

Horses for Courses: Identifying Coaching Capabilities and Contexts in Equestrian Coach Development Pathways

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Abstract

The British Equestrian Federation (BEF) aims to improve coaching quality by identifying essential capabilities within different participant contexts. This study focused on the performance development context, examining the specific coaching skills required to tailor coach education effectively. Seven expert performance development coaches (n = 5 females; n = 2 males), identified by the BEF, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to identify key coaching capabilities. Findings highlighted two major themes. First, expert coaches are coaches with expertise and experience, and effective coaches are empowering, as coaching extends beyond technical and tactical instruction, enabling athletes to become autonomous. Coaches recognized the importance of influencing riders psychologically and emotionally, not just through skill instruction. Coaches are open-minded, as they actively seek transferable skills and value knowledge from expert coaching in other sports, viewing cross-disciplinary learning as beneficial to their development. Secondly, expert coaches are adaptable, working comfortably across multiple contexts rather than exclusively within performance development. They emphasized that most coaching capabilities are required in all contexts, albeit to varying degrees. The pathway to expertise requires a substantial base of declarative and procedural knowledge, alongside extensive coaching, training, and competitive experience. While findings align with broader coaching literature, differences emerged due to the unique nature of equestrian sport, particularly the rider–horse dynamic. Further research into other coaching contexts is needed to develop a holistic understanding, ensuring these findings inform coach education across the equestrian sector.

Keywords

Equestrian; horse riding; expert coach

1. Introduction

Equestrian sport presents a unique coaching environment, shaped by the complex triadic relationship between coach, rider, and horse [1]. Despite the sport's distinct characteristics, coach education and development models in equestrianism have often mirrored more traditional, 'instructor-style' frameworks, potentially overlooking the nuances of horse–human interaction and the diversity of equestrian disciplines [2]. As the landscape of coach development continues to evolve across sports, there is a growing recognition

of the need to tailor athlete-centered coaching pathways to better reflect specific contextual demands and the capabilities required within each setting.

In broader sports coaching literature, there has been a notable shift toward understanding coaching as a situated, relational, and dynamic practice. Contemporary research emphasizes the value of context-specific knowledge, interpersonal skills, and professional judgment in shaping effective coaching [3,4]. Models such as the Professional Judgment and Decision Making (PJDM) framework [5] and

the Coach Competence Model [6] highlight that coaching expertise cannot be reduced to technical proficiency alone; rather, it is the integration of knowledge, values, and behaviors in context that underpins effective practice. These perspectives challenge generic, linear coach development pathways and call for more nuanced, responsive systems that align with the realities of specific sporting environments.

Furthermore, the concept of 'coaching effectiveness' is increasingly being linked to the development of coaching capabilities, that is, adaptable, applied skills that evolve through experience and are shaped by social and organizational contexts [7,8]. Capability-based approaches to coach development emphasize reflective practice, adaptive expertise, and learning-in-action [9,10], elements that are particularly relevant in equestrian sport, where variables such as the horse's behavior, rider experience, safety concerns, and discipline-specific demands require ongoing judgment and responsiveness from the coach [1,11].

Despite these advancements in coaching science, equestrian coaching research remains relatively underdeveloped, with limited attention paid to how equestrian coaches learn, adapt, and perform in diverse contexts. Given the sport's unique demands, including the need to manage risk, build trust with both horse and rider, and navigate a spectrum of recreational to elite settings [1], there is a clear need to better understand the capabilities that underpin effective equestrian coaching [12]. Moreover, current qualification frameworks may not fully capture the contextual and practical learning that coaches acquire through real-world experience and, therefore, may be unable to fully support coaches.

By concentrating on expert coaches, those identified for their expertise and influence, this study sought to uncover not only what expert capabilities look like in equestrian coaching, but also how they are developed, supported, or constrained within

existing coach development pathways. By situating equestrian coaching within the broader discourse on context-sensitive and capability-driven development, this research aimed to contribute to a more informed, relevant, and sustainable model for coach education in equestrian sport at all levels.

