

Exploratory Study of the Coach-Player Relationship and its Links with Sports Performance in Congolese Men's Soccer: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this study is the psychosocial coach-player relationship (dyad) in Congolese soccer. The aim is to show how the quest for performance mobilizes different and complementary behaviors in the two players. The aim is to identify the specificity of this functional and reasoned relationship in terms of the link between, on the one hand, action priorities, coaches' attitudes and players' expectations and, on the other, these behaviours and sporting performance. To this end, a qualitative and comprehensive case study was conducted in Brazzaville from May 23 to August 13, 2023. The cases were represented by three soccer teams: Diabls-Noirs, AC Léopards and FC Gothia, all affiliated to the Congolese Football Federation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches (two per team) and players (five per team). Analysis of the verbatims identified three configurations of the coach-player relationship, which appear to be less conducive to optimal sports use in line with them. The quality of this relational process is influenced by a series of individual, group and organizational variables. In sum, the results obtained demonstrate the reliability of the psychosocial approach in understanding the factors around which the coach-player relationship is articulated in team sports in Congo.

Keywords: psychosocial approach, coach-player dyad, soccer, interactionist theory, Congo

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, sport is a major global issue. "Sport fascinates, arouses admiration, excites feelings of the sublime, of surpassing the ordinary human condition. It is even the bearer of a certain excess" (Moreau, 2008, p.72). Most states invest considerable sums in top-level sport, which they aim to make a showcase for the strength and quality of their political system, as well as their economy and culture. Sport has been able to express its governance across diverse nations, establishing peace between formerly warring peoples. Through its sporting expressions of individual and team games, competitions have emerged. Among these sports is soccer, which is omnipresent in today's social life. Today, all the media give a very important place to sporting competition. In addition to its competitive aspect, soccer is also recognized today as an activity of deep social and emotional relationships, assuming a central role in the development of modern societies. Performance and success are common denominators in the objectives of the various players involved: athletes, coaches, managers, sponsors. In the process that mediates between the formulation of individual or collective goals and their realization, relationships of emotional and

motivational interdependence and social support are forged between the various players. The key to success lies in the quality of these relationships, which are often undervalued. The coach-athlete relationship must therefore be examined from a social psychology perspective. Currently, the Coach-Athlete Relationship (CAR), which is assumed to be a fundamental vector in the sporting context, is being widely investigated. Research has focused on many aspects of this dyad, from leadership and personality factors, to motivational, communicative, cohesive and emotional factors. Coaches and athletes form close relationships with a high degree of interdependence and interaction occurring in the training environment, when practicing the skills and techniques of their sport. The way they interact can have a significant effect on performance (Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007). Dyadic relationships are formed to enable individuals to achieve goals they could not attain on their own (Berscheid et al., 1989). In the coach-athlete relationship, this manifests itself in the athlete's need to acquire knowledge from the coach, the coach's need to pass on his expertise to the athlete and, for both of them, to translate this into positive results. It is in this sense that D'Arripe-Longueville and Fournier (1998) recognize the CAR relationship as "a cooperative activity organized to achieve a collective task (...) described as a totality endowed with adaptive properties" (p.86).

For over twenty years, numerous studies have highlighted the coach's major role in creating a social environment capable of influencing the growth, physical development and psychological and subjective well-being of their athletes (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Ntoumanis & Malle, 2014). These studies have shown that through their interpersonal style, coaches can strongly influence the motivation, performance and psychological well-being of their athletes. Coaches' attitudes, discourse and positioning can have a positive impact on athletes' motivation, or conversely, can generate particularly negative motivational consequences. To understand this process, we need to identify the interpersonal behaviours of coaches that can positively or negatively influence athlete motivation. Two elements stand out: the behaviours of the coach and the athlete are influenced by the social context; the differences between coach and athlete are linked to different focuses and preoccupations, in relation to different registers of activity.

In the Republic of Congo, the survival of ethnic attitudes and behaviour in sports club management makes conflict resolution difficult, and can affect the behaviour of both coach and athlete, undermining the ability to develop and maintain the relationship. In addition, the increasing poverty and impoverishment of the social strata from which the majority of Congolese football players come complicates the nature of the relationship with the coach, particularly in terms of psychological well-being and motivation. What's more, the process of selecting players during matches gives rise to disagreements and conflicts between coach and player.

