

The athletic consul: a new role in sports organizations

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ABSTRACT

Sports organizations are complex. In addition to the actual coaching of athletes, many utilize a myriad of different administrative and sport science departments or areas of expertise to aid in the achievement of success. Examples include sports administration, nutrition, strength and conditioning, sport psychology, counseling, athletic training, to name a few. Consequently, there are many voices within the organization, and communication and effectiveness may be affected by silos, fear of voicing opinions, or other challenges that come from the stresses and rigors of athletic competition. Anecdotally, we have noticed the often-informal introduction of an individual into some sports organizations and teams to help support the overall organization and its personnel. This individual does not necessarily have decision-making powers, but serves as a conduit of information, a supporter, and an advisor to all parties. To date, a specific title for this position has not been formally recognized, nor have its roles or responsibilities been defined. Therefore, the purpose of this conceptual article is to propose a name for this position, which we have termed Athletic Consul (AC). Further, we outline why such a position is valuable, its fit within an athletic program, the roles and responsibilities of the position, and why it is necessary for such this position be formalized.

KEYWORDS

coach; athlete; ombudsman; sport psychology; counseling; athletics; sport management

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INTRODUCTION

Sports is a massive industry. How massive is unclear, but it is estimated that over 50 million youth participate in sports in the United States alone (Baghurst & Benham, 2020). This excludes the millions of collegiate, adult, and masters-level participants. Not surprisingly, coaches are in high demand. The United States Bureau of Labor Sta-

tistics (2021) reported almost 300,000 jobs in coaching and scouting (excluding the hundreds of thousands of coaches who work part-time, volunteer, or work in areas not typically identified within the coaching profession) and predicted a “much faster than average” increase in the profession at a 12% growth over the next ten years. Trends are similar in the United Kingdom where the number of sport coaches, instructors, and officials has risen approximately 13% to 89,000 since 2021 (Statista, 2023).

The rise in sports popularity, followed by an increasing demand for coaches, highlights the many opportunities for employment in sports. For example, we unofficially surveyed coaches at a variety of club, high school, collegiate, and professional teams to identify what resources they used. Included were examples such as: athletic trainers, medical professionals, strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychologists, counselors, sports nutritionists, biomechanists, exercise scientists, data analysts, media professionals, academic support specialists, managers, agents, and owners.

Admittedly, most volunteer or small program coaches will lack many of the aforementioned resources and will be expected to know and handle many of these team functions, which creates its own challenges. However, regardless the level of competition or the personnel resources (un)available, coaches have many roles and responsibilities, including serving as a substitute parent, disciplinarian, tactician, academic tutor, mentor, and friend to their athletes (Davis, 2005). In addition, coaches may be expected to work with a variety of individuals not directly working for the sports organization or team, such as parents, boosters/fundraisers, sponsors, and reporters (Lyst, 2019).

Working with a vast array of individuals and groups within and external to the team can place enormous pressure on a coach, especially within the context of an outcome-oriented environment: coaches are expected to win (Pearson et al., 2020). While the expectation of a youth coach may be to develop athlete skills, create a fun environment, and foster lifelong activity (Wilson Jr., 2019), which we advocate at all levels, most coaches are evaluated on winning and losing, which is a very public evaluation of their job performance (Pearson et al., 2020). Athlete performance is often the judge of success, which depends on how well the athletes have been prepared. How well they have been prepared depends not only on the coach, but on the effectiveness of those supporting the coach and athletes.

With the many roles and responsibilities now placed on coaches, particularly in larger athletic programs that include staff across multiple areas of expertise, communication lines can become challenged, silos of expertise may develop, and an overall breakdown in desired culture may occur (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Zakrajsek et al., 2007). Stewart (2014) reported that in 409 US Division I collegiate athletic programs, 88% reported they believed silos to exist within their program. To help address this from occurring, within this conceptual article we propose the creation of a new position in sport programs, which we term the Athletic Consul (AC).

