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**MENTORING AS A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR A HIGH-PERFORMANCE BASKETBALL COACH****O MENTORING COMO ESTRATÉGIA DE DESENVOLVIMENTO PROFISSIONAL DE UM TREINADOR DE BASQUETEBOL DE ALTA PERFORMANCE**Heitor de Andrade Rodrigues<sup>1</sup>, Hélio Rubens Garcia Filho<sup>2</sup>, Andrea Woodburn<sup>3</sup> and Glenn Cundari<sup>4</sup><sup>1</sup>Goiás Federal University, Goiânia-GO, Brazil.<sup>2</sup>Sesi-Franca Basketball, Franca-SP, Brazil.<sup>3</sup>Laval Université, Laval-Quebec, Canada.<sup>4</sup>Professional Golfers' Association of Canada, Halton Hills-Ontario, Canada.

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**RESUMO**

O objetivo da pesquisa foi analisar a estratégia formativa do *mentoring* desenvolvida com um treinador de basquetebol de alta *performance*. A intervenção com o *mentoring* foi realizada ao longo de onze meses, tendo como propósito o desenvolvimento da prática reflexiva de um treinador de basquetebol de alta *performance*, participante de competições nacionais e internacionais. A metodologia utilizada é de natureza qualitativa, tendo como método o estudo de caso. Os instrumentos de coleta de dados foram o diário de campo e a entrevista semiestruturada. Para análise dos dados optou-se pela técnica de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados apontam os desafios inerentes à construção da relação mentor-treinador, os desafios enfrentados pelo treinador em seu cotidiano de trabalho e a relevância do *mentoring* no desenvolvimento profissional do treinador.

**Palavras-chave:** Capacitação Profissional. Prática Profissional. Educação.

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research was to analyze mentoring as a training strategy in the developed of a high-performance basketball coach. Mentoring intervention was carried out over 11 months aiming at the development of reflective practice of a high-performance basketball coach engaged in national and international competitions. Qualitative methodology was used in a case study approach. The data collection instruments used were field journal and semi-structured interview. The data were analyzed using the content analysis technique. The results pointed out the challenges inherent to the construction of a mentor-coach relationship, the challenges the coach faced in his daily work and the relevance of mentoring in the professional development of a coach.

**Keywords:** Professional Training. Professional Practice. Education.

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**Introduction**

A sport coach plays an acknowledged major role in the development of high-performance athletes and teams. The coach's capacity to conduct the training process and manage the competition environment are key for achieving sports results<sup>1</sup>.

Concomitantly, research has shown that the professional development of a sport coach, specially the development of the coach-athlete relationship<sup>2-4</sup>, is fundamental for the improvement of training quality.

Considering this, there is no agreement on the models of professional development that must be used with high-performance coaches, considering that in general coaches are known to give little value to formal learning situations<sup>5</sup> and that training expectations are driven by everyday work challenges<sup>6,7</sup>.

Thus, proposals for professional development training of a coach are thought to be based on the coach's everyday work requirements, be guided by adult learning theories, offer practice, reflection and research opportunities, as well as space and time for the coach to appropriate the training path<sup>8,9</sup>.

Mentoring is one of such approaches of professional development. It is considered to be a coach development strategy as it favors the linking between theory and practice and, as a result, it can potentiate learning opportunities arising from professional experiences<sup>10</sup>.

Broadly speaking, mentoring is a professional development strategy involving two individuals with different experiences and knowledge who engage in a relationship with the goal of exchanging information and building shared knowledge toward personal and professional development<sup>11</sup>.

The relevance of mentoring has been gradually acknowledged and studied in different professional fields, particularly in education and health fields. In the professional context of a sport coach, we observe a growing interest in the training potential of mentoring; however, this strategy is conceptually little developed and lacks more robust scientific evidence that corroborates its efficacy<sup>12</sup>.

