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## **Future Directions in Coaching Life Skills: Understanding High School Coaches' Views and Needs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study was designed to examine the types of personal and social issues high school coaches need knowledge of and what they perceive their roles are in terms of developing player life skills. A survey of 154 varsity high school sport coaches representing seven sports was conducted. Results revealed that these coaches ranked psychological/social development and teaching physical skills/physical development as their most important objectives. Failure to take personal responsibility, lack of motivation/work ethic, poor communication/listening skills, problems with parents and poor grades were the most frequently cited problems encountered in coaching high school athletes today. Findings are discussed relative to the need to provide life skills coaching education for school coaches and future directions in the area.

### **Introduction**

School sports in America are built on a strong educational foundation. For example, the mission statement of the National Federation of State High School Associations indicates that it “will promote participation and sportsmanship to develop good citizens through interscholastic activities which provide equitable opportunities, positive recognition and learning experiences to students while maximizing the achievement of educational goals” (NFHS Mission Statement,

n.d.). Sports for high school students, then, are justified for their educational, physical, personal and social-emotional growth values.

In recent years there has been increased interest in using sport as an arena for developing life skills in youth with life skills being viewed as those personal characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and potentially transferred for use in non-sport settings. For example, in the Year 2000 a special issue of the journal, *Community Youth Development* was devoted to an examination of extracurricular activities, especially sport, and their potential to contribute to the health of youth and community development (Terry, 2000). Similarly, in 1997 the exercise and sport science journal, *Quest*, devoted a special issue to teaching life skills through sport. Finally, Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte and Jones (2005) recently developed a framework for fostering life skills through sport and physical activity programs for youth.

Most of the youth development through sport emphasis in exercise and sport science has been focused on developing after school physical activity programs designed to teach underserved youth personal and social responsibility skills through sport participation (Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Hellison & Walsh, 2002). While these programs are an exciting and much needed development in our field, less attention has been focused on how school sport coaches can teach students similar “life skills” through participation. In fact, most coaching education programs fail to discuss personal and social development through sport to any great degree, and instead focus on skill instruction, physical training, injury prevention and performance enhancement, despite the fact that in the United States high school coaches work with over seven million student-athletes (NFSHSA, 2005).

It is encouraging that several researchers have begun to examine coaches’ roles in the personal development of their athletes. In a study of elite gymnastics coaches, for example, Côté and Salmela (1996) found the coaches not only cared about their gymnasts’ athletic development but also their personal development. However, because of the broad scope of the investigation, the researchers did not specifically focus on how these coaches were involved in their athletes’ personal development and the issues they perceived as most relevant.

Looking at volunteer youth coaches, McCallister and her colleagues (2000) found that coaches recognized the value of teaching a wide range of personal values and skills to their athletes. However, they struggled to explain how they did so and were also inconsistent in their explanations. In contrast, using more experienced coaches Gilbert, Gilbert and Trudel (2001a, 2001b) found that they reported more well thought out, purposeful strategies for influencing athlete behavior and personal characteristics.

Given the emerging emphasis on teaching youth life skills through sports participation more needs to be known about the types of personal and social issues coaches need knowledge of and what they perceive their roles are in terms of developing player life skills. To help rectify this state of affairs this investigation was conducted. Specifically, varsity high school coaches were surveyed to determine the life skill and social problems they face working with their athletes.

## Method

### *Survey<sup>1</sup>*

A Positive Youth Development through Sports Survey was developed based on knowledge of the sport psychology, youth development through sport literature, and the authors' personal experiences working with coaches. It included six parts: (1) demographics; (2) coaching objectives; (3) the role of sport in character development; (4) problems in sport today; (5) the role of coaches; and (6) coaches influence on athletes. The survey was comprised of 99 items, most requiring Likert rating responses.

### *Procedure*

Four hundred ninety-seven North Carolina high school varsity head coaches from seven different sports were randomly selected from a comprehensive statewide list of coaches provided by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association. This list represented public schools of varying sizes and locations throughout the state. Coaches of the seven sports sampled included football ( $n = 83$ ), boy's basketball ( $n = 83$ ), boy's soccer ( $n = 83$ ), girl's basketball ( $n = 62$ ), cheerleading ( $n = 62$ ), girl's volleyball ( $n = 62$ ), and girl's soccer ( $n = 62$ ). The number of coaches who coached boy's teams and girl's teams were nearly equal ( $n = 249$  and  $n = 248$ , respectively).

A cover letter, cover page, survey, and stamped return envelope were sent to the 497 coaches. After three weeks, a reminder postcard was sent to those who had not returned the survey. Finally, another mailing (again with a cover letter, cover page, survey, and stamped envelope) was sent out three weeks after the reminder postcard mailing.