Origin of the term “consul”

The term “consul” has multiple definitions, but early use of the term extends to the Roman republic where it was used to describe an elected chief magistrate (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Being elected was considered a great honor and consuls had significant power. For example, in 494 BC, Rome was in trouble. The underclass plebians,

the workforce of Rome, cried out for reform, but its patricians and the ruling senate refused to listen to the complaints. So, the plebeians left, leaving Rome without the workers needed to sustain it. The senate, recognizing the plight they were now in, requested Agrippa Menenius Lanatus, a former consul, to negotiate on their behalf (Guerber, 1896).

Menenius was a popular figure with the plebians and known for his eloquence. He recognized the need to speak to them in a form they would understand, so he told them a fable about the parts of the body. Specifically, some of the body parts were unhappy with the stomach because it did little work, so the body decided to stop feeding it. Initially, the body parts were pleased with this decision, but it was not long before they began to fatigue and realize their need for the stomach.

Of course, Menenius was suggesting that the patricians were the stomach, the plebians the other “working” body parts, and they needed to work together for the common good (Guerber, 1896). Through concessions and negotiations Menenius made with the patricians, the plebians returned to Rome, and Menenius remained a popular figure with both groups throughout his life. Interestingly, scholars debate whether he was a plebian or patrician (Livy, 1971), but the former consul has been recognized in history for his ability to work with both groups to the betterment of all.

Similarities to the athletic consul in other vocations

Although the AC would be a new position in sports organizations, there are examples within other vocations. For example, some recent job postings in the sports field include the title of Sports Performance Director, or something similar, whereby the individual has the responsibilities of overseeing performance departments such as strength and conditioning, sports nutrition, and athletic training. However, these positions focus primarily on administrative duties that may include responsibilities such as hiring, evaluating, and firing staff rather than providing support for all departments (SportsNet, n.d.). The role of the AC in other professional settings, such as business, might be seen in a human resources employee or high-performance consultant; someone outside the departments who is specifically tasked with facilitating department cohesion to achieve the mission of the company.

Rodrigue and Trudel (2019) suggested high performance coaches could benefit from a “Personal Learning Coach” or “PLC” to help them over their coaching journey. High performance coaches can be isolated following their coach education and training certification, and a PLC could facilitate new knowledge and reflection. However, while the processes within this framework are valuable, they are focused on coaches only, and more specifically those working in high performance. Therefore, the scope of the PLC is limited.

An ombudsman may also be suited to this type of role. A non-gender specific title, an ombudsman serves as an independent, objective investigator when there are complaints between parties. The individual evaluates whether the complaint has merit and makes recommendations how the problem can be resolved (Fowlie, 2017). Fowlie provides a variety of situations where an ombudsman can be of assistance within sports, but separates them by role (e.g., sport integrity ombudsman, club specific ombudsman, athlete ombudsman). Although the ombudsman may have some roles and responsibilities that are like those of the proposed AC, dispute resolution is the

central role of such a position, and the AC's roles and responsibilities should be much wider in range.

Some researchers have described how applied sport psychology professionals (ASPP) have assumed the role of AC or have been trained to assume a responsibility to support the sport science and management staff (Arnold et al., 2019). ASPPs are trained in managing areas such as stress, emotions, role clarity and conflict, communication, and cohesion; therefore, they are expected to be the resident resource for managing these issues among the support staff in addition to the athletes (Arnold et al., 2019). However, there is support for the idea that taking on these responsibilities could be overloading ASPPs and that there may be a need for an additional person to assume some of these responsibilities (Arnold et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2011; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

As the practice of applied sport psychology has grown, there have been instances where ASPPs have been tasked with expanding their practice to address the communication of the coaching and support staff (Arnold et al., 2019). For example, circumstances where the primary presenting concerns have been coach-athlete relationships, managing support staff stressors, or return from injury have been where many ASPPs find themselves in these roles (Arnold et al., 2019; Friesen & Orlick, 2011). Supporting staff cohesion has been another situation where an ASPP might be tasked with being the liaison bridging the gap between athletes and staff (Arnold et al., 2019).

