

Life Skills in Action

A qualitative study of recreational sports coaching in Italy

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Coaches play a key role in facilitating athletes' learning of life skills and enhancing Positive Youth Development through sports. Life skills can then be transferred to other life contexts, such as home, work, and school. This study aims to explore: 1) the role of recreational sports as an environment for acquiring life skills; 2) the strategies coaches use to facilitate the development of specific life skills; and 3) the methods employed to monitor their transfer to other contexts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 Italian coaches from recreational sports organizations and analyzed using the Template Analysis technique. Findings reveal that, despite lacking specific training, coaches recognize sports as a context for learning life skills and primarily adopt an implicit approach. Coaches reported that athletes develop self-awareness and group effectiveness skills. Practical implications include exercises shared by coaches to train life skills and highlight the need for structured training aligned with the Positive Youth Development approach.

KEY WORDS: Life skills, Sport psychology, Coach, Positive youth development, Qualitative, Health promotion.

Introduction

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SPORTS

Sports psychology studies have highlighted that sport practice has the potential to enhance a positive development of young athletes (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2015), and this has become a topic of interest in developmental and sport psychology in recent years, constituting an opportunity for athletes to improve their life skills (Hemphill et al., 2019; Pesce et al., 2016; Vierimaa et al., 2012).

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Positive Youth Development (PYD) recognizes that all young people have personal strengths that can be enhanced and nurtured, and that young people's participation in various forms of extracurricular activities can influence important developmental outcomes (Larson, 2000). Effective PYD programs provide leadership opportunities, emphasize the development of personal and life skills, and foster relationships among peers and with adults (Lerner et al., 2015). One important idea behind PYD is the concept of relative plasticity, i.e., the potential for systemic change over the course of a lifetime which makes the theory of PYD interesting not only for youth, for which it was developed, but potentially for any stage of life that may be subject to positive development (Neely & Holt, 2011). By creating appropriate social contexts, such as sport, the concept of relative plasticity can be harnessed in an attempt to influence the design of policies and programs that promote positive development (Neely & Holt, 2011).

Sport is a highly influential social practice and, when appropriately structured, can provide tangible opportunities for positive youth development (Larson, 2000; Martin, 2019). From the PYD approach, sport practice is enriched, in a structured manner, with "asset-building efforts aimed at promoting a number of constructive outcomes in youths during their formative years" (Martin & Camiré, 2020, p. 1). Sport-Based Youth Development (SBYD) programs intentionally use sport as a means to achieve PYD outcomes (Hemphill et al., 2019). They provide youth with structured sport that explicitly emphasize the development of personal and social life skills along with the physical development typically associated with sport participation. These structured training take the form of sports programs consisting of planned activities tailored to each age group with educational objectives that incorporate PYD goals through sport (Holt, 2017). In this context, life skills are broadly defined as personal skills that enable young people to survive and succeed in different areas of life (Hemphill et al., 2019).

The PYD approach has attracted considerable attention from both sports practitioners and sports psychology researchers. On the one hand, youth sport organizations have incorporated the PYD approach into their mission statements and sport activity programs, encouraging the acquisition and improvement of life skills (Camiré et al., 2009a; Webb, 2016). On the other hand, several studies have examined the impact of the PYD approach and life skills acquisition programs in young and adult athletes (for a systematic review, see Whitley et al., 2019; for a meta-analysis, see Bruner et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the systematic application of life skills development programs through sport is rare (Williams et al., 2022), and in some European countries, such as Italy, there is little relevant literature (Pesce et al., 2016).

Many Italian studies focus mainly on the development of life skills through physical activity in school or university programs and pay little attention to extracurricular sport, which is referred to as recreational sport (e.g. Aliberti & Manzo, 2023). Alternatively, they emphasize life skills as a facilitator for social inclusion, also via SBYD programs (e.g. D'Angelo et al., 2021; Latino & Tafuri, 2024). In contrast, in Italy there are few studies that focus on the figure of the coach who can support the development and transfer of life skills through sport (Pesce et al., 2016).

LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORTS

One of the PYD or SBYD programs is life skills development (Mahmud et al., 2024). Life skills are values and psychological abilities that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. At the end of the last century, life skills were described by the World Health Organization (1994) as skills for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of daily life, skills that can be learned and trained throughout the life cycle and are therefore not understood as traits. The basic idea is that what is learned is only a "life skill" if it can be transferred to another area of life (Gould & Carson, 2008).

The development of life skills through the PYD program has a positive impact on the young generation as these skills are used effectively in various settings such as home, school, sports, community, and the workplace. According to the conceptual framework developed by the WHO (1994), there are ten essential skills: *Decision-making* entails dealing constructively with decisions about life; *Problem-solving* helps people to deal constructively with problems in life, avoiding the experience of mental stress and physical strain; *Critical thinking* is the ability to analyze information and experiences objectively; *Creative thinking* enables people to explore the available alternatives, fostering adaptive and flexible responses to daily challenges; *Effective communication* entails expressing oneself appropriately within cultural and situational contexts; *Interpersonal relationship* skills facilitate positive interactions with others, which are crucial for mental and social well-being; *Self-awareness* includes our recognition of ourselves, our personality traits, strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes; *Empathy* facilitates understanding and acceptance of others, improving social interactions and promoting nurturing behavior and tolerance; *Coping with stress* involves identifying stress sources, understanding their effects, and taking actions to manage stress levels; *Coping with emotions*

entails recognizing and appropriately responding to emotions in oneself and in others. It is only recently that new skills demanded by contemporary society, such as *Teamwork*, *Time management*, and *Leadership*, have been included by Cronin and Allen (2017; World Health Organization, 2020).

In the context of sports, life skills are defined as personal assets that can be acquired and improved through sports practice, helping people to deal with various context-related challenges throughout their lifespan (Martin & Camirè, 2020; Santos et al., 2021, 2022). At the heart of many SBYD programs is the ability to promote positive developmental outcomes such as life skills.

Research has shown that sport as a learning context has the potential to help young people develop a range of life skills and promote the transfer of life skills to other areas of life (Newman et al., 2023).

Although the literature describes differences between individual and team sports in terms of agonistic levels (Rhind et al., 2012), there are no significant differences at the recreational level in terms of developed life skills, relationship with the coach figure and psychological well-being (Eime et al., 2012; Pluhar et al., 2019). Moreover, research has highlighted that life skills can be acquired across different types of sports – whether individual or team-based – and at all levels of competition, from recreational to elite (Newman et al., 2021). Various studies have examined a wide range of sports, highlighting how athletes develop various life skills regardless of the specific discipline. For instance, even athletes engaged in individual sports such as skateboarding can develop social skills interacting with peers and with the coach (Marsolier et al., 2020). The literature explores the role of sport in facilitating life skills acquisition and the coach's role in this process. While differences in priorities may exist between competitive and recreational sports – particularly in the intentionality and structure of life skills teaching and development – both contexts offer valuable opportunities for athletes to learn these skills (Newman et al., 2021).

