

## MENTORING FOR SUCCESS IN SPORT: DEFINING ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND THE PHASES OF AN EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

Snezana Jovanova-Mitkovska, Biljana Popeska, Misko Dzidrov<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University "Goce Delchev", Shtip, North Macedonia

### Abstract

*Mentorship represents a significant developmental mechanism that not only enhances athletic performance but also plays a crucial role in the overall personal, psychological, and social development of athletes. It is conceived as a structured and systematic process of support, guidance, and the transfer of knowledge, experience, and values from more experienced to less experienced athletes. In contemporary sport, where athletes face increasing demands, intense pressures, and the need for long-term career sustainability, mentorship has become particularly relevant and indispensable.*

*This paper presents a theoretical analysis and explanation of the concept of mentorship in sport, with emphasis on the roles of the mentor and the mentee, the phases of the mentoring process, and the importance of mentoring programs as an institutional framework for its effective implementation. Furthermore, the paper highlights the significance of formalized and systematically designed mentoring programs that provide clear structure, precisely defined objectives, continuous evaluation, and sustainability of the mentoring process within sports organizations. Such programs are essential prerequisites for the development of competent athletes, the creation of a positive sporting climate, and the achievement of long-term success in sport. In this way, mentorship is reaffirmed as a key factor in the integral development of athletes and in the establishment of stable and sustainable sporting systems.*

**Keywords:** *mentorship in sport, mentoring programs, phases of mentoring, athlete development, sports career, ethics in sport*

### INTRODUCTION

Sport constitutes one of the most influential social and cultural activities, exerting a profound impact on the holistic development of the individual. It is not merely a physical endeavor aimed at enhancing fitness, but rather a complex process that shapes psychological, social, and professional identity (Weiss, 2008, p. 45), or as Côté and Gilbert (2009, p.312) emphasize „participation in sport facilitates the integration of physical and mental health, fosters discipline, and cultivates values such as perseverance, teamwork, and fair play,,,

Due to its multidimensional nature, sport is present in every domain of personal development. It contributes to the improvement of physical fitness, motor skills, and overall health; strengthens self-confidence and resilience in coping with stress; and promotes mental endurance. Moreover, it encourages social integration, teamwork, and effective communication, while simultaneously supporting the development of leadership capacities, the establishment of professional networks, and the advancement of career trajectories.

Within this framework, it becomes evident that the developmental benefits of sport derive not solely from physical activity itself, but also from the structured systems of support and guidance that accompany sporting practice.

A central mechanism through which sport achieves its educational and developmental influence is mentorship. The mentoring relationship enables the continuous and purposeful

transmission of knowledge, experience, and values, thereby laying the foundation for the holistic development of the individual within both sporting and broader societal contexts. Mentorship extends beyond technical assistance, encompassing a complex interaction that integrates psychological, ethical, and social dimensions (Bloom et al., 1998, p. 270). It nurtures self-confidence, discipline, psychological stability, community integration, communication and leadership skills, professional orientation, and career development, while fostering the creation of professional networks. Fundamentally, mentorship seeks to establish an environment in which mentees are guided, motivated, and supported in realizing their full potential.

The effectiveness of this process is significantly enhanced by well-structured and ethically governed mentoring programs, which serve as a foundation for long-term success and sustainability not only in sport but also within wider social and professional domains (Gould & Carson, 2008).

Given the complex influence of mentorship on individual development in sport, the question arises regarding its systematic planning and purposeful implementation within sports organizations. Particular emphasis must be placed on the design and application of structured and ethically grounded mentoring programs as prerequisites for realizing their full developmental potential. These considerations form the focal point of the subsequent analysis and discussion within this paper.

### **Mentoring / Mentorship in sport**

Every individual, at some point in life, experiences a process of mentoring, whether in school, at university, in the workplace, or throughout personal and professional development.

Mentorship is defined as a collaborative and interactive relationship between two persons, unfolding within a specific timeframe, in which the more experienced party guides and supports the less experienced, with the aim of fostering learning and growth (Stojanovski, 2010; Vilotijević, 2001; Kram, 1985).

Mentorship constitutes a powerful resource with the potential to positively influence the growth and success of individuals in sport. It is a relationship in which one or several mentors (i.e., individuals senior in age or experience) provide guidance and support to one or more mentees (i.e., individuals seeking new knowledge and experience) to enhance career development (Ensher et al., 2003; Newby & Heide, 2013).

