route. This means that the skier can either go down the middle, on one side or the other, and out the bottom, or circle back up to the start via either the right or left side.

#### The Start.

At the top the athlete is standing in their environment, surrounded by family, friends, teachers/ coaches/mentors, mental training consultant, and other people of the community. Sport administrators and judges would be part of this community, if

appropriate. Within the athlete's head are depicted *imagery*, *self-concept*, and *attribution*; these being a few of the important psychological factors internal to the person.

Socialization is seen as being an over-riding process, interactive in nature, from which the beginning athlete emerges, and in conjunction with, the developing athlete evolves. The sport experience is an integral part of the socialization process. The eye and the ear are meant to symbolize this interaction between the athlete and the society. Factors such as *gender* and *cohesion* are under the socialization umbrella. The motivational climate is another important variable created within the community. According to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, parents, coaches, and other significant individuals contribute to an atmosphere that is either autonomy-supportive, or controlling (Deci, 1995). The style of this atmosphere has very important implications for the athlete, both for learning and for performing.

On either side of the course, there is a teepee. The teepee was used as a symbol for psychological skills training (PST) both because of the perceived connection of some of these methods to the traditional, aboriginal lifestyle, and because, in fact, many terrain gardens do have teepees through which the little skiers travel on their adventure through another world. The reason there is one on either side is because PST is used both in a remedial fashion and for on-going management and improvement.

*Decision making* is another product of the internal (within the person) and external (in the environment) worlds. Decisions are made at every turn, and the *attention* that the athlete gives to certain cues is a vital factor influencing which decisions direct behavior.

#### The Left Side<sup>1</sup>

The athlete feels somewhat distracted at the start, experiencing *anxiety* as they face the tunnel followed by the bumps. This anxiety could be a result of the climate; for example the athlete might feel that they are doing the course for the benefit of their parents, who want the athlete to be a champion. The athlete may also be lacking in confidence, feeling low in self-efficacy. Attentional control will probably be a problem for this individual, due to the distraction of feeling anxious and worrying about results. When faced with *competition*, this athlete might put an emphasis on outcome goals.

The large 'E' stands for *evaluation*, an essential part of any learning process. If this person is prone to negative evaluation, and they run into trouble, such as a fall after the jump in the dual course, they are likely to feel low in self-esteem, since in this case self-esteem is linked to success.

A trip to the PST teepee would be needed in order for this athlete to learn techniques for relaxation, refocusing, re-evaluation, and appropriate goal setting. If the fall involves an *injury*, mental training could help the athlete maintain motivation and form, (using *imagery*) during recovery and upon their return to competition. *Over-training* and *staleness* are possible outcomes of poor management, physical and psychological. Better planning, an improved motivational climate and the adjustment of cognitive representations could help these problems.

If the athlete does not receive the necessary assistance to overcome these obstacles, there is a strong likelihood that eventually the *extrinsic motivation* driving the athlete in this type of situation, would wear thin and the athlete will dropout. In this

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<sup>1</sup> In practice the two sides are mixed, as an athlete would always face some aspects of the left side on their way to achieving the right side circuit.

scenario, self-esteem remains low, self-growth is limited, and the transition following termination of the activity is likely to be a difficult one. This side of the model represents the negative experience that is unfortunately encountered by some athletes. The Right Side.

The athlete is feeling confident and fully focused on the *task* at hand. They are in a state of *optimal arousal*, having planned for this to be so by examining past performances and drawing lessons from these. It is likely that the athlete has used *relaxation* and *imagery* to prepare for the event. The use of these and other skills involved in PST help the athlete maintain the required *attentional control*.

The individual on this side of the circuit has an *autonomy-supportive* group of significant others and has been socialized to concentrate on being the best they can be on any given day. While this person is *competitive*, they do not focus on the *outcome* as the primary source of judging success or failure. Instead, their goal orientation is one that emphasizes the mastery of specific tasks. Since their self-esteem is not tied to a successful outcome, it is more likely that, providing the individual has tried their best, their self-esteem will remain high, regardless of winning or not. *Constructive evaluation* and positive thoughts are part of this individual's approach. All of these factors help this athlete experience *volition* and *enjoyment* that lead to *intrinsic motivation* and consequently the likelihood of *adherence* to the activity.

The person who continues on this road to excellence will engage in *deliberate practice*, which involves *goal setting* and *optimal challenge*. This practice leads to physical and psychological *skill acquisition* as the *performance level* increases.