In the absence of studies in sub-Saharan Black Africa on coach-footballer relationships and knowing that in sports science the person responsible for fostering positive developmental trajectories is primarily the coach (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014; Vella et al., 2013), to study this problem we started from a research question formulated as follows: Around what factors are coach-footballer relationships articulated in the Congo? To answer this question, we formulated the following hypothesis: Coach-football interaction in the Congo is regulated by the social environment, representations of coaching, and the expectations and behaviours of the two players. Our study, which takes an applied social psychology perspective, aims to examine the links between coach-footballer interaction, mutual representations of player selection during matches and sporting performance in the Congo. The aim is to determine: the link between: (i) what coaches define as their priorities for action and what football players expect; (ii) what coaches actually do and what football players expect; (iii) coaches' attitudes and football players' expectations; and how this link between these aspects influences the performance achieved.

Kelley and Thibault's (1978) theory of interdependence are the conceptual tool used in this study to question the coach-footballer relationship in order to construct the plot thread of the couple studied. This theory views interpersonal relationships in terms of social exchange and the interdependence of outcomes in a "dyadic" relationship. The research model on which this work is based is illustrated in Figure 1.

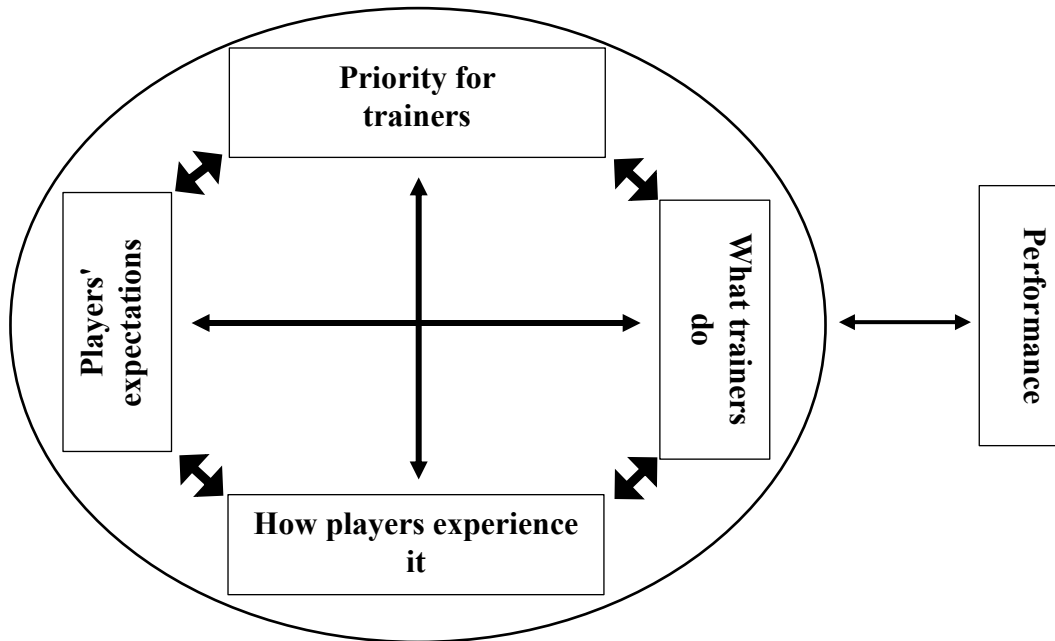


Figure 1: Search model

II. METHODS

Type, Framework and Period of Study

This is an exploratory, qualitative and comprehensive study, based on a case study conducted from May 23 to August 13, 2023 in Brazzaville. The adoption of the case study methodology was based on Yin's (2009) conception.

Population and Sample

Among the fourteen men's soccer clubs playing in the first division and taking part in the national championship, sporting season 2022-2023, two clubs were selected: the multi-disciplinary Diabes-Noirs and Athletic Club Léopards, who were taking part in the semi-finals of the Congo Cup. Diabes-Noirs is one of the three mythical teams in Congolese soccer. Today, they hold seven Congolese championship titles and nine Coupe du Congo titles, and are taking part in this year's Confederation of African Football Cup. As for AC Léopards, they are: five-time Congo Champions, four-time Congo Cup winners, two-time holders of the Congo Super Cup, and one-time holders of the African Football Confederation Cup. We've added a third team, Football Club Gothia, who play in the second division of the Brazzaville Football League, to get a broad view of the coach-player relationship in Congolese soccer. The target population therefore consisted of the soccer coaches of the three teams and the players of the same teams. The sample size was therefore 21 subjects, divided into six coaches and fifteen players, with two coaches (the principal and the assistant) per team and five players per team.

Inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: for coaches: (i) club membership; (ii) seniority of at least five years; (iii) consent to take part in the study; for players: (i) club membership; (ii) regular attendance at training sessions; (iii) seniority of at least five years; (iv) consent to take part in the study. All coaches and players were excluded from the study: impulsive and/or insolent; irregular at training; not consenting to take part in the study.

Study Variables

These were: the coaches' priorities for action, what they actually do; the coaches' concrete actions; the football players' experiences in relation to the coaches' attitudes; the football players' expectations; the influence of the four variables on performance.

Data Collection Tools

Interviews were conducted with all twenty-one respondents, and an interview guide was used as a basis for data collection. We drew inspiration from interview guides for adult athletes (Odier, 1985, p.8). A dictaphone was used to collect individual opinions. The use of a Dictaphone is very flexible: you can record and modulate the length of the interview. It also

has a number of disadvantages linked to operational hazards, and in the same vein, the verbal exchange of the tape recording may be too slow or too fast for some interviewees. To carry out our survey, we proceeded with a pre-survey phase.

The interviews took place both in areas assigned to us by the competition stadium authorities, and in the homes of coaches and players in the local neighbourhoods. The technique used was a semi-structured individual interview, recorded on a Dictaphone with the consent of the interviewee, lasting between 45 minutes and an hour. The choice of themes was based on the results of several studies devoted to coach-player relationships (Levêque, 2008; Totchilova-Gallois & Levêque, 2003; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Observations of matches were also carried out to gain a better understanding of behaviors between coaches and players.

In each club, data collection followed the same sequence: interviews with coaches; interviews with football players; observation of training and/or competition practices; interviews with players. The aim of this final data collection was to find out what football players and coaches thought of their team's ranking, how they felt about sporting and extra-sporting aspects at the end of a full season, what the atmosphere was like within the team, and so on.

Content Analysis of Interviews

The tapes were listened to, then the 21 interviews were captured, transcribed in their entirety and translated, trying to stay as close as possible to the interviewees' own words. To analyze this corpus, we first carried out a content analysis. This involved applying a range of techniques and methods to uncover the exact meaning of the discourse. Content analysis is based on the construction of evidence, and requires various stages (Mucchielli, 2000; Robert & Bouillaguet, 1997; Villatte & Monestes, 2010). We thus built an initial content analysis grid based on the three interviews which, because they were the longest and most precise, enabled us to delve deeper into the various themes studied thanks to our numerous reminders. The analysis categories and sub-categories were used to draw up the final analysis grid. We then classified the data collected on several content analysis sheets corresponding to each theme and sub-theme. This was followed by a cross-sectional analysis of the verbatim of all drop-outs interviewed, corresponding to each theme and sub-theme. This cross-sectional analysis revealed differences and commonalities in the representations of the drop-outs, their perception of their situation and the groups according to individual and contextual variables. All this enabled us to establish a typology of the participants solicited. The triangulation principle of case analysis was applied in the search for intra- and inter-analysis fidelity.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coach-Players Relationship Dynamics

Diables-Noirs Team

In terms of expectations, the coach and the players within the team seem "close". We can schematize these protagonists as two pawns located in the vicinity of a relational continuum. It seems that the main reason for this closeness is linked to respective expectations, which lead to a common target and are evidence of a mutual relationship. As evidence of this, on the basis of the information (formal and informal) gathered, we have selected four examples, which highlight convergences relating to support, "energizing" presence, amateur soccer practice and training objectives.

With regard to support/autonomy, we note that in competition, when game situations turn to the disadvantage of the Black Devils team, players expect support from their coach:

It's true that sometimes, in coaching, he's very quick to be positive, or so I think, just when we need him to keep his spirits up",

When we win, everything's fine. When we lose, he says something that motivates us, whatever we do, or he talks to the youngsters".

In the same vein, the coach would like to work with a team that can manage itself, cope with difficult situations and keep its head above water.

I really have a boss in the team; I have someone who controls or says Stop, we're playing like this!,"who directs."

En ce qui a trait à la présence « consistante » et « dynamisante »/attentes discrètes, certains joueurs attendent que leur entraîneur se manifeste davantage et dirige davantage.

He's too nice, we need to be shaken up,"

He should yell at us once and for all."

But the latter is sometimes reluctant to adopt such behavior.

Now, I'm an educator and it's often repression in a club like Diables-Noirs. I don't want to start policing again. I explain things nicely, I show them, I do things my way... When it doesn't work, you're happy, you're not happy, I make it clear like that, I'm not going to come nose to nose all the time and really play the torturer!"

With regard to the practice of task-oriented amateur football/Activities centred on socio-affective dynamics, we have noted that players wish to maintain relationships of camaraderie.

