Working with Male Athletes: The Experiences of U.S. Female Head Coaches

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Abstract

Historically, men have dominated the athletic arena; as a result, the number of women in sport management positions has been limited (Cashmore, 2000; Coakley, 2010). Even rarer is the opportunity for female coaches to coach male sport teams. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of women who have coached male athletes. Six female head coaches who had coached or were currently coaching a men's team at the high school (*n* = 3), college (*n* = 2), or professional minor league (n =1) level were interviewed, and a cross-case analysis method was used for tagging data and determining themes. Five primary categories emerged: 1) participants had a diversified athletic history; 2) participants had a positive male coaching influence; 3) participants used an intense coaching philosophy, 4) participants felt support from family and athletic administrators; and 5) participants experienced gendering of the coaching role as masculine. Participants suggested that the lack of support systems, mentoring, and networking are the main reasons that the number of women coaching men is so low. Future research should focus on combating the social stigmas in sports administration and coaching.

Key words: Gender Equity, Athletic Administration

"Good leadership is about the person and has little to do with gender," says Carol Meyrowitz, CEO of retailer TJX Cos., and currently one of only 13 female chief operating officers of a Fortune 500 company (Jones, 2009, para. 2). Collectively, under the company leadership of Meyrowitz and her 12 female CEO colleagues, their leadership has led to their respective company experiencing an average stock price increase of 50 percent during the fiscal year 2009 (Jones, 2009). Within intercollegiate athletics a similar minute number of women serve as CEO's of Division I athletic departments. According to the *2008 Racial and Gender Report Card*, of the 120 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision programs only five women (4.2%) headed an athletics department (Lapchick, 2009). Further investigation within this report indicated that only 40.3% of National Collegiate Athletic Association NCAA Division I women's sports had a female head coach and only 2.8% of NCAA Division I men's sports had a female head coach (Lapchick, 2009). Recently, Nancy Lieberman, one of the most successful female basketball players ever, was named the first female head coach of an NBA or NBDL team ("Lieberman returns", 2009) and Natalie Randolph was named the head football coach for the Coolidge High School team in Washington D.C.. Randolph is thought to be the only female head football high school coach in America (Goldenbach,

2010). But because a dearth of research exists investigating the plight of female head coaches of male sports, researchers lack the understanding of why more women are not choosing or being given the opportunity to coach men's sport teams.

In the early 1970's just 30,000 college women participated in intercollegiate athletics. In 2002, college women's intercollegiate athletic participation numbers rose to 150,000 (Carpenter & Acosta, 2005). Similar increased participation rates were experienced in female high school athletics as participation numbers increased to over 2.8 million by 2002 (Carpenter & Acosta, 2005). Although, female athletic participation opportunities have increased in both interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics, the same cannot be said for an increase in the percentage of women occupying head coaching positions.

Since the start of Title IX the percentage of women in *athletic leadership positions* (i.e. head coach, athletic director) has actually decreased (Bradford & Keshoch, 2009). Since 1972, the percentage of women coaching female intercollegiate sports has decreased by 48% and has steadily decreased (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008; NCAA, 2009). A possible reason for this decline has been attributed to the increased importance of women's sports in high school and colleges and thus more financial assets are entering women's athletics, thus more men are interested in coaching women's sports (Coakley, 2010).

Researchers have searched for explanations for the decreasing number of female coaches, but not without debate. Seminal research in this area was conducted by Acosta and Carpenter (1985; 1988); their work identified a difference in athletic directors' perception of why fewer women were coaching. Male athletic directors believed that women left for individual reasons, while female athletic directors believed women left because of structural barriers (e.g., discrimination). Lowry and Lovett's (1997) research granted additional evidence that covert discrimination, time constraints, and various other employment opportunities as leading factors for female coaches' exodus from the profession. Furthermore, female coaches have reported feeling 'second-best' at times, often having to prove their coaching competence (Norman, 2010a). A more recent attempt to better understand the lack of female coaches in intercollegiate athletics was conducted by the NCAA.

