BARÇA
INNOVATION HUB
Universitas

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE ELITE ATHLETE'S ENVIRONMENT

ATHLETIC ENVIRONMENT

1.2 Introduction

1.2.1 Coaches as leaders and experts

In this unit, we will review some studies that demonstrate the link between a coach not fulfilling his role optimally and sports abandonment.

In sports institutions that have a psychologist or a group of psychologists, in most cases, these are subject to the demands of the coaches. In 70% of cases, coaches are the ones who identify the need for psychological interventions and they designate the cases.

Sports psychologists must interpret the corresponding role of the coach and the influence he exerts on the performance of athletes, in order to ensure the coach's interventions are only contributing to the achievement of favorable results. As mentioned previously, in many cases the role of each is not clear and this negatively affects how the institution operates and how athletes are formed and trained.

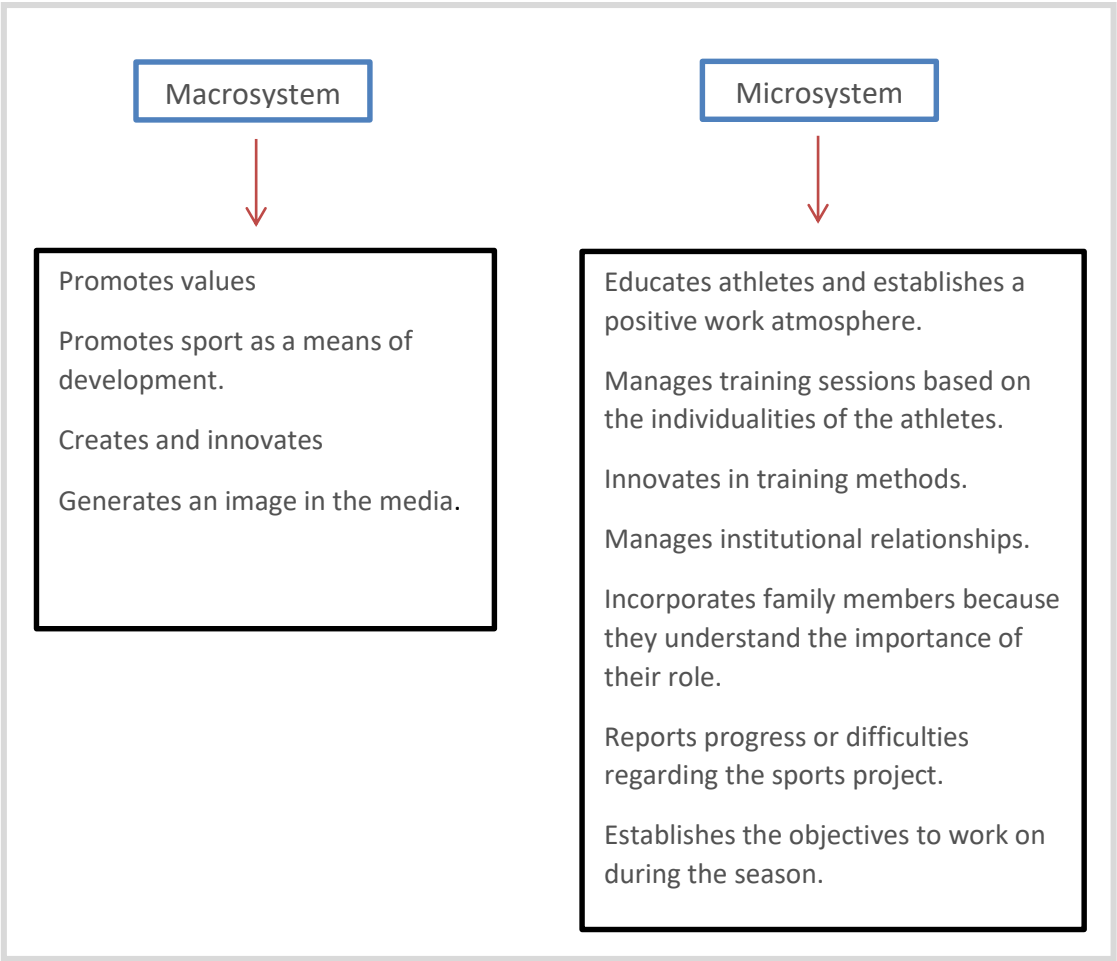
A study by Feltz (1992) showed that 80% of children who start a sport activity, later abandon it for reasons related to their relationship with their coach. These reasons include: the amount of and abuse in the distribution of workload, the lack of positive stimulation, prejudices and the perception of competition.

