Youth Sports Coaching Education and the Training of Soft Skills

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Abstract

The youth sports industry is a $17 billion a year industry in the United States of America (Eustis, 2019). Many factors go into the decision-making process when a participant is deciding on a program to join. A key component in youth sports is the competency of the coaching staff involved in a program because the coaches have a direct influence on the players (Strand, 2015).   According to the Aspen Institute (2020), parents report the highest source of pressure that their child feels comes from coaches. The following case study and review of literature addresses three themes focused on the field of youth sport coaches to better understand how people secure coaching positions: (1) recruiting practices to secure coaches, (2) coaching profiles of various levels and sports (3) the role of mentors in the development of coaches, and why soft skills are not considered criteria for successful coaching. A major challenge in reviewing the studies was the lack of consistent terminology not only across different sports but also within single sports.

Keywords: youth sports, coaching education, coaching profiles, soft skills

Chapter 1

Introduction

Youth sports have become a billion-dollar worldwide industry (Eustis, 2019). On the front lines of that industry are the coaches who instruct the athletes. The levels of coaching vary across the globe from the parent who is helping a child's team, to a professional coach who makes a living by training athletes. Regardless of coaching skill level, there is a common thread among all coaches: the amount of time that youth athletes spend with a coach can have a lasting effect both educationally and psychologically. A coach that demonstrates supportive behavior can create an environment where the athletes feel that their psychological needs are being met (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The concern that is raised by this relationship is the effects of the untrained or minimally trained coach's ability to meet those needs.

An effort to understand the educational effects that a coach may have on an athlete must start by understanding how coaches are selected or hired. The specific recruiting processes of youth sports programs may shift the educational desires of the coaches to obtain a position. These shifts in educational desires have the potential to put the coaching focus on sport-specific skills and tactics acquisition at the detriment to the coaching of soft skills.

The second component of coaching requires a look at the trait's coaches possess, to evaluate if there is a common theme between coaching success both in the realm of sport and in the development of life and soft skills. Currently, more than an estimated 6.8 million youth coaches in the United States of American (Aspen Institute, 2020). The methods a coach uses to deliver instruction, communicate with parents, resolve player conflicts, and many more skills are not only used to help teams achieve success, but are also often transferred to their

players either directly or indirectly. The ability to build general coaching profiles will help to understand when the development of the skills may occur.

Lastly, a review of coaching mentorship can help offer insight into how coaches shape their coaching styles and methods. Mentoring may hold the most promise as to understanding how coaches learn the skills that are often required away from the field of play to not only be successful but to also remain psychologically healthy. Peer guidance in the coaching field may help coaches shape their coaching philosophies while learning real-world usage of many of the before mentioned life and soft skills.

As youth sports coaching continues to grow, there is a need to look at not only the type of coaching education that is being offered but also what educational topics coach desire and value. The research presented in this literature review will help create a modern coaching profile across all ages and levels of sports coaches. A better understanding of "who" the coaches are will lead to better coaching education that will create a better atmosphere to coach in.

Problem Statement

Youth sports coaching education programs are growing in demand globally. Despite numerous opportunities and programs for coaching education in youth sports, a lack of training in soft skills exists. Soft skills such as communication, stress management, managing burnout, and conflict resolution are areas often prioritized lower than sport-specific technical and tactical skills in coaching education programs and thus, are not included in most youth sports coaching development programs. This problem seems to negatively impact youth sport coaches because it impedes the ability of those coaches to create a holistic coaching

environment and communicate effectively to address the behaviors associated with stress, burnout, and conflict.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study is to explore the current educational environment available to sports coaches at the youth and adolescent levels.   At this stage in the research, the educational environment will be generally defined as the learning options for coaches using various delivery methods and covering a variety of topics, with a focus on, but not limited to technical, tactical, and soft skills.

Research Questions

What is the benefit of training youth sport coaches in soft/life skills such as communication, motivation, conflict resolution, to themselves and those that they coach? Additionally, what do those coaches emphasize as a priority when they are looking to continue their formal coaching education? Lastly, what are the current industry methods and options available for coaching education directed at the youth and adolescent sports coach?