"
Well, I play soccer for the competition, even if we're not professionals. It's true that there are training sessions and matches we miss, but that's life, We're on a team of winners, We're not here to have fun!."

Moreover, their coach hopes to surround himself with a "professional" structure, which includes a physical trainer, psychologist, nutritionist, physiotherapist, etc., and within which the players are intrinsically motivated, demonstrate sporting ethics and an impeccable lifestyle.

One of the problems is that in many clubs like this, it's pure amateurism. There's no youth structure behind it. I've got a fitness trainer, I'm the one who brought him in, I know him, I appreciate his work... The club pays him because I want to make my players better. You don't always get feedback, in the sense that it comes and goes. The guy prepares for 24, they're 15. The next time, they're 18. We're trying to keep the momentum going, but are we going to keep going if they don't keep up? I don't have any means of transport, I don't have a PC, so it's a coach who goes to the table and manages as best he can. It's amateurism!"

In terms of training objectives, analytical pedagogy and overall experience, it appears that the trainer attaches great importance to improving physical condition.

I think it's important to work on the physical side of things. Tuesdays are pretty much dedicated to that, where I just do physical work interspersed with shooting to really work on their condition."

For their part, players expect training sessions to be more varied and to include a greater variety of played forms.

3-on-3 triangle, an exercise which is proposed from training to training, so from week to week, and which becomes more than painful,"
Shooting exercises that don't change from one training session to the next,"
Weeks go by and they all look the same,"
Make us work in the form of competitions."

From these examples, and beyond the contradictions noted, it is clear from the various interviews and observations that each seems to be living in an uncomfortable and unsatisfactory situation, and that the key to finding solutions for everyone is to be found in the other. In this kind of "couple", what's astonishing is that "one can always have the impression that the other is the jailer of the prison" (El kaïm, 1989). At this level, we wonder about the place that the two poles of the dyad give to their self-evaluation, to their questioning, and to their desire for behavioral modification. Are they even aware of the relational problems within their group? Do they have the means and the will to make positive changes?

At the contextual level, in an attempt to provide some answers and refine our understanding of the discrepancies observed in the Diables-Noirs team, it now seems essential to look at the club's organizational and structural contexts. The club is well known for its family atmosphere and its reputation as a "difficult environment"; indeed, the football players themselves are well aware of this. The quality of the pitch (holes, mounds, poorly mown grass, ...) limits the improvement of physical condition through classic exercises such as counter-attacking, shooting competitions... The dilapidated state of the facility does not lend itself to a convivial atmosphere.

The late hours of training are not conducive to player motivation or quality practice (Costill & Wilmore, 2006). Although the members of the technical staff are present, both physically and morally, they give the coach carte blanche in terms of recruitment choices, sporting strategies, methodological principles, etc.

Considering all these factors, it would appear that the trainer's responsibilities exceed his duties, that the structure does not allow him to achieve his priority objectives and, finally, that the club's general organization does not allow the players to benefit from the best sporting conditions.

In a reactive way, the protagonists try to find personal satisfaction in dimensions and areas other than those linked to progress, performance and coach/player relationships.

In terms of adaptation, while interpersonal differences are undeniably evident in the team, it seems that neither the coach nor the players are in a position to consider them sufficiently to "take the plunge" and try to improve operational cohesion. Cox (2005, p. 272) describes the latter as "the degree to which a team collaborates in pursuit of a specific goal" (in soccer, for example, operative cohesion manifests itself when a team initiates a system of play or sets up a "press defense" across the field). In fact, we had the impression that players were trying to compensate for their lack of operative cohesion through social cohesion, defined by Cox (2005, p. 272) as "the degree of attraction between team-mates and the degree of

satisfaction of players on a team in playing together". This second type of cohesion, based on affectivity, seems to be a way for the team to protect itself, to maintain a pleasant atmosphere between players and a way to positively counterbalance performance (or counter-performance). In fact, we have seen that this affective cohesion can have a negative effect on players' performance. In this regard, Gréhaigne et al. (1999) point out that, when athletes spend too much energy maintaining team cohesion, team output declines. Finally, while it appears from the literature that operative cohesion more easily leads to affective cohesion than vice versa (Moran, 2004), we also know that operative cohesion can more easily lead to performance than affective cohesion does. It would seem, therefore, that the conditions are not ripe for the Diablos-Noirs team's sporting success, particularly at international level.