Another situation that typically puts ASPPs in this role is during their rapport-building phase. Part of being a competent ASPP involves the ability to not only build relationships with the athletes but also the coaches and support staff (Friesen & Orlick, 2011). ASPPs have suggested that part of their role is to be a trusting friend/confidant to athletes as a "jack-of-all-trades" and holding respectful and appreciative relationships with coaches and other sport science staff as a means of maintaining a holistic practice (Friesen & Orlick, 2011). This is required to gain access, learn about the environment, and build trust when working with a new program (Friesen & Orlick, 2011). However, this often leaves ASPPs managing dual provisions of service and roles within an organization that can increase emotional stress around their job.

While the scope of training in sport psychology is expanding to include practices of industrial, occupational, and organizational psychology, the role of an ASPP does not necessarily include the roles and responsibilities of an AC. Rather, the focus of the field is in emphasizing the facilitation of performance excellence in the athletes (Aoyagi et al., 2012). However, the transferability of some of the skills ASPPs teach has put these practitioners in the position of filling these roles at times (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). It has been suggested that specialized training in performance, organizational, or occupational psychology might be a better suited professional to fill this role as the position of an ASPP within a sport organization managing both services can leave them prone to experience the division of the silos and ethical dilemmas in the workplace (Aoyagi et al., 2012; Fletcher et al., 2011; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). In fact, previous researchers have advocated that due to the emotional stress and overloading of responsibilities, there should be another professional to manage relationships among the silos (Fletcher et al., 2011; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Proposed function of the AC

The responsibilities for the AC will be situation specific. For example, an individual working within a collegiate program may need to understand and work with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules and regulations. Conversely, working within professional sports may require interaction with a team owner or executive director. Therefore, while we outline some areas for engagement, these could be considered conceptual suggestions rather than required.

Above all, the AC should act as a liaison between players, coaches, management, and other entities as needed. This may help address issues in role conflict, whereby an individual or group perceive themselves to have multiple roles that produce differing demands that are perceived to be unachievable (Bigby, 2021). The AC may be able to decipher when role conflict might arise or when expectations are perceived to be unrealistic.

The AC may be able to facilitate by holding office hours for groups or being available for appointments on an individual basis. They may also be a conduit for the sharing of information, such as the roles and responsibilities of each individual/group, but this must be rooted in trust. Athletes should not view this person as a coach, nor should the coach view them as “front office,” or they may be hesitant to share important information. All must trust that the AC will only share information that is given consent to share. The administrative and coaching staff must trust they are only sharing what is absolutely necessary to maintain the rapport between the players.

An example of information sharing could consist of a personal family situation that a player is experiencing. First, the AC should seek permission from the athlete to share sensitive information and allow the athletes to decide how much detail could be shared. To the player ... “Do you mind if I sharing this with (coach/management)?” To coaches and management ... “He’s not playing well because he’s dealing with a personal issue. I can’t go into detail about it, but I would suggest going easy on him today.”

Second, the AC should provide or facilitate educational and scientific support to the staff and team. Although each silo will be knowledgeable in their area of expertise (e.g., strength and conditioning, nutrition), the AC could provide holistic training to support the entire team. Examples might include communication skills, leadership training, inviting guest speakers on specific topics, and so on. Part of acting as the liaison or providing educational support, the AC could be responsible for coordinating regular meetings or workshops that educate the silos on how their individual works combine to holistically impact the athlete’s performance/outcomes as a way to build value and appreciation for the other silos and minimize competition between silos. Although larger organizations may have a system in place to provide this content, many do not, and the AC could fill this gap.

Third, with valuable knowledge, the AC should serve as an advocate for the program. An individual with exceptional communication skills could support the program by interacting with boosters, donors, sponsors, and even the media, which may be an unwanted or overly taxing responsibility often assigned to coaches.

