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# Prevalent Stressors Found Among Collegiate and Elite Coaches

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Prevalent Stressors Found Among Collegiate and Elite Coaches  
A Synthesis of the Research Literature

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A Synthesis Project  
Presented to the  
Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies, and Physical Education  
The College at Brockport  
State University of New York

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science in Education  
(Physical Education)

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by  
Kathryn Delaney  
December 19, 2016

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BROCKPORT, NEW YORK

Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies, and Physical Education

Title of Synthesis Project: Prevalent Stressors Found Among Collegiate and Elite  
Coaches

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### **Abstract**

Recent studies have explored the stress that individuals experience in the coaching profession. Stress can have negative effects on an individual physically, mentally, and emotionally. The impact that stress has on a coach can directly influence the anxiety and performance of their athletes. The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize stressors found in the literature. The prevalence of these stressors was then used to recommend coping techniques to help coaches reduce the impact that coaches experience. A total of 10 studies were analyzed for this synthesis. Results found seven prevalent stressors. The seven prevalent stressors found in the literature were performance, resources, many roles and responsibilities, athletes, assistant coaches, and self-imposed demands. Based on the stressors identified, four different types of coping techniques were recommended for coaches to use. The recommended coping techniques for these stressors were mindfulness training, self-talk, goal setting, and dyadic coping.

## Introduction

Stress related to one's occupation can be found in every profession. The relationship people have with their work and the difficulties that arise when the relationship goes awry, have been recognized as a significant phenomenon of the modern age (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Occupational stress is a worldwide issue that impacts employees and their organizations (Newton & Teo, 2014). Stressors can influence how employees feel about their job and it can impact their behavior (Newton & Teo, 2014). There are a number of negative effects that stress can have on an individual. The impact of stress can be felt in the short term and long term. In the short term, stress can lead to headaches, chest pains, and disturbed sleep (Blaug, Kenyon, & Lekhi, 2007). While in the long term, stress can damage arteries and increase the risk for cardiovascular disease (McEwan, 2009). The recovery-stress model suggests that chronic exposure to stress with insufficient recovery eventually leads to burnout (Kellman, Kallus, & Altfeld, 2016). The definition of burnout syndrome is constantly changing but it is still based around the definition presented by Maslach and Jackson in 1981 which describes burnout as a three dimensional syndrome which is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Manzano-Garcia & Ayala-Calvo, 2013). In addition to impacting the individual experiencing the stress, it also can affect others who interact with the stressed individual.

Much of the research on occupational stress has focused on individuals in positions that require high levels of human interaction; it was assumed for many years that coaches may experience high levels of occupational stress for this reason (Frey, 2007). Coaches interact with other coaches, officials, athletes, parents, and athletic directors to name a few. These assumptions have led to further research into the stress of coaches. There are a number of factors

that lead to feelings of stress that exist in the coaching profession. Similar to occupational stress in other professions, the stressors in coaching lead to similar outcomes in terms of health, job satisfaction, and burnout. Former Notre Dame head coach, Ara Parseghian, admitted that “coaching stress had defeated him, and he had reached a point of emotional exhaustion” (Frey, 2007, p. 39). Coaches’ responses to stress can vary which is why it requires greater research attention (Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays 2010). Additionally, the stress of the coach has a direct impact on the self-esteem, enjoyment, anxiety, and confidence of their athletes (Smith & Smoll, 2007).

Previous research has identified sources of stress that coaches experience. However, the research that exists on this topic does not attempt to quantify the prevalence of each stressor in the literature. No attempt has been made to identify the most commonly cited sources of stress impacting individuals in the coaching profession. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize the leading stressors among sport coaches by synthesizing the research that exists for stress within the field. The significance of these stressors is important when suggesting coping techniques to help reduce the impact of the stressor. Many coaches may feel any number of these stressors at one time. However, if an athletic director or sport organization identifies a stressor for a coach that ranks highly in this review, they may have a better chance of recommending a coping technique or mechanism that will be the most beneficial. Due to the lack of resources in some athletic departments or professional sport organizations, they may not have the time or resources to support multiple coping strategies.

## **Definitions**

The following section identifies and defines terms that are found throughout this review.

- Stressors: factors that are perceived by the individual in the study to cause stress (Babatunde, 2013).
- Stress: strain or anxiety that an individual feels. Stress can be viewed as the characteristics of the environment that an individual views as disturbing and cause a strained reaction in the individual exposed to such external features, situations or environmental factors (Babatunde, 2013).
- Collegiate coaches: individuals who coach at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletic (NAIA) sponsored institutions (Kelley & Gill, 1993).
- Elite coaches: individuals who coach Olympic and professional athletes (Olusoga et al., 2009).

### **Delimitations**

For the purpose of this synthesis, only research articles on sport coaches from the collegiate level and elite level of sport were reviewed. In addition, only stressors cited by head coaches were used in this synthesis.

### **Limitations**

The stressors are prioritized based on the number of times they are cited as stressors in the articles reviewed for this synthesis, but this may not mean that the most frequently cited stressors have the greatest impact on a particular coach. Furthermore, if a stressor is mentioned only once, or is not found within the literature, it is not mentioned in this review. This review, therefore, may not provide a definitive list of all stressors a coach may experience.

## Methods

The following section outlines the methods that were used to gather articles during the literature search and the plan for analyzing the literature included in this synthesis.