The NCAA (2009) surveyed 8,900 intercollegiate female athletes in an attempt to better understand the reasons behind a lack of female head coaches. Initial results indicated a lack of interest in the coaching profession on behalf of female student-athletes as a possible reason, as only 10% of female athletes intended to pursue a career in intercollegiate athletes. Female athletes further reported the desire for a higher salary, time requirements, and preferring a 9 to 5 position as additional reasons for not choosing a career in athletics. Approximately 20% identified a lack of female role models in intercollegiate athletics and family commitments as barriers to entering the coaching profession. While over 53% of survey participants reported knowing another female who is not

happy in their role in athletics. Lastly, about a fourth of female athletes mentioned that they have had a poor relationship with either their college or high school coach (NCAA, 2009). Several of these negative experiences could be indicators that something is lacking in the system. These results are consistent with the findings of previous research (Drago, Hennighausen, Rogers, Vescio, & Stauffer, 2005).

Historical social factors have also been shown to deter women from entering athletic leadership positions. Further data generated from the NCAA (2009) survey revealed that female athletes making career decisions reported that gender/racial discrimination and sexual orientation stereotyping in college athletics discouraged them from being intercollegiate coaches and administrators. NCAA Division I, II, and III female administrators have supported these concerns in hiring women because they believe that there are challenges relating to gender inequality, the lack of administration/institutional support and understanding, stereotyping, lack of experience, sexism and sexist attitudes, and career development issues (Quarterman, DuPree & Willis, 2006). Within athletics, especially college athletic administration, a "good old boys" club barrier can exist (Acosta & Carpenter, 1988). The "good old boys" club can be explained by the theory of homologous reproduction, which describes the phenomenon of the dominant group systematically replicating itself throughout the environment (Kanter, 1977) and the model of occupational closure where the dominant group uses exclusion and demarcation to prevent the subordinate group from obtaining positions of control (Witz, 1990). In other words, the individuals who have power are able to make more decisions relating to hiring opportunities, which result in a larger proportion of similar hires (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008; Lovett & Lowry, 1994). For example, at the Division I level in 2008, approximately 30% of coaching staffs were female when there was no female present in the athletic administration, but the number increased to 43% where there was at least one female on the administrative staff and to 50% when there was a female athletic director (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008). In a study on the gender make-up within British sport governance, researchers found an increase from the past 20 years in the number of females in leadership roles for organizations that are young in years of establishment and within sports that are traditionally 'female' or 'neutral' in nature; thus indicating that when there are few women in a predominately male environment, it is hard to attract more women (White & Kay, 2006).

While the percentage of women coaching female sports has decreased and more men have "crossed-over" to coach female teams, the same has not been true for women "crossing-over" to coach male teams. The number of women coaching male sports has historically been consistently rare and currently only 2-3% of NCAA men's teams are coached by a woman. This number has remained very low for the past three decades (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008). Of the women who are coaching men at the collegiate level, only 5% are exclusively coaching men's teams; in other words, most of the female coaches coach combined men's and women's teams in the sports of cross-country, track, or swimming (Yiamouyiannis, 2008). These data are not exclusive to the United States. In Canada, the number is similarly low, as a recent study

of over 800 coaches from a variety of competitive levels indicated that only 12.1% of the male teams were coached by females and only 2% of female high performance coaches coached men (Reade, Rodgers, & Norma, 2009).

In the only descriptive study on women coaching men, 84 female coaches reported the barriers to coaching male sports consisted of job access, discrimination, gendering of the coaching role and agency barriers (Yiamouyiannis, 2008). Upon further exploration into the unique challenges associated with barriers, three themes emerged: 1) competency questions; by society and male athletes, 2) gender relations; between male and female coaches, athletic directors, and athletes, and 3) lack of access into the "good old boys" club and lack of support from administration and male coaches. Yiamouyiannis (2008) further reports that these barriers seem to deter women from applying for positions more so than because of a lack of interest, experience, or expertise.

Even though there are women coaching males at both the high school and collegiate level, previous research indicates that there is still gender discrimination and inequality in the U.S. society, specifically in the athletic arena. Research attempting to understand women coaching male athletes is limited, with little knowledge into the psychological or sociological issues associated with females coaching male athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. female coaches who had served as the head coach of a male team at the high school, college, or professional level in the United States.