Fourth, and perhaps more at the professional level than others, the AC should facilitate communication and relationships between the athlete and the organization. Professional athletes may have agents or other staff, for example, who may encourage

athlete obligations and commitments that may conflict with team obligations. They may wish to take on roles that are traditionally housed within the team. This may potentially be a source of contention (Shropshire et al., 2016). So, if the agent is solely advocating for the athlete and their business, and the team's public relations is advocating for what is best for the team, the AC may be able to serve as the middle-ground facilitator. It is important to stress that the AC must not be pressured to share information that a player has specifically asked not to share. If the coaches and management cannot accept that there will be specific information that they cannot have access to, it will strain the relationship of all parties involved.

A very public example of this conflict occurred in 2018, when multi-Super Bowl winner Tom Brady's trainer Alex Guerrero came into conflict with New England Patriot's head coach Bill Belichick. For example, there were disagreements about the access Guerrero was given within the facility, who he worked with, and what authority he had compared to the team's medical staff. The dispute was reportedly one of the factors that influenced Tom Brady to leave the team with which he had built his legacy (Camenker, 2021).

Last, and while not necessarily a stated job requirement but perhaps more of a desired disposition, the AC should be an encourager and positive role model to the program. An encourager is someone who builds up and exhorts, taking time to learn about and understand others with the goal of adding to their self-worth and goals (Durkee, 2018). Being an encouragement, having a positive outlook, and demonstrating a commitment in the program is paramount to the success of the AC. Durkee (2018) proposed that for an encouraging action (i.e., delivery of the encouragement) to be effective, it is dependent on the discovery phase (i.e., need or reason to encourage) combined with the magic gratitude (i.e., the right word/verbiage/action to use) and the right timing (i.e., when the encouragement should be delivered). Thus, within the framework of the AC, examples might be developing awards or honors that recognize positive efforts of those within the program and supporting/cheering players/staff at practices and competition. Durkee (2018) suggested that even offering someone a piece of gum at the right time can serve as a way to provide encouragement.

Qualifications of the AC

Although someone such as an ASPP might be qualified to work with sports performance topics, they may not be qualified or comfortable supporting individuals within the organization outside of this realm. Further, given the intimate nature of what an ASPP does, there may be a lack of trust. For example, would a player be comfortable discussing personal situations with an individual who typically reports to the coach or athletic director? Therefore, we propose the qualifications of the AC stem from three potential areas, each with their own advantages and drawbacks.

Former player

Former players offer an immediate credibility with current players and the organization. This is particularly true if the former player competed for and was successful with that team (Note: if relationships as a recent former player are important, the AC may need to be replaced every few years). Players are more likely to open up and listen

to the advice of someone who has “been in their shoes” and understands what they might be going through. In a recent interview, former Duke women’s basketball coach Joanne McCallie stated that hiring former players to her staff was more effective than someone else unfamiliar with her system and program (FSU COACH, 2021).

Although a former player might benefit some, the coach must be willing to work with this individual, who may not understand or appreciate the intricacies of the coaching profession. Therefore, it would be important that the incoming AC be supported by the coach, and that the coach is willing to allow the former player to be a valued member of the support staff. Without this open communication and trust, it is unlikely the former player would be as effective bridging the gap between players and coach.

Former coach

Just as a former player might have a deeper connection with current players, a former coach may have the same effect with a current coach. Former coaches are likely to have a deeper knowledge of the coaching challenges and stressors experienced by the coach, which are many (Pearson et al., 2020). Further, they may also be better able to work with the many ancillary support groups that exist, such as athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches.

It should be noted that there is an inherent danger associated with a former coach acting as an AC. Former coaches may not wish to remain “former,” and could seek an opportunity to return to a coaching position. Therefore, any former coach hired to this position must be considered retired without personal ambition to resurrect their former career.

Sports academic

Although this may seem an unusual option at first, an individual with scientific training in coaching and/or sports performance may be more suited to this position than a former coach or athlete. Although former coaches and athletes bring value from their past experiences within the sport, they also bring additional challenges as already outlined. An individual external to the sports organization and without deep personal connections to the coaching staff, players, or organization may provide a more neutral perspective and more easily cross boundaries between silos. Further, they may have a more broad-based knowledge to contribute beyond those of a former coach and player, who are more likely to rely on their own personal experiences as opposed to scientific best-practices or current research.

