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# Coaching boys' high school teams: Female coaches' experiences and perceptions

Janna LaFontaine<sup>1</sup> and Cindra S Kamphoff<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Research has suggested that a minimal number of females serve as head coaches of male teams around the world. When they do coach males, female coaches have reported having difficulty establishing credibility, being one of the only female coaches, and feeling unsupported by administrators. The current study used open-ended responses and interview data to understand the experiences and perceptions of females coaching males at the U.S. high school level, as well as addresses the perceived barriers that may prohibit females from coaching boys. In general, the female coaches interviewed felt more support from their athletic administrators, parents, and other coaches than in previous research. The female coaches stated they enjoyed coaching boys, yet they believed they needed to be physically competent in order to prove themselves while coaching a boys' team. They also described struggling to be respected and often felt they needed to employ masculine characteristics in order to be successful. These details provide evidence of the continuing uphill climb and yet, simultaneously documents that females' experiences coaching male athletes may be improving. Further research is recommended examining the experiences of women coaching males at the high school level in the U.S. to determine if this trend is widespread.

## Keywords

Gender, head coach, scholastic sport

## Introduction

It's a story Julie Bell has retold often. As the Little Falls, MN boys' soccer coach walked into the stadium for a game... a security person asked if she planned to buy a ticket. "No, she said. I'm the coach." Later, another official came into the locker room and asked if she knew where the head coach was. "It's me," she said.<sup>1</sup>

Female athletes are commonplace today in most areas around the globe at the youth, high school, club, and elite levels. However, there are far fewer female coaches in the U.S. and around the world, particularly coaching male athletes. In general, the percentage of female coaches (nonteachers) have significantly decreased in the U.S. since the passing of Title IX and there are far fewer female coaches compared to female athletes in sport today.<sup>2</sup> For example, Acosta and Carpenter reported that in 1972, 90% of coaches and administrators at the collegiate level for female sports were women, but currently only 42.9% of all coaches and 21.3% of administrators are females.<sup>2</sup> When examining the female head coaches who coach male athletes, the numbers are almost nonexistent (2–3.5%) at the

collegiate level.<sup>2</sup> Similarly at the high school level in the U.S., the Minnesota High School Association reported that 17.3% of all head coaches were female, whereas only 2.2% of boys' teams were coached by a female head coach.<sup>3</sup> The trend of only a few females coaching males is worldwide and has been documented at the elite levels in the UK,<sup>4</sup> and in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have argued that the miniscule numbers of females coaching males are disturbing for a variety of reasons including that there is a lack of female role models for both male and female athletes, the female

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voice is lacking within sport politics, and a lack of opportunities exist within sport organizations.<sup>2,4,6</sup>

There are, however, small signs that female coaches are gaining ground. In the fall of 2010, Natalie Rudolph was hired and has been successful as the head varsity coach of a Washington High School boy's American football team—something previously reserved for men only.<sup>7</sup> In addition in 2014, Amelia Mauresmo was hired as the private coach for Andy Murray, a top 10 professional tennis player.<sup>8</sup> Andy's mother had been the only other female who had previously coached him, and after going through a number of male coaches, Andy sought out Mauresmo as his coach.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Shelly Kerr became the first female manager in Scottish senior football after taking charge of the Lowland League club at Stirling University in 2014.<sup>9</sup> Kerr was quoted as saying "I'm confident enough and completely focused on helping the guys develop as players. It shouldn't be about gender, it should be about your ability as a coach."<sup>9</sup> Although there are only a few females coaching men or boys, their presence is slowly addressing the perception that females are not suited to coach either men or boys. However, even in youth sport leagues, Messner<sup>10</sup> reported that females feel less comfortable and more hesitant to coach than men, and when they do coach, females need to prove they are competent in order to be respected. Other constraints reported by Messner<sup>10</sup> included that female coaches are often overly scrutinized, their authority challenged, and some feel isolated because of the lack of female colleagues.

Five studies have exclusively focused on women coaching men or boys; three studies were conducted at the high school level,<sup>11–13</sup> and two studies focused on women coaching men at the collegiate level.<sup>14,15</sup> Stangl and Kane<sup>12</sup> found when examining Ohio high school sports in the U.S. that female coaches who coach males were hired as a "token" and that the females felt marginalized because they were usually coaching only the "minor" sports (i.e., Olympic sports such as track and field, tennis, etc.). More specifically, using Kanter's<sup>16</sup> theoretical framework, Stangl and Kane<sup>12</sup> found that females represented "token" members because they represented less than 15% of the coaching profession. Their data also suggested that the female coaches who coached males experienced marginalization specifically because they were significantly more likely to coach less prestigious sports for men, which have lower status and power within collegiate athletics (i.e., compared to "major" sports such as football, basketball, or hockey).