Definition of Terms

Soft Skills are defined as "desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude" (Dictionary.com, 2020). The term is often used interchangeably with the phrase "life skills". In this study, the term is used to describe those skills that are not directly related to the technical and tactical training that is sport-specific.

Coaching Education is often described as educational programs that aim to achieve appropriate learning outcomes, however, unlike teacher education, coaching education does not define the coach's educational role and function because learning outcomes of

interscholastic athletics have not been established (Dills & Ziatz, 2000). In the context of this paper, coaching education is used to define any educational setting or delivery that has the purpose of improving the coaching ability and efficiency of a coach.

Mentor or mentoring is defined by Ibrahim as "a relationship in which a more experienced colleague uses his or her greater knowledge and understanding of the sport or game to support the development of a player/athlete. Mentoring involves the use of the same models and skills of questioning, listening, clarifying, and reframing associated with coaching" (Ibrahim, 2014). The term throughout this paper is used to describe this relationship between a master coach and a less experienced coach.

Youth is used in the context of this study to define the demographic of athletes that range in age from 3-18 years old, as set by the research done by the Aspen Institute (Aspen Institute, 2020). Any demographic that does not fall in the 3-18-year-old range will be noted as necessary.

Significance of the Study

This study will focus on the youth sports coaching environment. Specifically, it will focus on the training and education options that are currently available to those sports coaches and the educational priorities of the content presented to them. Additional focus will be on the training and use of numerous soft-skills and how they relate to both the health of coaches and the development of the athletes. The study will benefit numerous stakeholders in the youth sports environment, such as:

Coaches. Data and research of coaching education will help provide a better holistic framework for the coach to work in as well as helping to develop more effective coaching methods in the area of soft skills.

Youth Players. The development of more holistic coaching education will help ensure the transfer of knowledge from the coach to the athlete will have benefits outside of the sports world. It will also help to foster a healthier relationship between coaches and players.

Players Parents. The development of soft skills by the coach will help foster a better relationship between the coaches and the parents of athletes. As these two demographics are the biggest stakeholders in the development of the athletes, they must be both in the coordination of the players' development.

Administration. The ability to keep quality and respected coaches is important to the success of athletic programs of all levels. The investment in coaching education, as well as a focus on soft skills training, will be beneficial in not only the success in the sporting activity but also in the areas of marketing, recruitment, and organizational reputation.

Ethical Considerations

At this time, there are no ethical considerations as there will be no direct work or research done with any population or demographic.

Theoretical Framework

The author desires to create a coaching education curriculum that will focus on the training of soft/life skills that is currently lacking in the industry as it pertains to the youth and adolescent sports coach population. Much of the current education options for youth sport coaches focus on the technical and tactical aspects that are specific to the sport in which they are coaching. According to current research, coaches are generally satisfied with the coaching education that is provided to them by their organization (Nešić & Stupar, 2020). A key aspect of coaching at the youth level is that there is a transfer of knowledge from the coach to the athletes, but more importantly, that transfer happens from observation of actions and not solely

from direct instruction (Glen & Lavallee, 2019). Therefore, proper training of coaches in soft/life skills not only improves the quality of life in the coach as it pertains to coach/life balance but introduces those same skills in the population they are coaching.

Hypothesis

Currently, there is no hypothesis to present.

Delimitations of Study

Initially, this study will focus on the coaching profiles and educational programs concerning coaches who serve the youth sports population at the introductory to intermediate levels of sports activities.

Limitations of the Study

The requirements of holding a coaching position vary greatly from state to state and country to country and this can cause an issue due to required entry-level education in some demographical and geographical areas. Another limitation is that many coaches work or train with a variety of age groups that may cross-pollinate research.

