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Safety or Style? An Examination of the Role of Football Equipment Personnel

Brent D. Oja
Jordan R. Bass

Abstract

The national recognition of concussions has increased greatly over the past decade. While concussions have moved to the spotlight, institutional policies and procedures are just beginning their climb into the public eye. This research delves into a sphere of sport that has to date been largely ignored, the role of equipment personnel. Equipment personnel were chosen due to their connection to concussions and organizational power. Organizational power has traditionally rested with those who acquire the most resources. Coaches usually represent such power. However, power can also be derived from maintaining resources. Qualitative methodology was utilized to gauge the perceptions of equipment personnel on a variety of topics related to organizational power and concussions. The results revealed that equipment personnel have little overall professional power. Although a majority of participants reported that they believed they retained the power to choose protective equipment for student-athletes, this autonomy was neither consistent nor sovereign. Informal power structures were discovered in which coaches were thought to have more power than their formal supervisors. Administrators should consider implementing policies that grant greater autonomy to equipment personnel in order to better protect student-athletes.

Keywords: *concussions; power; hierarchy; structure*

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In the past 24 months, the volume of the national narrative concerning the physical damages occurring within the game of football has amplified greatly. Events like Junior Seau taking his own life (Hendricks, 2012), the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) *League of Denial* documentary (*League of Denial*, 2013), and most recently, former University of Michigan Coach Brady Hoke inserting a likely concussed player back into a football game (Fornelli, 2014) have raised questions about what is being done to protect the health of football players. In turn, much has been written about the administrators, coaches, and doctors that help determine the policies and procedures designed to lessen the risk of serious injury at all levels of football; specifically with college football concussion policies (AP, 2014), the National Football League's handling of the concussion epidemic (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013), in-game concussion test policies in college football (Hruby, 2013), and stricter mandates for robust concussion policies in college football (Tarm, 2015). This study aims to further this line of inquiry by examining how equipment personnel fit into the power structure of collegiate athletics departments and what role they play in injury risk reduction in this heightened climate of concussion awareness. An academic probe into the equipment profession is warranted due to their role of properly fitting protective equipment (e.g., the helmet) on athletes, which thrusts the profession into the prevalent concussion discussion. Specifically, we are interested in the role that organizational structure and politics play in the power dynamics that exist between equipment personnel, administration, and coaches.

This research is especially timely as football administrators are constantly tweaking aspects of the game in the name of improved safety. Restated, those in charge of football at the professional and collegiate levels have begun to significantly alter the rules of the game to help diminish the prevalence of major injuries. For example, the National Football League (NFL) has adjusted its rule pertaining to kick-offs. The kick-off was thought to be football's most dangerous play (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Similarly, football leaders at the collegiate level have created rules with the intention of improving player safety: The now infamous targeting rule prevents players from launching into a defenseless player by way of penalty and ejection (Staples, 2013) and the loss of helmet rule forces a player to leave the contest for one play if the helmet comes off during live action (Mandel, 2012). In all, both governing bodies are attempting to continually address the issue of player safety.

In sequence with the rules either altered or created to help improve player safety, the increased commercialization of sport has had the opposite effect. College football especially has seen an increased glorification of the wearing of new uniform and helmet combinations almost weekly. It has become the norm in college football to have multiple helmet and jersey combinations (Lukas, 2013). On any given Saturday, teams can be seen wearing completely new apparel and equip-

ment than was used in previous weeks. The most common rationale for this practice is to help attract recruits (Crabtree, 2013).

This trend is potentially problematic because equipment personnel have been increasingly pulled away from their primary job responsibilities related to protective equipment such as helmets and shoulder pads. This includes increased time needed to attend to the aforementioned multiple helmets, uniforms, and weekly accessories. The increase in workload may cause equipment personnel to become too taxed with superficial responsibilities and allow less time for their core mission. Restated, equipment managers' focus on safety may have become jeopardized by the increase in responsibilities for items that are not related to safety. In all, has this transformed the duties of the profession from injury prevention to customer service? Asked a different way, have the roles moved from safety personnel to Foot Locker employee?