### Identifying studies for inclusion

Studies for this synthesis were found through a search of six electronic databases (Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, GoogleScholar, Physical Education Index, PyscINFO database, and SPORTDiscus with full text database) using the predetermined keywords listed below. Additional sources also were found in the reference lists of articles.

**Keywords.** The following terms and phrases were input into the electronic databases during the literature search process.

- Stress
- Stressors
- Burnout
- Collegiate coaches
- Coaches
- Elite coaches
- Sport coaches
- Occupational stress
- Organizational stress
- Organisational stress
- Predictors of burnout
- Factors of stress (used as an alternative to “stressor”)



The terms and phrases listed above were used in multiple combinations (i.e. coaches and organizational stress, elite coaches and stress) in order to generate articles for the literature search. The combination “organizational stress and coaches” yielded the greatest number of articles.

**Criteria for relevance.** After the initial literature search using the databases and keywords described above, each study was then reviewed according to the additional criteria for relevance listed below:

1. Published between 1980 and the present
2. Published in English
3. Published in an Academic Journal
  - Academic journals were considered to be professional periodicals in which researchers publish scholarly articles of their work. Academic journals require the author’s work to be reviewed before it can be published to ensure that the articles that are published are well written and researched.
4. Research based articles
  - The research based articles included experimental research that was qualitative or quantitative and included methods such as questionnaires and interviews with participants or subjects.
5. Participants in the studies reviewed were collegiate or elite coaches
6. Coaches had to be sport coaches
  - Sport coaches were defined as individuals who are involved in the training, coaching, and operation of a sports team or individual athletes, as opposed to a

life coach, for example, who might advise clients on how to solve problems and reach life goals.

7. Stressors mentioned fit into the categories of contextual, interpersonal, or intrapersonal stressors

- These categories were derived from Frey (2007) who used the categories personal, interpersonal, and task related as well as from Robbins, Gilbert, and Clifton (2015) who used interpersonal, intrapersonal, and contextual to classify stressors. Individual stressors that fell under the category of demographics, personality, and cognitive appraisal as well as situational stressors such as sport and form of employment were not included.

Studies were excluded if they did not meet the above criteria. Review articles that attempted to synthesize the literature on this topic were not included in the coding portion of this review, however, the reference lists from those reviews were used to find original research to be included in this study.

### **Coding**

The articles included in this synthesis review were collected and then coded. The coding breakdown included the purpose of each of the studies to better understand what the researchers were trying to accomplish. Next, the types of participants in the study were included on the coding sheet to determine the types of coaches that were experiencing those stressors. The next coding piece identified the methods used in the study. Articles that used questionnaires had more participants and the results can be analyzed more objectively. In contrast, studies that used interviews included more in depth information and accounts of experiences by the participants. Next, the stressors that were identified by the study were determined. The stressors were then

categorized under contextual (e.g. recruiting, resources, and time), interpersonal (ex. athletes, assistant coaches, fans), or intrapersonal (e.g. isolation, personal demands). Lastly, the coding sheet identified any coping mechanisms that were used or suggested in the literature as a way to deal with specific stressors identified in the study.

### **Analysis**

The coding process allowed for the information to be broken down into categories that could then be analyzed. The studies were characterized based on whether they included stressors that fell into the categories of contextual, interpersonal, or intrapersonal stressors. Studies that included stressors in two or more of the categories were analyzed multiple times. The common stressors mentioned guided the direction of the synthesis. In order to determine significance, the stressors identified were given a tally for every article in which they appeared. Although some articles mentioned particular stressors more than once, only one tally mark was given. The results of this analysis are described in the next section.

### **Results**

During the literature search, the key words input into the database searches identified over 300 articles. The relevance criteria listed above were applied in a certain order. The first four criteria, published between 1980 and the present, published in English, published in an Academic Journal, and research based were applied first. After the initial criteria were applied, the results were down to 30 articles. Next, the criteria of sport coaches and coaches at the collegiate level and elite levels were applied which narrowed it down to 24 articles. Last, only articles that contained stressors that could be categorized as contextual, interpersonal, or intrapersonal were included which led to the 10 articles used in this synthesis.

Through the analysis process there were 15 stressors found in the literature. Each of the three categories had a number of stressors that fell under each. Table 1 shows the stressors, ordered by prevalence, listed under each category and the respective studies in which the stressors can be found.

Table 1

*Prevalence of Stressors in Each Category*

<b>Contextual</b>		
<b>Stressor</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Performance*	6	Frey (2007); Kelley (1999); Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Robbins (2015); Thelwell (2010)
Resources*	6	Kelley (1993), Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015); Thelwell (2010)
Competition	5	Frey (2007); Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015)
Many Roles and Responsibilities	5	Kelley (1999); Kelley (1993); Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Robbins (2015)
Time Commitment	5	Frey (2007); Kelley (1999); Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Recruitment	4	Frey (2007); Knights (2016); Levy (2009); Thelwell (2010)
Life Events	2	Olusoga (2009); Robbins (2015)
<b>Interpersonal</b>		
Athletes*	9	Bruening (2007); Frey (2007); Kelley (1999); Kelley (1993); Knights (2016); Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015)
Assistant Coaches	5	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015); Thelwell (2010)
Administration/Organizational Management	4	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015)
Media	4	Kelley (1999); Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Outside Supporters	3	Olusoga, Rhind (2013); Robbins (2015)
Family	2	Bruening (2007); Olusoga (2009)
<b>Intrapersonal</b>		
Self-Imposed Demands*	7	Bruening (2007); Frey (2007); Levy (2009); Kelley (1993); Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Robbins (2015)
Isolation	2	Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009)

*Note.* No. = The number of articles in which the stressor appeared. The author column only includes the last name of the first author listed in the article.