## Results

One hundred fifty-four coaches returned completed surveys. Seven coaches were found to be coaching more than one sport and received two surveys (one for each sport that she or he was coaching). Those seven coaches were entered once for the sport they completed the questionnaire for and were excluded from the other sport sampled, resulting in a total sample pool of 490 participants. Therefore, the final return rate was 31.4%.

### *Demographics*

On average, the coaches had coached for 12.2 years ( $SD = 8.43$ ). Their mean age was 40.5 years, ranging from 22 to 59 years old. Sixty four percent ( $n = 98$ ) of the coaches were males while 36 percent ( $n = 56$ ) were females. The majority of coaches (87%) were Caucasian, followed by African American (9.7%), and Hispanic American (1.9%). Most coaches (93.4%) held either an undergraduate college (69.9%) or Masters degree (23.5%).

Seventy-three percent ( $n = 112$ ) of the participants had formal training as a coach while 27 percent ( $n = 41$ ) did not have any training. Among those who had formal training, 60 percent obtained a physical education, sport science, or recreation degree. Moreover, 68 percent ( $n = 85$ )

took college-level courses in coaching. A vast majority of coaches (96.8%) had participated in a coaching education workshop or seminar. Finally, 87% ( $n = 134$ ) were certified teachers while only 24% ( $n = 37$ ) had some sort of coaching certification.

Next, coaches were asked how much time they devoted to coaching and coaching-related activity for their sport. On average, coaches spent 24.3 hours per week coaching ( $SD = 11.33$ ) during the season. Moreover, they reported a mean of 17.6 weeks ( $SD = 7.26$ ) for coaching or coaching-related activities in season. Lastly, coaches estimated the total number of hours they spent for coaching during the off-season. It varied greatly ranging from 0 to 999 hours. The average was 169.5 hours ( $SD = 164.35$ ).

### ***Coaching Objectives***

Coaches were asked to rank order four general objectives one could hope to achieve when coaching their athletes. The four general objectives included: (1) to have a winning team; (2) to help young people have fun; (3) to help young people develop physically and learn physical skills; and (4) to help young people develop psychologically and socially. Helping young people develop psychologically and socially had the largest number of coaches ranking it as most important ( $n = 65$  or 42.5%), followed by helping young people develop physically and learn physical skills ( $n = 44$  or 28.8%), with helping young people have fun being ranked as third in importance ( $n = 28$  or 18.3%), and with the fewest coaches ( $n = 18$  or 11.8%) ranking having a winning team as most important.

### ***Role of Sport in Character Development***

Coaches were asked to rate on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree their perception of whether their athletes learned positive values and skills from playing sports. Means and standard deviations summed over all coaches are listed below (Table 1). However, the mean difference from the highest to lowest ranked item was only .78 suggesting that coaches felt sport teaches many skills.” Coaches agreed/strongly agreed that teamwork, the value of hard work, time management and goal setting are developed through high school sport participation. Meanwhile, athletes learning fairness, accepting defeat gracefully, and not holding grudges after competitions were not as strongly agreed upon by coaches.

Table 1. Ratings of Character Benefits of High School Sports

Categories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Teamwork	3.67	.61
Value of hard work	3.44	.69
Time management	3.38	.65
Goal setting	3.35	.68
Citizenship/abiding by the rule of society	3.32	.69
Motivation to be physically active	3.29	.67
Respect for self	3.28	.65
Self-control	3.23	.67
How to compete cleanly and fairly	3.21	.67
Respect for others	3.20	.70
Winning gracefully	3.11	.62
Fairness	3.06	.56
Accepting defeat gracefully	3.04	.66
Not holding grudges after the competition	2.89	.69

*Note.* Ratings were made on 4-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*)

### ***Problems in Sport Today***

Next, problems that coaches might encounter in working with adolescent athletes were listed and the coaches were asked to rate their perception regarding how frequently they have encountered the problem with their athletes (1 = never, 4 = frequently). Results are contained in Table 2 and reveal that failure to take person responsibility, lack of motivation/work ethic, poor communication/listening skills, problems with parents and poor grades were the most frequently cited problems. The least frequently cited problems included dealing with sexual harassment, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, athletes committing anti-gay harassment, and athletes sexually assaulting someone.