Within this process, both mentor and mentee(s) are actively engaged. The mentor serves as a role model, advisor, and supporter, while the mentee is the participant who learns and develops competencies for personal, professional, and career advancement. Their relationship is dynamic, emotionally enriched, and oriented toward the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies that enable the mentee's growth and independence.

Mentorship as a process is directed toward several key dimensions:

- Support for professional development, through guidance, counseling, and the sharing of experiences, mentorship fosters the development of professional competencies and instills confidence in the execution of work tasks. Research indicates that mentorship positively influences the acquisition of practical knowledge, enhances work performance, and increases professional self-confidence (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).
- Support in the learning process, particularly within educational institutions: The mentor assumes the role of guide, leading the mentee toward connecting theoretical insights with practical application, encouraging the development of critical thinking, and shaping their professional identity.
- Provision of encouragement, support, and a sense of belonging, which is especially significant for novices in the profession. As Allen et al. (2004) emphasize, such support contributes to stress reduction, improved motivation, and greater job satisfaction.
- Educational and ethical influence: Through personal example, the mentor acts as a model who shapes professional values, ethical norms, and responsible behavior among mentees. Particularly in education, mentorship contributes to the cultivation of a professional culture grounded in collaboration, respect, and continuous improvement (Hobson et al., 2009).

### **Mentoring in Sport**

Mentorship in sport is realized as a continuous and systematic process in which an experienced coach, pedagogue, sports psychologist, or seasoned athlete guides and supports the developmental trajectory of the less experienced mentee on sporting, personal, and social levels. In contemporary sport, mentorship is a crucial factor not only for achieving athletic excellence but also for fostering healthy and fully developed individuals.

Within the mentoring relationship established between two or more persons (mentor-mentee), a range of roles are enacted:

- The mentor directs the mentee toward the enhancement of sporting abilities and performance. This includes facilitating the acquisition of technical and tactical knowledge, contributing to physical preparedness, and ensuring proper planning of the training process through individualized approaches and continuous feedback.
- Provision of emotional support: The mentoring relationship builds the athlete's self-confidence and stimulates intrinsic motivation. Particularly for young athletes, the mentor assists in coping with pressure, fear of failure, and competitive anxiety.
- Mentorship in sport carries a strong educational and ethical role. The mentor transmits values such as fair play, discipline, perseverance, responsibility, and respect for rules and opponents.
- Support for social development: In team sports, the mentor fosters collaboration, communication skills, and a sense of belonging. This contributes to a positive team climate, improved interpersonal relations, and enhanced collective efficacy (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Modern sport requires mentors who, beyond technical expertise, possess pedagogical and ethical competencies to ensure the long-term and sustainable development of athletes.
- Mentorship enables the creation of networks and access to new experiences and perspectives.

The realization of these functions and roles in sport mentorship is possible only within a high-quality and stable relationship, founded on mutual trust, respect, and active collaboration between mentor and mentee.

Such relationships are typically established between individuals who may not have prior acquaintance, and the process can last from several months to multiple years, depending on the professional context and institutional framework. Although temporary in nature, the mentoring relationship requires time investment, mutual acceptance, and active contribution from both parties in order to yield successful developmental outcomes.

At the outset of the mentoring process, the mentor's role is more pronounced and dominant, with the mentee relying heavily on the guidance, support, and experience of the more seasoned individual. As the process advances, responsibilities gradually shift toward the mentee, who becomes increasingly active, independent, and accountable for their own development. Nevertheless, each mentoring relationship evolves in a unique manner, shaped by individual characteristics, prior knowledge, interests, and the specific context in which it is enacted.

The quality and success of the mentoring relationship depend on several interrelated factors, among which particularly significant are: effective communication, open and honest dialogue; mutual trust and respect; shared interests; clearly defined common goals that are realistic, attainable, and aligned with the capacities of both parties. These, in turn, enhance the sense of meaning, motivation, and personal satisfaction. Equally critical is constructive and timely feedback, which plays a key role in identifying the mentee's strengths and weaknesses and serves as the foundation for further progress (Goldner & Mayselless, 2009; Tolentino, 1999).