In addition, Staurowsky<sup>13</sup> reported that all the female coaches she interviewed who coached traditional all-male sport teams experienced resistance, discrimination, and needed to prove their competence more than

their male colleagues. These female coaches also reported belittling language from male coaching colleagues, struggles with authority, issues with athletes and male coaches, and catching odd glances and gestures from other coaches during competition.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Staurowsky<sup>13</sup> reported that the female coaches were often seen as "sideline" workers, not coaches (p. 166). In general, this research supports that a coach is defined as a "male" coach in the U.S. society. Most of the images we see in the media, for example, are of male coaches. In addition, this research describes a culture that does not appear to be supportive and inclusive of female coaches and a culture that supports keeping women out of the coaching profession. Regarding the studies conducted on women coaching males at the college level, Yiamouyiannis,<sup>15</sup> who surveyed women collegiate coaches of men's teams, concluded that female coaches do not see jobs coaching men as available, they lack societal support, they receive lower salaries than their male counterpart, and athletic directors are not hiring women to coach men. Many of the women, for example, reported they had never considered coaching a men's team and never intended to do so even though they were currently coaching a male team. The societal perceptions of who can coach men are so prevalent that women are limited in who they perceive they can coach. Hence, the opportunity for women to coach men is lacking even though there is no law that exists stating that women cannot coach men or boys.

Kamphoff et al.<sup>14</sup> interviewed women who coached men at the Division I level and reported that they were extremely decorated athletes, but they felt that it was only acceptable for women to coach certain men's sports (e.g., men's minor sports), and experienced discrimination and gender bias while coaching men. More specifically, having an extremely decorated athletic background as a female coach (i.e., Olympic athlete, national champion) allowed women to establish credibility and respect because they were seen as being able to "compete with the boys"; hence earning more respect from athletes, parents, and administrators. This trend is not the case for male coaches, given that many men who coach a collegiate women's or men's team have never played the sport in which they coach and do not have the accolades of a decorated athletic career. It appears that the path to coach a men's or boys' team is different for men compared to women coaches.

### *A framework for occupational sex-segregation*

To better understand the reasons for the lack of females coaching boys sport, Harvard professor Rosabeth Kanter's<sup>16</sup> framework can be utilized. Her research

on women in business and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions relates to the male-dominated world of sports because of the low number of female coaches and administrators, and is used by various sport-related researchers around the world to better understand sex segregation in coaching.<sup>3,17-19</sup> Kanter<sup>16</sup> provided three key elements to explain the lack of females in leadership positions, which are opportunity, power, and gender proportion. She argued that females will not enter professions if they perceive a lack of opportunity, and that a lack of power and proportion in a profession keep women out of an occupation. Meaning, if there are few women in an occupation, they have a difficult time forming a network and developing power alliances. In addition, current research examining occupations and sex-segregation by Eagly and Carli<sup>20</sup> describe the work place as a “labyrinth” or a male-dominated work culture that females need to negotiate in order to feel fully accepted. The “labyrinth” is filled with subtle messages, barriers, and norms that men have established, and can be applied to better understand the challenges female coaches face when attempting to navigate the world of coaching males.<sup>20</sup> Examples of female coaches feeling disconnected from coaching peers can be seen at the youth,<sup>10</sup> high school,<sup>12,13</sup> and collegiate sport levels.<sup>14,15</sup> The lack of alliances can be a result of the “old boys’ network” or as Eagly and Carli<sup>20</sup> describe, the work labyrinth, a system that allows men to function effectively without realizing they are putting women at a disadvantage.

Within Kanter’s<sup>16</sup> theoretical framework, she explained two key concepts that can be applied to better understand women’s experiences coaching males: (1) tokenism and (2) marginalization. According to Kanter,<sup>16</sup> women are considered tokens when they occupy less than 15% of a particular occupation, and this tokenism limits women’s impact within the occupation. Women coaching men are clearly token members of the coaching profession because they represent between 1.5% and 3% of all collegiate coaches (see Acosta and Carpenter<sup>2</sup>), which is much less than the 15% that Kanter<sup>16</sup> established. According to Kanter,<sup>16</sup> when only a few women are hired in an occupation, this provides a false impression that the occupation and system are open to all and ultimately helps maintain men’s privileged position. Furthermore, Kanter<sup>16</sup> stated that marginalization occurs in occupations when women are in less desirable occupational positions than men (i.e., assistant directors compared to directors). Both Stangl and Kane<sup>12</sup> and Kamphoff et al.<sup>14</sup> have documented marginalization within the coaching profession within the U.S. Stangl and Kane<sup>12</sup> found that female high school coaches in Ohio were marginalized because they were more

likely to coach sports that are considered less prestigious; such as, track and field compared with basketball or football. In fact, they concluded that females have been “systematically marginalized into ‘lesser’ sports, and thus have little, if any, power” (p. 36). Similarly, all of the Division I (most competitive division in U.S. collegiate athletics) female coaches of men’s teams in Kamphoff et al.’s<sup>14</sup> study pointed out that they coached less desirable sports than the male coaches. The female coaches felt their sports were considered “minor” sports or had less emphasis within the collegiate athletic department such as cross country, golf, swimming and diving, tennis, and track and field.<sup>14</sup> The process of marginalization in which women are in less desirable occupational positions than men is evident in this trend. Men’s minor sports receive less emphasis within the collegiate athletic department in terms of media, funding, and attention of administrators; therefore, coaching a minor sport as a woman appears more acceptable. Furthermore, the minor sports are typically combined (i.e., a men’s and women’s track team) compared to a “major” sport such as football, hockey, or basketball. These findings suggest that it is more acceptable for women to coach a combined men’s and women’s team compared to a men’s only team. If this is the case, women have less opportunities as a whole to coach men if they are perceived as only acceptable to coach a combined male and female team.

