

Integrating psychological assessment in young sports coach selection: A systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews key psychological variables influencing the success of young sports coaches, including personality traits, leadership styles, emotional intelligence, athletic intelligence, and motivation. A systematic bibliographic review analyses validated assessment tools for these variables. Integrating psychological evaluations with traditional technical and tactical criteria is essential to improve recruitment decisions and athlete performance outcomes. Personality dimensions such as conscientiousness and agreeableness, and leadership styles like transformational and democratic approaches, strongly predict coaching efficacy. Emotional intelligence is crucial for managing stress and communication, while athletic intelligence supports dynamic decision-making. Motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, underpins coaches' commitment to ongoing development and athletes' wellbeing. The review discusses challenges including cultural adaptation and the need for longitudinal validation of psychological instruments. A multidimensional evaluation framework is proposed to enhance objectivity, reliability, and predictive validity in coach selection. Furthermore, the continuous development of psychological skills within coach education programs is advocated, with a focus on emotional regulation, leadership adaptability, and the sustainability of motivation to foster resilient and effective coaching workforces. This research promotes the holistic integration of psychological competencies with technical skills, thereby advancing coach-athlete relationships and superior team performance.

KEYWORDS: coach selection; emotional intelligence; leadership styles; psychological variables; young sports coaches.

INTRODUCTION

Coach selection processes have traditionally prioritised technical and tactical expertise while underestimating psychological attributes that strongly impact coaching effectiveness, team dynamics, and cohesion (Martens, 2012). Recent systematic reviews on elite and Olympic-level coaches highlight how key psychosocial characteristics influence athlete performance, mental well-being, and resilience, arguing for the systematic inclusion of psychological evaluations alongside technical-tactical criteria in recruitment and selection (Cook et al., 2021). In this line, specific selection models for basketball national team coaches integrate psychological, technical, and tactical competences to optimise decisions (Honari et al., 2021). Evidence on team cohesion as a mediator between

leadership and performance further reinforces the need for coaches to actively foster cohesive environments (Grossman et al., 2022). Beyond performance, sport psychology is also framed as an agent of cultural deconstruction, challenging gender and disability stereotypes through inclusive participation and performance settings (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2025).

Among the psychological variables extensively studied, personality traits remain fundamental. The Five-Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1989) has been especially influential in conceptualising these traits, identifying key dimensions such as conscientiousness and agreeableness as strong predictors of successful coaching outcomes (Denissen et al., 2020). Conversely, traits like neuroticism have been associated with reduced leadership efficacy and lower athlete satisfaction (Yang et al., 2015). Leadership styles also embody

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a vital construct; transformational, democratic, and adaptive leadership are linked to heightened athlete motivation and improved team climate (Lisá et al., 2023; Martens, 2012). In contrast, maladaptive interpersonal traits such as narcissism can detrimentally affect coaching relationships and team outcomes (Matosic et al., 2017).

Emotional intelligence is highlighted as a core attribute for coaching success because it supports stress management, empathy, and effective communication in demanding competitive contexts (Petrides, 2009; Shen et al., 2019). Athletic intelligence—rapid decision-making, strategic adaptability, and situational awareness—is also crucial for in-game tactical responsiveness and for problem-solving and creative tactical decisions, especially in sports like basketball, which are closely linked to personality and cognitive skills (Díaz-Rodríguez & Pérez-Córdoba, 2024; Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Intrinsic motivation sustains coaches' commitment to their own development and to athlete welfare, and similar personality–motivation patterns help explain adolescents' sport participation and persistence over time (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2026; Pelletier et al., 1995).

Despite this, many organisations still rely mainly on subjective judgments and technical qualifications, overlooking standardised, validated psychological measures in recruitment (Martens, 2012). Recent work therefore advocates multidimensional assessment batteries combining personality inventories, leadership measures, emotional intelligence scales, and cognitive ability tests such as the Athletic Intelligence Quotient and brief cognitive screenings, with the aim of improving predictive accuracy, selection objectivity, and ultimately athlete–coach relationships and team outcomes (Bowman et al., 2021; Robie et al., 2024; Vealey, 2024).

METHODS

This study systematically reviewed empirical research on psychological variables relevant to selecting young sports coaches and on validated instruments to assess them, across publications from 2000–2025 in major databases. It focused on personality, leadership, emotional and athletic intelligence, and motivation in relation to coaching efficacy and recruitment, ultimately analysing 67 articles and 10 books from a multidisciplinary perspective linking sport psychology, leadership theory, and talent identification (Costa & McCrae, 1989; Petrides, 2009).