We have chosen to adopt mentoring as a work approach focused on the development of a coach's reflective practice seeking to raise awareness of the challenges of everyday work and the shared construction of knowledge, aiming at instructing a coach's decision-making processes.

Reflective practice is a key element in experience-based learning<sup>13</sup> when it promotes the mediation of experience and knowledge<sup>14</sup>, giving the coach opportunities to deepen the knowledge of oneself and his or her professional practice<sup>15</sup>.

In other words, reflective practice is a process where the subject, in our case, a basketball coach, examines his or her experience seeking to access, understand and develop his or her underlying knowledge of it. It is an intentional cognitive process elicited by the questioning of one's own practice that entails the conversion of experience into knowledge and that results in a change in behaviors, values, beliefs, knowledge, etc.<sup>16</sup>.

As such, the research problem that guided this investigation can be formulated based on the following questions: What are the challenges involved in the implementation and development of mentoring? What are the potentials of this strategy in the professional development of a sport coach? In turn, the goal of this study was to analyze mentoring as a professional training strategy in a high-performance basketball coach.

## Method

### *Methodological approach*

A qualitative, naturalistic and interpretative approach was chosen for this study as it suits the investigation of phenomena in their natural environments and interprets them based on the meanings attributed to them<sup>17</sup>. The case study method was chosen due to the need to understand complex social phenomena and because it affords meaningful investigation of real-life events. More than a choice of a method, case study is also the method of choice for the investigation of a single, particular, specific phenomenon<sup>18</sup>.

### *Subject of study*

Our study case was the professional development of a male high-performance basketball coach aged 42, with 25 years of experience as a professional basketball athlete and important participations in numerous country-level teams and the Brazilian Olympic team. In the year 2015, the coach changed careers from an athlete to a coach in the so-called fast-track transition<sup>19</sup>. From the professional training viewpoint, the coach completed the Physical Education undergraduate course and three intensive internship periods under renowned coaches, Steve Kerr (Golden State Warriors), Svetislav Pešić (Barcelona), Carles Durán (Juventud Badalona) and Julio Lamas (San Lorenzo), from the United States, Spain and Argentina, respectively.

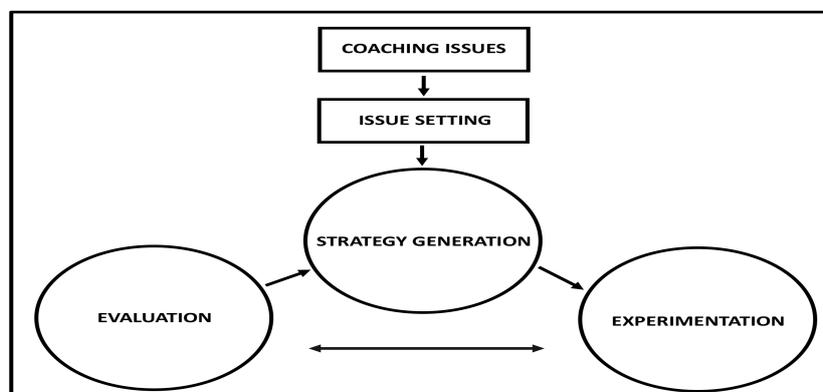
As a coach over three years, he participated in the Special Division Paulista Basketball Championship (Series A1), the National League of Basketball in NBB, the Brazilian premier professional men's basketball league, and the South American League of Basketball with significant results in all competitions, including his team's victory of championships in various years.

#### *Characterization of the intervention*

The mentoring intervention was conducted between February and December 2018 through bi-weekly meetings, mostly virtual meetings through Skype. A total of 16 meetings were held with an average duration of 45 min each.

During this period, the mentor guided, supported and stimulated the coach's reflective practice based on a set of structured activities starting from the coach's own work challenges. The choice of practice was reflective conversation<sup>17</sup>, where a critical interlocutor participates actively (as a critical friend). At the time, the mentor was responsible for mediating the reflective process by exploiting and adding new knowledge to the professional practice.