This marginalization restricts females from moving into leadership roles within men’s athletics because it “contains” females to less powerful or prestigious sports. Kamphoff et al.<sup>14</sup> concluded that marginalization still occurs today in the coaching profession even though Kanter<sup>16</sup> first proposed her theories about business in 1977, and was initially documented within coaching in 1991.<sup>12</sup> Kanter<sup>16</sup> also observed that organizations are often seen as “sex-neutral,” and yet, in reality masculine principles are pervasive since men typically set policies, hire others, and are in positions of authority. Clearly, Kanter’s<sup>16</sup> theories are dated, but many current researchers have utilized Kanter’s<sup>16</sup> work when studying females and sport organizations.<sup>3,6,18</sup>

### *Reasons for the lack of females coaching males*

Birrell’s<sup>21</sup> use of critical feminist theories to describe sport, including her definition of the idealized qualified coach as someone who is tough, aggressive, and emotionally focused on competitive success can help better understand the lack of females coaching boys. Her work can be applied to coaching in that if people perceive that female coaches have stereotypical feminine traits, such as caring, reassuring, and kindness,

they can be seen as better suited for a supporting role such as an assistant coach, volunteer, or “cheerleader,” not as a head coach. This may help explain the lack of female head coaches. Heckman<sup>22</sup> stated that while impressive strides have been made for female athletes under Title IX, “females are still imbued with the attitude that athletic employment, participation opportunities, and benefits are a gift and not an entitlement” (p. 553). Heckman’s<sup>22</sup> argument suggested that women often still see themselves as bystanders within the sport world and not always as viable, productive members in the male-dominated community of sport.

Research has also uncovered that the way female coaches who coach males are perceived by athletic directors is key when explaining their experiences and understanding the lack of females in coaching.<sup>6</sup> In the U.S., coaches are hired on individual contracts for each sport and often do not teach physical education, unlike other countries worldwide. Whisenant<sup>6</sup> found that athletic directors perceived men as being more qualified to coach than women, and argued that the practice of males dominating coaching boys’ sports “reinforces the presence of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 773), which can be defined as “the perpetuation of the status quo of male dominance” (p. 769). This causes women coaches to have limited power when it comes to decision making or being able to move into administrative positions within the athletic realm. Overall, global societies see only men coaching males, reinforcing the stereotype that it is the only viable option available, and dominating the coaching field overall. Whisenant’s<sup>6</sup> findings showed that females are not typically hired as coaches because male athletic directors rarely see females in sport leadership roles, and thus tend to believe they are not a good fit for this type of work. He also concluded that women are often seen as better suited to coach feminine or neutral sports, but men seem to experience no such restrictions.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Schein<sup>23</sup> discussed female leadership roles by stating, “if the managerial position is viewed as a ‘masculine’ one, then, all else being equal, a male candidate appears more qualified by virtue of such sex typing of the position than a female candidate” (p. 676). Schein<sup>23</sup> also argued that when it comes to hiring, the mantra “think manager-think male” permeates on a global level and that women point to male stereotyping as the biggest obstacle (p. 683). Thus, given these dynamics female coaches are rarely considered when hiring a coach for a male sport team. In general, people resist women’s leadership more than men’s especially when women behave aggressively according to Eagly and Carli,<sup>20</sup> and thus, this may be another reason women are rarely hired to

coach males. In addition, Burden et al.<sup>24</sup> conducted a quantitative study of 795 coaches (not teachers) where 70% were men, 30% women, and found that female coaches at high schools in the State of Georgia in the U.S. were better qualified or at least as qualified as male coaches in many of the key coaching attributes, such as educational level, coaching experience, and types of certifications, yet they were still not hired to coach males. The female coaches were dedicated teachers, looking to educate young people, and yet males were hired based on their coaching credentials, most likely their previous win-loss record.<sup>24</sup> Burden et al.<sup>24</sup> also state that from a purely qualification/preparation aspect, women should clearly be hired as head coaches, and that equity instead of gender should be used to make these decisions. What appears as differences in the hiring practice of female coaches actually can be seen as a form of quiet disrespect. For example, Acosta and Carpenter<sup>25</sup> claim that the term “qualified” appears when coaching positions are advertised only when looking to hire female coaches, but omitted when referring to hiring male coaches.

Few studies focusing on females who coach males are available particularly at the high school level in the U.S. In our search, we found three studies and two of these studies are over 20 years old.<sup>11–13</sup> The purpose of this study is to provide more current information, and to explore if the experiences of females who coach males have improved. Females who are considering coaching boys will benefit from understanding the experience and strategies applied by the female coaches in order to be successful, and this study will assist in dismissing stereotypes about females who coach males. This topic is also important because it investigates why females coaching males appears to be one of career paths that women currently still struggle to conquer. It is also essential to examine this topic so athletic administrators recruit qualified coaches based on competency, and not gender. Utilizing interview methodology, the following research questions were explored within this study:

- What are the experiences of female coaches currently coaching a U.S. high school boys’ teams?
- What advice will female coaches of U.S. high school boys give to future female coaches?