Football Club Gothia Team

In terms of expectations, it seemed to us during the focus group organized with the team that we didn't have access to the real expectations of the participants. Indeed, the majority of players seemed shy and uncomfortable with researchers (we are tempted to explain this phenomenon by a lack of scientific culture, thus reinforcing a feeling of apprehension, which we did not note in the other two teams). In addition, it appeared to us that the players did not dare to express themselves freely, for fear of their coach (perhaps they had the impression that, in one way or another, he would be aware of our discussion). We have, of course, taken account of this restraint in our analysis. It's interesting to note here that the coach says he expects to "receive before giving".

"I'm a coach who likes to receive before giving!"

However, the relationship established is such that a number of players seem hesitant as to what they really have to give, given what they receive (their attitude towards us seems to bear this out). Several players spontaneously express an expectation of being "pushed", but the majority talk mainly about their experience of the training style. In the end, this situation seems to attest to the low priority given to their expectations. In terms of rigor, our interviews showed that the coach, who comes across as very severe and strict, expects a great deal of rigor from his players, especially the younger ones.

"First of all, I think I can say that I'm a very, very hard person, and I think a lot of people will confirm that. When I say very hard, I mean that I'm very demanding [...] especially the younger the players are!"

On this subject, he admits to operating on the basis of a hierarchy that we could briefly summarize as follows: "Hardest on the youngest". To the dismay of the juniors, the team itself is fully aware of this hierarchy. Here, we note an initial contradiction in the respective expectations of the coach and the players. While the older players are (quite logically) delighted by the esteem and importance accorded to them by their coach, the others, relegated to the rank of newcomers who have yet to make their mark and have everything to prove, deplore this hierarchical structure.

"I don't really know what to say since I haven't played much and I don't even know why. He used to put us down a bit and there are times when we go out without knowing why and when we [the new guys] make a small mistake, he takes us out, but when it's a big one, he's still excused."

"Sometimes I get the impression that he gives me less chance to prove myself than the others [players he trusts], but I know that deep down it's my fault, I'm the one who has to prove myself;"

"I think he should have given those who didn't play a bit more of a chance!"

Carron (1993, cited by Marcellini, 1995), defines the sports team as "a collective of individuals who possess a collective identity, have common goals and objectives, share a common fate, develop structured patterns of interaction and modalities of communication, exhibit personal and task interdependence, reciprocal interpersonal attraction and see themselves as a group". This ultimate group characteristic refers to "felt identity" (a subjective, reflexive reality necessarily felt by the individual). In the Gothia team, there seems to be a real split between the older players, who convey a sense of belonging, and the younger ones, who feel a form of exclusion. Under these conditions, where some feel "left out", it seems unlikely that the team will share a "common fate". Yet, as several authors have mentioned (notably Orlick, 1986), we know that building collective harmony requires a commitment from all team members towards a common goal. Finally, the absence of a collective identity can be understood in terms of the club's philosophy, which is primarily aimed at helping players progress individually (collective progress is also an objective to be achieved, but it appeared to us that the coach's ultimate goal was to "get out of the pack" as many players as possible). It would seem, then, that the team has developed mainly around the issue of identity, focusing on distinguishing individual players, thereby relegating the group as a reference point for identity to the background. As far as verbal behavior is concerned, the interviews revealed that at training sessions, as at matches, the coach has a habit of shouting a great deal, whether his words are constructive and appropriate or simply convey a message, belittling or even disparaging the players.

"Listen to me, next time you shoot from there, I'll cut your head off! Every time you shoot from there, you waste time and break the rhythm,"

Seriously, my grandmother shoots better than that! How many out of a thousand do you think you're going to shoot? If you want, we can ask the federation to make the goals bigger!..."

Among the variables that can shed light on this attitude, we could mention a series of life experiences from childhood and adolescence, such as difficult family situations, disharmonious morphological development... Other interviews with players show that many of them want and expect more serenity and calm from their coach. The emotions of dismay and fear displayed by some during the observations (for example, during the match, some players left the pitch with their eyes lowered, and did not look at the coach when he addressed them) reinforce the idea that the command-based training mode advocated by the coach is inconsistent with the players' personal development (including their sense of well-being). A second discrepancy therefore appears to exist between the coach's expectations/behaviors and those of the football players.

Finally, in addition to the elements already mentioned, it also appears that some players would like training sessions to be interrupted less frequently (during observations, we found that activity was stopped approximately every two to three minutes). The many comments (useful/unuseful, fair/unjust, constructive/descriptive) made by the coach, as well as his desire to control all tactical and technical aspects down to the last detail, do not go hand in hand with this wish, and thus herald a third contradiction.