2. Method

Following institutional ethical approval, expert coaches were recruited using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be aged 18 years or older; (b) be currently coaching within Olympic equestrian disciplines in the United Kingdom (show jumping, dressage, or eventing); (c) be actively coaching within regional or national academies and/or World Class Development Programs; and (d) hold a recognized coaching qualification, specifically a UKCC Level 3 or Level 4, BHS Instructor (BHSI), BHS Fellow, or BHS Level 5 Performance Coach qualification.

Expert coaches who met these criteria had previously been identified and selected by the British Equestrian Federation (BEF) through its National Governing Bodies: British Eventing, British Dressage, and British Showjumping. These organizations recognized the coaches as operating within the performance development sphere, with extensive experiential and professional expertise and a proven record of performance coaching.

Eligible coaches were contacted via email, provided with detailed information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study, and invited to participate. Seven expert coaches (five females and two males), all currently coaching within Olympic equestrian disciplines, consented to take part in the study. Participants were subsequently asked to provide a suitable date and location for their interview. Interviews took place at coaches' homes or stables in a quiet room. Participant demographic information is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Coaches demographics.

Coach	Gender	Age	Athletic experience	Education	Years Coaching	Age of participants	Coaching context	Current certification	Years held certification
C1	F	49	National dressage/eventing	Postgraduate degree	31	>13 years	Academies	Equivalent UKCC Level 4	11
C2	F	41	National show jumping	Degree	25	All Ages	Academies	UKCC Level 3	8
C3	F	59	International dressage	High school	44	All Ages	Academies	UKCC Level 3	8
C4	M	45	International eventing, national show jumping	Postgraduate degree	30	>13 years	Academies	UKCC Level 4 (x2)	5
C5	M	46	International eventing	Degree	20	>13 years	World class development	Equivalent UKCC Level 3	12
C6	F	40	International dressage	Postgraduate degree	20	>13 years	Academies, world class	Equivalent UKCC Level 4	2
C7	F	52	International show jumping	Postgraduate degree	32	>13 years	World class development	UKCC Level 4	4

UKCC = United Kingdom Coaching Certificate

2.1. Interview Design

The interview guide (see **Supplementary Materials**) was based on Navin's research [13] on "The development of a sport-specific coaching system to support the participant Pathway." Minor adaptations were made to the interview questions to cater to the differences in equestrian sport. An introductory 'word web' was developed (see **Supplementary Materials**) and used to trigger thoughts and ideas associated with the study's key research questions. Words and phrases used on the word web were carefully selected from the literature within the subject area [9,13–15], introducing the topic without leading the interviewee toward certain answers.

The semi-structured interview used open-ended questions designed to encourage discussion and reflection on the participants' development as coaches. A semi-structured interview approach was selected to ensure comparability across participants while retaining the flexibility to probe the individuals' experiences, a methodology widely used in other sporting disciplines to generate rich, credible, and contextually grounded data [16,17]. The interviews were carried out by the same researcher (ACH) to ensure coherence and consistency between the interviews. Questions were modified within interviews to reflect emerging theory [18]. The lengths of the interviews ranged from 21 to 86 minutes (mean = 45 min).

The semi-structured interview began with questions focused on coaching contexts (for example, "Do you feel there are distinct contexts or domains within your sport, and could you define them?") and capabilities for performance development coaches (for example, "What do you need in your coaching toolbox?"). The final part of the interview consisted of questions regarding the development of expertise (for example, "When, where, and how does this coaching expertise develop?" and "How is it best learned?") and allowed participants to add any final information they felt was relevant to the study. Attention was drawn to participants' feelings, comments, and reasoning as they discussed the issues. 'Elaboration' and 'clarification' probes, as well as follow-up questions, were used to clarify participants' answers, add depth, elaborate on the context of the answers, investigate the implications of responses, and pursue the central themes revealed.