Table 1 shows all 15 of the stressors that were found in the literature classified by category. There is a number next to each stressor which represents how many articles the stressor appears in and the specific articles are in the column furthest to the right. The most prevalent stressors under each category are identified by an asterisk.

Table 2 divides the articles into collegiate and elite in order to determine prevalence by level. All of the stressors listed in the Table 2 were analyzed based on their significance for collegiate coaches and elite coaches. Articles were categorized based on the participants in their study. There was an even split of five articles that used collegiate coaches and five that used elite coaches as their participants. The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Stressors Found in the Literature Separated into Collegiate and Elite Coaches*

<b>Contextual</b>		
<b>Stressor</b>	<b>Collegiate Articles</b>	<b>Elite Articles</b>
Performance*	3	3
Resources*	2	4
Competition	2	3
Many Roles and Responsibilities**	3	2
Time Commitment	2	3
Recruitment	1	3
Life Events	1	1
<b>Interpersonal</b>		
Athletes*	5	4
Assistant Coaches**	1	4
Administration/Organizational Management	1	3
Media	1	3
Outside Supporters	1	2
Family	1	1
<b>Intrapersonal</b>		
Self-Imposed Demands*	4	3
Isolation	0	2

*Note. The full table that includes specific authors can be found in Table 4 located in Appendix A.*

Table 2 lists all of the stressors under their respective categories, similar to Table 1. However, the stressors were broken down by how many times they occurred in an article with

collegiate and then elite coach participants. The prevalent stressors that emerged are identified by two asterisks.

### **Summary of the Literature**

The details of each of the stressors presented in Table 1 and Table 2 can be found in the next sections beginning with the category of contextual stressors.

**Contextual stressors.** Contextual factors can be described as factors that relate specifically to the coaching profession. Through the research process, a number of factors that fall under the category of contextual stressors were discovered. Contextual factors were found in nine out of the 10 articles used in this synthesis. Each of the contextual stressors identified in the literature review are discussed below.

**Performance.** This analysis found that the pressure to win was present among coaches at all levels of competition. Frey (2007) interviewed 10 Division I head coaches in order to better understand coaches' experiences with stress. Coaches at the collegiate level felt the pressure to win in this study. One coach was quoted as saying, "there's the stress of just being successful. We get graded every week, 'Did you win or lose?' Not 'Did you play well?'" (Frey, 2007, p. 46). Similar results were found in a study by Rhind, Scott, and Fletcher (2013). Their study was conducted with 10 professional coaches to identify the organizational stressors that professional soccer coaches experience. "Soccer is a 'results-oriented business' and that has the potential to create a highly stressful work environment" (Rhind et al., 2013, p. 12). This pressure to be successful also creates feelings of uneasiness about job security. Elite coaches and collegiate coaches often operate on short contracts. Their success during the season dictates whether or not that contract is renewed (Rhind et al., 2013).

**Resources.** Resources were mentioned in five of the studies analyzed for this synthesis. However, the resources that coaches lacked were not always the same. Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees (2010) enhanced previous research on coaching stress by identifying stressors that elite coaches from the sports of cricket, rugby, and soccer experienced. In this study, coaches identified facilities as a resource they wish they had. The coaches complained that inadequate facilities resulted in poor training for their athletes (Thelwell et al., 2010). In a study of Division II coaches at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Robbins, Gilbert, and Clifton (2015) interviewed coaches to determine the stressors in this subset of collegiate coaches. It was discovered that money was a commonly cited contextual stressor for these coaches. Money had an impact on travel, recruiting, and scholarships. The lack of financial resources can heighten the stress of the other contextual stressors in this analysis (Robbins et al., 2015).

**Competition.** Coaches identified the competition environment as a source of stress for a number of reasons. The study by Robbins, Gilbert, and Clifton (2015) focused on discovering the stressors that impacted coaches that worked for HBCU at the Division II level. For the coaches at these Historically Black Universities, the weakness of the teams they were competing against was a source of stress (Robbins et al., 2015). Olusoga, Butt, Hays, and Maynard (2009) chose participants with international experience at the elite level to identify the stressors that coaches encountered as a result of working with world class athletes. Coaches at that level felt that maintaining elite standards and preparation for major competitions was stressful. In addition, the time constraints and schedule of competitions also contributed to the stress of competitions (Olusoga et al., 2009).

**Many roles and responsibilities.** Coaches often are stressed by the roles and responsibilities that they have in addition to their role as head coach. In the study by Levy,

Nicholls, Marchant, and Polman (2009), one coach was put through a 28-day longitudinal study in order to examine the organizational stress, coping strategies, and perceived coping effectiveness. Over the course of the 28-day program, this elite Aquatics coach made references to the additional roles and responsibilities they took on as a source of stress 18 times. The additional roles included covering other coaches' sessions, organizing materials, and meetings with management (Levy et al., 2009).