From a contextual point of view, the Gothia team has a number of distinctive features that set it apart from the other two clubs analyzed. It is a borough club, with young players aged between 17 and 22, most of whom live with their parents. The team, which has no special funding, cannot be promoted, but can be relegated, which gives it a certain sense of comfort. The players play for a "league" team, which allows them to play a few matches during the year. Although frequent meetings are organized between the coach and the various members of the coaching staff (fitness trainer, technical director), to discuss the team as a whole and each player in particular, no report card is drawn up for the latter. The Club gives the coach a great deal of freedom, both in his sporting choices (tactical, technical, etc.) and in his organization and working methods. This autonomy undeniably reinforces his sense of superiority over the players. The team's status also gives him additional peace of mind when it comes to match results. What's more, the team's particular structural and organizational context (living with parents or tenants undeniably leads the coach to rub shoulders with his players, particularly in the refreshment areas and VIP areas, and to maintain a certain almost fraternal relationship of authority with them) makes the players captive to the club and the coach, a situation that reinforces their subordination.

As far as adaptations are concerned, the interview data reveal a number of divergent elements, but it seems that the trainer is unwilling to take them into consideration, despite an undeniable awareness on his part (for example, he knows that some players are afraid of him). He leaves no room for feedback on his own behavior, whether perceived by himself or reported by others. According to him, the team must adapt to his way of acting, not the other way around. It seems, then, that the coach, who likes to feel "all-powerful", controls his young players and guides them like pawns on a chessboard, while the latter submit without having any other choice.

Athletic Club Léopards Team

In terms of expectations, during interviews with the coaches, the head coach repeatedly stressed the importance he attaches to the balance between work intensity and the quest for performance. According to him, the players go to training to perform and optimize their potential during the sessions. The players are well aware of this priority (indeed, they said so during the focus group) and seem convinced to work in this way. In the field, we have indeed observed this balance between physical work and technical-tactical performance. However, the latter takes precedence over the former, much to the chagrin of the coach and some of the players. It's worth pointing out that not only the coach and some of the players, but also the players themselves, have different perceptions of the way in which training sessions are conducted. Players' expectations don't seem to converge, and it seems to us that the reasons for taking part have different objectives (physical versus technical/tactical training). On this subject, Hachez and Bodson (1992) highlighted the development of technical and tactical skills as the primary reason for participation in high-level soccer competitions.

With regard to the closeness/singularity between coach and players, it emerged from the interviews that during matches, players expect the coach to make an emotional adjustment to the team's emotional experience. This finding converges with the support the coach gives his players. Indeed, he is positive and encouraging towards his team, either through gestures or words. On the other hand, during the interview, the coach explained that he knew most of the players, and that his relationship with them went beyond the "normal" coach-player relationship:

But I told them, that's why I wanted to take on this team, because there comes a time when you have to intervene, when you have to be more directive, when you sometimes have to get angry because things aren't going well, stories like that, and I didn't want to because I'd established a certain type of relationship with them. I was the good dad, the pedagogue, the one to whom, if we had a problem, we sometimes came to tell it, and so on. So, from the moment we created that relationship, I can't see myself moving on to another one. So that's why I was annoyed when I had to take over the team."

On the basis of the information we gathered, we were led to wonder about this apparent good understanding between coach and players: might the players not be as unanimous as they let on about their affinity with the coach? Do the feelings of some football players reach their conscience? Doesn't inhibition take place without their knowledge? Is there not a cohesive sub-group from which one cannot stray? In any case, it seems that the coach is reluctant to take responsibility for the team (he often needs to justify himself; he asks for someone's approval before making a decision...), because he wants to keep the privileged relationship he has with the majority of the players. But is this situation compatible with performance prospects? According to Jowett and Lavallee (2008), a relationship that is effective (from an emotional point of view) and unsuccessful (in terms of sporting results) will inevitably have positive results for psychological health and well-being, but no real improvement in performance.

At the contextual level, the structural and organizational models provide players with the necessary conditions for optimal practice. The training stadium is large (with the possibility of forming two pitches across the field), well-lit and equipped with synthetic turf. The equipment provided is of good quality, training times are not too late, and the premiums paid to players are relatively moderate. It therefore appeared to us that the general organization of the club did not constitute a factor of negative influence on group dynamics, coach-player relations or performances. However, the level of the latter is identical to that of the Diables-Noirs team (third at the Congo Cup in 2023), and we are tempted to hypothesize that the privileged relationship maintained by the coach with his players is compatible with optimal performance on the part of the latter. Finally, from the point of view of adaptations, there is a strong proximity between the players and the coach, which should enable certain behavioral limits to be set. A clear definition of objectives should also be established and known by all.