Table 2. Problems Frequently Encountered in High School Sport

Categories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Failure to take personal responsibility	3.31	.97
Lack of motivation/work ethic	3.07	.91
Poor communication/listening skills	3.07	.87
Athletes having problem with parents	3.07	.92
Poor grades	3.05	.90
Poor leadership	2.93	.85
Trash talking	2.85	.95
Poor goal setting skills	2.74	.81
Alcohol use	2.64	1.01
Poor stress management	2.54	.84
Lack of respect toward coaches	2.50	.93
Lack of respect toward officials	2.46	.90
Lack of respect toward other athletes	2.41	.88
Tobacco use	2.40	.44
Academic cheating by players	2.20	.76
Stealing	2.10	.98
Recreational drug use	2.01	.81
On the field violence	1.92	.77
Off the field violence	1.92	.72
Ongoing depression	1.84	.80
Players cheating on the field	1.75	.75
Hazing	1.65	.77
Racial harassment	1.55	.63
Trouble with police/arrested	1.54	.63
Sexual harassment	1.48	.66
Performance-enhancing drugs	1.31	.65
Anti-gay harassment	1.22	.54
Athletes sexually assaulting someone	1.20	.41

*Note.* Ratings were made on 5-point scales (1 = *never*; 2 = *rarely*; 3 = *sometimes*; 4 = *often*; and 5 = *frequently*)

### ***Role of Coaches***

Different roles that coaches might be expected to play when working with athletes were listed and the coaches were asked to rate their perception regarding four different aspects for each role expectation listed: (1) how frequently they serve this role (1 = never, 5 = frequently); (2) how prepared they feel they are to serve this role (1 = very prepared, 5 = very unprepared); (3) how successful they are when they do it (1 = very successful, 4 = very unsuccessful); and (4) whether

they feel serving in this role is an appropriate part of their job (1 = absolutely yes, 4 = absolutely not). Table 3 contains means and standard deviations for their perceived ratings and shows that the coaches felt they most often took on the role of counselor and athletic trainer, were most prepared to handle these roles, were most successful in fulfilling them and felt they were part of their role as a coach.

Table 3. Ratings of Possible Roles of Coaches

Role expectation	<i>How frequently encountered<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>How prepared?<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>How successful?<sup>c</sup></i>	<i>Part of your role as coach?<sup>d</sup></i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Surrogate father	2.47 (1.32)	2.29 (1.09)	2.15 (.89)	2.08 (.96)
Surrogate mother	2.19 (1.26)	2.66 (1.10)	2.46 (1.04)	2.37 (1.07)
Athletic trainer	3.87 (.95)	1.93 (.67)	1.84 (.58)	1.51 (.67)
Counselor	4.04 (.93)	1.78 (.66)	1.76 (.50)	1.36 (.57)
Best friend/brother/sister	2.95 (1.16)	1.95 (.86)	1.90 (.73)	2.24 (.92)

Note. <sup>a</sup>1=never; 2=rarely; 3=sometimes; 4=often; and 5=frequently

<sup>b</sup>1=very prepared; 2=somewhat prepared; 3=somewhat unprepared; 4=very unprepared

<sup>c</sup>1=very successful; 2=somewhat successful; 3=somewhat unsuccessful; 4=very unsuccessful

<sup>d</sup>1=absolutely yes; 2=possibly; 3=not really; 4=absolutely not

### ***Coaches Influence on Athletes***

The coaches were asked a series of questions about their influence on young athletes. All responses were made on 4 point rating scales with response options including “to a great degree” (1), “to some degree” (2), “not much” (3), and “not at all” (4). Results revealed that the coaches perceived that coaches as a general group have considerable influence over the values and behaviors of their athletes ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) and they in particular influenced the values and behaviors of their athletes ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = .54$ ).

### ***Differences Between Coaches of Boy’s and Girl’s Sports***

While not the primary purpose of this study, the data allowed the investigative team to examine whether coaches of boy’s versus girl’s sports differed in their perceptions of coaching life skills and coaching life skills issues. Univariate analyses ( $p < .05$ ) revealed that there was no significant differences between coaches of boy’s versus girl’s sports on the role of sport in character development and in beliefs or the role of coaches in life skills development items. However, significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found on the problems in sport today ratings. Coaches of boy’s sports rated a greater tobacco use ( $M$  boys = 2.58;  $M$  girls = 2.44), recreational drug use ( $M$  boys = 2.21;  $M$  girls = 1.83), performance enhancing drug use ( $M$  boys = 1.51;  $M$  girls = 1.21), alcohol use ( $M$  boys = 2.88;  $M$  girls = 2.44), trouble with the police ( $M$  boys = 1.79;  $M$  girls = 1.32), on the field violence ( $M$  boys = 2.11;  $M$  girls = 1.75), off the field violence ( $M$  boys = 2.07;  $M$  girls = 1.79), committing sexual harassment ( $M$  boys = 1.63;  $M$  girls = 1.35), stealing ( $M$  boys = 2.41;  $M$  girls = 1.83), cheating on the field ( $M$  boys = 1.92;  $M$  girls = 1.54), poor grades ( $M$  boys = 3.24;  $M$  girls = 2.89), and hazing ( $M$  boys = 1.84;  $M$  girls = 1.49) as significantly more frequent in boy’s sports as compared to girl’s sports. In contrast, being a victim of sexual harassment ( $M$  boys = 1.22;  $M$  girls = 1.45) and being a victim of anti-gay harassment ( $M$  boys = 1.11;  $M$  girls = 1.30) were reported to be more frequent among girl’s

sports than boys. Finally, as expected, boy's sport coaches responded significantly higher in the surrogate father role ( $M$  boys = 3.07;  $M$  girls = 1.91), while girl's sport coaches ( $M$  boys = 1.63;  $M$  girls = 2.65) were significantly higher in the surrogate mother role. No other differences were evident.