2.2. Data Analysis

All audio recordings were manually transcribed verbatim by the same person (ACH) to ensure that a complete and accurate documentation was obtained. This amassed 86 single-spaced pages of data. Following several readings, the data were then coded through the creation of analytical codes, concepts, categories, and themes developed from the data rather than existing conceptualizations [19].

Using Corbin and Strauss' work [20], data were coded by extracting concepts, which are defined as words that stand for ideas or interpretations contained in data, as products of

analysis. These concepts were then organized into categories and themes representing relevant phenomena and enabling the researcher to reduce and integrate the data [20]. Data could then be presented in an interpretable and meaningful form for peer dissemination. Data analysis concluded when theoretical saturation of concepts was attained, and no new ideas were emerging from interviews.

Coding was carried out by the primary investigator (ACH), who developed an initial code set through an iterative and inductive engagement with the data, informed by her professional background and reflective awareness of her own interpretive lens. To enhance analytic rigor and support triangulation, an experienced secondary researcher (DC) independently reviewed the coded dataset and compared interpretations. Any discrepancies were explored collaboratively, allowing for reflexive discussion and convergence of perspectives. Through this process, a consensus was reached, and a final, agreed-upon coding framework was established.

Identities of participants were only known to the primary investigator (ACH). All data were handled confidentially. All data collected were stored throughout the research process and disposed of appropriately according to the Data Protection Act of 2018.

3. Results

Participating coaches considered coaching their primary source of income. Coaches were additionally involved in coaching across all nine regions of the United Kingdom, providing a broad geographical research base. Participants' demographics, coaching context, and current coaching certifications are shown in **Table 1**.

The thematic analysis revealed two major themes (**Table 2**). First, Expert Coaches are coaches with expertise and experience. Secondly, expert coaches are adaptable, working comfortably across multiple coaching practice contexts rather than exclusively within performance development. Coaches emphasized that most coaching capabilities are required in all contexts, albeit to varying degrees. Nine categories emerged within these themes, suggesting that effective coaching extends beyond technical and tactical instruction to enabling athletes to become autonomous. Participants recognized the importance of influencing riders psychologically and emotionally, not just through skill instruction. These coaches actively seek transferable skills and value knowledge from expert coaching in other sports, viewing cross-disciplinary learning as beneficial to their development.

3.1. Coaching Expertise and Experience "Expert"

Analysis of raw data concerning competencies resulted in the grouping of coaching capabilities under four themes: attitudes, behaviors, skills, and knowledge (**Table 3**). These headings were not purposefully aligned to British Equestrian (BEF) [21] requirements but logically suited the raw data concepts and categories produced through data analysis.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of coaching expertise and contexts.

Theme	Categories	Supporting quotes
Coaching expertise and experience "Expert"	Perceptions of expertise	"For me, the word expert implies you have full knowledge of something..." (Coach 7) "To be an expert, you need experience and knowledge..." (Coach 5)
	Importance of experience and knowledge	"For me, an expert would know all about training horses and about coaching..." (Coach 3)
	Ongoing learning and continuous development	"You need to constantly be learning... CPD is huge..." (Coach 7) "I develop my own performance... so that I don't get stale..." (Coach 3)
Coaching contexts "Belonging"	Defining coaching contexts	"There is a system, isn't there?... You have your Fledglings, then you have BYRDS..." (Coach 6)
	Adaptability across contexts	"As a coach, I am happy to work with everybody, from grassroots to international..." (Coach 7) "I think you are a bit of a chameleon..." (Coach 1)
	Coaches do not work in a single context	"I feel I am quite happy across the spectrum... I feel I deliver across the spectrum..." (Coach 4)
	Limitations of the context within a pathway	"I think in some ways they interact... you can't have elite performance without adult participation..." (Coach 1)
		"I have to work in all of them, because it is the only way I can earn a living..." (Coach 3)
		"This looks to me like a pathway... it's something I can identify with..." (Coach 5) "I could have riders in here (Adult Participation) that are better than riders in here (Performance development)..." (Coach 3)
	Performance development as a broad concept	"Performance development for me is anybody that wants to keep improving their performance..." (Coach 7) "Performance development is pretty much what it is all about..." (Coach 4)
	Concerns about specialization in a single context	"I don't think anybody should be exclusive to any particular area..." (Coach 5)