Another potential consequence of the shifted responsibilities comes from how much, or how little, professional autonomy is granted to equipment personnel by coaches and administrators. For example, Wolverton (2013) described the struggle that college athletic trainers have with the power dynamics between trainer and coach. The issues described in the article essentially revolve around who makes the decision of when a student-athlete can return to the field of play. Wolverton (2013) explained several cases of athletic trainers losing their jobs due to their refusal to allow a student-athlete to return to the field while still recovering from a concussion. Hence, concussions and organizational power have been linked previously. However, to date this power dynamic between coaches and equipment personnel has not been investigated. Instead of being provided the autonomy that respected members of the player safety consortium receive, coaches may view equipment personnel simply as wardrobe specialists. This hypothetical classification would likely negate equipment personnel's ability to adequately do their job (i.e., protect the player) by limiting their power to decide which protective equipment to use if there was a dispute. Thus, we hypothesize equipment personnel are facing many of the same challenges being experienced by certified athletic trainers. As such, we aim to discover how employees describe the reporting process (i.e., who they feel they must consult with before major decisions), as opposed to the formal organizational flow chart.

Literature Review

Two separate constructs are particularly relevant for this study: (1) protective equipment and concussions and (2) organizational power. Within the game of football, the helmet has been construed as the predominate piece of equipment used to minimize concussions (Benson et al., 2013). Recent researchers have begun to show an association between proper fit and the effectiveness of protective equipment (Phillips, 2013). Further, poor helmet fit is related to the increased

risk of sustaining a concussion (Torg et al., 2013). The most important role of the equipment manager is to provide a proper fit of protective equipment (Brain, 2012). The severity of concussions, and the role of an equipment manager are all discussed in this section.

Organizational power is related to the research in that the decision-making process of helmet selection is in question. Recent findings have shown that certified athletic trainers have experienced less autonomy and control as to when a collegiate student-athlete is deemed healthy enough to return to competition (Wolverton, 2013). Hence, equipment personnel may be facing these same issues. To better understand potential conflicts the source of power for coaches within collegiate athletics departments has been reviewed. These factors combine to give a detailed view of the environment of equipment personnel, and the potential challenges faced when attempting to provide their expertise.

Concussions and Equipment Personnel

There is virtually no academic research on the role of an equipment manager within an intercollegiate athletics department. Equipment managers have an array of job responsibilities that range from fitting protective equipment to doing laundry to preparing and monitoring a budget (University of South Florida, 2007). The central role of an equipment manager is to provide proper safety equipment as well as technical skills with regards to properly fitting the protective equipment (Brain, 2012). Phillips (2013), as well as Torg and colleagues (2012), showed that helmet fit significantly affects the dispersion of force. Such results "...identify helmet fit as a factor related to increased risk for concussion..." (Torg et al., 2012, p. 18). Hence, if helmets are not fitted properly, the risk of a concussion will increase (Torg et al., 2012). If equipment personnel are not given appropriate autonomy to ensure proper care and attention is given to a football player, then that player's health is therefore put in jeopardy.

Providing proper care and attention to a football player and their equipment is a multifaceted endeavor. First, equipment personnel have a unique role in outfitting athletes (University of South Florida, 2007). There are some psychological benefits to being equipped and dressed appropriately for athletic contests, such as confidence, intimidation, knowledge of activity, and display of status and rank (Thomas, 1973). Some of these aspects can be traced back to primal facial war paint and the display of scars on the body (Thomas, 1973). Athletic apparel and gear also provides an avenue for athletes all wearing the same uniform to stand out and be easily identifiable (Thomas, 1973). A growing number of collegiate football teams are wearing multiple designs of helmets during a season (Lukas, 2013). Several equipment managers reported that the process of having multiple helmets has changed their job in several different ways, most notably having to spend more time preparing and changing out helmets and issues with storage of the helmets (Lukas, 2013). An issue brought up by some equipment managers is the fitting

and break-in process of the helmet. Some equipment managers preferred to have a player wear each helmet they are to wear during the season at least a few times before wearing it in competition; however, this proved especially difficult when coaches wanted to surprise the players with a new helmet right before a football game, which left little to no time to break-in a helmet (Lukas, 2013). It appears that the increasing responsibilities and seemingly shortening of preparation time has complicated the equipment profession. This further highlights the need for professional autonomy (e.g., voicing concerns) as multiple helmets and lack of time of preparation time might affect helmet fit and thus are related to concussions.