General Discussion

Analysis of these three teams reveals three types of coach-player relationship dynamic: the first is resilience, the second submission and the last fusion. Although these configurations are distinct, the different profiles of coaches and players do not allow any club to stand out in terms of performance at African level, and we are tempted to conclude that certain problem areas exist within the three teams.

In the first team, Diables-Noirs, organizational and structural factors tend to reinforce the coach's and players' respective positions. Indeed, the omnipresence of the fans' committee, the club's history, the intrusion of politics... reinforce the coach's idea that he cannot intervene, since, in his view, the state of the situation depends on distal variables (such as the context, the other's posture, external resources...) and not on proximal variables (such as, for example, his way of building the relationship, organizing training sessions, his posture in training...). In his opinion, the various factors mentioned above severely limit his immediate work and commitment. Finally, it seems that the situation is experienced very negatively by the coach, but that he doesn't question himself and prefers to attribute the fault to his players (lack of motivation, skills, seriousness...). In our opinion, there is room for improvement: firstly, in the common definition of the coach-player relationship, as it seems that this first stage has not yet been surpassed. On this point, we can refer, on the one hand, to the stages in the development of the functional maturity of a "task" group (Mucchielli, 2000) and, on the other, to the building of trust in collaboration (Newell & Swan, 2000). With regard to the first point, it appears that while security in the here and now is partly established (although the discrepancy between the words and behaviour of certain players, as well as the coach's discomfort, manifested on different occasions, indicate relative insecurity), interpersonal trust (the second necessary milestone) is not. This is borne out by the reproaches expressed by both parties regarding the three dimensions of trust¹ identified by Newell and Swan (2000). It is, however, vital that these different aspects are developed, given the non-professional nature of the context in which the relationship is established.

Among the improvements to be considered, the coach could, in particular, encourage feedback, take account of players' opinions by setting up consultation meetings, vary the exercises proposed to avoid the installation of routines, maintain the "delicious uncertainty" (i.e. propose exercises and game situations that allow success in 70% to 80% of cases. In this way, football players would be sufficiently alert and interested in improving, surpassing and winning... and would not be confronted with too high a failure rate, sometimes leading to abandonment). Two hypotheses seem to be able to explain, in part, the coach's denial of change: either he is unaware of his shortcomings, and therefore unable to make appropriate modifications, or he is aware of his shortcomings, but unwilling to take any steps to address them.

For their part, gamblers also seem very reluctant to undertake behavioral changes, despite being aware of the inadequacy of some of their behaviors.

I don't think we make any particular effort to train hard either. [...] Everyone relies a bit on each other and there's no one who's going to say, and I'm the first, 'Come on now, let's run and get on with it'. We look at each other, we laugh, we play the fool."

¹ « Competence trust, commitment trust and compaignon trust » trad. fr : « confiance relative à la compétence, confiance d'engagement et confiance relationnelle ».

For the majority of players, the circumstances in which they play seem to represent a first-rate excuse for their apathy. However, the coach's lack of presence, relational ease and emotional and sporting support seem to constitute a second obstacle for the team. The team doesn't feel sufficiently "supported" by its coach, and the players end up adopting behaviours similar to their own.

The coach could individualize the work to suit the personality of each player, and consider, overall, the need for collective adaptation for the team. The players might agree to make an effort to increase their attendance and investment, but also to promote, quantitatively and qualitatively, the contacts they make with their coach. This seems unlikely, however, and would require at least one influential member to take the initiative.

In the second team, FC Gothia, its structure reinforces the coach's supremacy over the players. Indeed, everything is designed so that he "only" has to manage and direct his team, without worrying about any organizational constraints. The permanent presence of the players within the club makes them highly captive to the situation, further reinforcing the feeling of control conveyed by the coach. Given these conditions, there seems to be no apparent reason for the coach to alter the relational dynamic that binds him to his players, especially as he presents himself as someone who wants to receive before giving, and his difficult past leads him to want to control everything with great confidence and certainty. The players have very little freedom of expression.

We tell him something, it's 'you shut up!'

and their behaviour is heavily scrutinized

Listen to me when I talk to you instead of opening your fried whiting eyes wide!'

The coach himself is aware of the apprehension he arouses in some people.

Yes, there are a lot of players being recruited this year who are afraid of me.

However, instead of placing himself at the center of "problematic" situations, he prefers to wait for his team to question itself.