## Method

Both open-ended surveys and interviews were conducted with high school female coaches who coach male teams to better understand the experiences of women coaches. Creswell<sup>26</sup> argued that data triangulation, or using multiple data sources, allows for a better

understanding of a phenomenon and enhances the overall strength of the research study.

### Participants

**Open-ended surveys.** Informed consent was provided by each participant via a statement prior to completing an online survey that included several, open-ended survey questions. Sixty-seven females who coached a boy's high school team in the State of Minnesota completed this online survey. The mean age of the female coaches was 41 years old (standard deviation [*SD*]=10.27), with a range of 23–63. Of the 67 female coaches, almost all of the coaches identified as Caucasian/White (94%; *n*=63). One coach identified as Black or African American (1.5%), one coach identified as Hispanic, and one coach indicated her race as "other" (note: one coach did not indicate her race). The female coaches were highly educated, given that 44.8% had completed a master's degree or above (*n*=30), 52.2% had completed a bachelor's degree (*n*=35), and 3.0% had completed an associate's degree (*n*=2).

The majority (84%; *n*=55) of the female coaches had competed in the sport that they currently coached 68.7% (*n*=46) had competed at the collegiate level, and 25.4% (*n*=17) had competed at the high school level. The women coaches also brought a wealth of experience coaching, 41.8% (*n*=28) had coached a high school sport for more than 10 years, 31.3% (*n*=21) had coached for one to five years, and 26.9% (*n*=18) had coached for 6–10 years.

**Interviews.** Eight women who coached a high school boys' team were interviewed to further understand their experiences and perceptions. All of the women coaches had indicated interest in being interviewed at the conclusion of the online survey. The average age of the women was 49.6 years old (*SD*=11.71) and they had coached high school sports for an average of 15.2 years (*SD*=8.1). The sports they coached included tennis, track and field, alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, swimming, cross country, and golf. Three of the coaches worked with co-ed teams. All the coaches had a minimum of a bachelor's degree, three had completed a master's, and five had a background in physical education.

### Survey measures

The survey was adopted from Yiamouyiannis<sup>15</sup> study and included two components: (1) a demographics questionnaire and (2) two open-ended items related to barriers and experiences. The demographics questionnaire included items such as age, race, level of

education, sport(s) coached, years of experience, and competition history. The participants were also asked to answer two open-ended questions related to their experiences and perceptions of women coaching high school boys. The two open-ended questions included: "What unique challenges or barriers do women who coach male athletes face?" and "Please indicate additional comments after completing the survey."

### Procedures

**Survey.** The female head coaches were identified from the Minnesota State High School League website based on their name. If the first name of the coach was ambiguous (i.e., Pat, Chris), a search via the internet was conducted to locate a biography or photo online to determine their gender. The search led to a total of 193 female head coaches of boy's high school teams. Each female coach was then sent an email invitation to complete the survey. A total of three emails were sent to coaches approximately two weeks apart to remind them to complete the survey. The survey was completed by 67 female head coaches (a 34.7% response rate). According to Matthews and Kostelis,<sup>27</sup> 40% is an ideal response rate using email, and yet Barach and Holtom<sup>28</sup> stated that when seeking response from individuals in top leadership roles (such as head coaches) the benchmark should be 35–40% response rate. The methods used in this research were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both of the Universities affiliated with the researchers.

**Interviews.** Twelve coaches were randomly chosen from the 27 women who indicated interest in being interviewed at the end of the online survey. Each of the 27 women who indicated they would be interviewed for the study was assigned a number. A random number generator was then used and the corresponding woman assigned to that number was contacted to invite them to participate in the study. All 12 women were contacted via email or phone. Eight women of the 12 responded with interest; therefore, a phone interview was then scheduled and the interview was conducted. Each of the interview participants was individually interviewed over the phone using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews ranged in time from 40 to 75 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data analysis

**Open-ended surveys.** A literal report of the open-ended responses was created. A literal reading includes documenting a version of "what was there" (p. 149) without interpretation.<sup>29</sup> The open-ended responses were

grouped into categories. These responses were then combined until the categories were clearly diverse from each other and mentioned by multiple participants. Themes were created by grouping similar categories; each theme is explained and direct responses from participants included. Two independent assistants trained in qualitative methodology reviewed the open-ended responses separately and assisted in establishing the themes.

*Interviews.* Mason's<sup>29</sup> process of indexing was used to analyze the interview data to ensure the themes presented in this study reflected the interviews and that research bias was minimized. More specifically, indexing allows for a systematic means of analyzing data in order to gain a view of the whole picture. The first author read each transcript multiple times and statements were divided into individual statements. Specifically, the first author read each transcript, highlighted key phrases on the transcripts, and wrote a conceptual label in the margins of the transcripts. The first author read through the transcripts multiple times to ensure all possible statements were indexed, and then the conceptual labels were constantly compared to each other to reduce the number of labels. Passages from the transcripts were then placed into categories and labeled with a theme. The second author served as an external auditor by confirming and clarifying the themes to decrease research bias.<sup>26</sup> Once the themes were finalized, a textual description of each theme was written to explain the experiences of the participants.<sup>26</sup> Participants' statements were chosen and presented in the Results section to best describe the themes.