Concussions are currently one of the premier topics in sport (Benson et al., 2013). In order to comprehend the importance of equipment personnel's role and expertise in player safety a brief overview of concussions is necessary. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013), a concussion is a traumatic brain injury (TBI) that is caused by an impact to the head, which can alter how the brain functions. Additionally, concussions may be the result of what appear to be mild injuries or impacts, and loss of consciousness is not required to sustain a concussion (CDC, 2013). Further, the CDC (2015) has created the HEADS UP initiative to aid those involved with youth sport to better understand the dangers associated with concussions, and to help prevent such injuries. However, the most potent danger of head injuries in football lies in Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is not dependent upon concussions to occur (Boston University, 2013). This injury has the potential to fundamentally change the game of football (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013).

“Chronic traumatic encephalopathy is a progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in athletes (and others) with a history of repetitive brain trauma, including symptomatic concussions as well as asymptomatic subconcussive hits to the head” (Boston University, 2013, para. 1). The repetitive brain trauma creates the progressive degeneration of brain tissue (Boston University, 2013). According to neuropsychologist Robert Stern, football players will take hits with forces of 20g or more of force or more, which is equivalent to hitting a brick wall at 35 miles per hour, anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 times a year (*League of Denial*, 2013). Doctor Ann McKee, a neuropathologist at Boston University, has found that 45 of the 46 brains of professional football players donated to Boston University have CTE (*League of Denial*, 2013). However, CTE is not limited to professional football players. The brains of college and high school football players have had signs of CTE (*League of Denial*, 2013). The effects of CTE are linked with confusion, memory loss, aggression, depression, and progressive dementia (Boston University, 2013). In summary, helmet safety in football is a deeper issue than simply whether or not a player is concussed. The severity of the consequences of concussions also underscores the value of the role of equipment personnel.

Organizational Power

Wolverton (2013) noted that there might be power struggles within collegiate athletics departments, as coaches might have more power than what the formal guidelines of the athletics department stipulate. This concept is reflected by Schroeder (2010), who posited that there are formal and informal power structures in intercollegiate athletics departments. For example, coaches appear to have the power, despite a lack of formal authority, to have athletic trainers either fired or moved to a different position for failing to clear an injured athlete when the coach has determined the player is ready to return to competition (Wolverton, 2013).

The source of power for some coaches appears to be explained through previous research. Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, and Pennings (1971) proposed a prediction of subunit power in organizations. Power can be predicted via three constructs. The ability to cope with uncertainty, the uniqueness of the subunit's aptitudes, and the significance of the uncertainty to the organization are the three elements of Hickson et al.'s proposal (1971). Further, Salancik and Pfeffer (1974) explained that organizations as open systems are reliant upon the acquisition of resources and found that subunits within an organization will possess different levels of power based on their ability to obtain outside resources. Coaches perform in a highly uncertain and sophisticated environment with highly significant and meaningful tasks, and their performance may result in the collection of large amounts of revenues. Indeed, Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, and Forrest (1990) found support for resource acquisition as a barometer for power within college athletics departments. The most salient finding from Salancik and Pfeffer (1974) was the support for their hypothesis that the level of a subunit's organizational power was indicated by the subunit's ability to bring in resources from outside of the organization. This can be witnessed via a coach who is effective and draws large crowds thus obtaining external resources. Conversely, obtaining external resources is not the only method of obtaining power as power might also be measured via the ability to *maintain* organizational resources (Salancik, Calder, Rowland, Leblebici, & Conway, 1975). This adds theoretical credence to the concept that equipment personnel should have more power as they attempt to preserve the health of athletes when they fit them with protective athletic equipment.

There are other theoretical avenues for equipment personnel to obtain power. Strategic contingencies' theory "...argues that the most critical organizational function or the source of the most important organizational uncertainty determines power within the organization" (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. 230). The environments of organizations are highly influential. Thus, it is crucial for organizations to respond to and cope with environment uncertainty and changing conditions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). While one could undoubtedly make a strong case for strategic contingencies' theory explaining the contemporary consolidation of power within the coaching profession, the theory would likely point to the new-

found awareness and uncertainty revolving around concussions as cause for a new allocation of power.