In other research, López Abascal and García Ucha (1994) conducted a study with 257 swimmers and demonstrated that 4 out of 10 males and 3 out of 10 females, abandoned training for reasons related to the coaches. The same authors conducted a questionnaire with 168 swimmers in which 3 variables were measured: cognitive ability, emotional stability and behavior. The results obtained in this questionnaire demonstrated that the most valued coaches worked positively across the three variables, obtained better results in competitions and lower dropout rates. The opposite was found in coaches who were given negative values for these variables.

Despite these studies, high performance and sport exist thanks to coaches. We aim in this case to provide training to help coaches incorporate appropriate strategies to manage athletes. In addition to this, it is important for sports psychologists to know that coaches are responsible for leading training processes, and therefore they should accompany this process.

Coaches and athletes are the protagonists of sports training processes. The following image summarizes the importance of the coach in institutions and in the society in which he is immersed.

Figure 3: The coach's role



Source: Prepared by the author.

Noce (2003) conducted a study based on the personality traits of coaches, their communication style and their leadership skills. As well as proposing a series of characteristics for an ideal model coach:

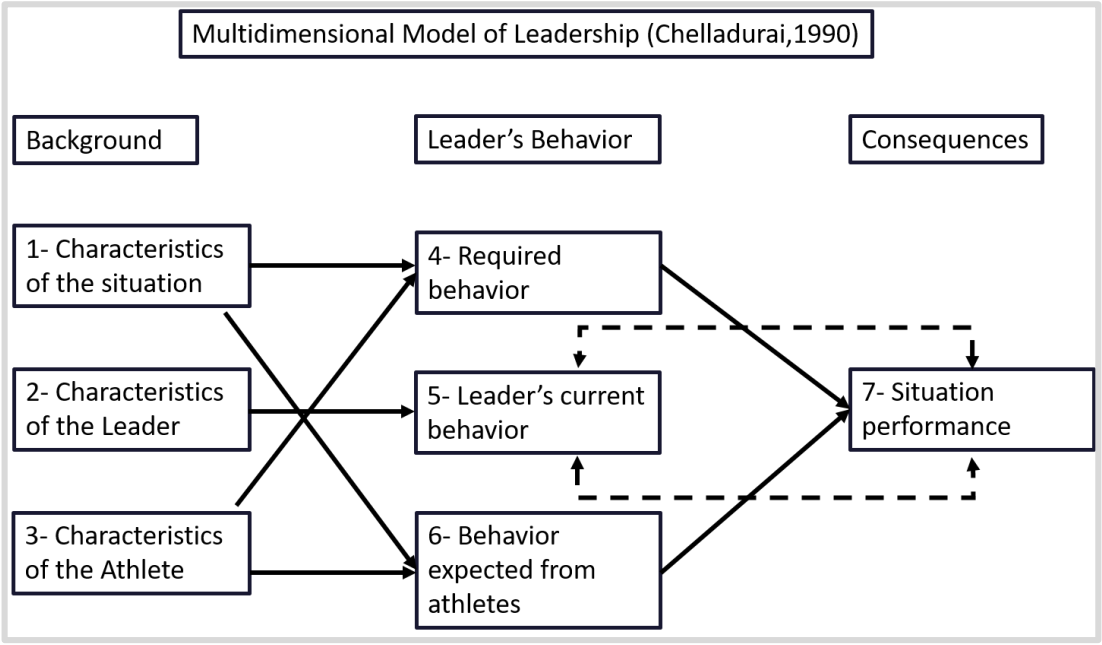
- Able to motivate.
- Be an example to follow in terms of behavior.
- Sets objectives adapted to the institutional and athletic reality.
- Identifies individual differences between the athletes and adapts the training methodology proposals.

- Listens and leads by example.

Chelladurai (1990) proposes a multidimensional model regarding the role of a sports leader. The model develops personality characteristics and group components, as well as the way these interact in the environment.

This model holds that the characteristics of the leader will adapt to the demands of the situation and context, to the reality of the athletes and to the institutional and team objectives. Hence it is defined as a multidimensional model.

Figure 4: Multidimensional leader



Source: Chelladurai, 1990.