Yet, there is also a risk in hiring an academic. Academics may be “academic” in nature, providing theoretical ideas and knowledge that may not apply effectively to the sports setting needing assistance. Further, some academics may not be actively engaged in the sports arena, and a lack of experience within the sport as a player, coach, or support staff may limit their understanding of the real-life situations occurring. Therefore, if considering an academic within this role, it may be important to ascertain their own sporting history. For example, have they played or coached sports? At what level? Do they have experiences that will translate into the “real world?”

Summary of qualifications

As noted, whether a former player, coach, sports academic, or someone else, there are advantages or drawbacks to each. Ideally, if a player or coach, it is important they have received additional training and knowledge beyond the scope of their own personal experiences. If a sport academic, it is important they have gained knowledge and experiences beyond those acquired in certifications and research. Recent playing/coaching experiences, even if not within the sport in question would amplify any “book knowledge” being shared. Therefore, ideally the individual should have playing/coaching experiences with additional knowledge and training that would support the organization and its members.

While qualifications may be debated, it is important that the individual also possess soft skills, which are being recognized as an increasingly important component of the workplace (Kyllonen, 2013). Examples include relationship building, communication, and leadership development as important skills that an AC should possess. As a slightly facetious example, we have provided a job description for the position from the time of Menenius, which is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Example Job Description for the Athletic Consul Position

Name	Chariot Racing Athletic Consul
Type	Part-Time
Posted	February 2, 503 BC
Category	Athletics
Location	Military College of the Roman Empire, Rome
Description	The Military College of the Roman Empire is seeking a dynamic and enthusiastic individual to support the College’s chariot racing program. Historically successful, the program has grown substantially, and has expanded its support programs to remain the very best across the empire. The Athletic Consul will help facilitate the operation of these different programs, while supporting athletes and coaching staff with best practices and current scientific knowledge. The individual will serve as a liaison between the team, coaches, and athletic administration, serving as an advocate of the program to external entities.
Required Qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either a sport scientist (training in chariot racing preferred), a former chariot racer, or a chariot racing coach. It is preferred the candidate has racing and coaching experience with evidence of having acquired additional training in sport sciences.
Essential Duties and Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and assist all aspects of the Military College of the Roman Empire’s chariot racing program. • Act as a liaison between players, coaches, athletic administration, and other entities. • Provide or facilitate educational and scientific support to the staff and team. • Serve as an advocate for the athletic program to external entities. • Facilitate communication and relationships between the athlete and the team, coaches, and College. • Perform all duties and maintain all standards in accordance with the College’s rules and regulations.

Desired Knowledge, Skills and Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive knowledge of chariot racing • Knowledge chariot racing at the collegiate level. • High level verbal and written communication skills. • Fluency in Latin required, other languages a plus. • Mentoring skills. • Ability to teach and educate in an individual and group setting. • Serve as a positive role model. • Maintain confidentiality. • Fundraise and advocate for the program.
Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chariot racing license and insurability with the College's insurance carrier. Individuals hired for this position may be required to operate a chariot. A chariot driving history (CDH) will be conducted in addition to a background check. • Current First-aid and CPR certification.

Former player, former coach, and sports academic are the three backgrounds we suggest an AC should be derived from. However, it should be recognized that each background will determine what focus an AC might have on the program. Therefore, ideally, athletic programs should consider hiring an AC with playing and coaching experience who has also acquired professional training that would enable them to integrate all areas of expertise.

CONCLUSION

This article is conceptual in nature and the idea of an AC within a sports organization and team is a new one. Although there are examples within sports to suggest that similar roles and titles exist, they are limited to one area of a sports team, such as supporting the coach but not the athlete. Although Menenius serves as an example of an individual who brought groups together, the AC can do this and more. In addition to resolving problems, we assert that an AC can support an athletic program through other areas, such as education, fundraising, and mentorship. Therefore, we propose that those within sports administrations consider the formal addition of this role, adhering to similar roles and responsibilities as outlined. Doing so will serve to support all parties in an unbiased and positive manner.

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