Coaches' ability to obtain external resources theoretically supports their power acquisition. Additionally, researchers have focused on the power of coaches and their professional interpersonal relationships. Potrac and Jones' (2009) review of research described coaches as power driven and seeking to manage other organizational members. Thus, the duties and circumstances of the profession "... often involve coaches manipulating others' impressions of them to generate the necessary professional support, space, and time to carry out their programs and agendas" (Potrac & Jones, 2009, p. 224). Potrac and Jones (2009) likened coaches' power to the concept of micro-politics. Blase (1991) states that, "Micro-politics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals. In large part, political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with a motivation to use power and influence and/or to protect..." (p. 11). Moreover, Potrac, Jones, and Armour (2002) discovered that coaches used manipulation tactics to protect their self-images in order to avoid their greatest fear of losing the respect of athletes. Also, Jones, Armour, and Potrac (2002) suggested that coaches created a self-image to generate power over and respect from athletes, and that coaches' power takes on many forms, including expert power (Jones et al., 2002). As an example of expert power, Wolverton (2013) suggested that some coaches believed their expertise extends beyond the games into the area of sports medicine as the coaches attempted to dictate sports medicine policies.

Past research has shown the dangers of concussions and CTE. While some researchers have demonstrated a relationship between proper fit and concussions (Phillips, 2013; Torg et al., 2012) there has been no research conducted that concerns equipment personnel and their professional autonomy. However, previous research has described the amount of power coaches and administrators have in athletics departments. There is a gap in research pertaining to the relationship between organizational power and the policies surrounding concussion management in intercollegiate athletics departments. This study addresses the gap by conducting interviews with equipment personnel to better understand their professional autonomy with regards to concussion management. We propose the following research questions:

RQ1: Do equipment personnel perceive that they maintain a sufficient level of power within the organizational hierarchy for their role in player safety?

RQ2: How do equipment personnel perceive other employees within the organization view the equipment personnel role within the athletics department?

RQ3: Does the increase in multiple helmets affect the safety of players via equipment personnel practices?

Methods

Qualitative methods were used to help determine the changing landscape of professional duties for equipment personnel. Due to a lack of prior research on the subject, individual semi-structured interviews were determined to be the best method in which to discover the current circumstances in intercollegiate athletics departments, as they provide a means to discover sport culture and sub-cultures (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The interviews were informed by both the previous literature and the experiences of author Oja as an equipment manager. Gratton and Jones (2004) described semi-structured interviews as, "...a standard set of questions, or schedule. However, the researcher adopts a flexible approach to data collection, and can alter the sequence of questions or probe for more information with subsidiary questions" (p. 141). Qualitative interviews are grounded in discussion, with importance placed on the researcher to ask questions and listen, and participants to respond (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The open-ended format of the interview questions allowed for participants to put into words their perceptions, emotions, and feelings in an elaborate manner. Dean and Whyte (1978) argued interviews that ask respondents to reveal sensitive information must ask a variety of questions to highlight a larger theme while protecting the confidentiality of the interviewees.

Participants

Eight equipment managers were interviewed. Snowball sampling was used to help recruit informed participants. The first participant recruited came from a previous professional relationship with author Oja. Participants were chosen based on their experience and knowledge of equipment operations. While no minimum cutoff for experience was required, each participant had been a collegiate equipment employee for at least five years. All participants had extensive experience at the highest level of intercollegiate football, and several had experience at a lower level. They were located in every region of the country and all but one of the Power Five conferences was represented. Additionally, respondents came from six different institutions. Participants (using pseudonyms) were as follows:

Bob – Director of Equipment, 16-20 years of experience

Will – Assistant Equipment Manager, 5-10 years of experience

Tom – Head Football Equipment Manager, 5-10 years of experience

Isaac – Head Football Equipment Manager, 11-15 years of experience

Alex – Assistant Equipment Manager, 10-15 years of experience

Tony – Head Football Equipment Manager, 16-20 years of experience

Carl – Director of Equipment, 20-25 years of experience

Mike – Director of Equipment, 10-15 years of experience

Procedure

Interviews occurred over the phone and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes depending upon how much detail was provided by the participant. Each participant was made aware of the purpose of the study and was given the option to remain anonymous. Further, they were asked to explain their role and previous experience. Next, a list of open-ended questions was read one at a time to the interviewee. The participants were allowed to expand upon their answers in order to gain as much insight as possible. Follow-up questions were asked as needed. This allowed for more truthful, in-depth, and quality information (Smith & Stewart, 2001). The questions asked were meant to determine the perceived level of internal power the profession holds (e.g., “Do you believe that you still maintain enough power to make the correct decisions with regards to which equipment is used?”), how their job has changed (e.g., “How has the perception of your role changed over the years?”), and to discover the actual reporting structure of their organization (e.g., “How many people do you report to, formally and informally?”). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and author Oja recorded and transcribed the responses.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to acknowledge the impact the researchers' background played in this examination (Giardina & Newman, 2011). This aids in the “critical representation of ourselves within our research” (Misener & Doherty, 2009, p. 466). As noted above, author Oja was an equipment manager, both as a student and professional, at five different collegiate institutions over an 11-year time period. Author Oja experienced frustration at the lack of professional autonomy, and discussed these concerns with other equipment managers during his employment. Many of the questions, both original and follow-up, were based on these experiences. This familiarity with the profession likely allowed author Oja to bring forth richer responses from participants. Finally, it must be recognized that the authors believe equipment personnel can play an integral role in improving the safety of student-athletes in this hyper sensitive climate.