THE ROLE OF COACHES IN TRANSFERRING LIFE SKILLS

Best practices for life skills development in SBYD programs include a focus on developing positive relationships, an explicit focus on teaching and learning life skills and transferring these skills to other areas of participants' lives, and integrating life skills instruction into sports programs (Hemphill et al., 2019). Coaches can teach these skills during sports activities, enabling athletes to transfer them to various life contexts, such as home, community, school, and work (Gould & Carson, 2008). Life skills transfer, on the other

hand, has been conceptualized as a subcomponent of the life skills development process, and has been defined as “the ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and internalizes a personal asset (i.e., psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned” (Pierce et al., 2017, p. 194).

In youth sport, a variety of mechanisms and factors contribute to the development and transfer of life skills. For example, Holt et al. (2017) proposed a model of PYD through sport by examining qualitative field research. Within the model, the researchers suggest that the combined effects of a PYD climate and a focus on life skills produce more outcomes than a PYD climate alone. This highlights the need to carefully design sport-based PYD programs to promote PYD outcomes such as life skills (Camiré et al., 2011). Coaches and their practices are considered particularly critical in relation to the development and transfer of life skills in youth (Newman et al., 2023).

Sport coaching is usually defined as “the purposeful improvement of an individual or team’s performance in sport and an extensive, comprehensive and multi-purpose process that prepares individuals and teams for participation in sports competitions” (Van Mullem & Dahlin, 2017, p. 248).

However, coaches serve also as the primary means by which young people and athletes learn and develop life skills, as highlighted by Camiré et al. (2021). Therefore, their role is crucial not only in teaching technical abilities but also in fostering life/soft skills – such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving – that are essential for navigating everyday challenges. These soft skills, as a key component of life skills, play a significant role in helping athletes to succeed both on and off the field (Kramers et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2018). In a review of the literature on life skills development through sport, Gould and Carson (2008) highlighted a model for coaching life skills that includes five components: understanding athletes’ internal (e.g., personality) and external (e.g., parental influence) assets; understanding the coach’s own characteristics and teaching strategies; explaining the content and utility of life skills; listing the positive and negative outcomes of sports participation; and facilitating the transfer of life skills. Facilitative coaching is a form of coaching based on intentional facilitation in which youth sports group leaders actively guide learning toward desired PYD outcomes. Coaches utilize a variety of direct and indirect coaching practices to promote life skills development and enhance life skills transfer. The results showed that these coaches not only provided continuous support and used motivational techniques, but also designed, promoted and evaluated sporting activities and actively

identified teachable moments (Newman et al., 2023). The literature highlights many heterogeneous training paths in relation to the figure of the coach: some coaches undergo university training, with a greater emphasis on pedagogical and educational aspects, while others follow training courses that entail a more experiential approach (Ciampolini et al., 2019; Maclean & Lorimer, 2016). Although higher education is now widely available and is rated by coaches themselves as the most comprehensive and highest quality educational experience (Mallett, 2011), there are still many coaches who, for a variety of reasons, opt for short courses, many of which do not include PYD-related concepts or specific coaching and life skills training (Santos et al., 2021, 2022).

AIM OF THE STUDY

Regardless of the training pathway, Santos and colleagues (2022) found that coaches are open to and interested in integrating or using the PYD approach in their training programs. Using the WHO (1994) definitions as a reference for life skills and considering recreational sports coaches who have never participated in training focused on exemplifying programs or techniques to promote the teaching of life skills through sports (see the Participants section below), this research was conducted using an exploratory approach guided by three main aims: 1) to understand whether coaches are familiar with the concept of life skills and whether they believe that recreational sports can serve as a context for their acquisition; 2) to explore the approaches adopted by coaches to foster life skills development and the criteria used to identify which life skills to target; 3) to analyze the specific techniques (i.e., training) and/or educational methods implemented by coaches to facilitate the acquisition of these life skills and assess their transferability to other areas of life.

Recent research highlights the potential of sports practice to foster Positive Youth Development (PYD) by enhancing life skills, yet the systematic integration of life skills programs in sports, particularly in Italy, remains limited. While PYD frameworks emphasize the role of structured sports environments and coaches in promoting personal growth, Italian studies largely overlook the recreational sports context and the coach's role in facilitating life skills acquisition and transfer.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore recreational sports coaches' familiarity with life skills concepts, investigate the strategies they employ to promote these skills, and identify methods used to assess their transfer to other life domains.

Method

PROCEDURE

This study originates from a broader project entitled “Skills for Life”, funded by Fondazione CRT (grant number: 2022/1705) and approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin (approval letter: 0214719 of 11/04/2024).

Semi-structured individual interviews (average duration: 38 minutes) were conducted from January to March 2024. An experienced researcher carried out the interviews, which were audio- recorded and then transformed into textual data. This study respects the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), as the participants were informed about the research goals and outcomes. The authors ensured the participants’ anonymity, and their participation was on a voluntary basis, giving their informed consent before participating. Table I shows the main questions that were asked to the participants.

TABLE I
Interview Questions.

Theme	Questions
Role of sport in life skills learning	Do you think it is important to teach life skills to younger individuals? Do you believe these skills can be learned through sports experiences?
Coach’s role	In your opinion, can a coach create an environment that facilitates the learning of life skills? What actions could a coach take? Looking back on your experience, do you think you have transferred/taught your athletes some life skills? If yes, which ones? Do you remember a particular experience/episode where you transferred any such skills that you would like to share?

PARTICIPANTS

The sample is formed by 31 coaches of recreational sport organizations. Coaches were selected using a convenience sampling method, relying on the authors’ network of contacts within the sports sector.

Specifically, participants were recruited from recreational sports associations (Italian acronym: ASD) affiliated with the “Italian Sports Center” (i.e., “Centro Sportivo Italiano”; CSI¹), a national sports promotion body recognized by the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) under Article 31 of Decree of the President of the Italian Republic (DPR) 530/74. The CSI has a membership of approximately 80,000 registered members, providing a broad and structured network for participant recruitment. Recruitment was conducted through the communication channels of CSI, inviting coaches within their network to participate in an interview study conducted by researchers from the Department of Psychology at the University of Turin. The invitation did not specify the research objective to minimize potential response biases. A follow-up reminder was sent 15 days after the initial invitation. Over the course of the following two months, 31 coaches agreed to participate in the interviews. The sampling

¹ [Http://www.centroportivoitaliano.it/csi/chi-siamo](http://www.centroportivoitaliano.it/csi/chi-siamo).

method was based on voluntary participation within an existing communication network, thus employing a convenience sampling approach.

Participants recruitment stopped when data saturation was reached. Data saturation was achieved by following the principle that new information does not significantly add new perspectives to the findings, as suggested by Guest et al. (2006). This concept is fundamental to ensuring the quality of qualitative research, as emphasized by Morse (2015). Interview analysis is based on an inductive approach, in line with established practices in qualitative research.