Methodology

Participants

After having secured ethical clearance through the lead author's institution, the authors searched ESPN.com and the NCAA and National Federation of State High School Association (NFHS) websites to identify eligible participants for the study. The qualification for participation was to be a female who had served or was currently serving as the head coach of a male sport team that was not linked with a female team. Women who were coaching or co-coaching both the male and female teams like swimming or track and field were not eligible for participation. The researchers attempted to contact ten U.S. female head coaches via e-mail or phone, and six coaches were reached, all who agreed to be interviewed.

To assist with confidentiality, some specific details about the participants' backgrounds have been left vague and personal information was not used. The participants have been identified throughout the paper in the following manner: Coach A= high school tennis coach, Coach B= college volleyball coach, Coach C= high school wrestling coach, Coach D= community college golf coach, Coach E= high school basketball coach and Coach F= semi-professional basketball. The coaches' tenure in these positions ranged from 1 to 12 years.

Details of the hiring process. To understand the circumstances of the coaches, the researchers did feel that it was important to share background information on the participants' athletic experiences (see Figure 1) and hiring process in order to better understand the context of the coach's situation (see below).

Figure 1. *Background Information on Participants' Athletic Experience*

Coach A
Coach A was a multi-sport youth athlete, but tennis became her main sport in high school. In college, she played tennis for four years. Throughout her career, Coach A had mostly female coaches and stated that she perceived them to take things more "personally" than her male coaches; the female coaches seemed to be more concerned with "personal issues" among team members.

Coach B
Coach B was a multi-sport youth athlete and played two sports in high school. She was a collegiate volleyball player and still participates in adult volleyball leagues and tournaments. Coach B reported that about 90% of her coaches throughout her playing career were male with her first female head coach in college.

Coach C
Coach C participated in basketball, soccer, softball, cheerleading, and wrestling as a youth athletes, but focused on wrestling in high school. She was a cheerleader in college and currently participates in close quarter combat activities.

Coach D
Coach D started playing golf as a child where she played with boys at a country club. She won a women's state amateur tournament twice, played on a men's team at a community college for one year, and spent two years on a men's Division I college team. Following college, Coach D won many women's amateur titles. She says that she took a "few lessons from a lady here or there," but most of the people in her life who have helped her with her golf game have been men.

Coach E
Coach E played baseball for seven years as a child. She describes herself to be "very competitive" and "naturally pretty athletic." Coach E began playing basketball in the sixth grade and played from then on through college. She also played softball for four years in addition to running cross country and track as a high school athlete. In college, Coach E ran cross country as a freshman in addition to playing both basketball and softball before transferring to a larger Division I university where she played both softball and basketball. Throughout her playing career, Coach E had mostly male coaches and few female coaches whom she said seemed to "throw a little more emotion into it."

Coach F
Coach F began playing softball and basketball in the second grade. She went on to play basketball in college and compete professionally after college.

•Coach A- She applied for a teaching job at a high school at the same time she applied for a tennis coaching job and had to fight a little bit to get the coaching position. Coach A recalls, "I had interviewed for a teaching job and did not interview well and I knew I hadn't and so they called me up and gave me a second chance. . . . And I know they were very worried whether I could handle the boys but quite honestly I student taught in an urban school, I coached in a rural school. . . I know everybody worried about me, could I handle the boys, could I do that?" She did have previous high school coaching experience.

•Coach B- She was not looking for a coaching position, so she was specifically asked to apply for the women's volleyball coaching job. During her second season with the women, the men's coach quit, so she was hired on to coach the men's team too. Then later she moved to just coaching the men's team. While she did not have any previous head coaching experience before taking the women's position, she did have volunteer coaching experience

at the collegiate level.

•Coach C- She applied for a high school teaching position and coaching job at the same time. She worked to convince the athletic administration that she was qualified and could bring back the wrestling program, as "they wanted to disband the program all together and [she] gave them [her] resume of wrestling accomplishments and was like 'just give me a chance'."

•Coach D- She played golf at the community college where she was hired, but left the area to finish her collegiate career at a Division I school. When the president of the community college found out that their current men's coach was retiring, he asked Coach D to apply, and at first she refused. She had no prior coaching experience.

•Coach E- She went back to her high school alma mater to coach softball and volleyball where her former high school basketball coach was the principal. She kept the scorebook for boys' varsity basketball her first two years at the school and in the third year was offered the head junior varsity coaching position, which she held for six years before applying and being hired for the head varsity coach position.