Ultimately, the performer may experience *flow* as they engage in their activity. *Flow* is an optimal experience during which people are completely focused on the activity and experiencing deep enjoyment. Such experiences that arise from the pursuit of excellence give meaning to the athlete's lives and are great opportunities for personal growth. When the right elements are there, the likelihood of a good *quality of life* is high.

The athlete who follows the right course will eventually decide to stop pursuing the activity. In this case, the choice for termination comes from the satisfaction of having done one's best, and the acceptance that it is time to move on to other things in life. This individual will most likely have the benefit of a positive transition to life beyond their particular performance domain, since they have learned much about the way to a rich and meaningful life.

## Appendix B

### Letters of Information and Consent

#### Analysis of the teaching-learning process in sport Letter of Information (coach)

When a professor from the University of Ottawa carries out a research project involving the participation of individuals, the ethics committee of the university requires the written consent of the participants. This in no way signifies that the project carries any risk to the participants. Instead, the intention is simply to assure confidentiality and the respect of the individuals.

The present research project will be conducted by Pierre Trudel and Diane Culver of the University of Ottawa. This project requires the participation of coaches and athletes, in order to permit us to gather information concerning the manner in which coaches and athletes participate in the teaching-learning process during training sessions and competitions. Information will be gathered in the following ways.

Interviews, pre- and post-season, lasting approximately 30-90 minutes. If it is not possible to do these interviews in person, telephone interviews will be conducted. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed.

Before training and races: a short interview of about 10 minutes on planned goals. Certain training sessions and competitions will be observed and video-taped, for analysis. After training and races: a short interview of about 10 minutes to see if goals were attained.

During stimulated recall sessions: the coach will be invited to watch the video and comment on certain aspects of the coaching-learning.

The object of this project is neither to evaluate the quality of the coaches work, nor the quality of the athletes' performance. The objective is to document the teaching-learning process from the point of view of the athletes and the coaches. The analysis of this process within several teams and clubs should permit us to prepare pedagogical material to be used in coaches' courses.

It should be noted that you are completely free to refuse to participate at any time, without repercussion. In addition, we assure that your name will not appear in our reports and that the audio and video material will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Please feel free to communicate with us at all times.

-questions regarding the research  
Pierre Trudel, Ph. D.  
School of Human Kinetics  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5  
Tel: (613) 562-5800 (4268)

-questions regarding ethics  
Roger Proulx, pres. ethics com.  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, ON, K1H 8M5  
Tel: (613) 562-5800 (8055).

**Analysis of the teaching-learning process in sport  
Letter of Information (athletes)**

When a professor from the University of Ottawa carries out a research project involving the participation of individuals, the ethics committee of the university requires the written consent of the participants. This in no way signifies that the project carries any risk to the participants. Instead, the intention is simply to assure confidentiality and the respect of the individuals.

The present research project will be conducted by Pierre Trudel and Diane Culver of the University of Ottawa. This project requires the participation of coaches and athletes, in order to permit us to gather information concerning the manner in which coaches and athletes participate in the teaching-learning process during training sessions and competitions. Information will be gathered in the following ways.

Interviews, pre- and post-season, lasting approximately 30-90 minutes. If it is not possible to do these interviews in person, telephone interviews will be conducted. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed.

Certain training sessions and competitions will be observed and video-taped, for analysis. Stimulated recall interviews (maximum 4): the athlete will be invited to discuss, while watching a video tape of training or racing, certain aspects of the coaching- learning process.

The object of this project is neither to evaluate the quality of the coaches work, nor the quality of the athletes' performance. The objective is to document the teaching-learning process from the point of view of the athletes and the coaches. The analysis of this process within several teams and clubs should permit us to prepare pedagogical material to be used in coaches' courses.

It should be noted that you are completely free to refuse to participate at any time, without repercussion. In addition, we assure that your name will not appear in our reports and that the audio and video material will be destroyed at the end of the project.

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### Consent Letter

#### Analysis of the teaching-learning process in sport Consent Form (coach)

I have been informed of the objectives of the research project to be conducted by Diane Culver and Pierre Trudel of the University of Ottawa.

I understand that the research, as defined in the attached letter of information, includes my collaboration during:

Two interviews (pre- and post-season).  
Short interviews prior to and after training and races.  
Four (maximum) stimulated recall sessions.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time should I wish to do so.