To ensure a balanced representation, coaches involved in this study are from the north (64.5%) and south (35.5%) of Italy. All participants have other jobs and perform their work as coaches either voluntarily or receiving payment only for expenses incurred. The sports represented are football (N=12), volleyball (N=9), basketball (N=3), martial arts (N=2), artistic roller skating (N=1), climbing (N=1), horse riding (N=1), pole dancing (N=1), multi-discipline sport (N=1). Therefore, there are both team sports (N=24) and individual sports (N=7). The trainers are 71% male and 29% female, with an average age of 45.42 years old (SD=13.13); 20 of them were also athletes in the past. Finally, 65.52% of coaches train only young people, 25.81% train both young people and adults, and 9.68% train only adults. Through an initial screening question, we ensured that none of the respondents had previously participated in training sessions focused on the SBYD approach, i.e., aiming to illustrate programs or techniques designed to promote the transfer of life skills through sports. The coaches meet their athletes approximately 2–3 times per week for training sessions lasting about 1–2 hours each. Regarding their coaching education, participants have attended different types of training courses: some have completed CONI-certified courses (e.g., second level coach for climbing; 41.9%), others have obtained elite-level certifications (e.g., coach UEFA C licence for football coaches; 22.6%), while a portion has undergone CSI-affiliated training programs (16.2%), and the remaining (19.3%) reported having completed minor coaching courses. Notably, none of the participants hold a degree in Sports Science, indicating a limited formal education on psycho-educational aspects, such as life skills development. This lack of academic training in sports sciences further supports the rationale of our study, as it is particularly valuable to explore the understanding and practices of life skills development among coaches who have not received structured education on this topic.

Investigating this group allows us to highlight potential gaps in their knowledge and assess how life skills are (or are not) integrated into their coaching practices in recreational sports settings.

DATA ANALYSIS

We employed the Template Analysis method (Brooks et al., 2015) to analyze our interviews, utilizing both a deductive approach, with predefined categories, and an inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge from the data. This method enables researchers to start their investigation based upon themes derived from the literature and to refine the final template with new, emerging themes to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the data (King, 2004). Initially, the researchers identified “a priori” themes at the first order (e.g., “Life skills learning through sport”).

In the first phase, two researchers independently analyzed the same interviews and then compared their findings to ensure alignment for subsequent encodings. Scheduled meetings were set to discuss the interpretation of the interviews. The final template included third-order codes that emerged during the coding process. Divergences in categorization were discussed until consensus was reached.

In the final step, to ensure the robustness of the qualitative analysis, we conducted inter-coder reliability analysis. This process involved independent coding by multiple researchers, followed by both comparing results to assess agreement and checking Cohen’s kappa coefficient. Thus, a third independent coder was trained on the meaning of the categories before conducting a third coding process on 10% of the statements (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). To assess the reliability of our categories, an intercoder reliability analysis was performed, resulting in a Cohen’s $k = .69$, indicating a substantial strength of agreement between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977), reinforcing the trustworthiness of our findings. High intercoder reliability is important in qualitative research as it minimizes subjective biases, ensuring that the coding process accurately reflects the data and enhances the study’s overall reliability and validity. Figure 1 graphically summarizes the steps performed for the qualitative analysis of the interviews.

Results

The authors specified three main a priori themes, i.e., “Life skills learning through sport”, “Coach’s role in life skills learning through sport”, and “Transferring life skills to other areas and life contexts”, identifying second-level and third-level labels for each. Table II gives an overview of the themes that emerged.

From the analysis of the interviews, conducted based on the major themes represented by the first-level labels, 26 third-level labels emerged.

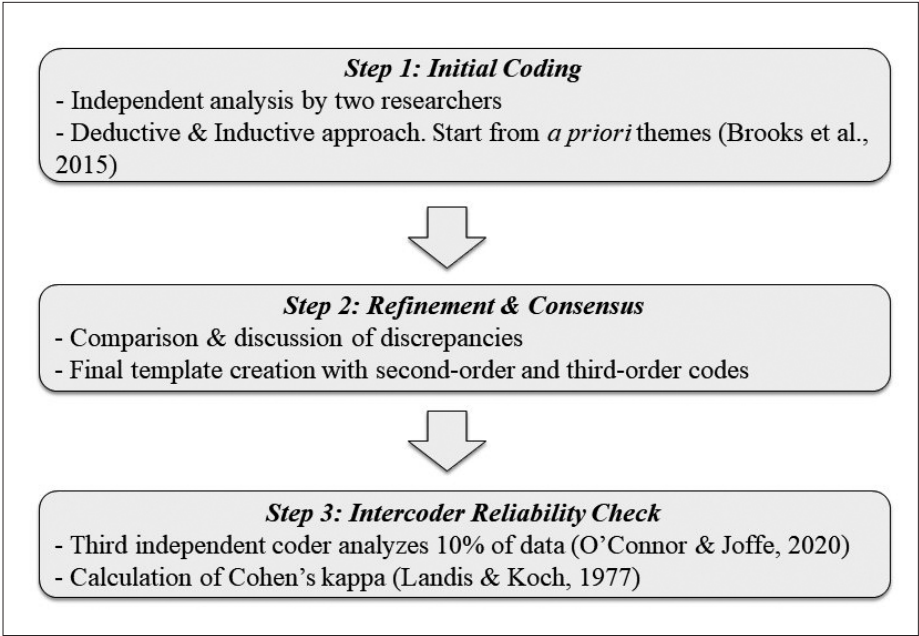


Figure 1 - Three-Stage Qualitative Data Analysis Process.

These labels refer to elements that provide more detailed explanations of the overarching concepts. In turn, the third-level labels were grouped into a total of six second-level labels, organized under the first-level labels as follows. The former theme was divided into two sections regarding the definition of sport as an environment in which athletes acquire life skills and where coaches highlight their characteristics; the second was divided into two sections, specifically regarding the coach's role in creating a positive environment for athletes to acquire life skills; lastly, the third theme was divided into two sections, exploring the various domains other than sport where athletes can apply the life skills acquired.

The following paragraphs will describe each label, quoting the most significant transcriptions from the anonymized interviewees, accompanied by

TABLE II
Overview of the Main Themes and Specific Elements Emerging from the Analysis.

<i>A priori</i> themes		Emerging themes	
First level codes	Second level codes	Third level codes	
Life skills learning through sport	Sport as a "gym of life"	Transferable skills development	12
		Shaping one's character	6
		Value transmission	4
		Discipline*	4
		Personal growth	3
		Inclusion	1
	Life skills acquisition	Interpersonal relationships	7
		Self-awareness	3
		Coping with emotions	3
		Problem solving	2
Coach's role in life skills learning through sport	Positive environment	Safe and challenging environment	17
		Team/Group valorization	12
		Interacting with athletes	5
		Managing parents' expectations	4
		Implicit and explicit learning	4
		Discipline*	2
		Stimulating self-awareness and personal growth	2
	Coach figure	Role model	8
		Need for training and support	4
	Person-centered skills	Knowing oneself	5
		Character strengthening	4
		Difficult events management	3
		Solid guiding principles	2
Transferring life skills to other areas and life contexts	Context-centered skills (school, home, and work)	Better approach to school life	7
		Approaching work in the same way as the game	6
		Better approach to peers	4
		Increased sense of responsibility	4

Notes: "Count" refers to the number of interviewees citing each aspect.

*This third-level code refers to two second-level codes.

the random code assigned to the individual respondent (e.g., interviewed coach number 1 = INT_01).

LIFE SKILLS LEARNING THROUGH SPORT

This section explores whether and how coaches perceive recreational sports as a context for life skills development. Results show which life skills coaches recognize they teach through sports and the effects of sports on youth and adult athletes in their personal growth.