## Results

### Interviews

Five general themes emerged from the interview data with high school female coaches of male teams: (1) support for female coaches, (2) societal barriers exist for women coaching boys, (3) females limited to coaching boys' minor sports, (4) working with male athletes, and (5) advice offered from female coaches. Additionally, comments from the open-ended survey questions are incorporated into these five themes.

*Theme 1: Support for female coaches.* The female coaches who were interviewed overall felt supported in their role coaching a boys' high school team. Three of the coaches particularly indicated that the athletic director had been very supportive, and two mentioned specifically that parents and peers were supportive emotionally. The emotional support these people provided included such things as open communication with the athletic

director, recognition of a job done well, and parental verbal appreciation. This level of support may have occurred because five of the eight coaches had significant number of years of coaching experience (15.2 years on average). All the coaches mentioned that they felt supported and respected by their athletes at the time of the interview. For some, support and respect took time to develop, but they all felt supported. One of the younger coaches who worked with the boys' swim team indicated that she had been treated fairly by all of those involved with the program, "I have been really fortunate that people know my experience and they judge me on what I do and who I am, not the fact that I'm female." In regard to support from the athletes, a golf coach commented, "I just think it's a respect between athlete and coach that goes both directions. They have been very respectful of me as a female coach, listening to suggestions, they, in return, have just worked really hard and tried their best, and I feel like they've been gentlemen." The support these coaches received contributed to the self-confidence each had in their coaching abilities. The coaches were confident they could direct a successful program with male or female athletes in their given sport.

Yet, there were a few comments that did not reflect support. One of the tennis coaches, for example, stated, "I think maybe over the years I can think of... maybe 3 coaches, 3 or 4 coaches that treated me equally." She went on to say that "my assistant was a male and I got along fine with him. I felt very comfortable, but as far as the other coaches, I didn't feel that camaraderie that you often feel."

In addition, there were a number of comments from the open-ended survey questions in regard to lack of support from various factions. The coaches commented on the lack of support from some including administrators, staff, coaches, and parents. For example, several of the coaches mentioned parents and said, "Parents thinking men are more qualified athletically" was a barrier and they felt "ridiculed by other parents that may not understand." Several other coaches specifically discussed others who questioned if they were the head coach of the boys' team such as this example: "I was walking in with a team into a stadium for a game with the team. I was asked if I had anything to do with the team otherwise I should be paying for a ticket. I told them I was the coach!" Another coach discussed the issue of not playing the sport she coached. She said, "There is this unspoken belief by parents, athletes, and other coaches that women are not as qualified because they did not play men's sports." The contradictory messages in this section may be explained by the longevity of the coaching careers of most of the interviewees; the overall experience level of coaches from the survey data was less.

*Theme 2: Societal barriers exist for females coaching boys.* The female coaches, however, indicated that the societal perception of females coaching boys was a barrier to being hired and female coaches feeling supported in general. The coaches indicated that male coaches are still seen as the “norm” and that male coaches are the standard when coaching males. One of the track coaches shared this exchange with an adult acquaintance when first coaching boys’ track. She stated that the acquaintance asked, “Do you think that’s kind of weird or whatever [when I got the job coaching boys]?” And I responded, “You know, it might be weird if I was coaching wrestling because I’ve never wrestled, but I’m like, I know track. I’ve run a lot of track. So, no I don’t think it’s weird.” While many adults see females coaching males as unusual, the coaches themselves do not because as they stated, they are using their sport knowledge to fulfill job requirements. Yet, the female coaches believed that the perception that females coaching males is unusual places females at an immediate disadvantage in terms of being hired as well as being accepted by some athletes and parents.

The barriers that the coaches identified all related to the societal perception surrounding the belief that females should not be coaching male athletes. For example, the female coaches stated that the public is “concerned with females handling discipline issues with boys” and that “female coaches are not always accepted as an authority figure.” In addition, a few women indicated that the stereotype that “females are not usually ‘forceful’ enough to properly discipline boys” was a barrier and the belief existed that “boys would not listen to a female coach.” Furthermore, many of the coaches said that stereotypes still exist related to the belief that females do not want to coach. For example, a track coach made this observation, “One of the things is that we live in a society that feels that girls cannot coach guys’ sports, and they are not qualified and don’t want to... we are still in the dark ages as far as that goes.”

In addition, a tennis coach added, “I think the school always looks for a man... I think they think men can handle the boys better. I think they think that a man is a better fit.” The coaches also discussed that societal perception may be one reason female coaches are reluctant to enter the coaching profession and why they avoid coaching males. Furthermore, a few commented that they did not always feel completely accepted by their male coaching peers or fathers of the male athletes. Some discussed times that they felt fathers questioned their authority due to the societal perception that females know less about sport, which was a source of frustration for the female coaches. Five of the eight coaches interviewed had been competitively successful while coaching a girls’ team when they were

asked by their administrator to coach the boys’ team as well. Hence, the women were not sought out as experts in the field likely because of the societal perception that males should coach males. They had to first prove they were competent and once they did, they were asked to coach males.