Chapter 2

Literary Review

Recruiting Processes

The recruiting process of youth sport coaches is instrumental in creating an accurate youth sports coaching profile that is specific to the needs of an organization. A 2018 study presented an in-depth look at the sports coaching landscape in Norway. The study, titled Profiling the Coaches of Norway (PROCON), was a survey of 5,977 sports coaches in Norway which included 4404 male and 1559 female coaches, ranging in age from 15-83 and represented 104 sports from 49 different sports federations (Chroni, Medgard, Nilsen, Sigurjónsson, & Solbakken, 2018). The method of data collection was an online survey of 63 items the authors felt would produce a clear picture of coaching profiles in Norway. The results offered a detailed breakdown of coaching data aligned with their goal to understand the coaching backgrounds, experience, and views of coaching education from the various levels of coaches in Norway. The survey focused on three key areas: 1) who coaches Norwegian sports, 2) what are the main pathways in coaching and 3) what are the differences between male and female coaches. For this research, the focus will be mainly on the second topic. The research found that 75% of sports coaches in Norway are volunteers (Chroni et al., 2018). In the educational context, 67% of sports coaches in Norway have some college education and 77% have some form of official coaching education (Chroni et al., 2018). Two key statistics in the survey were that 99% of the coaches that participated were former athletes and when it came to coaching education, 58% of coaches responded that they experienced obstacles when trying to obtain further education, with 85% of those participants citing "lack of available time" as the main obstacle (Chroni et al., 2018).

A similar study of Mexican coaches was completed in 2016. To understand the coaching profiles in Mexico, one must look at the structure of sport in the nation. The Mexican National Sports Commission (NSC) developed the Mexican Sports System (MSS). The MSS has four stages of athletic competition:

- Stage 1 – sports initiation
  - Athletes typically of ages 6-12 are introduced to sports and the concepts of team play, in a more cooperative and developmental level.
- Stage 2 – competitive development
  - Athletes typically of ages 10-12 are designated for more competitive play with an emphasis on the pipeline to National Junior Olympiad.
- Stage 3 – sports improvement
  - Athletes typically of ages 18-27 are designated for higher lea vel of competitive play, such as the National Student Games. This level also coincides with undergraduate and graduate studies.
- Stage 4 – national team phase
  - Athletes typically of ages 17-35 are designated for optimum sports performance levels and can be identified for national team level competition (Salazar, Flores, Del Rio, Barajas, Gómez Figueroa, & López, 2017).

The goal of the MSS to have coaches develop the athletes mentally and physically as well as gaining their confidence in each stage of the program. A coach may be a former athlete with minimal certification from the NSC (Salazar et al., 2017, pp. 346-347). An interesting note from the authors stated "Educational degrees and certifications are not relevant in the decision

to elect the head coach of national teams; these decisions are made by each sports federation and often based on a coach's popularity" (Salazar et al., 2017). The same study reported that amateur coaches are responsible for the bulk of youth player development in Mexico and therefore is the largest demographic. The minimum requirement for youth coaches in Mexico is to complete the Training and Certification System for Coaches (TCSC) (Salazar et al., 2017). The TCSC covers a variety of topics such as motor learning skills, training of sports techniques and tactics, health disorders, and intelligence (Mexican Federation of Athletics Associations, 2020). According to the research of Salazar et al., the lack of formal coaching education is a key contributor to coaches looking for education outside of Mexico, and the lack of education being a contributing factor to employment as a coach (Salazar et al., 2017). The coaching recruiting environment in Mexico is a stark contrast to the recruiting process demonstrated by Chroni, et al. When comparing the two coaching cultures, the Norwegian coaching model utilizes more formal training such as a college education as a foundation, in comparison to the Mexican coaching model which is focused more on sports-specific training for their coach hires. One aspect that was similar between the two studies was that both models had a large participation of previous athletes as coaches.

Another key aspect of the recruiting process is the age of the coach being recruited. Research has shown that younger coaches tend to view the position as a hobby and value the personal benefits of the job, whereas older coaches are more focused on their legacy and giving back to the sport and community (Ronkainen, Ryba, McDougall, Tod, & Tikkanen, 2020). One of the shifts that have happened in recent years is that the younger population has switched from the mindset of volunteerism as a social contribution to the community to volunteerism used as a path for professional development and self-realization (Ronkainen et

al., 2020). This shift may require organizations to evaluate how much resources and capital they are will allocate for coaching education to attract the younger coaching population.