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Mutual trust, respect, knowledge exchange, and inspiration constitute additional pillars of a successful mentoring relationship.

### Who is the mentor-role, responsibilities

The mentor is defined as an experienced and competent individual who voluntarily assumes responsibility to support the development of a less experienced person through counseling, guidance, and the sharing of knowledge and expertise (Sinclair, 2006). In the literature, the mentor is also described as an advisor, tutor, facilitator, role model, and critical friend, reflecting the diversity of roles fulfilled within the mentoring process (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Deuchar, 2008).

Although traditionally associated with an older and more experienced person, contemporary perspectives broaden this view, suggesting that a mentor may also be someone of similar age or with shorter professional tenure, provided they possess relevant knowledge, skills, and motivation to support others. What is common across all definitions is that the mentor is a trusted individual who actively listens, poses developmental questions, provides constructive feedback, and creates an environment conducive to learning and growth.

In sport, the mentor is most often a coach, sports teacher, physical education instructor, or experienced professional athlete, whose task is to guide and support the holistic development of the mentee, encompassing physical, mental, and socio-emotional dimensions.

The mentor fulfills numerous roles with professional, pedagogical, and formative dimensions.

One such role is the provision of technical support through the planning and implementation of training programs, the advancement of technical and tactical skills, and the monitoring of athlete progress.

The mentor also acts as a motivator, fostering self-confidence, perseverance, and intrinsic motivation, particularly in situations of failure or heightened competitive pressure (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Furthermore, the mentor serves as a protector who helps avoid professional risks; a connector who facilitates networking; an advisor who offers psychosocial support; and an evaluator who monitors and assesses the mentee's progress (Vizek Vidović & Žižak, 2011).

To successfully perform these roles, the mentor must possess a broad spectrum of competencies: expert knowledge in the field, solid theoretical and practical understanding of developmental stages, advanced communication and interpersonal skills, active listening, empathy, the ability to provide constructive feedback, and the capacity to build relationships based on trust and respect. Additional competencies include planning and evaluation skills, high professional ethics, teamwork ability, effective time and resource management, and adaptability to the mentee's evolving needs.

Through regular meetings, the mentor and mentee jointly plan and implement a structured program of mentoring support, ensuring continuous communication, guidance, motivation, constructive feedback, and encouragement of self-evaluation. These characteristics enable the establishment of a stable and productive mentoring relationship, thereby ensuring effective guidance and sustainable development of the mentoring process.

### Who is the mentee-role, responsibilities

The term *mentee* refers to an individual with limited experience in a particular field, yet who demonstrates strong motivation and readiness for personal, professional, and career development. The mentee enters into a mentoring relationship with the aim of receiving support, guidance, and expert assistance from a more experienced person the mentor (Nash, 2010; Zachary & Fischler, 2009; Cohen, 2001).

The establishment of a mentoring relationship between mentor and mentee is also contingent upon several key qualities that the mentee must possess. These include basic knowledge of the relevant field, well-developed communication and social skills, the ability to collaborate, engage in self-evaluation, and responsibly manage their own learning. Equally important are personal attributes such as initiative, openness, proactivity, curiosity, flexibility, professional ethics, and respect for moral and democratic values.

A defining characteristic of the mentee is the need for guidance and structured support, coupled with active participation in their own development.

Within the mentoring process, the mentee may be an individual or a group, with the essential prerequisite being readiness to learn, collaborate, and accept feedback. The roles assumed by the mentee are multifaceted: they are active participants in the process, co-creators of goals and plans, learners who draw upon the mentor's experience, and partners in building a reciprocal relationship that benefits both parties. The mentee also assumes responsibility for their own progress through self-assessment, reflective documentation, and ongoing collaboration with the mentor and the wider community.

The role of the mentee is to accept the mentor's guidance and feedback, integrate acquired knowledge into practice, and cultivate critical self-reflection regarding their progress. Such active engagement fosters autonomy, self-discipline, and a sense of responsibility, values that are significant not only in the sporting context but also in everyday life (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

The fulfillment of these roles presupposes advanced communication skills, the ability for self-evaluation, initiative, responsibility, and openness to learning. The expectations of the mentee from the mentoring relationship are typically directed toward maximizing personal potential, expanding knowledge, gaining new perspectives, and accessing opportunities for professional networking. The realization of these expectations depends on their clarity and realism, as well as on the quality of the established relationship, which must be grounded in trust, mutual respect, and clearly defined goals.