In addition, due to budget constraints, especially at the collegiate level, there are a number of head coaches who are only part-time. These coaches have other jobs besides their coaching obligations. Kelley and Gill (1993) explored the stress and burnout in collegiate teacher-coaches. The participants in the study were 214 NCAA Division III and NAIA dual-role teachers who were also head basketball coaches. These coaches were responsible for teaching physical education courses and other classes at their respective institutions. These participants felt the issues that arise from coaching as well as the overwhelming and conflicting demands of being both a coach and a teacher caused them significant stress.

***Time commitment.*** Individuals who choose the coaching profession dedicate a significant amount of time to their athletes and potential athletes during and out of season. For many coaches, this is a source of stress. A study by Kelley, Eklund, and Ritter-Taylor (1999) examined the stress and burnout of 265 collegiate head tennis coaches. Some of these coaches felt that sometimes they did not have enough time to successfully do their job and consequently, time management was a major source of stress (Kelley et al., 2009). Other coaches felt that they were committing such a great deal of time to preparing workouts, practices, and competition that they had to sacrifice their personal time (Rhind et al., 2013).



**Recruitment.** The recruitment and identification of talented athletes is a major part of a coaches' job responsibility. Frey's (2007) study aimed to identify collegiate coaches' experiences with stress. She interviewed 10 coaches in which, "eight of the coaches discussed some aspect of recruiting as a source of stress" (p. 46). These various aspects of recruiting included the competitiveness and the long process. There are many coaches who are looking for the "best of the best" and the recruiting process has become increasingly competitive. In order to gain a competitive advantage, coaches have to dedicate more time and start the process earlier than in years past while still adhering to recruiting regulations. One participant in Frey's (2007) study stated "if you're not thinking about recruiting 12 months a year, then you're not going to get the athletes you want... it never stops" (p. 46). Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees (2010) studied this stressor on elite coaches. The participants in their study were three coaches from the sports of rugby, soccer, and cricket. For all three professional coaches, "not being able to select and field a full-strength side [team] was by far the more debilitating stressor" (p. 247).

**Life events.** There are many events that occur that a coach cannot plan for but the probability that they happen during a coach's time in the profession is high. Injury of an athlete impacts the entire team and can impact the success of the program. Although training and care is taken to prevent this situation, injuries still occur. These situations can become an additional source of stress for coaches. Coaches at both the collegiate and elite levels cited injury of an athlete as a stressor (Olusoga et al., 2009; Robbins et al., 2015). Tragically, coaches sometimes have to deal with the death of an athlete. These unfortunate events add stress to the coach, the team, and the community. As the leader of the team, the coach has to be a strong person for everyone to lean on (Olusoga et al., 2009). These life events were mentioned by coaches as sources of stress if or when they occur.

**Interpersonal stressors.** The stressors directly related to the coaching profession are not the only ones that can cause stress for a coach. Coaches interact with various groups of individuals who also have been found to cause stress for coaches at both the collegiate and elite levels. Interpersonal factors can be described as factors that involve relations between people. The analysis found interpersonal factors in all of the articles included in this synthesis.

*Athletes.* Coaches interact with their players frequently both on the playing surface and off. Coaches also can take on roles as mentor, friend, and counsellor to the athletes on their teams. However, stress related to athletes was cited in nine out of the 10 articles in this analysis. In the study by Olusoga and colleagues (2009), two researchers individually coded the elite coaches' responses from an interview. After the coding process, the analysis moved toward ordering the raw data into themes. The themes were organized into groups of like responses and themes which resulted in lower- and higher-order themes. Athletes were the higher-order theme in two of the five higher-ordered themes that emerged from this study. The theme, "coaching responsibilities to the athlete," was found as a source of stress by 11 of the 12 coaches in the study. This theme included dealing with the elite athletes' professionalism, commitment, and performance.

The next theme, "athlete concerns," was cited by 10 of the 12 coaches focused on training needs and managing athletes psychologically. These coaches found many aspects of working with athletes to be a source of stress. The feelings toward athletes related to their behavior also was found in a quote from a participant in Frey's (2007) study who stated, "I think where the stress comes from is the fact that you're relying on 18- to 22-year-olds to make the right decisions and do the right things that prepare them to be successful both on the field and inside the classroom, and they don't always do that" (p. 45). The situations with athletes that

caused stress for coaches were different at the elite level than at the collegiate level. The elite level coaches were more concerned about the professionalism of their athletes, and dealing with the professional lifestyle (Olusoga et al., 2009). Collegiate coaches dealt with communication issues, negative attitudes, and issues in the classroom (Robbins et al., 2015).

***Assistant coaches.*** Similar to athletes, coaches work with their assistants both on and off the field year round. Coaches and their assistant(s) may not see eye to eye on how to conduct practice sessions or player selection. This conflict was identified as a source of stress for an elite rugby coach in the study by Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees (2010). In Rhind, Scott, and Fletcher's (2013) study, some coaches stated that the lack of quality among the existing support staff created stress. One coach did not even feel as though he could trust the staff hired for video analysis to properly break down the game footage.

***Administration/organizational management.*** Many coaches at the collegiate and elite level found administration and organizational management to be a source of stress. Elite sport organizations have a different structure which can be stressful. The board of directors or owners of the organization, in this study, showed a lack of investment through unclear plans and infrastructure within the program (Rhind et al., 2013). Coaches have their own philosophies about how their program should be run. However, their philosophies may not match that of the organization or the director which can be a source of tension (Olusoga, et al. 2009). Relying on administrators for paperwork and being a source of accurate information became an issue for collegiate coaches when administrators did not meet expectations (Robbins, et al. 2015).