The experience-based learning model was adopted to guide the reflective conversation between the mentor and the coach<sup>15</sup> (Figure 1). According to this model, coaches face daily coaching issues in their work that are not given or ready and which they need to formulate and delimit. The delimitation of the challenge (issue setting) is linked to the professional role played by the coach, which, in turn, is closely related to the philosophy of work adopted. After delimiting the coaching issues, the coach attempts to generate a strategy, and then puts it into practice (experimentation) and finally evaluates the results (evaluation).



**Figure 1.** Experiential learning model

Source: Adapted from Gilbert and Trudel<sup>15</sup>

#### *Data collection and analysis techniques and instruments*

Field journal and semi-structured interview were used for data collection<sup>20</sup>. The field journal was used to record the activities performed before, during and after each meeting, as well as to record the coach's impressions, perceptions and feelings during the mentoring work. In turn, the interview was conducted seeking to capture the coach's perceptions of the work carried out.

Content Analysis was chosen for data analysis<sup>21</sup>. First, the field journal and interview data were submitted to inductive analysis, which resulted in some provisional categories of meanings. The categories obtained through the field journal were the mentor's challenges, the coach's challenges and the mentor's impressions regarding the potentiality of the mentoring work. In turn, analysis of the interview allowed the identification of the coach's impressions of the development and his perception of the effectiveness of mentoring for his development.

Later, the categories obtained in the analysis of the field journal were compared to the categories obtained in the interview, which resulted in three final categories, which are: the challenges in the construction of the mentor-coach relationship, the coach's work challenges, and the coach's perceptions of his mentoring.

#### *Data reliability and ethics committee*

The following procedures were adopted concerning reliability and data validity: (1) the mentor/researcher responsible for the mentoring intervention and data collection was a university basketball lecturer and researcher and a coach developer certified by the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE), which qualified him for dialog and understanding the coach language, terminology and thoughts; (2) data and result revision was conducted by a peer researcher and coach developer and a third coach developer, both certified by ICCE. They analyzed the data set and compared their impressions with those of the primary researcher. There was no significant discrepancy between the analysis results.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa, CAAE) – No. 03932718.3.0000.5083) and conducted with the coach's consent.