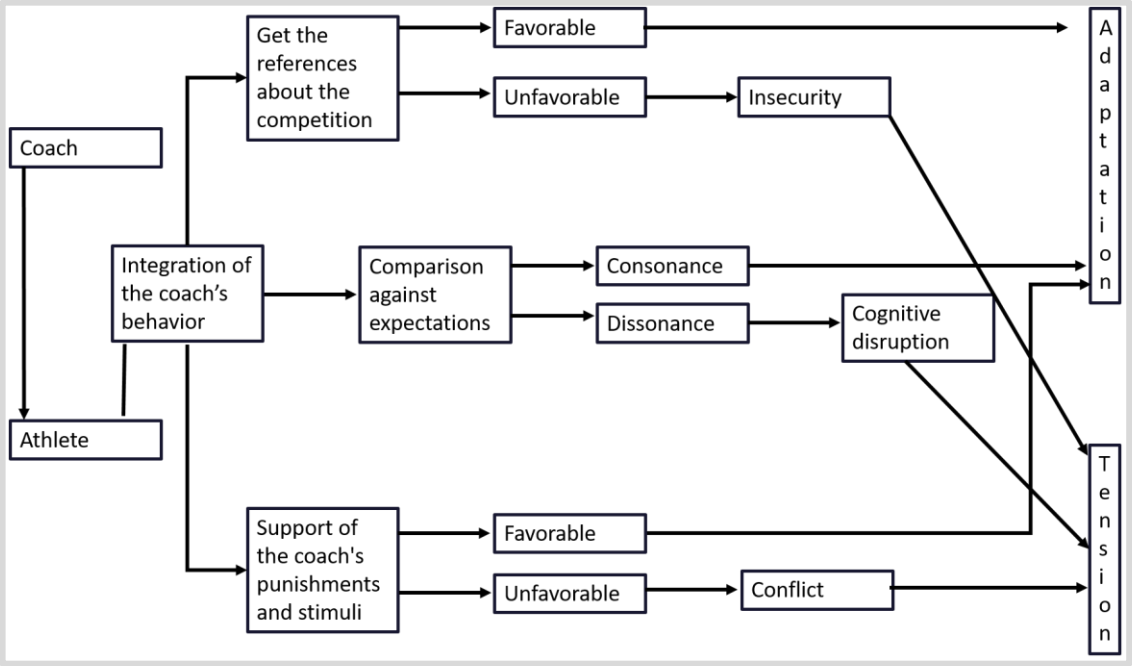
1.2.2 Relationship between the coach and athlete

Having clarified the role a coach should adopt to work effectively, we will identify the problems that frequently arise in the relationship between the coach and athlete.

One of the biggest problems that appears in this coach-athlete relationship is related to communication style, which is expressed through the subject's negative emotional states. The most frequent issues mentioned by athletes are:

- Lack of understanding towards athletes due to individual characteristics. Tendency to demand the same from all athletes.
- Favoritism with some athletes.
- Prejudices based on social stereotypes.
- Lack of ability to provide emotional support.
- Inability to interpret potential conflicts.
- Inability to interpret the use of their own body language and recognize the influence it has on athletes (inappropriate gestures, signs, etc.).
- Lack of adaptability to new trends in training methodology.

Figure 5: Coach's behavior and its consequences



Source: Brandao & Valdés, 2005.

In the case of sports institutions, many show flaws when selecting coach profiles to work in some areas. Most do so based on the sports history of a coach, on friendships or recommendations, but very seldom choose a coach based on his professional development or ethics. This is not the case in all institutions, but should be taken into account during the selection process.

If there is a sports psychologist on the team, they can help with the selection process, especially in institutions that do not have a human resources department for this purpose.