***Media.*** Coaches also felt that the media was a source of stress for them. The external scrutiny from the media left coaches feeling vulnerable, stressed, and frustrated. All 12 Australian Football League coaches, in the study by Knights and Ruddock-Hudson (2016),

discussed media as a source of stress. One coach went on to describe how he felt misrepresented in the media.

“The one negative is when you feel as though the message that you’re publicly putting out there is misrepresented in the media and the feeling of helplessness that you can’t really do anything about it, yet if you go out to try and justify that it’s been misrepresented [it] just builds on the actual story” (Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016, p. 165).

Coaches at the collegiate level also felt the stress over media because of negative media coverage (Kelley et al., 1999). The information that is presented in the media impacts the way people think about a coach as well as the type of program they are running. This pressure is heightened when the program is not performing well.

***Outside supporters.*** Students, parents, fans, and the community can be a great source of support for the team and the athletes. The fans also can create added pressure especially when the team’s performance is not meeting their expectations. In the study by Rhind, Scott, and Fletcher (2013), “coaches implicated the fans as a significant source of stress” (p.12). Fans also like to share their ideas about how the program should be run or what techniques the coach should be using to get their athletes to perform up to the fans’ standards (Robbins, et. al. 2015). Parents also put a great deal of pressure on coaches on behalf of their children. Parents do not always understand when their child is not playing or why they are not receiving a scholarship. This lack of understanding and miscommunication was cited as a source of stress by one coach at the collegiate level (Robbins, et. al. 2015).

***Family.*** Bruening and Dixon’s (2007) study explored the work-life balance of 41 Division I head coaches who also were mothers. Many of the coaches felt that it was difficult

dealing with their roles as mothers to their children and their obligations at work. They tried to minimize the impact their coaching had on their children. One mother very seriously considered quitting her job when her daughter started commenting on her absence at the age of 2. The coaches agreed that one area of their balancing of work and family that suffered the most was their relationship with their spouse or partner. They all felt that their jobs could have negative long-term relationship consequences.

**Intrapersonal stressors.** Coaches may experience stress as a result of interactions with any combination of the people listed above. However, they are not the only source of stress for a coach. Intrapersonal factors arise within an individual's mind or are factors relating to the self. These factors were found in three out of the 10 articles used in this synthesis.

***Self-imposed demands.*** Pressure and expectations from coaches by outside sources were cited by 11 out of the 12 coaches in one study of elite coaches. There were 10 coaches out of 12 that specifically identified the pressures they placed upon themselves as being stressful (Olusoga, et al. 2009). Coaches also pointed out that "being the ultimate leader of the program created stress because at the end of the day, the fault was on them and they 'better get it right'" (Robbins et al., 2015, p. 196).

***Isolation.*** In Olusoga, Butt, Hays, and Maynard's (2009) study of stressors in elite coaches, five of the 12 coaches described isolation as a stressor. They believed that the role of a coach often caused them to feel isolated from others. Coaches often feel that as the ultimate leader of the program they cannot ask for help without it being reflected on them negatively. Three of the five coaches cited a lack of a support system within their organization as a contributing factor to their feelings of isolation and stress (2009).

## Discussion

As evidenced in the results of the analysis, there are a number of overlapping stressors found in the literature that demonstrate the complexity of stress in the coaching profession. The top stressors identified in this synthesis fell under all three categories of contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal stress. The most prevalent contextual stressors, in the analysis that looked at all 10 articles together, were performance and resources with six out of 10 each. When broken down based on elite and collegiate coaches, performance and many roles and responsibilities were the most prevalent with three out of five for collegiate coaches; while elite coaches cited resources in four out of five articles. Athletes were found as a source of stress under the category of interpersonal in nine out of the 10 articles in the first analysis. Athletes were the most prevalent in studies on collegiate and elite coaches with five out of five and four out of five respectively. However, elite coaches also found assistant coaches as a major contributor to stress in four out of five articles. Lastly, the intrapersonal stressor of self-imposed demands was consistently the most prevalent stressor in that category in every analysis.

Stress can have a negative impact on the well-being of the individual experiencing the stress. If the stress is not managed, it could lead to burnout. Many studies have found that burnout can lead coaches to quit their jobs. In order to reduce feelings of burnout, administrators and professional organizations should utilize coping mechanisms to help coaches experiencing high levels of stress. Coping can be defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Coping Strategies to Reduce Stress**

This review identified stressors found among coaches at the collegiate and elite levels. The significance of these stressors is important when suggesting coping mechanisms to help

reduce the impact of the stressor. However, if an athletic director or sport organization identifies a stressor for a coach that ranks highly in this review, they can recommend a coping mechanism or treatment that will be the most beneficial. Table 3 gives an overview of the stressors and recommended coping mechanisms.