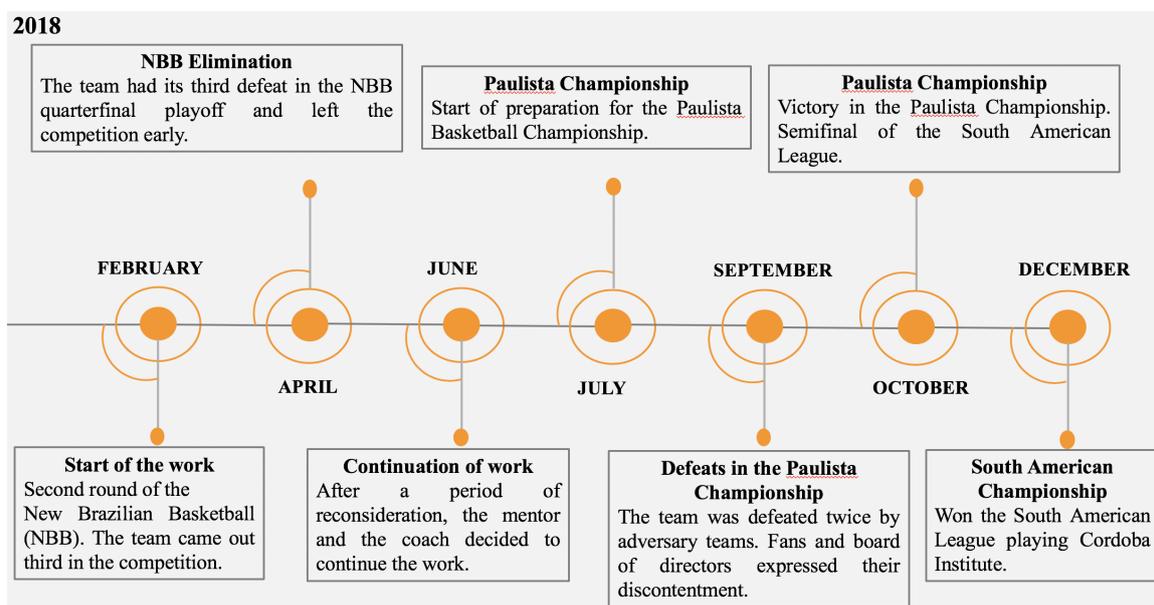
#### *Study Context*

The mentor-coach relationship started in late 2017 with assistance from the strength and conditioning coach, who arranged an informal meeting between them after the mentor's visit to the team. On that occasion, the coach mentioned his professional challenges and his wish for professional development. In turn, the mentor informed about his engagement and experience in professional coach training and development.

In that first meeting, the coach expressed his interest in learning about the training strategies that might be available to him and the mentor informed him about the need to understand the coach's expectations and objective. This led to a second and more structured meeting where they agreed to work together periodically and systematically.

In February 2018, the coach started working on his professional development and challenges based on the mentoring strategy focused on the coach's reflective process.

The work was conducted over four competitions, namely: NBB 2017/2018, Paulista Championship 2018, South American League 2018 and NBB 2018/2019.



**Figure 2.** Work timeline

Source: Prepared by the researcher

Three moments can be clearly distinguished during the work in the events described above. The first, between February and April, characterized the beginning of the interventions, when the coach enjoyed relative stability. The second one, between April and September, was marked by great instability. Finally, the third moment, between October and December, showed a change of course, with an improvement in the team's performance and more significant results in the competitions.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data resulted in three categories, which gave evidence of: (1) the challenge inherent to the construction of a mentor-coach relationship, (2) the challenges the coach faced in his daily work, and (3) the coach's perceptions of mentoring in relation to his professional development.

### *Construction of the mentor-coach relationship*

In the very beginning of the interventions, the mentor faced the challenge of establishing a relationship of complicity and trust with the coach that engaged him in the training proposal. Although the coach had decided to take part in the mentoring work, he had difficulty in finding time to participate in the meetings and carry out the tasks proposed.

This was a challenge in the first three months and resulted in non-systematic meetings, with superficial participation and shallow reflections by the coach. To record, the coach never considered the possibility of interrupting or stopping the work altogether; however, the coach's superficial commitment to the development of the training strategy bothered and upset the mentor.

Initially, this difficulty in participating effectively in the work was interpreted as a lack of time due the coach's busy routine. However, when asked about his behavior during the interview, the coach replied that in the beginning he had difficulty in finding meaning in the work.

In the beginning... it was the deal of... of my trusting and understanding what the process would be. What his work would be in relation to my work. Really, that happened... because I wondered. How will it benefit me? Where will I use it to improve what I have to do, to get better in or out of court, in the relationship... and so on?

As the work evolved, the coach's resistance could be interpreted as a kind of shielding against the vulnerability created by the work. Here, it is worth pointing out that the coach disclosed both personal and professional information to the mentor, revealing, in a certain way, his weak and strong points.

Besides shying away from the mentor's attention, we identified that this behavior was part of a process of signification of feelings and information that the coach had been exposed to during the work. In other words, before gaining a clearer understanding of himself and his professional challenges, the coach wondered about his capacity and willingness to go over his values, beliefs and behaviors, as well as about how to deal with his professional challenges.

Being so, the initial work raised the coach's distrust, diffidence and doubt, to which, consequently, he closed himself off and resisted the proposed work. Added to this, the first phase was marked by lack of time and an initial lack of understanding of the mentoring strategy.

