



LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DRONACHARYA COACH DR. KUNTAL ROY AND HIS OLYMPIC ATHLETES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF ELITE PERFORMANCE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Elite sport performance emerges from complex interactions between coaching expertise, athlete motivation, and socio-cultural context (Côté et al., 1995; De Bosscher et al., 2008). In India, Dronacharya awardee coaches play a central role in nurturing Olympic athletes, yet limited research has explored their lived experiences and relational dynamics with athletes (Mukherjee, 2017). This qualitative case study investigates the lived experience of Dr. Kuntal Roy, a Dronacharya awardee athletics coach, and his Olympic athletes to understand how elite performance is co-constructed within the Indian high-performance ecosystem. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with the coach and three Olympic-level athletes, supplemented by performance narratives and training documents. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed four experiential dimensions: (1) coaching as lifelong mission, (2) relational trust and psychological safety, (3) autonomy-supported discipline, and (4) adversity-driven excellence within resource constraints. Findings indicate that sustained Olympic performance emerged from a culturally embedded coaching philosophy integrating authority and care, structured discipline and athlete autonomy, and resilience cultivated through systemic challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). The study contributes a lived-experience model of elite coaching in India and highlights the relational and contextual foundations of Olympic success. Implications for coach education and high-performance policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Dronacharya coach; Olympic athletes; lived experience; elite coaching; India; qualitative case study; sports performance

INTRODUCTION

Elite sport performance is widely recognized as the outcome of long-term athlete development, specialized training, and psychological preparation (Gould et al., 2002; Henriksen et al., 2010). However, beyond these measurable components, performance is shaped by the lived experiences of athletes and coaches operating within socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Cassidy et al., 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Coaching relationships, motivational climates, and systemic constraints influence how athletes develop and sustain elite performance trajectories (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Green & Oakley, 2001).

In India, Dronacharya awardee coaches represent the highest level of coaching excellence, recognized for producing international medalists and Olympic athletes (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2016/2024). These coaches operate within unique environments characterized by limited infrastructure, centralized authority structures, and strong interpersonal bonds between coach and athlete (Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Mukherjee, 2017). Despite their significance, little empirical research has examined how such coaches and their athletes experience the process of Olympic performance development.

The concept of lived experience refers to individuals' subjective interpretations of events and relationships as perceived and constructed in everyday practice (Van Manen, 2016). In elite sport, lived experience encompasses how coaches and athletes interpret training, discipline, success, adversity, and relational dynamics (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Understanding these experiences provides insight into how performance is co-constructed through interaction rather than produced solely by individual ability (Jones et al., 2019).

Previous sport coaching research has emphasized leadership behaviors, motivational climate, and coaching effectiveness (Cushion & Lyle, 2017; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). While valuable, such approaches often treat coaching as observable behavior rather than relational experience (Cassidy et al., 2009). Qualitative studies have shown that coach-athlete relationships involve trust, shared identity, and emotional investment that shape performance development (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Yet the specific lived experience of Indian elite coaching contexts remains underexplored (Mukherjee, 2017).

This study therefore examines the lived experiences of a Dronacharya awardee athletics coach and his Olympic athletes. By analyzing their narratives, the research seeks to understand how elite performance is experienced, constructed, and sustained within the Indian high-performance ecosystem.

Research Gap

Despite recognition of Dronacharya coaches' impact on Indian Olympic success, limited qualitative research has explored their lived

experiences or relational processes with athletes (Mukherjee, 2017). Most literature focuses on policy structures or performance outcomes rather than experiential dynamics (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). This study addresses that gap by providing an in-depth qualitative case analysis of lived coaching experience in India.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

A qualitative explanatory case study design was adopted to explore lived experiences within a real-life elite coaching context (Yin, 2013; Stake, 2006). Case study methodology enables examination of relational processes, contextual influences, and performance development over time (Creswell, 2013). The case comprised one Dronacharya awardee athletics coach, Dr. Kuntal Roy, and his Olympic athletes.