Table 3

*Recommended Coping Strategies for Most Prevalent Stressors*

Stressors	Level of Sport	Coping Techniques
<b>Contextual</b>		
Performance	Collegiate	Mindfulness Training
Resources	Elite	Self-talk
Many Roles and Responsibilities	Collegiate	Goal Setting
<b>Interpersonal</b>		
Athletes	Collegiate and Elite	Dyadic Coping
Assistant Coaches	Elite	Dyadic Coping
<b>Intrapersonal</b>		
Self-Imposed Demands	Collegiate and Elite	Mindfulness Training

Table 3 shows the most prevalent stressors that were experienced by coaches at the various levels of sport. In addition, there is a coping technique that is recommended for that specific stressor also shown in the table. The following section details the coping techniques found in the literature for the most prevalent stressors identified in each of the categories.

**Mindfulness training.** Performance was a prevalent source of stress among both collegiate and elite coaches. They identified the pressure to win and the performance of their team as causing the stress. Coaches' contracts are determined based on their level of success. Unfortunately, there are events that occur outside the control of the coach that can impact how the team performs. A study by Longshore and Sachs (2015), investigated the impact of Mindfulness Training for coaches. The results determined that this form of training helped decrease their level of stress caused by performance. Mindfulness training encourages coaches

to be in the present moment, focus on process, let go of judgement, the uncontrollable, and past performances (Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009). Mindfulness training approaches such as Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) and Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) have shown their effectiveness in enhancing performance (Longshore & Sachs, 2015). Therefore, mindfulness training would be beneficial to helping coaches with the performance of their team.

Additionally, coaches at both the collegiate and elite levels cited self-imposed demands as a source of stress. A coach in Frey's (2007) study stated, "I put more stress on myself than anybody else does. My expectations of myself are higher than anybody else's" (p. 45). Remaining present and focusing on the process can help coaches either when they feel the stress of performance or their own pressures. This may include ignore the pressures they feel after a loss. After mindfulness training sessions, instead of stressing about how it impacts their contract, a coach would be more likely to focus on practices and the next game. There are various types of training sessions that can be tailored to the time and financial constraints of an athletic department or sport organization. The MAC, for example, uses a manual that includes a seven-module intervention protocol which is usually taught within seven sessions but allows for flexibility. The protocol involves practitioner-directed exercises as well as homework for in-between sessions (Longshore & Sachs, 2015). On the other hand, MSPE varies in the number of sessions and intervention length and primarily focusses on meditation and awareness (Longshore & Sachs, 2015).

**Self-talk.** Elite coaches identified resources as one of the most prevalent contextual stressors that they experience. A lack of resources such as adequate facilities and money impacted the coaches' ability to successfully do their jobs. After identifying poor facilities as a



stressor, the coaches in the Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees' (2010) study went on to explain that self-talk was the coping technique that they used to reduce the stress. Self-talk was used to rationalize and accept the current situations. Unfortunately, lack of resources is a stressor that does not disappear unless there is money or additional funding that is provided. Therefore, the best way to cope is for coaches to change their view of this stressor through self-talk. Self-talk helps a coach to focus on the positives of the situation. This was supported in a review by Tod, Hardy, and Oliver (2011) that explored the effectiveness of self-talk on positive thinking. This positive thinking can be fostered through self-affirmation and reminders of motivation (Olusoga et al., 2010).

**Goal setting.** Coaches at the collegiate level identified the many roles and responsibilities that they have as a stressor. Coaches in a study by Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, and Hutchings (2008) identified goal setting as a psychological skill used to reduce stress. Goal setting was used to aid organization and provide standards for themselves. In addition, it was used to help facilitate appropriate focus. When coaches have a number of responsibilities, they need to be able to effectively focus on the task at hand. Sullivan and Strode (2010) suggested that individuals should work towards creating goals that are "SMAART". This acronym points out that goals should be specific, measurable, aggressive yet achievable, relevant, and timely. Goal setting allows a coach to focus on what they want to achieve and the best way to do so. One coach explained, "I know where I want to go and how I am doing it" (p. 48). If a coach is able to set and achieve goals for each of their roles along the way, then it may help to reduce the stress they feel in their roles overall.

**Dyadic coping.** In the overall analysis of collegiate and elite coaches, out of all of the stressors found, athletes were the most prevalent stressor. The dyadic relationship between

coaches and athletes help to keep the team together. A dyad can be defined as “two individuals maintaining a sociologically significant relationship” (Dyad, n.d). Studies have found that this relationship is particularly important for coaches (Nicholls and Perry, 2016). Dyadic coping serves to reduce the stress for both partners. Additionally, the stress of a coach has an impact on the stress level of individual athletes and on the team as a whole. Secondly, dyadic coping helps to enhance the relationship quality. Positive dyadic coping helps to foster trust, respect, commitment, and support (Levesque, Lafontaine, Caron, Flesch, & Bjornson, 2014).

In addition, there is a level of trust, respect, commitment, and support that needs to exist between a coach and his/her assistant coach(es). Elite coaches also identified assistant coaches as a source of stress. Often times, they felt that they could not trust their assistants and questioned their commitment. The relationship between the coach and the assistant coaches is just as important as that of a coach and his/her athletes. Therefore, dyadic coping is also recommended to strengthen the relationship between a coach and an assistant coach.

One approach to dyadic coping is utilizing communication and conflict resolution techniques (Nicholls & Perry, 2016). In order to support one another, all of the parties involved need to understand what is causing the stress for the other. For example, a coach needs to explain to their athletes or assistants that their apparent lack of commitment is a source of the problem. Upper management should encourage coaches to also work on their communication skills. Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, and Hays (2010) found that communication helped coaches better explain their expectations to others in their study of coping strategies that elite coaches employed. Problem solving and conflict management can help the coaches and the athletes or assistants to work through the problem. A productive team environment is the result of a social environment in which a coach is able to relate, interact, and communicate with their team. The

development of effective dyadic coaching relationships with his/her athletes and assistant coaches can be crucial (Jowett & Felton, 2014).