•Coach F- She was well known in the community where the team was located. She had no previous head coaching experience and was asked to apply for the position with a professional men's minor league basketball team, and at first refused.

Interview Guide

The interview guide contained four sections. In the first section, participants were asked about their own sport participation history including when and where they played each sport. This section also included questions about their experiences playing for both male and female coaches. The second section contained questions regarding the participants' coaching philosophy and their success in coaching while in this position. In the third section, questions focused on the participants' coaching environments, experiences with athletes, fans, athletic administration, and other coaches in their league. The last section asked coaches to provide suggestions and advice for other female coaches.

Data Collection

Before the interview, participants were contacted and informed about the research purpose and procedures, and then gave consent to participate. A semi-structured interview approach was used, and each participant was presented with identical, open-ended questions. Although there was structure to the interviews, the order and content of each interview differed as particular probing questions were asked based on the specific answers of the participants. This approach was used to control for the depth of answers for the investigation of the primary topics. Follow-up questions were also used to clarify participants' answers. All interviews were conducted over the telephone lasting between 45-70 minutes. Each interview was tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were made available to each participant following the interview for her review.

Analysis

After the transcriptions of the interviews were approved by each participant, a content-analysis using deductive and inductive

reasoning was performed by four researchers. Qualitative data analysis followed the guidelines set by Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993). Using a cross-case analysis, two researchers created tags of meaningful units of text. Then the data tags were categorized into meaningful themes by four researchers; discrepancies were addressed through dialogue and re-assignment until an agreement was reached. Primary themes represent the overarching concepts identified in the data, while secondary themes are the supporting topics.

Results

The following section provides background information about each coach and the primary categories and supporting themes identified from the interview data (see Figure 2). Five primary categories were identified: 1) diversified athletic history, 2) positive male coaching influence, 3) intense coaching philosophy, 4) support from family and athletic administration, and 5) gendering of the coaching role as masculine. Participants were identified as the following: Coach A= high school tennis coach, Coach B= college volleyball coach, Coach C= high school wrestling coach, Coach D= community college golf coach, Coach E= high school basketball coach and Coach F= semi-professional basketball coach.

Figure 2. *Thematic Categories*	
Primary Themes	*Secondary Themes*
Diversified athletic history	•Multiple youth sports •Participants played sport they currently coach •Participants played "boy" sport(s) or sports with boys
Positive male coaching influence	•Participants adopted previous coaches' philosophies •Negative experience with female coach(s) • Positive experience with male coaches
Intense coaching philosophy	•High expectations for their current players •Qualified and confident in their coaching abilities •Strong first impression important •Program improvement
Support from family and athletic administration	• Supported immediately by family members and friends • Supported over time by other coaches and home fans • Supported by athletic administration
Gendering of the coaching role	• Player-coach communication challenges • Stereotyping roadblock • Portray an unshakable presence

Diversified Athletic History

The *Diversified Athletic History* category identifies participants' playing experiences from youth through college as well as post-collegiate play. Within this category, three supporting themes emerged: 1) participants played multiple youth sports; 2) participants played the sport at the collegiate level that they coached; and 3) growing up, participants played "boys" sports or played their sport with boys. Nearly all of the participants reported playing multiple youth and high school sports. These sports included: basketball,

volleyball, hockey, tennis, track, soccer, cheerleading, and softball. Half of the participants reported playing boy-dominated sports including wrestling, golf, and baseball. Participants reported playing at least one sport in college with one participant playing two sports in college.

Positive Male Coaching Influence

The *Positive Male Coaching Influence* category emerged as a result of all participants reporting having a male mentor who served as a coach during youth and then as a friend or person to go to for advice once they began coaching. Within this category, two themes were extracted: 1) participants had negative experiences with female coaches; and 2) participants had positive experiences with male coaches. The female coaches with whom the participants worked were reported to have a lack of coaching experience and/or knowledge and as being emotional and dramatic. Coach A said of her female tennis coach "she had no relationship with us except for poking us on the shoulder if we were going home." Coach B mentioned her least favorite coach in all of her playing experience as being her female college volleyball coach because "when it came to volleyball, she was not very knowledgeable, . . her emotions got in the way and she played favorites, [and] . . . she made it so competitive that it turned the athletes against each other." Coach C found her female college cheerleading coach to be more of a friend and that the coach created a dramatic atmosphere. Coach E felt that her college female head coach had less knowledge about the game than her male assistant coach and that she was not learning as much as she would have liked. Finally, Coaches D and F did not have any female coaches throughout their playing careers.