Research has demonstrated that time is the greatest hindrance to the development of reflective practice, which makes coaches avoid it or look for alternative ways to carry it

out<sup>22,23</sup>. On the other hand, Anderson *et al.*<sup>16</sup> pointed out that reflective practice requires professionals to be open and save time and room to examine their practice retrospectively. Sometimes, this inquiry may arouse feelings of discomfort or vulnerability. Olsson, Cruickshank and Collins<sup>24:56</sup> suggested:

Of course, having to abandon long-held beliefs, assumptions, and perceived facts will be a substantial, taxing, and uncomfortable journey for the mentee (and, perhaps, the mentor), including inevitable dips in confidence, and, potentially, performance. As a result, many will shy away from the apparently reduced clarity and rights or wrongs of sophistication, remain reluctant to update their beliefs, ignore contrary evidence [...].

We also point out that the effectiveness of the relationship established between the mentor and the coach is entirely related to the hierarchical position of the mentor in the sports field and mainly to the way the coach perceives this position, which requires taking into consideration the social, cultural and symbolic capital accumulated by the mentor<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, there is evidence<sup>25</sup> that the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is linked to certain behaviors. Among the mentee's behaviors that affect the mentoring experience, what stands out is: a lack of commitment, a negative attitude and a lack of foresight and preparation for the supervision sessions.

Besides these aspects discussed by other authors, the result of this research revealed that the implementation of mentoring requires the mentor to clarify the guiding principles of the training strategy and the coach's responsibility in the development of the work repeatedly. Concomitantly, empathy and patience are necessary to handle the possible discomfort the coach may feel in the beginning of the work.

### *The coach's challenge*

By challenges we mean complex and/or troublesome situations hard to solve, that affect the coach's work and the team's results.

The talks between the mentor and the coach were filled with numerous challenges worth mentioning, such as: coach-athlete relationship, coach-assistant coach relationship, coach-director relationship, the construction of a match philosophy and model, the choice of a team captain, strategies and attack tactical action, the pressure of supporters and the influence of social networks on the coach's leadership and authority.

The first three challenges mentioned above were recurrent. These challenges affected the coach's daily work at different moments and, because of this, they were extensively discussed during the reflective conversations. The coach approached the first challenge, linked to the relationship between the coach and two athletes, at the start of the work, from February to April. Broadly speaking, the two athletes challenged the coach's authority through unruly and disrespectful behavior toward his decisions. The coach showed to be rather upset by this situation and wondered about the reason for the athletes' behavior, and, most of all, about the best way to solve that conflict.

The second challenge appeared in the period of reorganization of the team, on the eve of the Paulista Championship, and was related to the coach-trainer relationship. On that occasion, the coach remained in charge of the team and the trainer was replaced. This change resulted in conflict for the coach, as he was used to the work of the previous trainer. Furthermore, the replacement trainer had a rather different professional profile, which required an effort from coach to get acquainted with his new workmate, negotiation of match conceptions and the training process and definition of the spaces and responsibilities of each one in the direction of the team.

The third challenge, related to the relationship between the coach and the board of directors, occurred in the middle of the work and became more evident in mid-September, in the second phase of the Paulista Championship. The contact between the board of directors and the coach was mainly mediated by the supervisor, the president and some team counselors and those involved in hiring athletes and in team performance. The coach showed dissatisfaction toward his role and power in the decision-making process and, in his mind, some of the decisions made by the board of directors should have been his own. The coach's dissatisfaction grew in the second half of the Paulista Championship when the board of directors was ambiguous about his permanence on the team.

The three challenges described can be classified as interpersonal conflict in sports<sup>26:88</sup>, that is: "a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions, or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions". Additionally, they are linked to the coach's interpersonal knowledge<sup>27</sup>, his capacity of interaction with individuals and groups in the training context.

Despite the good intentions of sports actors (coach, technical committee members, athletes, directors), there are moments of disagreement, misunderstanding or conflicts. Such disagreements that may be caused by unmet expectations, disagreements on training load or content, inadequate performance or private life choices, and also by individual behaviors, such stark and autocratic management and inadequate and inappropriate athlete behavior<sup>28</sup>.