As evidenced in the analysis that separated collegiate and elite coaches, different stressors occurred more frequently for each group. This further supports the idea that athletic departments and organizations should recommend coping strategies that will be the most effective for the coaches they oversee.

### **Limitations**

While matching coping techniques to prevalent stressors in the literature as described above seems reasonable, it should be noted that this analysis did not take into account individual factors such as age, gender, motivation commitment, and personality. These factors influence an individual's assessment of stressful situations (Schaffran, Altfeld, & Kellmann, 2016). There may have been additional factors such as these that caused some of the coaches in the studies used in this synthesis to evaluate some stressors higher than others. This synthesis also assumed that the stressors that were placed into the categories of contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal do not fall into more than one category. If stressors could have been classified by any of the three categories then it would have changed the prevalent stressors. For example, if athletes also had been considered a contextual stressor, then they would have been the most prevalent stressor in both the contextual and interpersonal categories.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The research on burnout and stress in coaches has been expanding for years. This synthesis identified the stressors that coaches at the collegiate and elite levels experience and suggests coping mechanisms for dealing with those stressors. Future research should determine whether the sources of stress, identified in this synthesis, vary for coaches when factors such as age, gender, race, personality, or other factors that may impact a coach's assessment of stressful

situations also are taken into account. It is also recommended that future research further explores the effectiveness of the coping strategies recommended here for coaches as an effective tool to alleviate stress from athletes and self-imposed demands, the two most prevalent stressors found in this review.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Table 4

*Stressors for Collegiate and Elite Coaches Found in Specific Articles*

<b>Contextual</b>		
<b>Stressor</b>	<b>Collegiate Articles</b>	<b>Elite Articles</b>
Performance	Frey (2007); Kelley (1999); Robbins (2015)	Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Thelwell (2010)
Resources	Kelley (1993); Robbins (2015)	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Thelwell (2010)
Competition	Frey (2007); Robbins (2015)	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Many Roles and Responsibilities	Kelley (1999); Kelley (1993); Robbins (2015)	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009)
Time Commitment	Frey (2007); Kelley (1999)	Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Recruitment	Frey (2007)	Knights (2016); Levy (2009); Thelwell (2010)
Life Events	Robbins (2015)	Olusoga (2009)
<b>Interpersonal</b>		
Athletes	Bruening (2007); Frey (2007); Kelley (1999); Kelley (1993); Robbins (2015)	Knights (2016); Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Assistant Coaches	Robbins (2015)	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013); Thelwell (2010)
Administration/Organizational Management	Robbins (2015)	Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Media	Kelley (1999)	Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Outside Supporters	Robbins (2015)	Olusoga (2009); Rhind (2013)
Family	Bruening (2007)	Olusoga (2009)
<b>Intrapersonal</b>		
Self-Imposed Demands	Bruening (2007); Frey (2007); Kelley (1993); Robbins (2015)	Knights (2016); Levy (2009); Olusoga (2009)
Isolation	N/A	Knights (2016); Olusoga (2009)

*Note: The author column only includes the last name of the first author listed in the article.*



## Appendix B

### Coding Sheet

Study Citation	Study Focus	Characteristics	Design	Contextual	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal
<p>Bruening, Jennifer E. &amp; Dixon, Malene A.</p> <p>Work-Family Conflict in Coaching II: Managing Role Conflict</p> <p>Journal of Sport Management 2007, 21, 471-496</p> <p>Database: Business Source Complete</p>	<p>The purpose of the study was to examine the manifestations of role conflict in both the work and family realm.</p>	<p>Sample: 41 mothers, Division I head coaches</p> <p>Various sports</p>	<p>Online focus groups</p> <p>18 weeks</p> <p>Open-ended interview guide</p>	N/A	<p>Athletes</p> <p>Family obligations</p>	<p>Pressure on self</p>
<p>Frey, Melinda</p> <p>College coaches' experiences with stress-“problem solvers” have problems, too</p> <p>The Sport Psychologist 2007, 21, 38-57</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The purpose was to better understand coaches' experiences with stress, the perceived effects of stress on their coaching performance, and their coping strategies</p>	<p>10 Division I head coaches (6 males, 4 females)</p>	<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Time commitment</p> <p>Recruiting</p> <p>Pressure to win</p> <p>Competition</p>	<p>Communicating to athletes</p> <p>Lack of control over athletes</p>	<p>Pressure on self to do well</p>