Traits of Youth Sport Coaches

A second aspect of building a coaching profile are the traits of youth sport coaches. A recent study conducted in Spain assessed the approaches and coping strategies that youth sport coaches use to maintain positive personality traits. The study surveyed 2,135 sports coaches (1,478 male and 657 female) with an average of 7.3 years of coaching experience (Laborde, Guillén, Watson, & Allen, 2017). A Spanish version of the athlete coping with sport questionnaire (ACSQ) was used. Skills such as coping, hope, optimism, resilience, optimism, and perseverance were measured using psychologically standard scales. The study found that there were notable differences in coping skills between male and female coaches. Another variance the study found was a difference in personality and coping traits between coaches of individual athletes and team coaches (Laborde et al., 2017). The Laborde et al. study also found that the more experience a coach had, the less likely they were to use mental withdraw and the turning to religion as a coping method. There was also a difference noted between individual coaches and team coaches in the area of planning. Individual coaches relied less on social and active planning as their team coach counterparts (Laborde et al., 2017). The study referred to the "light quartet" as the positive traits of hope, optimism, resilience, and perseverance. The study found that while there were slight deviations associated with gender, length of a coaching career, and individual versus team coaching, almost uniformly those coaches who scored high on the light quartet had the best results in coping methods and active planning.

In their study; Cho, Choi, and Kim defined anxiety as "a reaction by an individual to a stressful situation" (Cho, Choi, & Kim, 2019). There are many sources of anxiety for athletes of all levels, but the main source can be a coach. While the research in this study is focused mainly on the athletes' perceived perception of their coaches' abilities, the data can help create a coaching profile. A key finding from Cho et al. was that negative coaching behavior was a large source of trait anxiety in athletes that led to burnout (Cho et al., 2019). Another finding in the study was the negative effect that a coach with a controlling leadership style also had on athletes. Ultimately, the study found that "certain coaching behaviors are better predictors of sport anxiety" (Cho et al., 2019). These results are in line with previous studies on coaching burnout. Emotional exhaustion and the need for approval are key indicators of coaching burnout (Tashman, Tenenbaum, & Eklund, 2010). There is a clear link between the coach-athlete relationship and perceived stress and burnout.

Roles of Mentorship in Coaching Development

The last segment of building the coaching profile is the role that mentors have on the coaching profession. Most coaching education is a closed-circle environment (Leeder & Cushion, 2019). A result of the closed-circle coaching environment is that coaching education is often unchecked and unchallenged by those receiving it. The coaching education material is coming from a source, such as a national governing body (NGB), and therefore the coaches receiving the information accept it with full compliance and complete reproduction in their work. Leeder and Cushion explored the role the mentors have in creating compliance with the NGB mandates and educational values. An important aspect of Leeder and Cushion's research was the finding that "Although arbitrary, NGB's can reinforce ideas, beliefs, and dispositions that can become embedded. These can be positive or negative and constrain or enable an

individual's practice" (Leeder & Cushion, 2019, p. 11). A second key aspect of the Leeder and Cushion research is how it shows the mentorship is an effective training tool, as per the responses from the subjects of their study, by helping to steer the mentee towards training methods and certifications that are endorsed by the NGB (Leeder & Cushion, 2019). An obvious pitfall in the mentorship method is the influence the mentor has on the mentee can be unchecked. One must trust that the information and methods coming from the mentor are correct and relevant. It is that concern, which was studied by Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom on the Multi-mentor system. The multi-mentoring system is based on the belief that mentoring occurs with various events and levels of events in a lifetime; each of which benefits from different mentors of varying levels (Burlew, 1991). The focus of the study revolves around the traditional concept that mentoring in the coaching education setting is often a one-dimensional relationship between the mentor and mentee, with the mentor holding a position of power due to his/her experience. (Sawiuk, Taylor, & Groom, 2017). The study was conducted by interviewing 15 elite sport coach mentors on a variety of topics such as the mentors' perceived value of the mentor system, how progress was tracked, was their conflict in their current methods of mentoring from stakeholders, and other questions related to mentoring both in the one-on-one aspect and the multi mentor system. The respondents unanimously agreed on the advantages such as larger knowledge pools, different skills set, and different perspectives of the multi mentor method, although it was not without its challenges. A key obstacle in the multi mentor process was the introduction of micro-politics, which is the different interactions that take place between the stakeholders in a mentor system, that may at times conflict with other interactions and values (Sawiuk et al., 2017). Two areas of micro-politics in the multi-mentor relationship are that of secrecy and "giving back". The first area, of secrecy, can point