These results corroborate studies<sup>29</sup> that place coach-athlete interpersonal relationship at the core of sports training. For Jowett<sup>30</sup>, training is an interpersonal process where both coach and athlete inevitably get involved with each other. The coach-athlete relationship is, therefore, a social situation marked by thoughts, feelings and behaviors of both parties in a mutual and interdependent way. In this perspective, it is possible to state that a good relationship may potentiate the coach's capacity to influence, support, help, listen, guide, instruct, etc. On the other hand, without a good relationship, it is not possible to train effectively.

The results of the present study indicate that the interpersonal conflicts went beyond the coach-athlete relationship and ran through the relationship with other sports actors, which required the coach to build good relationships with the technical committee and management members. For that, it seems fundamental for the coach to know himself, develop careful listening to learn about the expectations of others (assistant coach, supervisor, etc.) and make the prerogatives and responsibilities of each one involved in the training context clear.

### *The coach's perception of mentoring*

The coach acknowledged the relevance and effectiveness of mentoring in the second half of the work, when he realized the low performance of the team and faced a professional instability situation.

In September 2018, after two defeats by rival teams competing in the Paulista Championship, the coach saw a torrent of criticisms about the team's performance. Part of the fans and the press questioned his capacity as a coach to continue leading the team. Even the board of directors held a meeting to evaluate the negative results and decide on the continuity of the work.

Amid this situation, the coach stated that the results of the mentoring work in the last seven months were fundamental for him to get through and overcome the difficulties he had at that time.

Nowadays I realize that... when you talked about the radical change we went through. The change in fact only happened because of this preparation I had in the

mentoring and the psychological counseling. This process I went through to get where we are today was very important. [...] today I can see it was the many meetings we had, the things you said.

The coach's statements indicate that the mentoring work contributed to his self-confidence and efficiency. In other words, the activities carried out contributed to greater self-knowledge, to his philosophy, his professional competences and capacities, which was essential to deal with an adverse situation.

Right there I made this decision. I know who I am, I'm that guy. I am strong. I'm ready for this. I'm doing something to stay strong. I know about the sport, the game; I know what I have to do. Then, I went to the meeting and said: - I'm holding strong, I'm strong, I'm undergoing mentoring, I'm having psychological counseling, the team is disciplined, I can't complain about them as I used to about the other team. And I'll face it without fear wherever I go.

It is important to point out that the coach mentioned the psychological counseling under a qualified professional. In mid-June, because of personal issues of the coach that went beyond the mentor's area of competence, the coach felt he needed help from a qualified professional. For the mentor, the psychological counseling, even though done independently, contributed to the coach's progress in the mentoring work, particularly in relation to self-realization and development of self-confidence.

Regarding the results of mentoring in his professional development, the coach reported having gained knowledge, improved his communication skills and self-confidence, which enabled him to innovate game strategies.

Knowing how to communicate, to express myself. Communication is very important. After you have had coaching, tactics and technical training, what will make a difference is communication. To know how to express whatever you want to the players, demand what is important from them, make what you want clear. I improved enormously. The communication with the players. To be more assertive. More resolute. To know how to stand up when I disagree.

To have no fear of innovating. I was afraid in my first year, but in the second, I spoke up: Man... what if we play box-and-one and the adversary attacks hard? I lost a bit of confidence to innovate in the second year. This work with you, the counseling, the basketball clinic helped me regain confidence to innovate.

Regarding the mentoring strategy, the coach described what he considered the key point of the work, that is: the questions asked and reflections proposed by the mentor.

I think that the reflections you proposed. Without going into the tactics side, you proposed... reflections... I would say something and you would remark: Man, you are going to self-sabotage. Can you see that you will self-sabotage? Why do you think they will win for you? What is the work you did for them to win for you? How have you made that clear to the players? These reflections, pointing out the way to go, have been very important to me on my path so far.