Sport as a “gym of life”

Transferable skills development. Coaches often emphasize that sports teach skills that are transferable to other areas of life. Sports not only “teach” but “train” individuals for life by presenting both positive and negative situations in a controlled, rule-based environment. This allows young athletes to learn how to navigate these situations before encountering them in everyday life.

Sport is the basis of all these [skills] also because, as the saying goes, “sport is a school of life!” It’s hard [for athletes] to hide and you need to establish more interpersonal relationships, to communicate... The sports environment manages to bring that type of learning into life and it becomes easier [afterwards], because it translates [skills] into the social sphere. (INT_2)

Shaping one’s character. Sport exposes individuals to situations that compel them to overcome difficulties. The presence of an opponent is not necessary: the challenge lies within oneself, and engaging in sports helps to shape one’s character in facing adversities. Coaches report that sport helps young people both to cope with traumas resulting from challenging experiences, such as those encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to avoid taking harmful life paths.

On the course I attended with the psychologist we talked about the fact that after the pandemic there have been lots of problems, especially among boys and girls, with panic attacks and withdrawal behaviors. I’m not saying depression, but... sport helps a lot to overcome them and to experience them in a positive way and to try to overcome these traumas... sport has always been a positive school of life. (INT_2)

Value transmission. Many coaches used the expression “gym of life” as a metaphor for the role of sport in teaching life skills for young people. Practicing sport should not only be related to acquiring hard skills regarding the

performance of a specific discipline, but it should also be considered an opportunity to transfer values such as respect, self-acceptance, loyalty, mutual help, and error management.

We definitely teach the “ABCs” of volleyball, [...] but we also teach a whole series of things, which is to share, to be together, to respect each other, to respect opponents and rules, to deal with tensions, defeats, victories, a whole series of things that we try to convey more than to teach (INT_30)

Discipline. One of the major lessons for young people in sport is discipline, i.e., choosing behaviors that help young people to be focused in improving their sport practice (e.g., with efficient time management) and, at the same time, to be respectful of others, and to observe the behavioral rules established by the coaches.

They are willing to suffer, in the sense that they are happy to train every day, to endure the cold or heat, to obey the coach who instills in them very strict discipline; the fact of going to bed at nine-thirty and not at midnight because, otherwise, my performance won't be up to standard tomorrow. Or even the organization of studying around sports commitments: the desire to play, to do sports is so great that I [referring to the athlete] fit my school activities into my schedule and then I also do well because that's a natural consequence. (INT_11)

Personal growth. Participation in sports fosters personal growth, a development observed by coaches when young people, for instance, assume roles that require attention and responsibility even off the field of play. Assuming responsibilities could be an indicator of adopting an active role in facing life events, thereby expressing agency.

If we are able to bring out some talented kids for the future, that's great, but our greatest satisfaction is seeing kids who at 15 or 16 years old become scorekeepers, self-referees, and will gradually be the ones to replace us. (INT_16)

Inclusion. Sport, particularly in recreational clubs, promotes inclusion by providing an environment where participation is open to all, regardless of income, geographical origin, or ethnicity.

We try to give people who economically cannot afford to join another sports club the opportunity to play. We also have some second-generation immigrant children. (INT_27)

Life skills acquisition

During the interviews, coaches mentioned life skills they recognize as being transferred to the young people and adults they coach, which align with the WHO classification we used as our reference framework.

Interpersonal relationships. Being with others involves not only building strong interpersonal relationships but also an individual's awareness of their role within the group, including tasks, expectations, and appropriate behaviors.

In sport, besides technique, which is obviously important, there's also the aspect of relating to others, relating to the group, knowing who you are within it, what is asked of you, what you have to give, what not to give. (INT_24)

Self-awareness. In the sporting context, athletes learn to adopt an introspective approach aimed at understanding their own body, abilities, and emotions.

In my opinion, it's crucial that young people somehow learn all these life skills, [...] mostly for greater awareness of who they are and especially what they are feeling. Starting at a young age, the sports environment, perhaps even more than the academic one, is able to reach children more immediately. Maybe because it's something they may have chosen; they feel more comfortable with it. (INT_9)

Coping with emotions. During competition, athletes are required to manage their emotions, which involves recognizing and controlling them, expressing them appropriately to the situation, and avoiding violations of sports regulations. Additionally, they must consider the emotions of others (teammates, opponents, referees, staff, audience, etc.), recognizing them, taking them into account when making decisions, and potentially offering support. Finally, sports that involve animals add another layer of connection with the other participant (in this case, not a human), providing an additional perspective in terms of emotion management.

[Sport] teaches us to have control over our emotions because we [in equestrianism] are always connected with our horse. It is scientifically proven that the rider's heartbeat synchronizes with that of the horse, and we should learn to breathe and not panic because the horse is a prey animal in nature and is therefore extremely sensitive to our emotions. So, the first thing is to learn to manage [our] emotions. (INT_4)

Problem-solving. Engaging in sport promotes the ability to identify creative solutions rather than to rely on rigid schemas. In addition, within the sport context, individuals are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone, to test their limits, and to take on challenges similar to those faced in life.

Knowing how to think for yourself and to solve problems not in a schematic way, not thinking "when I'm there, I'll do that", but reading the moment: "if they give me space, I'll shoot"; "if they're on me, I'll try to get round them"; "if my teammate calls for the ball, I'll pass it to them". These

momentary interpretations are important, particularly in basketball, as it's always changing and very dynamic. [...] If I play against a team, it changes, so I really need to possess these skills that are certainly transferable and will ultimately benefit me in everyday life. (INT_6)

COACH'S ROLE IN LIFE SKILLS LEARNING THROUGH SPORT

This section examines the specific role of coaches in facilitating life skills learning. The results reveal that coaches play a pivotal role in shaping athletes' experiences, primarily through modeling behaviors, fostering supportive environments, dealing with some obstacles, and implementing (implicit or explicit) strategies to promote life skills development. The role of the coach as a role model for athletes also emerged.

Positive environment

Safe and challenging environment. The coach's role is to create an environment that fosters inclusion, social interaction, and a desire to be together. The focus on winning competitions is secondary to the athlete's growth, which includes learning life skills to be transferred to other life contexts. The coach facilitates periods of thought about the meaning behind actions and game situations, encourages the participation of athletes who are less technically skilled, and promotes collaboration both on and off the field.

[What we do is] involve kids in teamwork and thus organize games where healthy competition and sharing of emotions come into play. (INT_4)

It is about creating a calm atmosphere: each of these objectives [i.e., life skills acquisition] can be achieved because in this way you can have a dialogue with the boy or girl in front of you. (INT_9)

Team/group valorization. Coaches often guide young people through situations of competition and conflict, which, when managed constructively, can lead to positive outcomes. The role of the coach involves not only teaching sports techniques but also creating a supportive atmosphere where young athletes can bond as a team and interact positively. The sport team is one of the most significant peer groups for young people, comparable in importance to the school classroom group, providing essential social interactions and a sense of belonging. Therefore, creating a supportive climate within the team is a key aspect for coaches, and this may include organizing activities outside of training sessions to foster camaraderie among the athletes.