Analysis

Open coding, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), was utilized. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated, “in open coding, event/action/interaction, and so forth, are compared against others for similarities and differences; they are also conceptually labeled. In this way, conceptually similar ones are group together to form categories and subcategories” (p. 423). The authors of this article independently read the interview transcripts and collectively deductively coded the responses into primary codes based on the a priori themes from the research questions. When differences in interpretation arose, they were discussed until agreement was reached (Hambrick & Kang, 2014). Next, inductive coding was utilized to identify any secondary themes that were not explained in the primary coding stage. In all,

three primary themes emerged from the analysis. Within each of these, a number of secondary themes (seven total) were identified (discussed below). Once additional codes could not be found, data saturation was achieved.

Results

Reporting Structures

The first primary theme from the data was the formal and informal reporting structures for participants. A vast majority of participants explained that they formally reported to administrators at some level (e.g., Director of Equipment, Associate Athletics Director, Athletics Director), and informally reported to coaches. However, all participants explained that they attempt to appease coaches over athletics directors. This is an unusual phenomenon in that participants aligned themselves with those who they did not formally report to, and would sometimes go against those who they formally reported to.

Communication of structure. Participants explained the fear of coaches using their power to get staff members fired. Almost all participants justified their desire to appease coaches by explaining that they work with coaches on a daily basis as opposed to occasional interactions with athletics directors. Carl explained how different organizations have different priorities:

Depending on the school you are at, at (school A) or (school B) I would appease the coach more than the athletic director; at a smaller school I have more access to the athletic director. At (school A) they had recently been in a BCS bowl game, so it was a huge revenue building sport for them. My boss was the CFO there, and he told me you have to keep the coach happy...have to! Whatever he says. Each school had different philosophies. It's all about the revenue, follow the money...don't bite the hand that feeds you. (Carl, personal communication)

Many participants highlighted the importance of communication between themselves, coaches, and administration. Participants also explained how they often teamed with certified athletic trainers for support in the case of disputes.

Support from coaches and administrators. Unlike the Wolverton (2013) findings, all participants reported their belief that coaches and administrators would support them in the event of a student-athlete insisting on wearing a style of helmet that does not fit him or her properly. This is likely due to the desire of coaches to keep their players on the playing field and out of the training room. Participants explained how their role is related to injury prevention. Tony added, "We always tell the new recruits coming in on visits that our number one job is to try and keep you out of the training room." Some coaches understood this, as Alex noted "Our (head football) coach, he's really into the equipment aspect, which is sometimes great and sometimes not, he would be one to look at a kid and say we want you to be protected, gotta keep you protected." Tom also highlighted the

influence of coaches, “I think the player will relent when a coach explains it (importance of proper fit of a helmet) to them.”

Influence of coaches. Participants were asked if a coach ever attempted to influence or insist upon a student-athlete wearing a certain helmet or being allowed to wear a certain helmet. A trend emerged from participants’ responses that described how some coaches would question equipment managers’ decisions or acquiesce to student-athletes requests for certain forms of equipment. Some participants explained that coaches wanted equipment personnel to broaden their selection of equipment. The majority of participants explained either direct examples or stories from fellow equipment personnel. Carl stated, “At (school), he (head coach) was the ultimate micromanager, he knew your job and better than you did, so he would tell me what helmets guys would be in and what type of shoes they need to be in.” Further, Will explained,

I have heard coaches say they (student-athletes) can wear whatever they wanted even if we advise against it. We had an athlete who had a concussion and we recommended against the VSR4, but even though (we advised against it), the coach said he could wear whatever helmet he wants. (Will, personal communication)

Another participant explained how a student-athlete beseeched the authority of an assistant coach when the equipment staff told him they would not switch him out of the helmet before practice. The equipment staff felt they had to follow the *order* of the assistant coach to switch helmets for the student-athlete. This is potentially another example of coaches attempting to maintain the respect of their players (Potrac et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2002). Others had their professional acumen questioned by coaches with regards to equipment selection. This is akin to coaches utilizing their self-anointed expert power to dictate how football players are outfitted in protective equipment (Jones et al., 2002; Wolverton, 2013).