Participants:

Participants included one Dronacharya awardee athletics coach Dr. Kuntal Roy (30+ years experience) and three Olympic athletes trained by the coach (1 male, 2 female). Purposive sampling ensured participants possessed rich experiential knowledge relevant to elite performance development (Creswell, 2013). All athletes had represented India at Olympic Games and international championships.

Data Sources:

Multiple qualitative sources were used to enhance depth and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): in-depth semi-structured interviews (coach and athletes), training and performance narratives, and archival records and media interviews.

Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, emphasizing interpretation of lived meanings across narratives (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Transcripts were coded inductively and organized into experiential themes reflecting shared meanings across coach and athletes. Cross-perspective comparison identified relational dynamics in performance development.

Trustworthiness:

Credibility was supported through triangulation of sources and member validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was ensured through audit trail and coding transparency. Reflexive notes addressed researcher positionality in interpreting lived experience (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Findings

Analysis revealed four interconnected experiential themes describing how Olympic performance was co-constructed.

Coaching As Lifelong Mission:

The Dronacharya coach experienced coaching as a vocation rather

than profession. Athlete success was described as national duty and personal purpose. Identity-based commitment is widely recognized in elite coaching literature as a driver of sustained excellence (Lyle, 2002; Cushion & Lyle, 2017). Athletes perceived the coach's dedication as extraordinary, describing him as mentor and guardian of their careers. Such mission-oriented coaching enhances athlete motivation and persistence (Gould et al., 2002).

Relational Trust and Psychological Safety:

Trust emerged as foundational to performance development. Athletes described unwavering belief from the coach even during poor performance phases. The coach emphasized knowing athletes personally, not only technically. Relational trust and emotional support are central components of effective coach-athlete relationships (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Psychological safety enables athletes to express fear, doubt, and ambition openly, enhancing confidence and performance readiness (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Autonomy-Supported Discipline:

Training was highly structured and disciplined, yet athletes experienced increasing autonomy over time. Early stages involved strict control; elite stages allowed self-regulation and decision participation. This pattern reflects autonomy-supportive coaching within structured environments, consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Athletes described discipline as supportive rather than restrictive because it was combined with personal trust. Autonomy within structure fostered ownership of performance (Pelletier et al., 2013).

Adversity-Driven Excellence in Resource Constraints:

Both coach and athletes emphasized systemic challenges—limited facilities, financial struggles, and institutional barriers. Rather than hindering performance, these constraints were interpreted as strengthening resilience. Psychological resilience in elite athletes often develops through adversity and challenge (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). In developing sport systems, resource constraints can shape motivational meaning and collective identity (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Bandyopadhyay, 2011). Shared adversity created determination and national purpose among participants.

DISCUSSION

Findings demonstrate that Olympic performance in this context emerged from relational and experiential processes rather than solely technical training. Coaching mission orientation reflects identity-based commitment found in elite coaching literature (Lyle, 2002; Cushion & Lyle, 2017). Relational trust aligns with research emphasizing coach-athlete bond as performance driver (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Autonomy-supported discipline illustrates culturally embedded coaching in which authority and autonomy coexist rather than oppose, suggesting contextual adaptation (Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Adversity-driven excellence highlights how systemic constraints shape motivational meaning and reinforce persistence and national pride (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Together, findings indicate that Olympic performance was co-constructed through shared purpose, trustful relationships, structured autonomy, and resilience within context.

Implications

Coach Education:

Indian coach education should incorporate relational and psychological competencies alongside technical training, recognizing coaching as developmental partnership (Cushion & Lyle, 2017; Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

High-Performance Policy:

Support structures should reduce systemic constraints while preserving athlete-coach relational continuity essential for performance (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013).

Research:

Future studies should examine multiple Dronacharya coaches across sports to develop culturally grounded elite coaching models in India (Mukherjee, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Dronacharya awardee coach Dr. Kuntal Roy and his Olympic athletes. Olympic performance

emerged as a relationally co-constructed process shaped by mission-oriented coaching, trustful relationships, autonomy-supported discipline, and resilience within resource constraints. These findings provide a culturally grounded understanding of elite coaching in India and highlight lived experience as central to Olympic performance development.

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