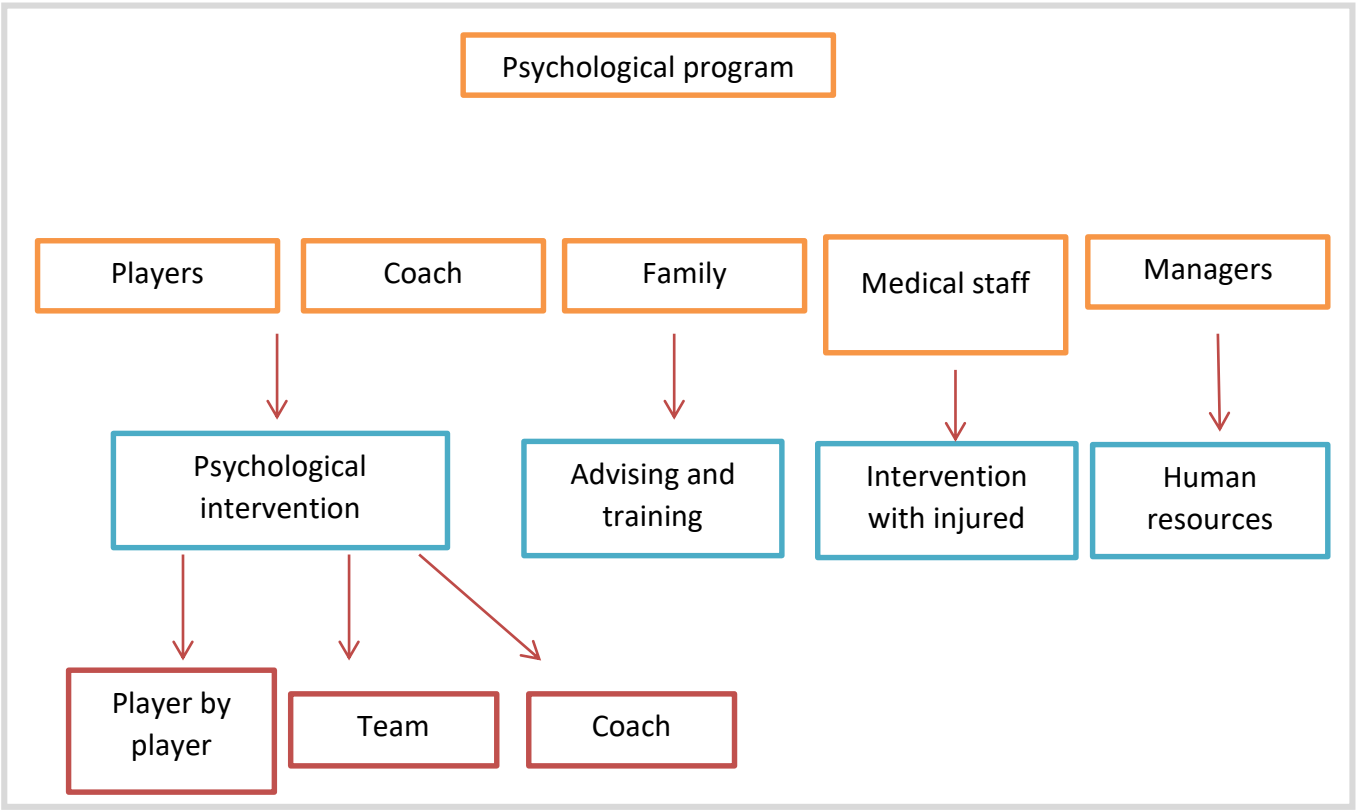
Role of the sports psychologist in the training process

A study conducted by the psychology department at a Spanish soccer club, clearly defined the specific role of that department, as well as the way sports psychology projects are managed. It is important to highlight the work done in this study in order to provide guidelines for potential sports psychologists when dealing with intervention programs.

Psychology departments are teams made up of a group of psychologists specialized in sports. Their interventions aim to provide answers to behavioral, emotional and cognitive issues, in athletes as well as coaches or managers. The interventions follow: evaluation, advice, training and guidance.

In the organizational chart for work, interventions are carried out as outlined below.

Figure 6: Work program



Source: Prepared by the author.

Work Philosophy

We will start by establishing a set of basic principles from which the intervention model will be implemented and which will be applied to the entire institutional structure. The model is adapted to the needs based on: the individual differences of each member, specific situations (training or competencies), and demands (training or performance).

Based on this, the established principles include:

- The player is the protagonist: in this case the need arises to work based on the particular demands of each player separately. The psychological variables of each player are different based on the different circumstances they have been through. Therefore, everybody handles their anxiety levels, motivation, self-confidence, etc. in a different way.
- Potential of the player: individually, each of the players has a quality that can be strengthened. Regardless of their current behavior and ability, you have to believe in the players and long-term projects for their training and formation. The player is the protagonist and everybody else is a collaborator accompanying their training and formation process.
- The player as a person: the approach is inclusive, the player is a whole in which athlete and subject are the same person as are their realities and experiences, both within and beyond the sports institution. There is often confusion about how to treat an athlete with regards to the training intensity level and the fact that they are only children (in the case of youth soccer teams) is thus overlooked.
- Thinking player: during his sports career, a player must make decisions, interpret contexts and respond to different situations. For this reason the aim is to train subjects capable of successfully facing the different situations encountered in life and sport.
- Integral player: the athlete is considered a functional unit (social, emotional, physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral) and should be considered from this complex perspective in the training proposals and psychological interventions.
- The coach as a leader: in this case the coach must overcome the athletic obstacles to reach, as a person, the athlete.