Finally, the open-ended survey questions displayed comments surrounding sexual issues and/or sexual harassment. Comments included, “Sexual harassment is an issue” as well as comments related to physical contact, such as, “Taking care of injuries like in the groin is an issue” and “If there is need for physical contact when demonstrating skills, it’s very tricky.” Another coach stated

I think with any coach-athlete relationship where it is the opposite sex you always have to be careful of what you say and do because people may see things as not okay, like hugging an athlete, etc. Or, for example, in basketball the male coaches always tap the butt of their male athlete when they put them in the game. I DOUBT this would fly if the coach was a female.

This comment demonstrated frustration felt by some female coaches toward a double standard in regard to behavior that is acceptable for male coaches and not for females.

*Theme 3: Females limited to coaching boys’ minor sports.* All of the female coaches interviewed coached a boys’ “minor” sport. The female coaches said these sports are considered to be “easier” in relation to public scrutiny, and not as “mainstream.” Many stated their experience as well as the support they received would likely be different if they coached a boys’ team sport such as basketball or soccer. A female tennis coach commented, “I am going to say that people look at tennis, and they think about it as being such an easy sport [and it is okay for me to coach it].” Most of the female coaches felt that coaching boys’ minor sports made it easier to be accepted, and that if they were hired to coach a “major” sport, they would experience more difficulty. In addition, the golf coach indicated that a female coaching a “major” sport like baseball “was way out there. Like, oh you know, just being able to hit the ball hard enough for the kids to get them good workouts [would be impossible].” Finally, one of the tennis coaches mentioned that the only reason she was able to get along with the athletic director was because she was “only coaching a minor sport.” Clearly, the female coaches felt comfortable coaching minor sports and perceived it as one avenue that allowed them to successfully coach males.

*Theme 4: Working with male athletes.* The female coaches believed that male athletes benefited from having a female head coach because they learned to respect women as leaders including how to take direction from a woman and to learn that women are just as competent as men in our society and specifically within sport. The female coaches overwhelmingly felt that male athletes could be pushed harder than female athletes and complained much less. The coaches enjoyed the seemingly more competitive nature of the boys and the fact that most of their athletes were driven to improve and succeed. Communicating in a direct fashion was easier with the males than with the female athletes they coach or coached in the past, the female coaches indicated, and this fit nicely with the coaches' personalities. The Alpine ski coach stated, "It seems like I can be more straightforward with them. They seem to have more respect for me." One of the tennis coaches displayed her direct communication style when she stated, "I am a straight shooter. I shoot right from the hip. You know, I am not gonna sugar coat it and I am not going to lie." She indicated that she enjoyed being herself when coaching males and thought her approach was particularly effective. One of the swim coaches said she could be very straightforward and said, "The guys are more like 'just tell us what we need to do and we'll do it.'" Also, the head Nordic ski coach interviewed stated, "I like that the boys are more driven... they want to win... I can be more honest and tell a boy what he needs to do to get better without worrying about hurting his feelings... I can talk to a boy a little more sternly without offending them." Even though some of these comments appear stereotypical and unsupportive of female athletes, the coaches also indicated this was not their intent. They believed that a number of factors such as the longevity of their coaching careers, successful athletic seasons, and being physically skilled had allowed them to continue to enjoy the experience of coaching males.

However, some of the open-ended survey responses told a different story. Most often, the women reported experiencing difficulty gaining respect and credibility with male athletes. They specifically mentioned comments such as "boys not taking you seriously," "credibility with boys... you have to prove yourself," as well as "male athletes do not see the women coaches as a competitive athlete... this means they might not see you as qualified if they can 'beat' you." There is a possibility that the coaches who had a negative experience chose not to be interviewed, thus providing an explanation for the contradictory findings.

*Theme 5: Advice offered from female coaches.* The female coaches indicated that they had been successful as a head coach for boys because they felt comfortable

being very direct with their male athletes, and several times the female coaches described this as "male-like" in their communication style. An Alpine ski coach described her success, "It seems like I can be more straightforward with them. They seem to have more respect for me. I know I have to be tough." The specific coaching techniques the females described as contributing to their success included being confident and not intimidated by other male coaches. Furthermore, the women coaches said they needed to be physically competent in their specific sport in order to be accepted as an expert and coach a boys' team. They felt they needed to "prove themselves" by either directly competing with some of the boys on the team or by demonstrating their athletic prowess. For example, one swimming coach said, "Being able to prove myself first was kind of like, put up or shut up. I don't have to speak, I don't have to tell them one word, I can get in and I can show them." Another coach mentioned that it would be more intimidating to coach boys if the coach did not feel physically competent in their chosen sport.

In addition, the female coaches stated that self-confidence and establishing credibility were "musts" for any type of coaching, but particularly important when females coach males. One of the tennis coaches was not intimidated by coaching boys and explained, "Because we are confident, because we know our stuff." In addition a track coach stated, "I think one of the things is that you need to believe in yourself and feel comfortable with the guys."

The coaches discussed that gaining credibility can occur by having a winning team. For example, the female track coach stated that after her boys' team won the conference championship "they were so excited. And I think that basically got me in the door." In addition, some female coaches noted that credibility may be easier to come by if there is a male assistant coach.