[There is] a game that is not only played on the field or during training

or competing against another team, but involves other moments [...] of living together with the group even outside the sports activity, which allows us to interact by touching other strings [...] enabling us to get to know each other more broadly and independently from the sporting value that each individual demonstrates on the field [...] Traveling, for example, can help us get to know each other better... even just choosing the music to play on Spotify [...] involves group work, taking turns, and leads them to see and discover different things about each other. (INT_18)

Interacting with athletes. The role of the coach involves constantly balancing the requirement to treat all athletes equally so as to avoid creating differences while offering individual attention; consideration should be given to meeting the unique needs of each athlete. Coaches acts as significant others in the relationship with athletes, being able to influence their development, especially for young people, since coaches are the adult role models.

We always try to find a solution for each person, because obviously there is one person who is happier to be seen and one who is not, one who gets more nervous about a confrontation and one who gets more nervous about the result of what is going to happen. So, with each individual you have to find a particular mechanism [of interaction]. (INT_21)

Managing parents' expectations. The role of parents is crucial to whether or not sports facilitate the acquisition of life skills. Often, parents can even hinder learning by pressuring their children based on their own expectations of results, which may differ from those of the coach they sometimes replace, thus causing misalignment. Consequently, managing parents' expectations poses a challenge for coaches as they strive to create a positive environment to foster the learning and growth of young athletes.

The expectations are sometimes different and they have to learn to manage them because unfortunately there are parents who expect miracles and there are kids who can't handle these kinds of expectations. They always expect you to win here, to win there, and there are those times when you couldn't care less about winning. (INT_11)

Implicit and explicit learning. Athletes acquire life skills both implicitly, by tackling the challenges presented by training and competition, and explicitly, through opportunities for reflection facilitated by their coaches.

The exercises are carried out. So, mutual respect, respect for instructions received, mutual help among kids when they are on the field, team spirit [...] are learned implicitly through the type of exercise you have them do. (INT_28)

The post-match analysis that we have always done on any occasion, regardless of the result, whether it is one of infinite joy or great anger, has al-

ways been very important because it involves evaluating what happened. [...] The match analysis, which takes place at two different times, immediately after the final whistle and later on, is important because at these different times, various aspects emerge that are all important to analyze. [...] Evaluation, especially self-evaluation, is fundamental as it gives you that self-awareness. (INT_30)

Discipline. Young people's growth in sports, as in life, also involves learning behavioral rules that coaches are dedicated to teaching, with the goal of fostering a sense of responsibility in creating a positive environment.

Basically, we set rules within the group, so even just the schedule, the clothing, the way the bag is kept neat and organized in a certain way... I ensure that they learn how to behave in the gym, but how they behave in the gym is actually the basis for how they behave outside it as well; [the rules] serve to make each person responsible. (INT_24)

Stimulating self-awareness and personal growth. The coach encourages athletes to face challenges that lead to understanding their limits and, consequently, to gaining self-knowledge in overcoming difficulties.

Sport helps a lot with self-awareness because it helps you to understand your own limits. Although I talk about limits, it's actually a word I don't like to use. Because I always say, 'Guys, never set limits but goals, because if you set a limit, you'll struggle; instead, if you set a goal, it's like saying, "Okay, it's something I have to do sooner or later, maybe I won't be able to do it right away, but little by little, I'll get there"'. (INT_15)

Coach figure

Role model. The coach must lead by example, embodying positive behavior. As a leader, the coach guides rather than commands, showing the way forward. Coaches listen, communicate effectively, encourage reflection, and exhibit empathy and authority without being authoritarian.

It's important when I give courses: [I say that] coaches are a lighthouse for kids, they are a reference figure, they are very important because the child goes to school, the adult does their work and everything else, but [...] the sports activity is chosen, the family chooses it together with you. [...] There, you meet people who, to me, must be impeccable because they have a very difficult task, which is to give kids the opportunity to become better people, healthy people who can then transfer sports values into everyday life; if that teaching does not address certain things, does not take certain factors into account, you can set a bad example. (INT_1)

Need for training and support. None of the coaches have ever under-

gone training aimed at developing life skills and techniques to facilitate their acquisition and transfer. In this regard, coaches feel the need for training on the topic of life skills. At the same time, they recognize the need to be supported by someone with appropriate psychological expertise. Ideally, this approach should be adopted at federation level.

We [coaches] try to do a job, let's say, when we know there are difficulties, to be a bit more tactful, but we don't have the professionalism that you [psychologists] have. Sports psychology is fundamental; in my opinion, it would be great if there were [such a figure] in all clubs. (INT_29)

Transferring life skills to other areas and life contexts

This section investigates the extent to which coaches recognize and support the transfer of life skills beyond the sports context. The findings suggest that while many coaches believe in the potential for life skills transfer, explicit strategies to assess or reinforce this process are often lacking.

Person-centered skills

Knowing oneself. According to coaches, the primary lesson learned in sports is self-awareness, including understanding one's own strengths and areas for improvement. Sports offer continuous opportunities for introspection and self-discovery, which can ultimately lead to increased self-esteem.

[The first thing is] self-awareness, also because many times sport helps you to build self-esteem and to be more self-confident, including about your limits, but certainly about your own value... not to be overwhelmed, and not to be belittled by others, and therefore to have the confidence to be proud [of yourself]. (INT_3)

Character strengthening. The personal domain of sport involves improving one's character through sports, becoming more confident and also more responsible.

I have known [this athlete] since she was very young and I am pleased that she is working hard after having told her many things about managing her bad temper and the fact that this year you [ed., referring to the athlete] are the captain, you are the oldest, and you have to manage the team, [...] and I was very pleased to see how seriously she took this role, trying to keep her mouth shut when she wanted to say something nasty [...] or trying to encourage the teammate who

wasn't doing well, or cheering on her teammates during the games. (INT_5)

Difficult events management. Sport teaches participants how to manage reactions to difficult moments in everyday life, whether they occur within the family, among friends, or in other domains. Facing challenges in a controlled environment with established rules helps individuals to become aware of the mechanisms for managing their emotions and addressing difficulties.

Her mother actually told me: "Thanks to sport, my daughter is able to manage her emotions better, and it is thanks to this sport that my daughter has never had panic attacks at school". (INT_15)

Solid guiding principles. The values learned in sports are not confined to the playing field; they are solid principles that contribute to the holistic education of an individual, facilitating their growth and development into a well-integrated member of society.

At our soccer school, we have worked a lot on behavior, on teaching fair play. [...] Now, some of them have started their own families, some are continuing to study, all "good kids"; this is a source of pride for me and my colleagues. Maybe just 5% have taken paths that are not "great", they have deviated a bit, and you feel fulfilled and satisfied by this because we have always, as a philosophy of managing our soccer school, worked a lot on behavior. (INT_31)

Context-centered skills (school, home, and work)

Better approach to school life. Sport teaches participants skills that can be applied in order to perform well in school. The same abilities and efforts that enhance performance in competitions can also benefit academic achievement, drawing a parallel between studying and training.

I try to make this connection: in the context of school, when there are bad grades or failed tests. We come into the weight room and I always suggest being consistent in training. For example, a boy who attends a classical high school received a bad grade in Latin and Greek, and he told me that he had revised really well for the test. I said to him, "What can we do? We have to keep training and studying". And, what do you know, he caught up on his studies after that. (INT_8)

Approaching work in the same way as the game. Adults who practice or have practiced sports often report to their coaches that they remember and apply experiences and encouragement from their sports training when they are facing challenges in the workplace. These sports-related lessons help them to solve problems, manage teams, and demonstrate leadership in their professional lives.