## Discussion

If sport psychologists are to facilitate coaches efforts to develop life skills in young athletes a need exists to better understand coaches' views about personal development of athletes, their role in teaching life skills, and the problems they face in doing so. The results of this survey show that these high school coaches placed primary importance on the objective of psychological and social development of student athletes. This is in contradiction to the assumption that many coaches are in coaching to "win." In fact, these coaches recognized that coaches in general and they themselves in particular have a powerful influence on the students who play for them. In particular, they felt that teamwork, the development of a hard work ethic, time management, and goal setting were the skills most developed in student athletes through coaching. Interestingly, these findings support the contentions of leading youth development researcher, Reed Larson (2000), who feels that participation in extracurricular activities, especially sport, can develop initiative or the ability to start and follow through on goals and activities in participants. They are also consistent with studies of adolescents that show the youth who have mentors (such as coaches) in their lives have more positive attitudes toward school (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Nataro, 2002). However, it is important to note that coaches (especially untrained and inexperienced coaches) may be socialized to believe sport develops these attributes but as McCallister and her colleagues (2002) found may not be implementing strategies to do so.

Some of the most interesting findings from the study relate to the problems the coaches identified in working with student-athletes today. The failure to take personal responsibility for one's actions and a lack of motivation were seen as the most significant problems. Poor communication/listening skills, problems with parents, and poor grades were also rated as very significant. Addressing these needs is critical for coaching educators, sport psychologists designing life skill development programs, and athletic administrators. In addition, the very serious problems of hazing, racism, sexual and anti-gay harassment, and performance-enhancing drugs were rated as happening "rarely." However, one cannot be sure that these things happen rarely as the coaches may not be aware of such incidents.

Relative to the failure of student athletes to take personal responsibility for their actions it is interesting that this issue has been addressed in detail by Hellison (1995). Specifically, Hellison (1995) has outlined a five-stage model for teaching responsibility to youth through physical activity and recent evidence testing the model is very encouraging (Hellison & Walsh, 2002). This model includes the stages of: self-control and respect for others; effort; self-direction and goal setting; caring for others; and applying these goals outside of the gym. Practical strategies for implementing this model have also been identified. To date, however, this information has not been infused into coaching education curriculums. This needs to be done.

Relative to problems with athlete motivation and communication, existing coaching education materials (e.g., Martens, 1987; Seefeldt, Clark, & Brown, 2001) addresses these topics



in considerable detail. However, the perspective taken is on how coaches can improve their own motivational and communication skills. More emphasis needs to be placed on how to teach student athletes to motivate themselves and to develop appropriate communication skills that they can use on a daily basis. Examining the research on self-regulation may be most useful in this regard as it focuses on how individuals can learn to regulate and control their own behavior (Gould & Chung, 2004).

It is not surprising that high school coaches would be interested in student athletes' academic progress, especially poor grades. In a recent study of award winning high school football coaches who were identified for their character building qualities in players (Gould, Collins, Lauer & Chung, in press), it was found that these coaches took a special interest in their players academic performance whether it was monitoring academic progress, encouraging good grades or tutoring players. The National Football Foundation has also recently initiated its "Play It Smart Program" that provides special academic coaching with high school athletes and this has resulted in noted academic improvements (Petitpas & Champagne, 2000). This certainly suggests that coaches paying special attention to academics can greatly facilitate academic development and help counteract concerns over poor grades.

Finally, problems with dealing with parents were identified as a significant issue facing coaches today. High school coaches need training in this area both relative to what they can do to prevent such problems from occurring (e.g., organize and run a parent orientation program at the start of the season) and how to handle unavoidable confrontations with sport parents. Fortunately, programs such as the American Sport Education Parent Training Program (1994) have been developed to help coaches in this regard.

In summary, high school coaches play an important role in helping adolescents develop personal and social life skills through their sports participation. It must be remembered, however, that the youth sports literature has consistently shown that the development of desirable personal and social skills are not an automatic by-products of participation. Character is not caught, but taught through participation (Hodge, 1988)! Hence, we must make efforts to assess the issues high school coaches face and then provide educational information and training to help them better meet the needs of the students with whom they work. Additional research is also needed. Examining if, when and how coaches at different levels of play foster life skills and develop desirable personal characteristics in their athletes is important as would be a nationwide survey of issues facing student athletes today. Finally, case studies of how coaches teach life skills may be particularly useful to conduct as little is known about the process of doing so.

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