Perceptions of Equipment Personnel

Participants had a fairly unified view on the perceptions of their profession within their departments. All participants explained how either they felt or other departmental employees viewed their profession as customer service based or a provider of goods and services.

Lack of respect. Many participants noted a lack of respect from student-athletes and others were concerned with student-athletes’ sense of entitlement. One participant provided a story of a borrowed pair of workout shoes being unceremoniously thrown into the equipment room after a workout instead of setting them on the table. Various participants further explained how those members of the athletics department who worked with them on a daily basis understood the professionalism needed to function at a high level. Isaac explained, “most employees think it’s pretty mindless work, but football team members think differently.” Tom described other’s views of the profession:

They see it as laundry hand out and once the season is over there's nothing to do. There's a view that we hand out socks and towels and wash laundry every day and that's it. They don't realize we are responsible for a quarter of a million dollar budget and preventing being sued for millions of dollars by preventing injuries. (Tom, personal communication)

Misconception of duties. Almost all participants viewed their standing within the organizational power structure as a consequence of their perception as a provider of services and goods and lacking professional relevance. While many participants agreed that there is a customer service/provider aspect to their profession, all claimed to retain at least some level of power in selecting protective equipment. As noted in Torg et al. (2012), proper fit of a helmet is a vital aspect to be considered when attempting to prevent concussions. Fitting of helmets and other protective equipment is an aspect of the profession that all participants noted as a critical part of their profession. This presents a dichotomy of sorts. Equipment personnel are seen as “bottom rung” as noted by Alex, or “kind of lower bottom of the totem pole” and equivalent to a secretary according to Isaac, and yet they provide valuable professional skills that are vital to protecting student-athletes.

Safety

Opinions related to the increase in multiple helmets and uniforms of the participants were solicited. Two major trends arose from the participants.

Shift away from safety. The first trend was that the added emphasis on multiple helmets required more man-hours and effort on the part of equipment personnel. This added work would not affect the emphasis on safety, but it added additional burdens to the job. Participants frequently used words like *stress* or *pressure* to describe the consequences of additional helmets and uniforms. Mike clarified,

The biggest challenge is the time it takes in trying to get everyone through; we have limited hands and limited time with a roster of 120. Every time you have to fit everyone, it is very time consuming to make sure you have enough lead-time to properly fit and outfit everyone. (Mike, personal communication)

Bob described how having multiple helmets can generate a chain reaction,

If you have a kid that is wearing a helmet in camp then has issues with (the helmet) sliding or rolling down, and you end up switching him into a new practice helmet you have to wait a few days to see if it fits, then you have to switch out the other helmets. Proper fit may take a while to get to. (Bob, personal communication)

When asked how difficult it is to manage multiple helmets, Isaac illustrated how switching out a helmet is more complicated than just picking out a new shell, “It's not difficult, but definitely tedious. Attention to detail is a must, now with styles of facemasks and chinstraps there's a lot of stuff. There's different helmet

colors and different decals, it's just cumbersome." The other trend was that participants did feel the emphasis took away from safety. As Will noted, "...we are managing with more helmets, we are focused on just making sure they get done as opposed to a proper fit." Alex explained how difficult it is to manage multiple helmets,

It takes away attention from other things like game day preparations, it takes a lot of time, we can miss something, or forget something, like forget to put in a front sizer pad, I've seen that, or something happens and the air bladder is broken. You can miss some things, things can go wrong, you can't catch everything. (Alex, personal communication)

Carl succinctly stated, "When you deal with multiple helmets, you have more of a chance to put someone in jeopardy. You set yourself up to possibly miss something that could cause serious injury to someone."