Particular attention was given to widely used psychological assessment instruments, including the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which evaluates personality across neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness,

and conscientiousness and is relevant for predicting stress management, social functioning, and organisational competencies in team leadership (Costa & McCrae, 1989). The review also considered the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS), a sport-specific tool assessing autocratic, democratic, and social support leadership behaviours and their impact on athlete motivation and group cohesion (Marcén et al., 2016), and the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), which measures emotional awareness, regulation, and interpersonal skills crucial for managing high-pressure interactions (Petrides, 2009). Cognitive and decision-making dimensions were captured through the Athletic Intelligence Quotient (AIQ), focused on rapid information processing and tactical adaptability (Bowman et al., 2021), and motivational aspects were addressed via the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS), which differentiates intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation in sport settings, informing the motivational climate fostered by coaches (Pelletier et al., 1995).

Data extraction summarised psychometric quality, use contexts, and predictive validity of the instruments, and proposed combining questionnaires with scenarios and interviews to better capture coaching competencies. Basic statistical analyses were suggested to link variables and improve the prediction of coaching success, thereby supporting more objective selection decisions.

RESULTS

The review confirms that several psychological variables are critical for the selection and success of young sports coaches. Among personality traits, conscientiousness, as measured by the NEO Five-Factor Inventory, consistently emerges as a strong predictor of coaching efficacy, being associated with organisational skills, goal orientation, and persistence that translate into structured training and diligent athlete monitoring, thus enhancing team performance (Costa & McCrae, 1989; Denissen et al., 2020). Agreeableness is also important for fostering interpersonal harmony, as coaches high in this trait tend to create cooperative and supportive environments that improve communication and reduce conflict among athletes (Yang et al., 2015). This trait aligns with democratic and transformational leadership styles, measured by the Leadership Scale for Sports, which promote athlete autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and greater group engagement (Lisá et al., 2023; Marcén et al., 2016). Transformational leadership—characterised by inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation—is strongly linked to higher athlete satisfaction and team cohesion, with coaches drawing on emotional intelligence competencies to manage

stress, build trust, and align team goals, so that psychosocial factors such as emotional intelligence and motivation show significant associations with athlete satisfaction, performance outcomes, and overall team cohesion (Shen et al., 2019).

Athletic intelligence, assessed with the Athletic Intelligence Quotient (AIQ), covers rapid decision-making under pressure, situational awareness, and pattern recognition, allowing coaches with high scores to adapt effectively to dynamic competitive environments and gain performance advantages (Bowman et al., 2021). The Wonderlic Cognitive Ability Test adds information about general cognitive skills relevant to coaching and broader professional demands (Robie et al., 2024). Motivation—especially intrinsic motivation, as measured by the Sport Motivation Scale—supports sustained professional development and care for athletes' holistic well-being; intrinsically motivated coaches tend to foster passion, resilience, and continuous improvement within teams, thereby enhancing athlete commitment and outcomes (Pelletier et al., 1995).

Combining multiple psychological measures, such as situational judgment tests with standard questionnaires, improves the accuracy and breadth of coach selection profiles, helping selectors identify coaches best suited to different sports and cultural contexts (Martens, 2012). Case studies and organisational reports indicate that programmes using such comprehensive psychological evaluation frameworks achieve better coach retention, healthier team climates, and greater competitive success than those relying on subjective selection alone, although challenges remain regarding the cultural adaptation of instruments and the confirmation of their long-term predictive validity (Vealey, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

This review concludes that psychological variables—including personality traits, leadership styles, emotional intelligence, athletic intelligence, and motivation—are crucial for the success of young sports coaches, and that using validated psychological assessment tools in selection protocols increases objectivity and offers predictive insight into future effectiveness. The proposed multidimensional evaluation framework broadens the focus beyond technical knowledge, helping recruiters identify coaches with the psychological robustness to manage dynamic team environments and high-performance demands, while aligning with organisational culture and athletic goals to support athletes' holistic well-being and development. A psychologically informed approach to coach selection and development also serves wider sociocultural aims, positioning sport psychology as an agent of cultural deconstruction that challenges gender and

disability stereotypes, and suggests that prioritising coaches' personality and motivational profiles may indirectly promote more sustained and healthy sport participation among young athletes (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2025; Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2026). Finally, beyond pre-selection assessment, the continuous development of psychological skills—such as emotional regulation, adaptable leadership, and motivation maintenance—is highlighted as essential for sustaining coaches' resilience and effectiveness throughout their careers.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Carlos Díaz-Rodríguez — Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Supervision; Project administration; Validation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Manuel Ayuso-Blanco — Investigation; Data curation; Writing – review & editing.

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