Look at the players who have been working for two or three years. I've never been aggressive with them.'

The recruitment system, organized to select players likely to join the club the following season, suggests a lack of collective identity. Indeed, it seemed to us that the club's ultimate objective was to "release" as many talented youngsters as possible, with a view to integration into a national first-division club or a league-level team. As a result, it seems that the only dimension that unites all the football players, that forms the team's "identity", is the project of individual progression, attached to a need to distinguish and stand out. While the club's image is promising for young players, the reality is far less so, both in sporting and human terms. Indeed, a number of pertinent questions remain unanswered: to what extent are the least competent elements considered? what care and consideration is given to the most psychologically fragile players? what are the real team objectives amid the multiplicity, even incompatibility, of general and individual objectives?

It seems that the very organization of the structure (no relegation or promotion, which would constitute common and collective objectives), contributes to the fact that there is no concrete objective, against which to confront the methods employed to judge their validity or non-validity. On the other hand, if the aim is to "bring out" one or two talents a year, this type of training may well be appropriate. In such an amalgamated context, with a coach advocating a work-by-command style, a group guided by apprehension, and individuals trying to distinguish themselves... we wonder about the long-term effects and collateral damage.

As for the Athletic Club Léopards team, its organizational structure can be described as somewhere between the two. Indeed, although the committee is not very present (in human, sporting or financial terms), the infrastructures, schedules and material conditions offer the team the opportunity to perform to a high standard. What's more, this third team is, on the face of it, made up of the most competent and most homogeneous group in terms of sporting talent. Outwardly, the situation seems conducive to collective performance. However, this is not the case. In fact, the AC Léopards team is among the top 5 teams in the Congolese Football Federation rankings, alongside the Diables-Noirs team. It seems that the privileged relationship maintained by the coach with the majority of the players is a factor negatively influencing their commitment and sporting results. Indeed, as the boundaries are not sufficiently defined, the coach finds it difficult to impose his work philosophy, which aims to combine physical work intensity and the development of technical-tactical skills, with the players largely favouring the second aspect. For fear of being misperceived or provoking conflict, the coach always seems to accommodate the situation. We likened this avoidance to one of the facets of submissive coaching, described by Martens (2004) as a style that allows others to dominate the conversation and where coaches belittle confrontation and conflict. During our observations and interventions, we had the impression that there were fault lines within the team.

Well, actually there are two teams, there's an AC Leopards 1 and an AC Leopards 2. I don't even know who does both. Er... Otherwise, we all get along very well...'

and that a cohesive sub-group, based on affectivity, prevented the expression of any singularity. As a result, players have to conform, or risk not being accepted into the "luxury team". But this apparent affective cohesion has no (or little) effect(s) on performance improvement (Mullen & Cooper, 1994), which ultimately prevents the latter from having any effect on the development of operative cohesion.

IV. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyze the psycho-social dynamics of the coach-player relationship in the Congo, in order to identify concrete courses of action for athletes and members of their coaching staff. The analysis of three cases illustrates the difficulty of establishing a functional, reasoned² coach-player relationship that can organize the internal dynamics between players. As we have illustrated in each of the cases, this deficiency creates a default structuring of the group and a definition of its aspirations. As we have illustrated in each case, this deficiency creates a default structuring of the group and a definition of its aspirations. Our analysis has led us to identify three configurations of the coach-player relationship, which appear to be less conducive to optimal use of the resources present, with a view to achieving a sporting performance in line with them. Referring to Kelley and Thibault's (1978) theory of interdependence, we can attest that the coach-player relational process underpins the team's effective functional work process. The quality of this relational process is influenced by a series of individual, group and organizational variables, not all of which we have explored. However, a number of them appear to us to be capable of bringing about a significant improvement: clarification and sharing of a common target, which articulates the expectations of both parties; clear definition and contractualization of respective role expectations; task organization (training methods and structures, match preparation...); consideration of non-modifiable organizational variables and their consequences on the work process (training location and schedule, available resources and coaching...); consideration of non-modifiable organizational variables and their impact on the work process (training location and schedule, available resources and supervision, etc.); identification of the relational norms present in the team, their impact on the work process (existence of two sub-groups with very different cohesion, norm of competition and individual rather than collective emergence, etc.) and the way in which the coaches maintain them. This non-exhaustive list highlights a lack of shared and harmonized expectations, of explicit regulation processes, on the one hand, and on the other. The first consequences are the absence of clearly perceived, shared and accepted objectives, with the resulting poor performance.

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² Which means taking a step back.

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