Many times, they say to me: “You know, in that meeting I managed to stay calm, I thought about when you told me <look ahead, don’t just stand still, but make whatever moves that you are able to>”, and they applied it to their work. (INT_21)

Better approach to peers. Knowing how to manage yourself within a team helps you to improve your ability to relate to peers, which becomes even more evident when this skill is transferred to the school environment.

I remember the mom of a very shy girl who also had problems relating to her peers, with her classmates, often feeling a bit sidelined and always left alone. After a few months, she told me: “Look, even in the team, this effort to try, not to see yourself for what you are not capable of, but for the fact that we are a group where everyone has to contribute, has improved her integration into that group”, which often corresponds to the class. (INT_18)

Increased sense of responsibility. Coaches mention responsibility as a life skill that athletes learn through sports and apply in the home context. The primary indicator of this responsibility is the habit of keeping their bedroom tidy, which generally helps foster better relationships with other family members.

Parents have told me many times that there is an increase in the sense of responsibility: some mothers have reported to me that after starting to play soccer, some boys or girls have started to keep their bedrooms cleaner. (INT_9)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore if coaches in the Italian context address the teaching of life skills in their training of athletes, to identify which life skills are mainly taught during the training, and to illustrate how athletes transfer these life skills from sports to other areas of life. Three main topics were discussed: life skills learning through sport, the role of the coach in life skills learning through sport, and the transfer of life skills to other domains. In a nutshell, the results showed that coaches working in recreational clubs are aware of the importance of sport and of their own role in facilitating the teaching of life skills to athletes. Additionally, they expressed a need for more structured training on this topic.

With regard to the first topic – life skills learning through sport – coaches recognized sport as a context that provides factors facilitating the acquisition of skills that are useful for dealing with everyday challenges (Short & Short, 2005). Consistent with the reference literature on sport-based youth develop-

ment (SBYD), it is possible to use sport to promote the development of life skills that are important for success in various life contexts (Hemphill et al., 2019). It is no coincidence that coaches often use the metaphor of “sport as a gym of life”, meaning that in sports, athletes not only learn technical skills, but also how to face difficulties and challenges they might encounter in other domains. Through sports, athletes learn values, respect for others, and discipline, thereby shaping their personalities (Gould & Carson, 2008). The values inherent in sports refer to the ethical, social, and personal principles that sporting practice fosters, such as fairness, teamwork, perseverance, self-discipline, and respect for rules and opponents. These values are recognized not only in the academic literature but also at the institutional level. For instance, “the Italian Constitution explicitly acknowledges the educational, social, and well-being-promoting value of sports in all its forms” (Article 33, Paragraph 8; *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 2023²). In line with the literature, sports serve as a powerful tool for teaching soft skills that help athletes avoid harmful life paths and prevent delinquency (Piggott et al., 2024). Not surprisingly, “respect” has been cited as a key life skill often acquired through sports (Marsollier et al., 2020). Sports practice fosters personal growth, meaning the acquisition of various forms of responsibility (Bruner et al., 2023). This responsibility drives athletes to express agency, become agents of change, and behave in an active and engaged manner (Pierce et al., 2020).

Among the life skills recognized as being developed through sports, “interpersonal relationships” was the most frequently cited. This skill refers to the ability to build significant positive ties with others, particularly with peers, and to fulfill one’s specific role effectively within the team. This finding is in line with previous research, according to which athletes involved in PYD programs are supported in acquiring social and personal responsibilities (Bruner et al., 2023). Participation in SBYD programs not only promotes the development and transferability of life skills for each participant considering the individual level, which were already the focus of the PYD approach, but also works on relational aspects (Hemphill et al., 2019; Holt, 2017; Mahmud et al., 2024). In particular, sport fosters an inclusive community where diversity is celebrated as a valuable resource and relationships between peers and with significant adults are strengthened through the sharing of meaningful experiences such as those offered in the sport context (D’Angelo et al., 2021; Pink et al., 2020; Latino & Tafuri, 2024). It is important to note that, in relation to the ten core life skills identified by the WHO (1994), the interviewees mentioned only four (i.e., interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, coping

² [Http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/10/07/23G00147/SG](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/10/07/23G00147/SG).

with emotions, and problem-solving). Since there is no specific literature analyzing the knowledge of coaches regarding the definition and nomenclature of each life skill, we can only speculate and share some thoughts. For example, we can hypothesize that the four life skills mentioned by coaches are representative macro-categories to which the remaining WHO life skills can be attributed: interpersonal relationships could include effective communication, self-awareness could include decision making, coping with emotions could include empathy and coping with stress, problem solving could include critical and creative thinking. The other possible hypothesis is that at this level of sport, which is defined as recreational, only certain life skills are more pronounced than others, such as decision making and coping with stress, which might be more evident at the level of competitive sport. Finally, it cannot be ruled out that coaches who do not have a university education on the subject may have difficulty naming life skills and therefore refer to categories that are more common in other areas of work or daily life. As stated in the *Implications* section, this underlines the need for structured and intentionally designed educational programs aimed at recognizing the educational potential of sports practice.

The second topic addresses the coach's role in teaching life skills through sport, which involves creating a positive environment where athletes can develop these skills. Coaches recognize that the skills learned by athletes in sports are transferable to other domains, treating sport as a controlled setting in which to train for dealing with difficulties and becoming more adept at handling problems in everyday life (Pierce et al., 2017). The climate established by coaches (i.e., coaching climate) is a crucial factor in the development of life skills in sports (Martin & Camiré, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). A mastery-oriented coaching climate, focused on cooperative learning and personal improvement rather than on winning competitions or engaging in social comparison, is strongly related to life skills acquisition (Mossman et al., 2021).

Our findings are consistent with the literature and demonstrate that recreational club coaches focus on fostering collaboration and facilitating moments of reflection. In line with studies on the SBYD (Jacobs & Wright, 2018), these programs aim at teaching technical sports skills (e.g., shooting a free kick in football) in interaction with developing life skills athletes can apply outside of the sport context. Consequently, some coaches reported incorporating moments of reflection at the end of training sessions, with the aim of encouraging athletes to consider not only the technical aspects of their performance but also the life skills potentially acquired. Nevertheless, as the participants' responses show, the development of life skills through sport tends to occur largely in an implicit manner. As a result, these practices re-

main occasional and lack the systematic integration that would be expected in a structured SBYD program.

Sports teams represent one of the most significant peer groups for young people, offering essential social interactions and a strong sense of belonging, comparable to the importance of school classroom groups (Allen, 2013; Eccles & Alfeld, 2007). It is not just the coach who facilitates the reflection on life skills; the presence of peers also plays a significant role. Peers can be both resources and obstacles, and, as in other domains, athletes have to manage relationships in order to succeed in sports and beyond (Yi et al., 2024). Consequently, fostering a supportive team climate is crucial for coaches. This may involve organizing activities beyond regular training sessions to strengthen the relationships between athletes. Coaches also serve as “significant others” for athletes, with the ability to shape their development, particularly for young people, as they often act as key adult role models (Mills et al., 2012).