My collaboration is freely given. I will have access to all the research data that concerns me. In addition, it is understood that: a) that the results will be confidential and that I will not be identified in any publication of the results and b) that the content of the video and audio-tapes will be destroyed when the analysis is terminated.

Your time and help in this study are greatly appreciated. Please sign two copies of this form and bring them to the Nakiska camp on Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

Signature of coach \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please feel free to communicate with us at all times.

-questions regarding the research  
Pierre Trudel, Ph. D.  
School of Human Kinetics  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5  
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Faculty of Health Sciences  
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Ottawa, ON, K1H 8M5  
Tel: (613) 562-5800 (8055).

**Analysis of the teaching-learning process in sport  
Consent Form (athlete)**

I have been informed of the objectives of the research project to be conducted by Diane Culver and Pierre Trudel of the University of Ottawa.

I understand that the research, as defined in the attached letter of information, includes my collaboration during:

Two interviews (pre- and post-season).  
Short interviews after training and races.  
Four (maximum) stimulated recall sessions.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time should I wish to do so.

My collaboration is freely given. I will have access to all the research data that concerns me. In addition, it is understood that: a) that the results will be confidential and that I will not be identified in any publication of the results and b) that the content of the video and audio-tapes will be destroyed when the analysis is terminated.

Your time and help in this study are greatly appreciated. Please sign two copies of this form and bring them to the Nakiska camp on Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

Signature of athlete \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please feel free to communicate with us at all times.

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## Appendix C

### Interview 1: Guides

#### Head Coach: Early Season.

Background:

Experience as an athlete.

Years coaching, certification.

Level, teams

Philosophy/approach

Schedule

Team:

“Define” the athletes. Approach (same for all, or different).

Difficult cases (?).

Goals:

For the team

For certain athletes

#### Assistant Coach

Background:

Experience as an athlete.

Years coaching, certification.

Level, teams

Philosophy/approach

Role as assistant coach:

Involved in planning?

Involved in goal setting?

Approach with different athletes

Transition:

Coaching this level

#### Athletes

Background:

Tell me about your experience so far in ski racing?

How you got to where you are, the teams, the coaches?

Coaching changes

Coaching preferences:

What do you like in a coach?

How do you learn best?

What helps you improve the most?

**Do you discuss preferences with the coaches?**

**Transition:**

**Do you feel comfortable on this team?**

**Goals:**

**Seasonal, long term.**

**Who makes them? Are they discussed with coach?**

## Appendix D

### Sign posts

1. **Communication at the junior national team level (17-19 years of age): Special aspects looking at the development over time of such communication.**
  - Named to NST
  - Coach change, coach philosophy, coach dedication
  - Growth
  - Social
  - Uncharted terrain
  
2. **Communication from a global aspect:**
  - Good times and bad times
  - Language
  - Athlete' experience.
  - Trust.
  - Gender.
  
3. **Communication in Action: Events, how communication occurred.**
  - Injuries: Katie, Catharine.
  - Erin.
  - Europe.
  - Goals
  - Feedback
  - Role of coach
  - Good times and bad times.
  - Radio communication re. course info. (Sugarbush).
  
4. **Free**
  - Key phrases
  - Fun
  - Image

## Appendix E

Interview 2: Guides

These matrices, the result of the second and third steps of the data analysis, were used as the interview guides for the second interviews. The interviews started with a lead in question regarding how things were going for them, then the questions in the matrices were asked. The first part of the matrices pertain to specific interactions between coaches and athletes. The second part of the matrices apply to more general communication themes. Some additional questions were added as a result of seeing the athletes' journals, and of observing the team.

## Teresa

Referent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
Coach C.	Has he been coaching T.?	Ask T. and coach C.
Race feedback (Europe)	What was the outcome of the last email? Did T. talk to coach D? Ask Dave how it went in Europe with this athlete? Was he angry with T? What was the intent of his silence? Did he eventually discuss this race with her?	Ask T and ask coach D.

## Petra

Referent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
Pressure to return	Ask P if she ever asked the coach P why they were pressing? Or told them she felt pressure? Ask coach P same two questions?	P Coach D
Before 2 <sup>nd</sup> injury	Ask P how it was in Europe. Ask if she felt ready to race? If she had talked to coaches re. how ready she felt. Ask coach D if he did remind her that she was just coming back from injury. Verify answer with P. Verify with coach D that she was ready to race. Had he discussed this with her?	Ask P Verify with P Ask coach D
Since 2 <sup>nd</sup> injury	What has the communication been since then?	Ask P and coach D.