to the competitive nature of sports coaches. Often, successful coaches feel a need to protect their "secrets" and methods and may not truly pass the information on in the mentorship environment. The second area, "giving back", occurs when a mentor becomes ostracized for training methods outside of the realm of their sport. This is a common occurrence in the Olympic sports arena, due to the limited resources of the sports and the desire to outshine other sports who do not receive as much global attention as other mainstream sports. An example would be a track coach working with an MMA coach. The track coach may find themselves no longer accepted in their coaching circles due to working with an outside sport. While the coach mentor concept has its pitfalls, such as micro-politics and the unchallenged consumption of knowledge, the evidence presented in both previously mentioned studies shows the effectiveness of the mentor training method.

One key aspect of the mentoring system that can lead to negative results is the failure to distinguishing between the acts of coaching versus that of being a mentor. The terms are often incorrectly applied to training and educational situations. Coaching generally involves the training of skills related to a specific task, such as sports and sales while often maintain the control and direction of the training; in contrast, mentoring often involves the overall potential and capacity of the learner while focusing on long term goals (Koh, Ho, & Koh, 2017). The distinction between the two is important to note as it is often perceived that tenured members of an organization would make acceptable mentors. While this can often work out as a positive training method, without proper mentorship training a tenured coach may not be able to provide the proper mentor/mentee training that would best help the growth of the mentee. There is currently a lack of research available that shows current mentor development

pathways and activities that are beneficial to the foster the growth of the mentor (Koh et al., 2017)

Conclusion

Studies like those of Chroni et al. and Salazar et al. have shown that there are multiple paths to becoming a coach, but most entry points are being a volunteer coach, and having previous experience playing competitive sports helps with obtaining a coaching position. Cho et al. and Tashman et al. studied the traits of coaches and how those traits help to make exceptional coaches. Lastly, the studies by Leeder and Cushing and Sawiuk et al. help to show the benefits and methods in a mentoring system that can help coaches not only succeed in their positions but also avoid coaching burnout and other pitfalls of the profession. Using the information provided by all the studies in the literary review will help create a coaching profile to better understand the hiring process, traits, and mentorship capabilities to create better coaching education methods.

Implications

A basic coaching profile created by the research shows most youth sports coaches are a volunteer or part-time with little continuing education at the university level and have limited resources such as time and money for coaching education.   Coaching education resources such as NGB's and those in the private sector will be better suited to create programs that ensure quality instruction on a multitude of coaching skills and delivery methods by being equipped with the knowledge of these coaching profiles. The programs can help guide the hiring decisions of sports coaches, like this mentioned by Chroni, Midgard, Nilsen, Sigurjónsson, & Solbakken. It will also help those educators create programming to help coaches battle the challenges their profession has, like those mentioned by Cho, Choi, and

Kim. Lastly, the incorporation of multi-mentorship can be explored as a meaningful educational method. All these areas and methods can be benefited by the attention of the educators in creating a more holistic approach to coaching and coaching education. By better-equipping youth sport coaches to deal with the stress, challenges, and burdens of their profession, they will be more like to create positive coach-player transfer in often underutilized soft skills. Those skills that are often the key points for need, globally, of youth sports.

Future Research

Three areas of future research that should be explored when looking at coaching education in the sports world. The first could focus on current coaching education options offering in the realm of life and soft skills training. The second could be to determine the skills required by those in a position to hire coaches and those skills found to be most valuable to the coaches and to incorporate those skills into coaching education. Future research options will help guide the creation of better training methods and subject matter to ensure a more holistic coaching environment in youth sports. The final area of research should focus on the development of mentors and how successful mentors created programs and pathways to better empower and educate their mentees.

Chapter 3

Methods and Procedures

This chapter presents the methods to be used in the study. Subjects of the study, instruments used, procedures of data gathering, and the statistical treatment of the data will all be outlined. The case study will assess the opportunities, delivery, and topics of emphasis on coaching education provided to select populations of youth sports coaches.

Method of Research

The method of research will be a descriptive case study because the goal is to form a holistic view of youth sports coaching education environment. Qualitative research will be used to gather data about opinions concerning coaching education from the respondents through a comprehensive survey questionnaire.