3.2. Coaching Context "Belonging"

Coaches advocated that the majority of expert coaching capabilities are required across all contexts, though utilized to varying degrees. The context that coaches felt required the most distinctive set of skills was coaching riders aged 12 years and under.

"No actually, I think they would need the same things in their toolbox, they might not need the depth of knowledge so much, but they would certainly need to have an understanding of the aspects... I think the toolbox is perhaps not as full, but it's definitely got the same basics in there... you would probably wear a slightly different hat." (Coach 2).

"I wouldn't see any difference in someone's coaching skill between 13 to elite, those four boxes, in their knowledge. What I would expect is that... by the time the rider is elite, they probably don't need much more from their coach apart from... being... analysis and assessed." (Coach 6).

"The strongest skill a coach has to have is communication, and more so with the performance pathway, because very often they are working under a certain level of pressure trying to achieve performance, and normal communication skills might not work." (Coach 7).

The researcher was subsequently required to clarify whether coaches perceived any capabilities that might identify a coach as an exceptional performance development coach:

"You must be of an open mindset... You need to be very organized; you need to be very structured... anyone that knows me will tell me I am forward-thinking. I am constantly looking for another way, a better way. I have a strong ethic of reflection... And I believe with youth especially... that I am inspirational as a coach." (Coach 7).

"Be a good communicator, generous with their knowledge, and be able to mentor them, so gaining the trust of the athlete." (Coach 6).

"You've got to have a knowledge base... trust and respect... managing the politics." (Coach 4).

"For me, I am enabling people to not only ride, but also to process, so they can make a decision when they are on their own." (Coach 6).

These findings suggest that coaches are more comfortable with a definition of an 'expert performance coach' as one which includes coaches being able to work in any context and impact learners through vastly more than their technical or tactical knowledge.

Table 3: Thematic structure of expert performance coaches' expertise and experience.

Themes	Categories	Capabilities
Attitude	Coach-rider relationship	Open and honest
		Trusting
		Mutual respect
		Enabling (autonomy)
		Approachable
	Inspirational	Philosophy
		Sympathy/empathy
		Open-minded
Behavior	Passionate	Forward-thinking
		Hard working
		Mental toughness
		Discipline focused
	Developing confidence	Always learning (CPD)
		Supportive
		More interpersonal
		More interactive
Skill	Communication	Use of language
		Learning styles
		Reading personalities
	Emotional intelligence	Team management
		Controlling pressures
		Managing conflict
	Performance management	Creative and innovative
		Organized/structured
		Profiling
		Planning and goal-setting
Knowledge	Coaches' experience (tacit knowledge)	Talent identification
		Reflection
		Training horses
	Professional knowledge	Competing
		Coaching
		Depth of knowledge
		Mentoring
		Auxiliary support

3.3. Developing Expertise "Benchmarking" and "Becoming"

Perceived learning situations reported by performance development Coaches along their pathway to 'expert' status are detailed in **Table 4**.

Coaches spoke predominantly about a combination of knowledge and experience impacting their growth, commenting that "you have to do your time" and that you never stop learning.

"You don't necessarily have to be a good rider to be a great coach; I think it would be one of those things that I would put in brackets, but it helps." (Coach 2).

"I personally suspect there is an element of you either can or you can't... you've got people who have qualifications until the cows come home but can't really deliver." (Coach 4).