Lack of time. Participants were also asked whether they ever felt their student-athletes had insufficient preparation time in their helmets before game use. Most of the participants felt their student-athletes always had enough time in their helmets before game use. Participants disagreed on the concept of "break-in time." The minority that advocated a break-in period felt there might have been circumstances in which student-athletes had insufficient time in a helmet before game use. Participants were asked for their opinions on the ideal number of helmets that a team should use and the amount they actually used. For all but one participant, teams used more helmets than what the equipment personnel thought appropriate. This could be due to a lack of power for equipment personnel. As Carl explained, "a lot of times if a coach wants to add a helmet, he's going to add it anyway, you're just going to have to protect the best you can." This resonates with Potrac and Jones' (2009) contention that many coaches want control, and it further validates the premise that coaches do have a large amount of power and influence. The responses also fit with Wolverson's (2013) examination of the power (or lack of) of athletic trainers in that the expert opinion of the equipment personnel was easily dismissed when it was not in congruence with the wants and desires of coaches and administrators.

Discussion

With regard to RQ1, the findings support the notion that some equipment personnel have a lack of autonomy and power, with coaches having varying levels of influence. While the results did not provide an example of a coach deliberately intervening in the fitting process, there were several stories or occurrences that indicated undue influence or the potential for influence. For example, in the case where an assistant coach told the equipment staff to switch out a student-athlete's helmet, the coach may have taken the side of the student-athlete to maintain power and not look weak in the face of the player (Jones et al., 2002; Potrac et al.,

2002). Further, this action would bolster the perceived expert power of the coach in the eyes of the student-athlete (Jones et al., 2002). Coaches also appear to be the source of the additional duties the profession has encountered in recent years. This lack of autonomy and power may be related to the lack of resources brought in by equipment personnel (Salanicik & Pfeffer, 1974). Additionally, it was found that coaches' power is likely to alter formal reporting structures in intercollegiate athletics departments. Equipment personnel reported an abnormal power structure of intercollegiate athletics departments. Participants explained how they would appease the needs of coaches over athletics directors, even though athletics directors or another administrator were ultimately their formal supervisor. This development speaks to the notion discussed by Schroeder (2010) of formal and informal power structures within intercollegiate athletics departments. It also resonates with Blase's (1991) explanation of micro-politics in that individuals will use formal and informal power to fulfill their desires. Further, we posit that this informal power structure is a consequence of coaches' ability to bring in outside resources (Knoppers et al., 1990; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). Coaches of sports that generate revenue are likely to bring in more revenue than the athletics director or other members of the administration; subsequently such coaches have more power than their supervisors despite formal hierarchical structures. This trend has the potential for serious consequences. Wolverton (2013) warned of the consequences of providing coaches with formal authority over athletic trainers. However, many coaches did not possess formal authority over equipment personnel. Rather, coaches' informal authority, in addition to their ability to capture outside resources, comes from their power to influence personnel decisions. Several participants described how coaches can ultimately terminate them and how coaches eventually get what they want. It is relevant to note that formal reporting structures place college coaches below athletics directors and presidents, yet one college president has publicly admitted, although in jest, the school's football coach may have more power than he does (Morris, 2011), and there have been public concerns from other academics regarding the power of coaches (Wieberg, 2011). Much like Wolverton (2013) and Potrac and Jones (2009), we found coaches to have an immense amount of power.

Interestingly, we learned that equipment personnel generally retain enough power and autonomy with specific regard to fitting and choosing football helmets. Participants felt they would receive the support of coaches and administrators with regard to student-athletes wearing properly fit helmets. This support may be a consequence of the role of equipment personnel in preventing injury thus allowing coaches to utilize their best players and improve their team's performance. This could potentially explain the differences in support between our findings and the Wolverton (2013) findings, as athletic trainers aim to return an athlete to the field of play when fully healed but as quickly as possible. This autonomy and power seems limited and tenuous as some participants relayed instances of coaches

interfering in the fitting process. Also, based on participants reporting how their duties have been altered by coaches and are now generally more stressful and time consuming, support seems likely to be provided when it is beneficial for coaches and administrators.

The results pertaining to RQ2 demonstrate that other organizational employees have little understanding of the roles of equipment personnel. Participants explained that, in general, their fellow employees, administrators, and even student-athletes did not look upon them with ample professional esteem. We posit, based upon strategic contingences' theory (Hickson et al., 1971) and the results of the study, that this occurrence represents a lack of understanding of equipment personnel's role in contending with highly relevant and uncertain circumstances via protecting student-athletes, who are highly valued assets, and their role in shielding the department from potentially harmful lawsuits. Accordingly, equipment personnel *should* realize more power and in general garner more professional respect. Equipment personnel may not acquire resources but they clearly protect them, which can be a form of power (Salancik et al., 1975).