Subjects of the Study

In this case study, 150 youth sports coaches will be selected to participate in the process. The participants will be divided up into three equal groups that are separated by the demographic in which they coach.

Group One will consist of 50 coaches who primarily coach and train youth athletes who are in the elementary school level of education. Elementary school level for this study is defined as Kindergarten through fifth grades.

Group Two will consist of 50 coaches who primarily coach and train youth athletes who are in the middle school level of education. The middle school level for this study is defined as six through eighth grades.

Group Three will consist of 50 coaches who primarily coach and train youth athletes who are in the secondary school level of education. The secondary school level for this study is defined as ninth through twelfth grades.

Only active coaches at a single educational level will be considered as participants in the study. Any respondents who concurrently coach at multiple levels will be counted in the highest education level in which they train.

Sampling Technique Used

Convenience sampling, which is a non-random with participants who are familiar to the researcher, will be utilized in this research (Glen, 2015). The researcher has access to over 20,000 coaches of all levels and demographics as an administrator of an online coaching community called Volleyball Coaches and Trainers (VCT). VCT is an online community based on Facebook that is comprised of volleyball coaches from across the globe and a wide variety of coaching levels ranging from beginner to professional. The three groups will be selected from responses sent to the entire VCT group membership to participate in the study, via the Survey Monkey application. Participation will require that a coach be based in the United States of America, a currently active coach, and in good standing membership with their local and national governing bodies. No preference will be given to the gender of the coach or athletes they train, years of coaching experience, coaching certifications, or organizational level they coach (i.e. high school, club programs, or independent coaching).

Research Instruments Used

A questionnaire using Survey Monkey will be used to collect the data from the subjects. The questionnaire will be comprised of three main sections: biographical information, pervious coaching education, perceived coaching educational needs. Each

section of the questionnaire will make use of rating scales, multiple-choice, and short answer questions.

Biographical information consists of general background information on the subject such as age, gender, levels of coaching, years of coaching, playing background, the gender of athletes trained, and geographical data.

Previous coaching education consists of previous coaching education topics, length of training, cadre information, certification requirements, and delivery methods. Questions dealing with "why a subject engaged in coaching education" (i.e. required or self-enrichment) as well all how the coaching education was sought out will also be highlighted in this section.

Perceived coaching education needs will focus on the topics the subjects feel are the most important in their specific coaching education path. The subjects will rank topics that were compiled from previous research methods in order of importance. The topics will be clearly defined to ensure that all subjects have the same understanding of those presented.

Validation of Instruments

A panel of 5 coaching education chairs from various United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) governing bodies will validate the questionnaire. A group of 15 coaches, 5 from each subgroup, who were not selected to participate in the study will be asked to complete the questionnaire. Their responses will be used to test the validity of the questionnaire.

The procedure of Data Gathering

The case study will consist of four stages.

Stage 1 is the creation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire will be created using the online tool "SurveyMonkey.com". Stage 1 will also open the calls for participants via a

posting in the Volleyball Coaches and Trainers (VCT) Facebook page. This stage will also include the invitation to USOC governing bodies coaching education chairs to join the validation panel. Preference will be given to those who chair organizations with a large and diverse coaching population such as volleyball, basketball, soccer, and baseball.

Stage 2 will consist of editing the questionnaire based on the feedback of the validation panel. This stage will also produce the list of participants as well as the participant validation group. Participants will be sorted and grouped by the coaching level in this stage. General background and requirements notification will go out to each participant at this point. A waitlist will also be created for those coaches who were not accepted into the study but may replace any non-respondents.

Stage 3 will have the participants complete the questionnaire via survey monkey. At the end of 10 days, any participants who did not respond will be replaced by coaches on the waiting list who are in the same demographic. The results will be calculated and saved.

Stage 4 will be the final stage where the research is sorted, calculated, and made presentable. The data will be compared to the validation group to test for reliability

Statistical Treatment

. The data will be added to a Microsoft Access database to help with the sorting and production of the results. Multiple reports will be produced based on the results. Comparison of answers concerning geographical, coaching levels, and years coaching data points will be the focus in presenting the results.

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