This suggests that successful coaching in equestrian sport is highly reliant on previous experience as a rider, trainer, and coach, as this provides an essential understanding of the sport. There is also a strong belief among coaches that the exclusive provision of technical and tactical knowledge is insufficient for coach development and that more holistic knowledge, including pedagogy and psychology, is required. Coaches also expressed concerns regarding the provision of coach education through a formal environment, particularly within equestrian sport:

"... It's also being able to develop your psychological equine and psychological human side, so you are able to also feel what is going on..." (Coach 1).

"Educational environment is crucial to the development of any coach... it (formal education) closes people's thought processes down, becomes negative, certainly in our sport, the people are outdoor, hands-on sort of people who can't really sit behind a desk... it just creates an environment where people don't want to learn." (Coach 7).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the capabilities and practices of expert equestrian coaches, focusing on how these are developed, supported, or constrained within existing coach development pathways. By examining the unique relationship between coach and rider, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform context-sensitive, evidence-based approaches to equestrian coach education.

4.1. The "Expert": Expertise and Experience

This study found that extensive knowledge and experience are vital for coaching expertise in equestrian sport. This knowledge base is all-encompassing, with coaches suggesting that requirements far beyond technical and tactical knowledge are essential. Conceptual knowledge, both declarative and procedural, was considered a primary characteristic of effective coaches in analogous research [14,15,22–25]. Effective coaches can translate their experiences into knowledge through a process of reflection, allowing expert coaches to 'see things' that others may not [26].

Table 4: Learning situations reported by expert performance development equestrian coaches.

Learning situation	Description
Coach education programs	UK coaching certificate UKCC assessor British showjumping excels coaching program Elite coach apprenticeship program
Clinics/seminars	Expert/professional coach
Personal experiences related to:	Riding experience Coaching experience Being coached
Face-to-face interactions with other coaches	On UKCC courses In seminars Communities of practice
The Internet	Web Coaching subscriptions
Books/videos	Technical/tactical information
Formal mentoring	Mentoring and being mentored
Reflection	Self-reflection on all the above

Coaches emphasized a broad experience base, which included extensive coaching experience, a successful competitive riding background, and experience in training horses to a similar level to what they coach. All coaches in this study had competed at either national or international level in their respective equestrian discipline and reported that athletes' respect was initially based on coaches' competitive success and perceived knowledge [1,27]. This requirement for a broad experience base correlates with the unique nature of equestrian sport, where a strong partnership between human and animal and the development of 'feel' are essential for success [1,28].

While some coaches identified as experts, others perceived expertise as unattainable 'full knowledge' and emphasized the importance of lifelong learning [29]. It has been suggested that future research may differentiate expert coaches from less successful coaches by examining athletic backgrounds and time invested in coach learning and development [30]. Within equestrian sport, exceptional coaches exemplify a combination of absolute and relative expertise [1]. They are 'exceptional people' within their domain, who have distinct journeys from novice to master.

4.2. Coaching Contexts

Findings suggest that equestrian sport, and subsequently coaching contexts, are distinctive from most other sports [9,13,31,32]. Coaches acknowledged the value of equestrian coaching pathways for both coach and athlete but stated that their contexts have changed over time and that this contributed to their development into their current coaching positions. While coaches aimed to progress along the 'pathway', with ambitions to work with elite performers, they identified an overlap between contexts and suggested that the current framework is over-simplified given the dynamic nature of equestrian sport, where progression not only depends on the rider (with Olympic riders ranging from 16 to

71 years old) but also on the horse [31]. Coaches recommended a reconceptualization of coaching context pathways to allow flexibility and/or adjustments to age-group contexts, if included, to better align with competition structures.