One example of an obstacle that coaches identify as needing to be managed in their work with athletes is represented by parents, who may add extra stress to athletes by imposing their own expectations (Mossman et al., 2021). Parents often focus on their children achieving results in terms of performance rather than on emphasizing the educational aspect of sports, particularly in recreational clubs. As the other main significant figures in athletes’ daily lives, parents wield considerable influence over their sport experiences, making them a crucial contextual factor in their learning of life skills (Pesce et al., 2016). The role of sports coaches involves navigating multiple conflicting phenomena, often balancing the expectations of sports organizations, parents, and athletes. One of the most significant challenges reported by coaches is managing parental expectations, which can sometimes be misaligned with the educational goals of recreational sports.

While coaches aim to foster group cohesion, relationship-building skills, and the ability to face challenges, parents often focus on performance and winning. As highlighted in the interviews, some coaches address this issue by explicitly communicating to parents that the primary objective is not merely competition but the holistic development of young athletes. By adopting a SBYD approach, coaches can redefine their role, viewing these challenges as opportunities to teach resilience, teamwork, and emotional management to athletes. This aligns with the broader educational value of sports and its role in shaping personal growth.

According to the literature, coaches report that life skills teaching can occur through both implicit and explicit approaches (Martin & Camiré, 2020). From the implicit approach, coaches do not intentionally integrate life skills teaching strategies into their coaching practices, but they create an

environment where athletes can naturally learn and apply life skills, transferring them consciously or unconsciously to other contexts (Holt et al., 2017). Conversely, from the explicit approach, coaches intentionally incorporate life skills teaching into their training or create opportunities to reflect on these themes; athletes thereby learn life skills in a more deliberate and conscious manner, with heightened awareness (Pierce et al., 2017).

When asked to reflect on their role, coaches emphasized their awareness of being significant figures for athletes (Pesce et al., 2016), acknowledging their influence on athletes' learning and development. In addition, coaches expressed the need for more structured training on teaching life skills. This requirement is related to the educational background of the sample; in fact, all coaches who participated in the interviews had not attended university courses, which often include more psycho-educational aspects and focus on positive youth development (Ciampolini et al., 2019; Maclean & Lorimer, 2016). As is also evident from the literature, unlike university courses (Mallett, 2011), many coaching licenses do not include a specific focus or specific modules on life skills (Santos et al., 2022). Although coaching education remains of paramount importance, the support of a sports psychologist would be crucial to investigating these issues with athletes and improving their skills.

Our results recall the theoretical framework of life skills transfer provided by Pierce et al., (2017) and with recent findings in literature as regards results of life skills transfers thanks to having participated in a SBYD program (Scheidler et al., 2024). Learning and applying life skills can be understood through a theoretical life skills transfer model, which suggests that the initial development of life skills occurs within a specific learning environment, such as a SBYD program or a sports context. However, the successful transfer of these skills to other areas of life depends on various facilitating factors, which, according to Pierce et al. (2017), are categorized into internal assets (e.g., prior knowledge, intrinsic motivation), external assets (e.g., support from coaches, parents, and peers), and autobiographical experiences (e.g., personal challenges and lived experiences). The extent to which athletes recognize similarities between their sports experiences and other life domains – such as teamwork in sports and collaboration at school or at work – also influences life skills transfer.

Furthermore, this process requires continuous interactions, interpretations, and adaptations to new contexts. As athletes engage with different environments and social groups, they have to be guided to actively perceive these settings as opportunities for transfer and adjust their application of life skills accordingly. Research suggests that structured reflection and guided discussions during moments of debriefing on how life skills can be applied

beyond sports enhance this transfer process, making it more deliberate and effective (Camiré et al., 2009b; Pierce et al., 2017, 2019). This is also reinforced by recent literature on the long-term results of athletes participating to a SBYD program, who reported that the feature facilitating the learning and transfer of life skills were the moments of socialization with others, the staff support, practice opportunities and reinforcements, the participation in other programs, and family support (Scheidler et al. 2024).

As regards context-related skills, sports practice also improves school performance (Martin & Camiré, 2020), as the culture of discipline and training instills values that can be applied to academic studies. Furthermore, athletes learn to interact with their peers, which benefits them in school settings. Coaches also note the long-term benefits of sports participation, as former athletes recognize that skills learned in sports contributed to their professional success. For example, being a team captain helps in managing people, and sports experience aids in handling failure and managing emotions. Consequently, former athletes seem to be better equipped to apply these skills in the workplace in order to overcome challenges (Matsankos et al., 2020). At home, coaches report that parents observe increased responsibility in young athletes, such as tidying their bedrooms more often.

Implications

The results of the interviews with Italian coaches reflect several themes found in the literature on life skills in sports and their transfer. For example, even without having attended an official course with the PYD approach (Larson, 2000), coaches highlight that life skills learning can occur both explicitly and implicitly (Martin & Camiré, 2020). Using the framework of life skills provided by the WHO (1994), coaches reflected on the role of sport in life skills training, thoroughly exploring some features such as their role in this learning and how athletes can then transfer such skills into other domains. Coaches are significant others in athletes' growth (Pesce et al., 2016) and, together with parents and peers (Mossman et al., 2021), they contribute to the development of athletes' social and psychological learning of life skills. Therefore, coaches need to be more aware of their role starting from as early as when they train to become coaches, so that they are able to establish a positive environment for facilitating the acquisition of life skills, both implicitly and explicitly (Martin & Camiré, 2020). Athletes who acquired life skills can replicate those skills in different contexts. For example, a team captain who acquires the skills to energize and unite the team members could replicate

these skills at work, being able to unite colleagues and boost team-building behaviors (Urbini et al., 2025), or being able to overcome work challenges with a fun or competitive approach, according to the playful work design (Caracuzzo et al., 2024). Exploring connections between life skills acquired in sport and psychological dimensions related to other contexts could be insightful for expanding knowledge of the importance of life skills acquisition.

As regards the practical implications, and as has been seen in other studies (Santos et al., 2022), coaches express the need to incorporate official and structured training on teaching life skills in sports into coaching training programs. Additionally, coaches emphasize the importance of having assistance from sport psychologists, even in recreational clubs, to support them in managing the psychological dynamics involved in their relationships with athletes, as they had received limited training on this topic. The significance of teaching life skills is also evident in the outcomes, such as athletes' growth and well-being. Life skills help to increase athletes' confidence, which is identified by the literature as the most influential factor in facilitating their transfer (Pierce et al., 2017). Furthermore, sports practice helps athletes to acquire values and avoid delinquency in the long-term (Piggott et al., 2024). Thus, this study confirms the need to insert life skills training into coaching programs, focusing on this topic alongside the teaching of technical skills.

The fact that the coaches mentioned only four out of ten "core" life skills (WHO, 1994) indicates that while they recognize the significance of teaching life skills alongside sports practice, they require additional training to raise awareness of all the life skills outlined by the WHO (1994) and to provide practical strategies for creating environments that effectively support their transmission. As previously stated, this selective identification may be attributed to several factors.