Thus, the mentor functions as a role model and source of motivation, while the mentee actively participates in the process of learning and professional maturation. Although not every mentoring relationship proves successful, due to unclear expectations, insufficient communication, or compromised trust, effective mentorship can result in the development of professional identity, acquisition of new knowledge and skills, ethical maturity, and greater control over one's career trajectory (Vizek Vidović et al., 2004).

### **Phases in the mentoring process**

Mentorship represents a structured, dynamic, and developmental process that unfolds through several interrelated phases. Although the literature offers different approaches regarding the number, duration, and naming of phases, all conceptualizations share the view that the mentoring process begins with the establishment of a relationship between mentor and mentee and concludes with the gradual independence and professional maturity of the mentee (Žižak, 2014; Stojanovski, 2010).

Phase one: Initiation and establishment of the mentoring relationship This phase consists of two sub-stages. The first involves the initial contact between mentor and mentee, during which trust is built and a foundation for collaboration is established. The second sub-stage entails the clear definition of short- and long-term goals in the mentee's sporting and personal development, the creation of an individualized development plan, identification of specific skills and competencies for improvement, and determination of success measures. Characteristic of this phase is the dominant role of the mentor, who provides clear guidance, demonstrates professional practice, and offers intensive support. The mentee, in turn, is more dependent on advice and instructions, observes the mentor's actions, and gradually becomes integrated into the working environment and institutional culture. This phase is particularly significant, as initial impressions and established communication patterns can exert long-term influence on the quality of the mentoring relationship.

Phase two: Development and maintenance of the mentoring relationship This phase focuses on strengthening the professional competencies of the mentee. The relationship becomes more dynamic and balanced, with the mentee engaging in practical activities, demonstrating increased independence, initiative, and responsibility for their own development. The mentor's role gradually shifts from direct instructor to facilitator and advisor, supporting learning through developmental questioning, constructive feedback, and encouragement of reflection. Training sessions, individual meetings, and performance analyses are conducted. The mentee learns through experience and application of acquired knowledge, while the mentor provides correction and guidance. This is the longest phase and constitutes the core of the mentoring process, where the most intensive transfer of knowledge, skills, and professional values occurs.

Phase three: Independence and conclusion of the formal mentoring process In this phase, the mentee achieves a higher level of professional maturity, discusses results, analyzes successes and challenges, adapts the development plan, and assumes greater responsibility for actions and decision-making. Dependence on the mentor is significantly reduced, and the mentee becomes autonomous, capable of managing their own development. This marks the successful completion of the mentoring process and prepares the athlete for a long-term independent career (Bloom et al., 1998). The relationship between mentor and mentee may evolve into collegial or partnership collaboration, grounded in mutual respect and exchange of ideas. The conclusion of the mentoring process includes systematic evaluation of outcomes, reflection on achieved goals, and identification of opportunities for further professional and career development.

Additional phase: Renewal or transformation of the relationship Some conceptual frameworks highlight an additional phase of renewal or transformation, in which formal mentorship ends but contact and collaboration continue informally and on an equal footing. In this phase, the former mentor may remain an important professional resource, while the mentee gradually assumes the role of supporting less experienced colleagues, thereby ensuring continuity and sustainability of the mentoring culture within the institution.

Such a phased mentoring process in sport leads to systematic development of the mentee, the creation of a positive sporting climate, the strengthening of self-confidence for independent career management, and the cultivation of competent mentors. The phased process of mentoring is most often operationalized through formally designed mentoring programs, which provide clear structure, defined goals, resources, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating athlete development. In this way, the individual mentoring relationship is embedded within a broader organizational framework that ensures continuity, quality, and sustainability of mentorship in sports institutions (Jones et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2020).

### **Mentoring programs as systemic support in athlete development**

Mentoring programs in sport represent strategically and systematically organized initiatives aimed at supporting, guiding, and fostering the long-term development of athletes through structured connections between experienced mentors and less experienced athletes (mentees). Contemporary research highlights the significant role such programs play in enhancing athletic performance, psychological well-being, and the cultivation of ethical and socially responsible sporting practices (Jones et al., 2019; McQuade & Nash, 2015).