Besides triggering a reflection process in the coach, the mentor's questions unfolded into effective actions in the daily training. Two examples are worth citing due to their direct association with the challenges described before in relation to the coach-athlete and coach-trainer relations.

In the first example, after pondering about the nature and motive of conflict between two athletes from his team, the coach acknowledged the need for identifying and understanding the expectations, motives, drives and objectives of each athlete. For that

reason, in the Paulista Championship pre-season, the coach conducted individual meetings with the athletes of a new team to sound out their individual expectations and objectives, as well as present his development plan for each athlete. In summary, he adopted a strategy to receive and understand the demands of individual athletes, which was the first step to building up a relation of respect, care and complicity.

In the second example, when a new trainer with a professional profile different from what he was used to was hired, the coach acknowledged the need to get to know the workmate's views of playing and training and clearly define the attributions of each one. To this end, he requested that the trainer put down on paper his considerations on the coach's model of playing, with special attention to the defense, attack and defense/attack transition principles. With these considerations on hand, they met to talk about their individual conceptions of game and the role of each one in the context of training and the game.

The analysis of the coach's perceptions in relation to the mentoring results for his professional development allowed the identification of an improvement in self-confidence, self-efficacy and communication skills. The scientific literature brings concrete evidence of the contribution of mentoring to the improvement of self-confidence and self-efficacy of professionals in the health care field<sup>31,32</sup>; however, studies with sport coaches are scarce. The current study presents indications that mentoring effectively contributed to the development of the coach's confidence in relation to his personal skills and his ability to handle training challenges successfully.

Milistetd *et al.*<sup>33</sup> carried out an intervention similar to the present one; but, with a high-performance field tennis coach. The results also showed an improvement in communication skills, which strengthens its central role in the coach's work. It is worth pointing out that the development of these abilities is an expressed proposal of studies<sup>30</sup> that identify the quality of interpersonal relations being core to training, considering that effectiveness of communication is associated to a strong coach-athlete bond and an improvement in team performance<sup>35</sup>.

In turn, concerning the mentoring strategy, the coach highlighted the potential of his questions and proposed reflections in the development of the coach's reflective practice. Studies<sup>10,36</sup> have demonstrated that mentoring effectiveness dwells on the mentor's capacity to support and guide the coach in the identification, analysis, and, most of all, reflection on training dilemmas, and, as a result, in envisioning solutions to dilemmas. Furthermore, these studies also advise the mentor to avoid the temptation of offering, pointing out or proposing solutions, rather than allowing the coach to develop independence of thought and decision-making, which bears fruit on the development of the coach's self-confidence and self-efficacy.

## Conclusions

The findings of the present study allow stating that mentoring requires the mentor's knowledge and mediation of at least two dimensions of a coach's life and work, namely: individual and relational.

The individual dimension refers to the constitution of the coach as a subject, having a personality and life history that reflect on his values, beliefs and knowledge. By entering this dimension of the coach's life, mentoring contributed for the coach to become aware of his constitution as a person, which was fundamental for the clear identification of the coach's potentials and limitations, which, in turn, pointed to strategies for the coach to seek to strengthen his strong points and reflect and elaborate on his weak points and flaws. The counseling work, for example, was a need that the coach himself identified.

In turn, the relational dimension led to the coach's interpersonal relation with the various actors in the sport scenario, particularly the players, the technical committee and the board of directors. Exploiting this dimension allowed a clearer understanding of the nature of the conflicts the coach experienced, which was fundamental for the definition of the challenges to be overcome. For that, an effort for comprehension and mediation of motivations, expectations and objectives of the work team members was necessary.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that this study was conducted with a basketball coach who had been a professional athlete at the beginning of his career as a coach. Our hypothesis is that these characteristics may indicate the results of the intervention and perception of the coach himself in relation to the mentoring strategy. Thus, further research is recommended to evaluate mentoring with coaches from other sports modalities and/or with distinct professional profiles and experiences.

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