The results related to RQ3 show that multiple helmets are likely to have an adverse affect on student-athlete safety. Moreover, multiple helmet initiatives were found to be originating from coaches. Specifically, it was found that equipment personnel are now faced with a larger volume of work due to multiple helmets, which creates added pressure and stress. Some participants indicated that it takes them away from their core job responsibilities related to safety and thus needlessly puts student-athletes' safety at risk. Therefore, multiple helmets are likely to have affected player safety via coaches' power to determine how many helmets are used even though intuitively it would be more appropriate more sense for equipment personnel to make this decision due to their expert power. However, this occurrence highlights the discrepancy in expert power. Equipment personnel have been trained in the applications of football helmets while most coaches have not. Yet, the results indicate that coaches retain the ultimate decision-making capacity. Essentially, individuals who have little technical knowledge of helmets hold the power to make decisions that directly affect player safety. Further, coaches likely accumulate power through obtaining outside resources, and when companies like Adidas or Nike thrust new helmet designs into the repertoire of choices this directly affects the coach's ability to retain their power. If large apparel and shoe companies refuse to financially support a school due to the coach's denial of additional helmet designs, a coach has then reduced the outside resources obtained by the organization thus limiting their power.

Organizational power and concussions are intertwined in this research. The devastating effects of concussions speak to the criticality of the role of equipment personnel. According to Hickson's et al. (1971) strategic contingences' theory, if the consequences of concussions were not as grave then the importance of and power associated with the role of equipment personnel would likely be reduced.

Yet, the media and academic research has largely ignored professionals, such as equipment personnel, who play a vital role in reducing concussions. Further, the relevancy of proper fit in preventing concussions should escalate the need for professional autonomy of equipment personnel. Their professional acumen is, in many cases, paramount to preventing concussions. This study is crucial to the overall understanding of power structures within intercollegiate athletics because of the dangers and consequences of concussions. In addition, the discovery of informal and formal power structures calls into question whether coaches can be constrained in their decision-making processes. The findings of this research point to a more general question of power and autonomy allocation within intercollegiate athletics departments. Also, the findings might serve as a guide to administrators as they create and implement policies related to concussions and protocol.

This research is also relevant in that it further exposes the potential for coaches to exert their power in player safety situations (e.g., coaches overruled equipment personnel when a player wanted to switch helmet styles), and the inability for those with expert technical skills and knowledge to have professional autonomy with regards to player safety (e.g., equipment personnel recommended using less helmets that were actually utilized). If equipment personnel are constrained from providing their expertise with player safety or if the pressure and nuances of multiple helmets generates human error, not only will student-athletes' safety be in jeopardy, but also there might be resulting legal issues. Several participants explained how their expertise prevents injuries as well as large lawsuits, and how the use of multiple helmets invites danger. This research adds to the growing evidence of the consequences of having power within intercollegiate athletics departments densely distributed to the coaching profession (Morris, 2011; Wieberg, 2011; Wolverton, 2013). Further, the results begin to fill the current hole in academic research concerning coaches' power and relationships with subgroups in intercollegiate athletics departments. This research is unique in that its scope is focused on equipment personnel.

Table 1
Salient Findings from the Research Questions

Research Question Theme	Findings
RQ1: Perceptions of power	Most participants felt they held adequate power, but instances of undue coaches' influence were discovered.
RQ2: Others' perceptions of role	Participants perceived a general lack of understanding of their roles by other employees.
RQ3: Multiple helmets and safety	Participants cautioned the use of multiple helmets, and suggested this practice invites danger.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study includes only interviewing eight equipment managers. The participants all had experience from major conferences, and a limited number of participants had additional experience at lower divisions. Interviewing equipment personnel from other collegiate levels, as well as the professional level might provide a different perspective. Also, no coaches were interviewed. Their prerogative would have been insightful.

There are several avenues for future research based off of the findings. One could attempt to interview equipment personnel from various levels of football. Future researchers would be wise to interview heterogeneous groups of equipment personnel to see if the same occurrences are present at other levels of football. Further, more research on the nature and viability of informal and formal power structures is warranted. Research that focuses on other support staffs of intercollegiate athletics departments would also be valuable to better determine the movement of power within collegiate athletics departments.

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