In order to provide the athlete with comprehensive training, sports psychologists must take into account the daily life of the subjects. Work should focus on: the family with its socio-affective relationships, school or academic training and the

sport that is practiced. In each of the areas outlined there is a reference or responsible person, with whom one must work using a multidisciplinary approach. Based on this, objectives are set with a view to:

- Train athletes so they achieve high performance.
- Improve individual and team performance levels.
- Generate competitive levels.
- Train athletes in life skills beyond sports.
- Establish and increase the sense of belonging in athletes in relation to their institution.
- Prepare players to meet high performance demands and, for those who do not achieve this, help them to maturely understand the reasons and causes for this.

Based on this project and intervention model, there are theoretical resources available to address, from psychological departments, the work performed in sports institutions.

In this way we aim to improve the athletic level of each society, club or the sport in general.

1.2.3 Psychology and athletic training

When the coach occupies the role of leader, they must understand the variables determining athletic performance. One of the most important variables is the athlete's behavior and how it can be controlled by sports psychology. Added to this is the knowledge about the benefits of psychological interventions on athletes' mental health, which makes it essential to have a sports psychologist who can report on, create or manage this process within the institution.

The coach is responsible for managing this basic knowledge when working with subjects pursuing an elite project and with those who have already achieved high performance. As mentioned previously, one of the coach's tasks is to train athletes so they can successfully develop in their own sport and who, once retired, are able to apply this knowledge to their life. To this end, being aware of sports psychology's contributions to mental health will become a meaningful variable for athletes who train with coaches who apply this knowledge.

There are numerous studies that aim to demonstrate the benefits of sports for the well-being of humans at the physiological, biological, as well as cognitive levels. Sports psychology is precisely based on this last point.

These benefits are reflected both in short- or long-duration training and in high- or low-intensity training. They all have a positive impact on mental health.

Based on the impact of psychology in sports, we will review some hypotheses supporting the reasons why sports psychologists should be part of institutions and collaborate with the coach as required.

Cognitive hypothesis

In this case work is done to generate positive thoughts that are used to counteract negative ones and improve the athlete's moods. Experiencing positive thoughts helps to break the cycles or spirals of thoughts that negatively affect performance.

Social interaction hypothesis

This hypothesis holds that if training is carried out with peers with whom they are emotionally engaged, the levels of mental health, participation in sports and the sense of belonging are improved.

Distraction hypothesis

This hypothesis argues that training contributes to athlete's being distracted from the concerns or conflicts that subjects experience. It was found that training creates a better mood than any other relaxation or meditation practice (Alferman & Stoll, 2000).

Amine hypothesis

In this case the secretion of chemicals acting as neurotransmitters generate positive moods and mental health. Some studies show that depression is related to low levels of amine such as norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine (North et al., 1990).

Endorphin hypothesis

Training produces chemicals that exert an effect similar to that of morphine (they reduce pain and generate euphoria). Euphoria is generated through the secretion of endorphin which, in turn, reduces anxiety levels, confusion and being overcome with negative thoughts. Kraemer et al. (1990) observed a decrease in plasma endorphin with positive moods. They argue that the release of endorphin might be related to moods.

This information as reviewed above helps subjects understand the importance of having a sports psychologists or coaches who can assess psychological contributions to improve performance.

In many athletic disciplines, coaches are retired athletes with little training and they often reject utilizing psychological resources to work with subjects. The importance of the coach being an agent in continual training is reiterated. Insofar as a coach understands that training athletes must be comprehensive, he will have a different role within the institution.

1.2.4 The role of sport in society

The growth of sport as a consumer good and its inclusion in the economic market have led to certain deviations from the objectives that gave rise to it, one of them being the integral training of the subjects. This has meant that coaches have had to develop the capacity to interpret new market trends and how to adjust accordingly without losing sight of the essential aspects of sport. That is why it is extremely important for coaches to be properly trained and prepared, not only due to the social and athletic reality, but also because of the characteristics of their role and their degree of influence in an athlete's life.