It has been cautioned that coaching contexts may overlap [30], and this was evident in the findings. Coaches willingly and effectively worked across a range of contexts, likely due to the currently limited pool of equestrian performance athletes and the individualistic and elite self-coaching culture of the sport [1]. Coaches also acknowledged that although several of their 'performance development' athletes would similarly slot into the 13–18-year-old transition phase, they were not exclusively drawn from these contexts. Considering this, caution is recommended when applying the concept of coaching contexts and capabilities to equestrian coach education. It is also suggested that the athlete pathway be taken into consideration, ensuring fluency in transition between stages, as coaches acknowledged a need for congruency in information provided to athletes at every stage. Finally, coaches identified controversy with the term 'performance development,' suggesting that it represents the primary role of a coach rather than a context. It is therefore suggested that the term 'performance development' be reconsidered, potentially adopting 'talent development,' as used in hockey coaching research [9].

4.3. Coaching Capabilities

Expert equestrian coaches have a diverse set of personal characteristics, as well as distinct backgrounds as athletes. Differing from [9] and [13] in hockey and netball, coaches felt that the majority of 'expert' coaching capabilities are required within all contexts, but they are utilized to varying degrees. The most distinct context was riders aged 12 years and younger, where coaches needed to be more innovative and creative while teaching the fundamentals of riding, and coaches were least likely to have athletes within this context. Although the coaches identified capabilities required within the high-performance context, the apparent overlap between contexts suggests that 'expert' coaching capabilities are perhaps more about whom people ARE, than what they do [33]. Following this, a distinction is therefore recommended between coaching capabilities and competencies.

Essential attributes of all coaches in this study were identified as open-mindedness, passion, and a hunger for knowledge. The study reinforced the importance of coaches' investment in the coach–athlete relationship, including trust, mutual respect, open and honest communication, empathy, confidence-giving, and creativity [9,13,34]. While team sports coaches may exert more ownership and responsibility within the coach–athlete relationship [9], equestrian sports frequently operate individually, often without external assistance during competition [1], explaining the emphasis coaches placed on enabling their athletes to be completely autonomous [34].

Coaches emphasized being open-minded, forward-thinking, and lifelong learners. Coaches warned that within equestrian sport, failing to remain open-minded would limit a coach's progression and capabilities. Coaches in this study conveyed intense passion for coaching and expressed the need to be hard working and mentally tough,

as a coach's role is multifaceted and generally not monetarily rewarding [35]. It has been suggested that coaches also require structure, the ability to profile athletes, and the capacity to support flexible and adaptable goal setting on performance pathways [9,14,36]. Performance development coaches felt they influenced their participants more through 'craft' knowledge (pedagogy, emotional intelligence, and social skills) than through technical or tactical knowledge. Although coaches did not explicitly refer to emotional intelligence, they spoke of managing teams, pressures, conflicts, and reading personalities. These capabilities align with the definition of emotional intelligence as 'managing the interplay between human cognition and emotion' [36]. Emotional intelligence and management in equestrian sport may be more pertinent than other sports, due to the effect that a rider's emotional state can have on the horse [37–40], and should therefore be considered a core capability for equestrian coaches across all domains.

Finally, coaches spoke at length about auxiliary support within the performance development context. This auxiliary support includes knowledge of individuals who can provide additional services [13,41]. However, unlike many other sports, auxiliary support in equestrian sport also encompasses the multiple supporting roles a coach may be required to adopt (counselor, advisor, psychologist, nutritionist, etc.). This appears to be distinctive to equestrian sport, where the rider makes many of the performance planning and management decisions [1].

4.4. Coach Development

This study also explored how expert coaches learn and develop excellent coaching practice, informing coach education for emerging equestrian coaches. The learning and development process through which the coaches journeyed can be understood through Jarvis' theory of human learning [42]. Coaches spoke extensively about their personal journey or "biography," indicating that learning is socially constructed and experience-driven [43]. The experiences were additionally contextualized and defined as either mediated or unmediated. Through reflection, coaches translated these experiences, cognitively, emotively, and practically, into contextualized knowledge and skills [22,44–47], and developed a personal philosophy surrounding these experiences, which subsequently influenced their attitudes and behaviors.