## Sophie

Referent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
Sophie in races	How is communication between athlete and coach?	Coaches and S. Observe.
Sophie's independence	Noticed some frustration of coaches that she was "on her own program". See how this fit in action with coach D's comments about her knowing when to work and play. See if S. felt pressure to conform.	Ask coaches Observe at next fieldwork. Ask S.
S's injuries	Ask about this. Did she feel pressure to get back from coaches? How did coaches perceive her injuries and comeback?	Ask S. Ask coaches.

## Rosi

Referent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
<u>Learning style</u>	Check if Rosi told them when she thought "things were going bad" (her words, int 1). What approach did coach D take with athletes R? Did he ask her what she thought she needed? Verify with athlete.	Athlete R Ask coaches.
<u>Goals</u>	Did coaches and R ever go over goals or plan for season? Was this reassessed?	Athlete R and coaches.
<u>Pressure to perform</u>	Did R feel this? Discuss with coaches?	Ask R and verify with coaches.

Other questions for Rosi (arising from journal entries):

Pre-Christmas: Said felt nervous in races and wished she could tell the coaches that she needed to relax. Clarify and ask about follow up. Two SL's at Quebec, ask if she felt coaches would stick with her through thick and thin (see her interview 1). At GS's couldn't explain anger to Charles?

At Vt. Communicating well with coaches leads to increased confidence?

Feel not talking messes things up?

Happy when communicating better?

Europe: Communication at this point? Pressure re. financial problems. Felt this? What role did coaches play in the amount of confidence you felt? Did you ever communicate this to them? Ask about "to go nuts, be smart, and deal with the minor things later"? Ask about relationship between coaches showing their belief in you and your skiing well.

Race in February: Ask about talking to Dave re. consulting with sport psychologist.

Ask about this week (speaking to Dave re. feeling neglected).

## Themes

Referent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
<u>Radio Communication at start</u>	<p>Observe.</p> <p>Have the coaches and/or athletes made any changes regarding this communication?</p> <p>What has been the impact of staff cuts (coach D on his own).</p> <p>Do athletes show more trust in coaches' comments as season progressed?</p> <p>How do participants see the importance of this communication? Have athletes told coaches what sort of info they like to have before the start?</p>	<p>Observation in field.</p> <p>Ask athletes, especially R. and T.</p>
<u>Injuries</u>	<p>How has communication been going re. injuries?</p> <p>Discuss pressure to return with coaches. Check with involved athletes first.</p>	<p>Check with athletes and coaches. (presently out and those who have come back). Check with coaches.</p>
<u>Respective roles &amp; Transition</u>	<p>How do the participants perceive the sharing of roles? Is this very individual?</p> <p>Do certain individual athletes take more the role of initiator? How do the coaches perceive and deal with this?</p> <p>Has this developed much over the season?</p> <p>Are roles shared differently depending on the referent?</p>	<p>Observe and check with participants.</p>

<u>Goals</u>	<p>Ask to see goals sheets of coach P.</p> <p>Ask athletes if they have been clear on these? Has they been revisited during the season?</p> <p>Ask Julie this especially.</p>	<p>Coach D</p> <p>Athletes.</p> <p>Athlete S.</p>
<u>Pressure of being on the team</u>	<p>Ask athletes if they have felt this?</p> <p>Coaches feel and/or transmit pressure to perform?</p>	<p>Observe.</p> <p>Ask participants.</p>

Refer-ent	Further evidence needed	Likely source
<u>Gender</u>	<p>Has this come up?            Do coaches perceive their roles differently because they are coaching females?            Do athletes feel they are treated differently because they are female?            Ask some coaches and athletes (K.) why they say Dave would make a good girls' coach.            Ask why they thought the Jr. Women's team would make good study material.</p>	<p>Ask participants.</p> <p>Other coaches and athletes on national team.</p>
<u>Europe</u>	<p>Ask athletes about it. Was it what they expected? Did coaches go over plans? When?            Ask coach D. How was it? How did athletes seem to adjust?            Check replies with respective athletes. Did he go over plans again with athletes? If he knew (as he indicated in conversation with me) that the athletes would probably say that they didn't know what the plans were, why wouldn't he clear it up?</p>	<p>Ask athletes.            Ask coach D.</p> <p>Ask coach D.</p>
<u>Langu-age</u>	<p>Ask C why she didn't feel comfortable to communicate with Harry last season?</p>	<p>Ask athlete C.</p>