The coaching staff of a team can greatly vary from one entity to another, whether in terms of professionalization, financial means, human resources, or the number of athletic disciplines. Each organization is also influenced by the context of its location – a capital city is not the same as a provincial city, or a town on the outskirts of a large city. This determines the material and human resources available.

Some institutions lack resources and only have one coach that is responsible for the management which, in some cases, is carried out by family members collaborating alternately. As it grows, some specific roles are delegated to each area and the coaching staff also increases, until it includes a physiotherapist, nutritionist, podiatrist, sports psychologist, etc. In this way they get transformed

into institutions with executive committees responsible for the management and growth.

Incorporating more people requires communication channels to be fluid, as well as a clear initial structure in which the objectives, individual roles and group goals are established. Additionally, a work plan to achieve them must be shared and it should be ensured that everyone knows, broadly speaking, the inputs that will reach athletes.

A sports psychologist can be incorporated into the coaching staff in different ways. Their intervention may be oriented towards different agents and their work may be direct or indirect. That is, a sports psychologist can work, not only with the athletes but also with the members of the coaching team, the managers, the family members, etc. The organization may have a team of psychologists who carry out different types of interventions. In the case of large sports institutions, the team of psychologists is responsible for specific areas, such as: the youth teams, the first team, the coaches, etc.

For those institutions that do not have a sports psychologist, the responsibility lies with the coach, who must be trained and qualified to manage the relationships and make the most of each athlete's performance.

Sport in society works as a socializing agent; there is no other activity that includes the members of a society this way. Educational institutions may come to mind however, they are part of the system that is legislated and the subjects have to attend them on a compulsory basis. The phenomenon that occurs in sports is related to subjects who choose, voluntarily (in most cases), to get involved or ask their parents to participate in such practices.

This adds an extra dimension of value, since it is the subjects themselves who make the decision to carry out a physical activity. Then, once they start, they discover the contributions training makes in terms of quality of living. Here are some of the most outstanding ones:

- Contributions to biological, physiological and physical-chemical levels for organic health.
- Contributions to mental health by directly impacting the psychological variables of anxiety, stress, depression, etc.
- It encourages teamwork and camaraderie. If you do not work as a team, you cannot achieve good results.

- It encourages respect for rules and regulations.

This is directly transferred to the subject's life beyond sports. For these reasons the role of sport in society becomes very important and it is the coach's main responsibility to ensure that it develops in the best possible way.

One of the countries that invests the most money in sport is the United States. Its investment is reflected in the achievements at the Olympic level and in the athletic activities that characterize that country: American football, baseball, etc. It is probably worth studying why 58% of the population of one of the countries making the biggest investment in sport has a sedentary lifestyle. Between 10 and 25% of Americans suffer from depression and anxiety. What role does physical exercise play in this society? Has the battle with the media and junk food been lost? These are some aspects to reflect on in relation to the role of sport in each society.

Norms and values

Each entity, regardless of its size, has a more or less explicit charter of values that reflects the identity of the people who are part of it. Management is responsible for establishing the means for it to be complied with, as well as the club's image renewal if its ethical image is damaged.

In addition to the rules related to the use of the facilities, club membership or to coexistence, the coach must establish internal norms for the team or the group with which he works, namely:

- Locker room norms, adapted to the team and agreed to, in a certain way, with it.
- Housekeeping rules, both in the club facilities and in its living quarters.
- Coexistence and behavior rules: helping each other, collaborating with other areas, being part of activities beyond sports and that require collaboration, respecting rival teams, respecting club members (coaches, maintenance personnel, managers, etc.), greeting others when entering the institution and when leaving, etc.

From when these conduct principles are established, as norms or values, it is important that the consequences for non-compliance also be clarified. Likewise, it must be ensured that all persons belonging to the sports entity are aware of them.

It is also recommended that the incorporation of new athletes, trainers or family members be accompanied by a written commitment of compliance. This will favor moral commitment to these norms and will provide advanced warning regarding the profile of the institution which they are joining.

Based on the content covered in this unit, it can be said that the role of the coach covers a complex and diverse spectrum. The leader of a team or institution is responsible for carrying out his work without losing sight of the aspects outlined.

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