While this study advocates a more holistic approach to coach education [4,7,48], placing more value on informal education [30], coaches also recognized a place and purpose for formal learning within equestrian sport. Furthermore, as coaching was recognized as a practical endeavor [23,26], and no coach in this study had entered coach education as a "blank slate" due to extensive experience in equestrian riding, training, and coaching [49], it was cautioned that coach education, regardless of context, if over-simplified, irrelevant, and inappropriate in delivery, risks "shutting down minds" and restricting the development of potential expert or beacon coaches [50].

Imaginative, dynamic, and thoughtful coaches require education aligned with these needs [51]. Equestrian coaches are social and practical beings, operating in social environments, and knowledge is socially established and mediated.

This research subsequently suggests that coach education, while valuable, is not a substitute for experience. Therefore, experience should be incorporated into coach certification, with mentoring and reflective practice supporting the translation of knowledge into effective coaching [43,45,52].

4.5. Limitations

Although aspects of equestrian coaching have been examined previously, the literature remains limited regarding coaching context, discipline, and rider performance level. Consequently, this study was confined to expert coaching within Olympic equestrian disciplines and performance development environments, and the findings were therefore context-specific and not intended to be generalized beyond these settings. Furthermore, while equestrian sport is often conceptualized as comprising distinct coaching contexts, the results of this study suggest that there may be greater overlap between these contexts than initially assumed. This potential overlap represents a limitation in interpreting contextual boundaries and may reflect the unique, multidimensional nature of equestrian coaching. A further limitation was that participant validation of the final themes was not undertaken, which may have reduced the credibility and confirmability of the qualitative findings.

It should be acknowledged that the recruitment of coaches may have introduced bias, as these coaches were preselected by the BEF and National governing bodies based on their certification and experience, and their perspectives might not reflect those of all equestrian coaches in this context.

Finally, a single-method approach of semi-structured interviews, while a valid form of qualitative research, only provided participants' perceptions of the roles of the coach. The inclusion of coaching observations from video analysis could provide further insight into the coaching roles displayed in practice.

5. Conclusion

This study positioned the expert coach in equestrian sport as an individual distinguished by extensive equestrian knowledge, supported by substantial experiential foundations, such as competitive riding backgrounds and long-term, varied coaching involvement. Coaches demonstrated the need to work across multiple contexts, often for financial sustainability, revealing considerable overlap in the capabilities required across settings. These findings indicate that the current British Equestrian Federation coaching pathway may oversimplify the complexity of real-world coaching practice, highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach to contextual differentiation in coach education. Coaches also challenged the term 'performance development,' arguing that developing athletes is central across all contexts, and suggesting that 'talent development' may be a more accurate descriptor.

Coaches identified a range of core behaviors such as open-mindedness, passion, trust, respect, honesty, and confidence-giving, alongside key skill themes such as performance management, communication, reflection, and emotional intelligence. Knowledge requirements centered on both professional expertise and lived experience, aligning with previous research. Participants emphasized their

role in fostering athlete autonomy and expressed a strong commitment to lifelong learning, noting that formal education cannot replace experiential understanding. This study provides a foundation for further exploration of coaching across additional equestrian contexts, and future research should employ consistent methodologies to allow meaningful comparison. Importantly, emerging work must continue to prioritize coach development that safeguards the well-being of both riders and horses, reflecting contemporary ethical expectations within equestrianism.

Supplementary Materials

The **Supplementary Materials** include the semi-structured interview guide used in this study. Additionally, a "word web" tool is provided, which was employed during interviews.

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Authors' Contributions

A.C.H.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration; V.L.: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; L.D.: Writing – review & editing; L.C.: Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the Hartpury University Ethics Committee. The study complied with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Microsoft Copilot, in order to improve readability. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

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