First, coaches might naturally focus on life skills that are more explicitly linked to sports practice and team dynamics, such as interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, coping with emotions, and problem-solving, while overlooking others may be perceived as less easily recognized if not properly trained in these aspects. Second, as results highlighted, coaches used mainly an implicit teaching of life skills, based on their experience rather than formal education. This may lead them to recognize only those skills they intuitively address in their coaching practices. According to the implicit-explicit framework by Bean et al., (2018), coaches of this study stop to the second step of this continuum (i.e., structuring the sport context and facilitating a positive climate), while they are not trained to realize the others (i.e., discussing and then practicing life skills, discussing and practicing transfer). To bridge this gap, coaches should also be as specific as possible when identifying how life

skills transfer to other contexts, engaging in conversations with athletes and acknowledging the bidirectional nature of this transfer. This means, also, recognizing that what is learned in various life settings can be integrated into sports and serve as a valuable resource. Skills acquired or applied in contexts outside of sports can then be used and implemented in sport practice.

By fostering this understanding among coaches – and subsequently among athletes – the latter can become more aware about their personal growth. Athletes who are mindful of using life skills learned from various life contexts and experiences, other than sport, can improve their sports performance, making them more effective and valuable assets to their sports organizations. This dual enhancement, both as athletes and as responsible citizens, highlights the need for sports clubs to see training budgets as true investments that produce long-term value.

Exercises for life skills

During the interviews, the coaches were asked to provide some examples of how they, in practice, promote life skills acquisition and development among athletes. Thus, they described some practical exercises they use, sometimes in more general terms and sometimes in greater detail. Table III shows one exercise for each of the four life skills mentioned, according to the WHO (1994) definition. For each exercise, a title, a brief explanation, and the related technical and life skills objectives are provided.

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations to consider. First, the study only includes coaches from certain regions of Italy and is therefore not representative of the entire national context. Second, the qualitative nature of the study facilitated only a categorical analysis, which was not further investigated by analyzing the text and was not correlated with quantitative data. Third, while we acknowledge that life skills can be acquired at any stage of an individual's life cycle through the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, only 10% of our sample consists of coaches who exclusively work with adult athletes. This limits our ability to fully explore life skills development in adult sports settings. Fourth, although coaches provided examples of athletes applying life skills learned in sports to other life domains, such as the workplace, our findings do not explore the factors that facilitated this transfer (as outlined in the model by Pierce et al., 2017). In contrast, previous studies, such as Schedler et al. (2024), have examined specific mechanisms that support

TABLE III
Practical Exercises for Training Life Skills.

LIFE SKILLS (WHO, 1994)		EXERCISES
PROBLEM- SOLVING	Title	<i>"THE SPARROWHAWK"</i>
	Description	The sparrowhawk is the athlete who is positioned at the center line of the field and can only move horizontally on that line. The other athletes, positioned at one end of the field, with the ball at their feet, must cross the sparrowhawk's line. The sparrowhawk must "catch" the other athletes by touching ball; if he succeeds, the "caught" athlete in turn becomes a sparrowhawk. As the game progresses, the number of sparrowhawks grows, increasing the difficulty for the ball carrier. Sparrowhawks cannot communicate verbally with each other but only by understanding the movements of their teammates.
	Technical objective	The sparrowhawk and his teammates must be able to find a common strategy and cooperate without speaking but by creating an understanding on a physical and technical level between them.
	Life skills objective	For sparrowhawks: to be able to reach an understanding with teammates with whom to "catch" opponents; for athletes with the ball: to find different ways of getting past the increasing number of sparrowhawks.
COPING WITH EMOTIONS	Title	<i>"SIMULATING THE MATCH"</i>
	Description	Train the mental aspect by reconstructing the competitive context, prompting the athlete to identify to the fullest extent with the moment of competition. All actions that could promote the activation of the flow state should be practiced prior to the competition (e.g., 3 or 4 people are asked to act as spectators, while the athlete concentrates on the moment of entering the court and greeting the audience).
	Technical objective	Ensure the athlete gets used to the external stimuli he will experience in the competition (e.g., perception of observers not as an obstacle, but as a normal and not unexpected aspect).
	Life skills objective	To experience one's own emotions and manage the stress that can be experienced during competition.
SELF- AWARENESS	Title	<i>"THE BONFIRE"</i>
	Description	Athletes are placed in a circle and asked to reflect on the emotional aspects of a previous competition, before starting training or in the case of misunderstandings or problems.
	Technical objective	Discuss the positive and negative technical aspects that emerged.
	Life skills objective	To foster awareness of the emotions and physical sensations experienced by each individual, and to connect these to how each person responded in the field
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	Title	<i>"REPEATING TOGETHER"</i>
	Description	Everybody should do the exercise, until everybody completes it; even those who succeed immediately continue to repeat the exercise with them.
	Technical objective	Repetition of the exercise consolidates technical learning.
	Life skills objective	Knowing how to wait for others; helping others.

life skills transfer. This limitation, however, strengthens the rationale for our study, as it highlights that Italian coaches are not formally trained in these aspects. Consequently, instances of successful learning, transfer, and application of life skills occur primarily through implicit learning rather than structured PYD approaches. Finally, coaches have a variety of educational backgrounds, both university and non-university, and coach a variety of sports, both individual and non-individual.

Future studies could add to the knowledge gained on this topic through a quantitative analysis to assess the possession of life skills in coaches and athletes and their transferability to other contexts in interaction with other variables involved in positive development, such as self-confidence and social ties. It would also be interesting to identify athletes' perceptions of their knowledge of life skills, their experiences to date in their development and their view of their relationship with coaches in seeing them as facilitators of skills. Such studies could be replicated with samples of coaches and professional athletes to assess life skills transfer in relation to dealing with the psychological demands typical of professional sports, including performance pressure, media interactions, and managing fame (cf. Birrer & Morgan, 2010). Additionally, future research could explore the life skills topic from the opposite perspective, i.e., investigating if different contexts, other than sport, provide abilities that may be useful in the sport domain. For example, a good coach could be someone who uses psychological skills gained in another life domain in the sport area, i.e., another psychological skill that is practiced or has proven to be useful in life could be transferred to and improved in sport. Moreover, quantitative research could be used to obtain further knowledge of the relationships between coaches and athletes in teaching and transferring life skills.

Conclusion

This study contributes to literature in systematizing examples of how to teach and transfer life skills in sport practice, referring to the WHO (1994) framework. Specifically, coaches offered a practical viewpoint on their role in athletes' life skills learning. Through reflection, coaches identified some practical exercises they already use to teach life skills, which can serve as an example for others. This study underscores the need for a shared understanding among coaches that working on these aspects is crucial (both implicitly and explicitly). As a result of this research topic, recreational sport organizations could also work to include indicators of life skills acquisition in their sustainability reports and activity reviews, incorporating them into their practice evaluation processes. This would allow for a structured approach

to monitor athletes' personal growth alongside their technical improvement. Additionally, providing coaches with training on how to track life skills application could be beneficial. Creating tools such as structured observation sheets documenting athletes' behaviors in different contexts (e.g., how they interact during team shuttle journey before and after competitions) could serve as practical methods for assessing life skills transfer beyond the sports setting.

From a broader perspective, this work suggests, in line with the international literature, the need to add official and structured training of life skills for coaches, considering their positive outcomes on athletes' growth and behaviours across various life domains.

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