The positive experiences with male coaches were focused on the intense, disciplined, and aggressive coaching styles. Specifically, male coaches incorporated more drills, gave a more individualized approach, and were more hands-on. Coach B reported that her male coaches were "a little more demanding" and that they "did not want to hear about your personal life." Coach C says of a male coach of hers "he was very aggressive in his coaching style. He was no holds barred, everything was in your face, he was not going to sugar coat it." Coach E's experience was similar: " . . . men had a stronger sense of, you know, this is how it's gonna be and you're gonna do it or else." Coach F felt a strong relationship with her mentor, "I respected him and his system and he was a mentor and friend. I talked to him all of the time."

Intense Coaching Philosophy

Overall, the participants reported implementing an intense coaching philosophy. The specific supporting themes for this category included: 1) participants felt qualified and confident in their coaching abilities; 2) participants had high expectations for their players and worked hard to make a strong first impression; and 3) participants helped their programs improve. Coach A said of her qualifications, "I just thought it was the job I deserved, I guess 'cause I thought I was more than well qualified and I knew I was more qualified than another candidate that they received." In Coach A's interview, she reported that when interviewing for the coaching position, the interviewer asked what she would do if she were three feet away from the net (in tennis) and she replied, "I would hit it away from them. Well, if I had no choice I would

just hit [it at] them, I would hit it as hard as I could so they could not get it." This demonstration of Coach A's coaching knowledge really "clinched the job" for her, she reported. In contrast, Coach C reported having to make a strong case in order to be hired by stating that she wanted to coach and be involved with the school. Coach C reported that she told her interviewer that she was qualified and then, "I gave them my resume of wrestling accomplishments and I was like 'just give me a chance.'" Coaches D and F had a bit of a different experience in that they were pursued for their coaching positions and had no previous coaching experience. Coach F reported feeling "frightened and very nervous about it," while Coach D said that "it was a lot of trial and error. I absolutely did not know what I was doing when I got into it."

Of the coaches interviewed, five stated that they wanted to be up front with their expectations with their teams and wanted to make a strong first impression of their coaching philosophy. Coach A took over for a coach who did not create a disciplined atmosphere in practices. This meant that the kids misbehaved quite a bit, so to combat that, Coach A reported, "We just had a lot of drills and we didn't do a lot of chit chat. It was just get the balls out and the ball hoppers out and went at it and we worked on something new every day." Coach D reported that when she came in, she had the players immediately start "doing things, having workouts, playing in a lot of tournaments the following spring, having a lot of practices, and working on our game." Coach B compared her experience in coaching female athletes by stating, "Unfortunately with the guys I have to be stricter, I have to be harder on them. I have to run a very strict team . . . I need to keep them busy in practice." Another difference Coach B found was that she had to be more intense with the male athletes than with her female athletes. Coach E showed her players that she was serious about discipline and her coaching philosophy. Specifically, Coach E recalled,

[I was] intense, very intense, maybe somewhat to a fault . . . They know what I expect. I have high expectations . . . I expect them to take care of the facility, take care of their grades, do what they're supposed to do, act right, treat people right, etc. You come in for a few hours. You work your tail off.

Adding to their intense coaching philosophies, some of the coaches reported implementing, improving, and ultimately building successful sport programs. Coach A felt that the program she built was not only successful, but well-respected. She reported, "I think we came back, and everybody that beat me, that kinda made fun or put their junior varsity in and beat my varsity, I think I got all but two of them before I was done." Coach B attributed some of her success to recruiting and to dismissing the players that she considered "troublemakers." She reported that her team is doing "fantastic" and stated, "We were nationally ranked most of the season . . . I think I've earned a lot more respect this year because I think I did a really good job recruiting and my team is kicking everybody's butt." Coach C was able to join the other coaches in their tales of success by reporting that her team had a better record than they had in the past several years and that they traveled to the regional tournament. Coach D's success went beyond program improvement and reached other teams statewide. She reported,

Shortly after I started coaching we got lucky and finished second in the nation. It just took off from there . . . It all

worked out great. . . In twelve years, when I left [Community College] and retired, the competitiveness in the state had definitely improved. It really had. A lot of it I contribute to our school being in the forefront and giving the kids a program they could be proud of, they could improve at, and they could hopefully go on and play somewhere else.