<p>Kelley, Betty C., Eklund, Robert C., &amp; Ritter-Taylor, Michelle</p> <p>Stress and Burnout Among Collegiate Tennis Coaches</p> <p>Journal of Sport &amp; Exercise Psychology 1999, 21, 113-130</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The purpose was to examine stress and burnout among collegiate tennis coaches</p>	<p>265 (males=166, females= 99) collegiate head tennis coaches NCAA Division I (n=80) NCAA Division II, III or NAIA (n=185)</p>	<p>Maslach Burnout Inventory Perceived Stress Scale Coaching Issues Survey Hardiness Scale Leadership Behavior Questionnaire SCAT- Coach Demographic Information</p>	<p>Winning</p> <p>Lack of Time</p> <p>Take on many tasks</p>	<p>Pressure from media</p> <p>Athletes</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Kelley, Betty C. &amp; Gill, Diane L.</p> <p>An Examination of Personal/Situtational Variables, Stress Appraisal, and Burnout in Collegiate Teacher-Coaches</p> <p>Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport 1993, 64 (1) 94-102</p> <p>Database: GoogleScholar</p>	<p>The purpose of this study was to further research stress and burnout based on Smith's (1986) theoretical model, which provides an intuitively attractive framework to begin investigating stress and burnout</p>	<p>214 male and females (males=99, females= 115)</p> <p>NCAA Division III and NAIA dual-role teacher-head basketball coaches</p>	<p>Maslach Burnout Inventory Perceived Stress Scale Coaching Issues Survey Coaching Problems Survey Social Support Questionnaire The Teacher/Coach Survey</p>	<p>Budget considerations</p> <p>Dual role</p>	<p>Athletes</p>	<p>Pressure on self</p>

<p>Knights, Sophie &amp; Ruddock-Hudson, Mandy</p> <p>Experiences of occupational stress and social support in Australian Football League senior coaches</p> <p>Sports Science &amp; Coaching 2016, 11 (2), 162-171</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The purpose was to examine the experiences of occupational stress and social support of Australian Football League senior coaches</p>	<p>12 National AFL senior coaches</p>	<p>Interview</p>	<p>Team selection</p> <p>Winning games</p> <p>Personal time</p>	<p>Scrutiny from media</p> <p>Athletes</p>	<p>Loneliness</p> <p>Pressure on self</p>
<p>Levy, Andrew, Nicholls, Andrew, Marchant, David, &amp; Polman, Remco</p> <p>Organisational stressors, coping, and coping effectiveness: A Longitudinal Study with an Elite Coach</p> <p>International Journal of Sports Science &amp; Coaching 2009, 4 (1)</p> <p>Database: GoogleScholar</p>	<p>The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative diary methodology to examine longitudinally, organisational stressors, coping strategies, and perceived coping effectiveness with an elite coach</p>	<p>1 male elite Aquatics coach</p>	<p>A 28 day longitudinal study using journal entries</p>	<p>Recruitment of talent</p> <p>Many roles</p> <p>Competition</p> <p>Lack of Resources</p>	<p>Administration</p> <p>Athletes</p> <p>Support Staff</p>	<p>Pressures</p>

<p>Olusoga, Peter, Butt, Joanne, Hays, Kate, &amp; Maynard, Ian</p> <p>Stress in elite sports coaching: identifying stressors</p> <p>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology 2009, 21, 442-459</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The purpose was to identify the stressors these coaches encountered in their experiences coaching world class athletes</p>	<p>12 (6 male, 6 female) coaches with international experience were interviewed</p>	<p>Interview</p>	<p>Performance of team</p> <p>Availability of Resources</p> <p>Competition</p> <p>Many roles</p> <p>Time commitment</p> <p>Life events</p>	<p>Assistants</p> <p>Athletes</p> <p>Media pressures</p> <p>Fans</p> <p>Family</p> <p>Administration</p>	<p>Isolation</p> <p>Expectations of self</p>
<p>Rhind, Daniel, J. A., Scott, Michael, &amp; Fletcher, David</p> <p>Organizational stress in professional soccer coaches</p> <p>International Journal of Sport Psychology 2013, 44 1-16</p> <p>Database: GoogleScholar</p>	<p>The purpose was to investigate the organizational stressors experienced by professional coaches from soccer.</p>	<p>10 male professional coaches working in the United Kingdom</p>	<p>Interview</p>	<p>Lack of time</p> <p>Resources</p> <p>Competition</p>	<p>Athletes</p> <p>Manager</p> <p>Support staff</p> <p>Fans</p> <p>Media</p>	<p>N/A</p>

<p>Robbins, Jamie E., Gilbert, Jenelle N., &amp; Clifton, Alexandra M.</p> <p>Coaching Stressors in a Division II Historically Black University</p> <p>Journal of Intercollegiate Sport 2015, 8, 183-205</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The purpose was to further the research by studying coaches at a Historically Black College/ University (HBCU) and Division II (DII) athletic program</p>	<p>7 head coaches, 5 assistant coaches Division II Coaches</p>	<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Resources</p> <p>Job Security</p> <p>Outside responsibilities</p> <p>Competition</p> <p>Life events</p>	<p>Athletes</p> <p>Expectations from others- parents</p> <p>Administration</p> <p>Staff Dynamics</p>	<p>Need to get it right</p> <p>Lack of control</p>
<p>Thelwell, Richard, Weston, Neil J.V., &amp; Greenlees, Ian</p> <p>Coping with stressors in elite sport: A coach perspective</p> <p>European Journal of Sport Science 2010 10(4) 243-253 2010 10(4) 243-253</p> <p>Database: SportDiscus</p>	<p>The aim of this study was to supplement previous work that identified the stressors experienced by coaches and examine the coping strategies that elite-level coaches employ to overcome stressors</p>	<p>3 male elite-level coaches</p>	<p>Interview</p>	<p>Poor performance</p> <p>Selection</p> <p>Poor training facilities</p>	<p>Other coaches</p>	<p>N/A</p>