The female coaches indicated that if females want to be successful in "landing" a job coaching males, they need to believe in themselves, enjoy being around males, have a direct or "in charge" type attitude, and not be intimidated by adult males such as fathers, male coaches, or male administrators. The Alpine ski coach stated that being true to her natural personality was important and would encourage other coaches to do the same when coaching males. On the other hand, a swim coach, offered this piece of advice to other female coaches

I guess she would just have to feel comfortable being around guys. I mean, you can't be, in my opinion... a prim and proper girly girl, delicate flower and coach boys. They don't mesh. You have to have an edge. You have to have a little bit of, you know I call it "my testosterone side."

This quote demonstrated that some of the coaches believed that in order to be effective they needed to adhere to a masculine-type coaching style.

Some of the coaches felt strongly that it is important for other coaches to understand how boys develop, both physically and emotionally. For example, a tennis coach stated that many of her male athletes have “a lot of emotion and fear, and lack of confidence, which is hard for them if you are 6 feet tall and scared.” In addition, the swim coach described the difference she perceived when working with male athletes compared to females as, “I think . . . the biggest conflict is making sure that I switch off my emotional side with the girls and be more matter of fact with the boys.” Unfortunately, comments like this appear to propagate stereotypical observations about male and female athletes. Finally, the coaches also said that it is important for female coaches to see other females coaching boys to see coaching boys as an option. One of the tennis coaches made this comment when asked how to increase the number of females coaching males, “How can you increase it? Well . . . by just seeing that it can be done.”

## Discussion

Overall, the female coaches who were interviewed were very positive about their coaching experience with male athletes and would choose to coach males. Compared to previous research,<sup>13,14</sup> the female coaches who were interviewed for this study reported feeling more supported specifically by school administrators. The female coaches could have an open dialogue with their athletic administrators, received positive comments for their quality of work, and were publicly acknowledged for their impact. The level of support appears to be an improvement compared to Stangl and Kane's<sup>12</sup> work and also connects with the recent findings by Blom et al.,<sup>11</sup> who reported that female coaches felt supported by their administrators, faculty, family, and friends. The results of the open-ended responses on the survey, however, still indicated that many female coaches struggle with inadequate support from administrators and parents when coaching males.

The female coaches who were interviewed had many years of experience and more years of experience than previous research, hence, experience may have impacted the results of this study. It appears that experience matters and may be a strong factor that impacted the overall positive results of this study compared to the findings of previous research.<sup>12,14</sup> Perhaps the longer a female coach remains in the coaching profession, her credibility is less likely to be questioned and she has an overall more positive experience.

All the female coaches interviewed believed that the most qualified person should get the job coaching a boys' team regardless of gender, but that utilizing stereotypical masculine characteristics (i.e., toughness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness) was essential to establish credibility. Gallin<sup>30</sup> discussed how females can use masculine-like qualities to succeed in management by incorporating masculine traits such as confidence, courage, leadership, and assertiveness that compliment feminine traits such as good communication and creativity. Gallin<sup>30</sup> also stated that when masculine and feminine traits are used together, female employees have a greater chance for advancement. This further supports statements made by the female coaches in regard to the stereotypical masculine type of behavior needed to be accepted when coaching males. McNay<sup>31</sup> stated that women who portray masculine characteristics are often seen as more successful by adapting to the social norms of an organization. This may help us understand the reason the female coaches in this study believed qualities that are described as stereotypically masculine are needed or preferred over traditional feminine qualities when coaching boys. This finding may provide evidence as to why more women do not seek coaching positions because exhibiting stereotypically masculine qualities may be incongruent with their personality, values, or behavior that is natural for them.

Conclusions by Burden et al.<sup>24</sup> stated that females should be encouraged to apply for *all* coaching positions including coaching males, and administrators should provide support and encouragement to female coaches. This support could range from financial support for continuing education, to helping create a mentoring program, and offering open dialogue sessions with the athletic director specifically related to female coaches. Burden et al.<sup>24</sup> also agrees with the importance of female coaches needing to “know their stuff” and believe in themselves. Female coaches need to recognize the unique and effective coaching styles they bring to sport and sell that to hiring committees, players, and other coaches. A few of the female coaches in Norman's<sup>4</sup> study claimed that the unique attributes females bring to the profession actually make female coaches more valued. Furthermore, according to Greenhill et al.,<sup>18</sup> Australian female coaches' career pathways were positively affected by the recognition of specific coaching attributes they exhibited such as effective communication skills, their ability to develop a supportive environment, and readily available coaching networks. However, Greenhill et al.<sup>18</sup> also helps us understand why women might be tempted to use their more “masculine qualities” because they clearly feel those are the attributes (such as being assertive and direct) that are favored by coaching organizations.

Thus, females will generally not apply for positions without the recommended and advertised credentials, whereas males have no problem sidestepping some of these obstacles.<sup>18</sup> This supports the connection to Kanter's<sup>16</sup> theories in regard to lack of opportunity and tokenism when a small percentage of females are working in this area. In addition, the hiring practices and the culture within sport organizations need to take responsibility for establishing a more welcoming and supportive climate for female coaches. This can be done by including more women in the hiring process and within sport administration in order to provide a more balanced approach.