Support from Family and Athletic Administration

While most of the coaches felt supported by family, friends, and athletic administration, the support they received from fans, coaching colleagues and their athletes was not consistent or automatic. Three supporting themes came out of this category: 1) participants felt immediate supported by family members and friends; 2) participants felt supported by athletic administration; and 3) participants felt that it took time to earn consistent support from coaching colleagues and their athletes. Specifically, participants cited that their friends and family had confidence in their ability to coach males and were even excited for them. Coach A stated "I think my own personal friends or people who knew me very well knew I was more than capable of doing the job." Coach D had similar sentiments regarding friend and familial support: "[My dad] was tickled, my twin brother was tickled" along with Coach E as she recalled: "The family was just ecstatic. Of course my dad was- he just couldn't contain himself and my mom too. My friends felt like I was well-deserving and good enough. I was very much supported." In addition, Coach B mentioned that her family and friends were surprised at her decision, but were equally excited for her opportunity.

Aside from friend and familial support for these coaches, support from the athletic administration was consistently reported among most of the coaches interviewed. Coach A knew she had the support of her athletic administration after they came out and watched some of her games. Coach B said of her athletic department, "It's a really small [athletic] department, there's only seven of us full-time, so it's a pretty close relationship with most. The AD and I are the closest, he really helps out with my program." Coaches D and E said in their interviews that they also felt supported by their administrative cohorts. Finally, Coach C summed up the support from her athletic administration saying, "My athletic director is amazingly supportive . . . we have a great open relationship . . . You know most of them (athletic administration) are amazing, they have been so supportive."

From coaching colleagues and the athletes, support was less consistent and autonomic, although most participants felt that they did gain support over time. Coach A mentioned that the opposing coaches gained a lot of respect for her over time, as they began to call her the 'black widow', stating that the coaches said 'She's a black widow spider, she looks really nice, and she looks really quiet, but she'll come on and kill ya.' After a couple of seasons, Coach D recalls receiving phone calls from other coaches asking for advice. Coach B felt that she gained respect after a season or two because she ". . . did a really good job recruiting and [her] team [began] kicking everybody's butt," and Coach C felt like she played the 'kid sister' role to the coaches for a few years. Coach E felt that,

the coaches were a little bit bewildered at first because they would go to my assistant coach and shake his hand and he

would say, "Well, she's the coach" and they would go "huh?" It didn't happen all the time, but like I said, when we would go out-of-town, . . .it would happen more. And then after that everybody kind of knew, so it was no big deal. I really had very few negative experiences.

With the athletes, Coach C said that she felt she gained respect when she worked out with them: "I think they respect the fact that I work out with them and I run with them...the other ones were like "I thought it was weird at first, but then I realized she was serious."

A couple of participants did report some exceptions to the general feeling of support, as Coach B and E reported that they had some trouble with the fans. Coach B said that she heard derogatory comments, like 'you look much better in a mini skirt' or 'which one of your guys have done something with your coach?' from the spectators occasionally. Overall the coaches said they had positive experiences and felt supported.

Gendering of the Coaching Role as Masculine

The *Gendering of the Coaching Role as Masculine* category included three supporting themes: 1) player-coach communication challenges; 2) the stereotyping roadblock; and 3) the need to portray an unshakable presence. As for communication with their players, Coaches A and B found communication with their players to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. Coach A stated,

To be real honest with you, the boys had issues that were very inappropriate to talk to them about. And of the issues they had, number one, I did not have the same equipment and they need someone they are close to that is not a parent to talk to.

Similarly, Coach B found that,

for men a lot of times, I can't relate to their points of view or their conversations are ridiculous. I went away with a women's team for 4 days, like I can at least somewhat join in the conversation. Men's it's like I just have to sit there and like read.