Effective mentoring programs in sport are characterized by several key structural components. First, careful selection of mentors is undertaken, ensuring they possess sporting expertise, pedagogical skills, and high ethical standards, alongside the selection of mentees who demonstrate motivation and readiness to learn. Clear roles, expectations, and responsibilities are then defined for all participants, thereby establishing a framework for effective and trustworthy collaboration. Another essential component is the development of a structured activity plan encompassing individual and group training sessions, mentoring meetings, and education in psychological, social, and communication skills. Additionally, the establishment of a system for continuous feedback and evaluation, through regular meetings, progress monitoring, and program adaptation to individual needs is indispensable (Jones et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2020).

Research indicates that such programs yield substantial benefits for mentees, mentors, and sporting organizations alike. For mentees, they provide individualized approaches to the development of technical, tactical, and physical abilities, while strengthening self-confidence, motivation, and psychological resilience under competitive stress. Through mentoring interactions, communication skills, teamwork, and a sense of belonging are cultivated, alongside values such as fair play, responsibility, and discipline, critical for sustainable sporting development (Nicholls et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2020). Mentors, in turn, enhance their leadership, pedagogical, and reflective

competencies, thereby contributing to the improvement of coaching quality and organizational practice (McQuade & Nash, 2015).

Despite these numerous positive effects, contemporary literature also identifies challenges in the implementation of mentoring programs. These include the recruitment and retention of competent and motivated mentors, constraints related to time, financial resources, and infrastructure, as well as sustaining long-term motivation and commitment among participants. Additional challenges involve aligning with the individual needs and expectations of mentors and mentees, managing interpersonal conflicts, and ensuring systematic and continuous evaluation of programs (Jones et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2020).

Addressing these challenges, while adhering to ethical principles and professional standards, constitutes a key prerequisite for the sustainability and effectiveness of mentoring programs in sport. A systematic approach, clearly defined rules, and ongoing evaluation contribute to the creation of a safe, supportive, and development-oriented environment for athletes.

## CONCLUSION

Mentorship in sport is identified as one of the key mechanisms for fostering the personal, psychological, and professional development of athletes, particularly in the context of the increasing demands of contemporary competitive sport. Mentorship provides a stable framework for long-term development, sustainable athletic careers, and a positive sporting culture, grounded in clearly defined roles and responsibilities, structured program phases, and an ethically oriented approach (Jones et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2020).

The mentoring process unfolds through several interrelated and consistent phases: initiation, development, maturity, and conclusion or redefinition of the mentoring relationship. In the initial phase, the foundations of the relationship are established through trust-building, clarification of expectations, and alignment of goals. The developmental phase is characterized by the intensive transfer of knowledge, skills, and experience from

mentor to mentee, with the mentor providing continuous support and guidance. In the maturity phase, greater autonomy and independence of the athlete are encouraged, while the concluding or redefining phase allows for the transformation of the relationship into a partnership or advisory form, depending on individual needs and context (Kram, 1985; McQuade & Nash, 2015; Jones et al., 2019).

Contemporary research indicates that the role of the mentor in sport extends far beyond the provision of technical and tactical advice. The mentor increasingly assumes the function of supporter, motivator, and role model of professional and ethical conduct. This, in turn, contributes to the development of self-confidence, psychological resilience, and moral values among athletes (Nicholls et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2020). In line with this perspective, the role of the mentee is also transformed: athletes are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the process, contributing to their own development and the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship through goal-setting, reflection on timely feedback, and continuous learning (Stambulova et al., 2021).

Despite its significant benefits, the mentoring process in sport is also associated with certain challenges and ethical dilemmas. Among the most frequently identified are mismatched expectations between mentor and mentee, time constraints, the risk of excessive dependence, and the need to ensure confidentiality and professional boundaries. Research shows that these challenges can be effectively addressed through systematic approaches, clearly defined rules, ethical codes, and continuous education of mentors (Jones et al., 2019; Piggott & Coutts, 2022).

Well-structured, research-based, and ethically managed mentoring programs represent a vital factor for the comprehensive development of athletes and the realization of their maximum potential. The application of these principles not only enhances athletic performance but also creates a supportive environment that fosters the long-term personal, professional, and moral development of athletes, an essential prerequisite for the sustainability of modern sport.

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