It is vital to have more female role models so that male and female athletes and young coaches see females in coaching as a normal and accepted role in sport. Whisenant<sup>6</sup> argued that many young women will self-select out of a coaching career because of the lack of female role models. According to Cyphers and Fagan,<sup>32</sup> the low number of women coaching males is an important issue to address because female athletes are often coached by both males and females, but males are rarely exposed to female coaches. Thus, this is a bigger dilemma than just a fair-employment issue. A story to illustrate the importance of females breaking into the field of coaching males can be displayed when a Division III volleyball coach was considering coaching her eight-year-old son's summer baseball team. She was met with this comment from her son, "Mom you can't coach boys. You are a girl and can only coach them."<sup>33</sup> This clearly shows that stereotypical notions about women coaching males are established at an early age and more role models are needed to breakdown this misperception. Kanter<sup>16</sup> noted that in order for corporate culture to reach a "tipping point," a certain mass of female workers (greater than 15% of the work force) are needed for the climate to adjust (as cited in Messner,<sup>10</sup> p. 91). A tipping point is necessary in the coaching realm, and in particular this is necessary in the area of females coaching male athletes.

## Conclusion

Coaching educators can use the findings of this study to share with future female coaches regarding the opportunities and barriers when coaching males. Similarly, this study could be useful for females who may be interested in coaching males in order to learn more about the experiences of females who coach male athletes and what it takes to be successful. In addition, athletic directors need to read and hear about successful female coaches who have worked effectively with male teams, in order to be open to hiring the individual best suited for the job, regardless of gender. Burden et al.<sup>24</sup> provided clear examples of a few highly qualified females

successfully coaching males at the high school level and that their hiring depended on their qualifications, not gender. Tactics used to improve gender equity such as establishing internships and training programs for females interested in coaching, as well as using women's hiring networks might increase the number of female coaches overall.<sup>34</sup> This will assist female coaches in navigating the labyrinth of the male-dominated work environment, as Eagly and Carli<sup>20</sup> clearly suggest that in order for women to succeed in a male-dominant work environment, they need to build social capital by networking with other women, as well as men. Also, this study was important because female coaches need information about role models who coach males so that they may be encouraged to follow that path. Coaches need to be hired based on competence and not on gender, and this study supports females coaching both males and females. Finally, this study adds to the current limited information on females coaching males, and includes some positive trends reported at the high school level.

A number of female-only coaching clinics are held each year in the U.S. hosted by the National Association of Collegiate Women Athletics Administrators (NCAWAA), and the Alliance of Women Coaches has begun to provide opportunities through clinics and online forums to educate, support, and mentor female coaches. The results of this study should be shared at these venues to provide female coaches with a broader perspective for coaching males. Online discussion forums could be created to provide female coaches an avenue to find the support needed when coaching males, and an organization or a division of a current organization could be established to support and encourage more women to coach males. Coaching education can help boost the self-confidence of females when coaching males so they apply for both female and male coaching positions.

Acosta and Carpenter<sup>25</sup> stated that when "women coaches of men's teams are accepted and supported for their coaching skills without regard to their sex" (p. 2), it will fulfill the true spirit of Title IX. This study supports that there are several examples of female coaches being hired to coach boys regardless of their sex, yet this trend is not widespread. In addition, Fazioli<sup>35</sup> hoped that the consequences of Title IX would produce the same positive effect for female coaches as it did for female athletes. If female athletes are encouraged to continue their passion for sport and become future coaches, they need to understand the experiences of their role models who have been successful. However, females should be aware of the barriers that still exist within the coaching world. Drago et al.<sup>36</sup> reported that coaches and athletic administrators described their employment as involving "jobs that never end" (pp. 4–5), while the student athletes

described their own coaches as leading “lives that are crazy” (p. 5). These extreme workloads can be viewed as not family friendly, and thus may be a barrier for some females who want or have family commitments.<sup>36</sup> Other challenging issues related to coaching can be the unpredictability of job demands, timing of practices and games, as well as recruiting trips.<sup>36</sup>

This study adds to the literature available on females’ experiences coaching, and documents that females’ experiences coaching male athletes may be improving compared to 20 years ago. It also highlights the real-life experiences of women coaching males. However, the sample of coaches interviewed, which included seasoned and highly experienced coaches, may have impacted the findings of the interviews in this study. We suggest follow-up qualitative research on the experiences of women coaching males at the high school level in the U.S. to determine if this trend is widespread. Within those follow-up interviews, we suggest interviewing both highly experienced coaches as well as less experienced female coaches of boys’ teams to determine if improvement is consistent regardless of the years of experience of female coaches. We also suggest the interview questions touch on issues regarding tangible support such as accessible financial resources, as well as framing questions to understand the type of emotional support provided by various individuals for the coaches.

We also suggest future research in the following areas. First, additional research addressing the role of personality traits, such as introversion/extroversion; temper and level of confidence that are utilized when women are coaching males, women are coaching females, or women are coaching both males and females. Second, further research with females who coach males at the youth level would add to the overall understanding of females who work with boys’ teams. Third, surveying female students who are enrolled in coaching education courses about their desire to coach males would be helpful in understanding females’ intent to enter the coaching profession and the levels (i.e., youth, high school, collegiate, professional, etc.) they are interested in coaching. This also could provide a glimpse into the future in order to see if the limited female role models who are coaching males are making an impact, or if the upcoming female coaches have the confidence to apply for both male and female positions. Overall, additional research would add to the literature and create strategies to increase the number of females coaching males, and potentially improve their experiences.

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