Coach C found that she changed her perspective on communicating with her players. She said,

. . . Next year I'm not planning on the team meeting to be like, 'Hey you know if you can't handle the fact that I pee sitting down,' I probably wouldn't say that, I can show by example, lead by example.

Four out of the six participants in their interviews mentioned feeling gender discrimination. Coach A specifically mentioned that "Once you get in you have to have a suit of armor and I think that's very hard to do over the years 'cause you never break into the club'." In addition, Coach B said of male coaches,

I think that they literally think that men should not be coached by women. It's a stereotype, they just think that men aren't going to listen to women or respect women and that's just a stereotype. Unfortunately you know a lot of athletic directors won't hire, they don't want to deal with that . . . I had a couple occurrences this year with away fans making comments because I am female, like 'Oh coach you look much better in a mini skirt' and 'Which one of you guys have done something with your coach?'

Coach C adds that,

More and more women are getting into wrestling, but I think there is still that stigma. I think it is really them (i.e. the women who are coaching men) having to fight through the stigma they are going to face. The main thing is that these women are strong enough to overcome and fight through, and is it worth it to them.

Another strong theme within this category was the idea that in order to be successful, female coaches who coach men need to "portray an unshakable presence." The female coaches need to be able to come in and set up a strict and disciplined program in an attempt to diffuse the aforementioned stereotype. For example, Coach C advises future female coaches not to "focus so much on the fact that you are female coaching male athletes . . . be like, 'this is what we are going to do' and not even bring up the gender [issue]." Though this advice was provided by nearly all of the coaches interviewed, Coach B wishes she "would have been a little stronger right away" because it would have given her more time to prepare and that in general, "being a new coach, you have to come in really strong." Perhaps most explicitly stated was Coach C when she reported, "At our first meeting, I told [the players] 'If you cannot handle the fact that I pee sitting down, then you don't need to be here' . . . and from that point forward, I think they knew I was serious." Coach E describes the importance of being a strong female coach,:

[A female coach needs to be] strong enough to handle anything that comes at her, whether it be a father who is chauvinistic, whether it's a player who doesn't know how to handle it, whether it's just regular stuff. But, most definitely in high school [athletics], it's a perception and it's challenging. . . I think that, to be honest with you, there might have been more problems with some of the dads than the players. You've got, let's cut to the core here, you've got some male egos that just don't think that females can do this. You see them on newscasts and you see them on ESPN now. Men are saying, 'Why is she on there, she can't even (fill in the blank). ' I hear it.

Discussion

Recently more researchers have explored reasons for the declining number of women coaching female sports, but the focus has not been on the low percentage of women coaching men. This unique qualitative study provides insight on the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of women coaching male athletes and a better understanding of the challenges women face as well as information for future women embarking on a coaching career in male athletics.

Five main categories of responses emerged from the data, with the two relating to the participants' experiences prior to taking the head coaching positions (i.e. diversified athletic history and solid male coaching mentor) and three relating to their experiences while coaching (i.e. intense coaching philosophy, support, and exposure to gendering of the coaching role as masculine). Overall, participants indicated they had both positive and negative experiences while coaching male athletes, and after reviewing the results, it can be argued that the obstacles for female coaches within male sports may come in the attempt to *obtain* a position as well as once they are in the position.

One of the keys to obtaining a position was in relation to their elite level success as athletes; all of the coaches had college playing experience, and several also had high-level post-collegiate opportunities. This finding is supported by the NCAA (2009) study that found that women who were "first team" athletes or starters were more likely to go into a career in athletics than those who were not. In a Canadian study on high-performance coaches, researchers found that the female coaches were more likely to have had national or international competitive experiences than their male counterparts (Reade et al., 2009). Additionally, the coaches in the current study were all multiple sport athletes and played either with boys or had sport experience with more traditionally male sports, like wrestling and baseball.

Experiences in high level sport or in more traditionally male sport avenues may assist women in breaking through the "good old boys' club" and may be best explained by the subordinate groups' opposition to occupational closure through mechanism of inclusion (West, Green, Brackenridge, & Woodward, 2001; Witz, 1990). West et al. (2001) found with a qualitative study of British female coaches that the coaches believed their experiences as athletes gave them credibility in securing the respect of others, which West classified as a form of inclusion. West describes that in the occupational closure theory (Witz, 1990) the subordinate group adopts a mechanism of inclusion to gain entry into a field that is 'closed' to them. The significant focus that both the administrators and the female coaches in the current study placed on the coaches' athletic background may have served as rationale for the hire.

Another key in the hiring process was having a previous connection to the school (or community) or being hired in an emergency situation. Only two coaches, who were both at the high school level, applied for a boys' coaching position without having previous experience with the hiring committee, and they both stated they had to "fight" for the position. Several of the other coaches were recruited for the position (two initially refused), and one coach was an assistant when she was hired as the head coach. Interestingly, the coaches who were recruited for the positions had very little, if any, previous experience as a head coach, while the ones who 'applied' for positions, did have this leadership experience. Having a strong network served crucial for these coaches, even more important than experience as a head coach. Networking is an important tool for women in sport and leisure fields (Aitchison, Brackenridge, & Jordan, 1999; Dubois & Bacon, 1999) and women's exclusion from informal coaching networks is a mechanism of occupational closure (West et al., 2001). In Dubois and Bacon's (1999) research, only 16 female applicants applied on their own without sponsorship or being recruited. Between the limited opportunities for networking with female coaches and the exclusion from informal male-based coaching networks, women may not feel that certain coaching positions are open to them (West et al., 2001; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004).

Along the same lines as developing networks, having a solid coaching mentor has been shown to be helpful for a successful coaching career. In the current study, participants reported that their mentors were their former male coaches; none of them had female coaching mentors. They also reported that their former male coaches influenced their coaching philosophy and personal life, teaching them to be "good people", "toughening them up"

and teaching them sportsmanship. This finding leads to two points. First it indicates masculine gendering of the coaching role (West et al., 2001), as the female coaches adopted traditionally masculine characteristics as part of their coaching styles and mentioned this approach as a key to success. Secondly, this finding supports the idea that female coaches are needed as role models to influence student-athletes to enter the coaching profession (Welch & Sigelman, 2007). All of the participants who had female coaches at the high school or college level reported less positive experiences with those coaches because the female coaches were 'too emotional" or "not knowledgeable." NCAA (2009) research indicates that a poor relationship with college/high school coaches and lack of role models as reasons for female student-athletes to not enter the coaching profession.

In the current study, the participants felt supported by their administration, which is different than past research where 29.1% of NCAA women coaching male sports felt they were treated differently by administration (Yiamouyiannis, 2008). However, perceptions of treatment from administration may be related to the gender make-up of their administration staff (Lovett & Lowry, 1994), the age of the athletic program (White & Kay, 2006), or the amount of money that the organization commits to female athletic programs (Welch & Sigelman, 2007). Unfortunately, a limitation of the current study was that information about the administration or organization was not gathered.

Another finding from this study was that participants reported experiencing occupational closure, particularly in the category of support from other coaches, athletes, and fans. While all participants stated that they felt generally supported, participants reported that respect had to be gradually earned from other coaches. Furthermore, even when they felt that there was mutual respect among their coaching colleagues, they felt that they were still not viewed as an equal peer. Women coaching men may be the least socially acceptable coaching scenario (Yiamouyiannis, 2008), and they may often have their abilities undervalued by both males and females (LeDrew & Zimmerman, 1994). However, participants believed that they could earn respect over time by demonstrating their knowledge of the sport and abilities as a coach, which supports Norman's (2010b) findings with female UK coaches' perceptions. Additionally, these findings are similar to the finding of the Yiamouyiannis (2008) study, which indicated that 40% of NCAA female coaches of male sport teams felt they were treated differently by parents and student-athletes and 14% felt they were treated differently by fans.

Conclusion

In summary, there seems to be an "initial reaction in realizing that a woman is a head coach for a men's' sport team [that] is one of shock and surprise" (Yiamouyiannis, 2008, p. 105) at which time, their coaching ability, authority and experience as a coach are often questioned. By understanding the sociological issues that female coaches may face, researchers and coach educators can better understand the main reasons that the number of women coaching men is so low. To add to the current study, future research should focus on the beliefs, attitudes and experiences of male athletes who have had a female coach and have not had a female coach for comparison, as well as administrators who have hired

females to coach male sports. Also, research should continue to explore Witz's (1990) model of occupational closure as a method to understanding this sport sociology phenomenon.

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