

Developing Effective Mentoring Relationships: Increasing Head Coaching Desires of Female Assistant Basketball Coaches

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Most Title IX advocates have focused their energy on female athletes, thus creating increased opportunities for women to participate in high school and college sport. Following the enactment of Title IX in 1972, female athletes playing college sports has risen from 16,000 in 1972 to 180,000 in 2006. In addition, the number of women's teams per school has grown from 2.5 in 1970 to the highest number at 8.45 in 2006. While there are increased opportunities for women to participate in sport, the percentage of women's teams coached by women is at an all time low.

The number of female head coaches of women's teams has dwindled from 90% in 1972 to 42.4% in 2006. Over the past three decades, nearly every sport has seen a steep decline in the proportion of teams coached by women. Of the five most popular sports - basketball, volleyball, soccer, cross country, and softball: all but soccer has seen a decrease in female head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006). Why has obtaining a head coaching position for women's teams remained a struggle? Some research indicates female assistant coaches have less desire and are less likely than male assistant coaches to apply for a head coaching position (Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2003).

This is discouraging considering female assistant coaches have the largest candidate pool (57.2%) for women's head coaching positions within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006). What can be done to help influence the intentions of female assistant head coaches in becoming a head coach? Formal mentoring has been linked to increased satisfaction, personal growth and career mobility of many within sport organizations (Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2001, 1999). The mentoring relationship can also be a critical factor in recruiting, educating, and retaining assistant coaches. The head coach has a definite influence on the assistant coach by serving as an expert facilitating learning. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how the mentoring relationship influenced head coaching desires of Division I female assistant basketball coaches. Four research questions were focused on mentoring characteristics, professional preparation, benefits of the mentoring relationship, and barriers or challenges of the mentoring relationship between the head and assistant coach.

Approximately 650 Division I female assistant basketball coaches from the 325 universities from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) were asked to participate in the study. Following recommendations by Dillman (2000), a letter, and the Profile of Mentors in Sport survey (Bower, 2007) were mailed to all participants. All non-respondents were mailed a postcard two weeks following the first mailing. Two weeks later an additional postcard was sent to all remaining non-respondents. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the demographics using SPSS 14.0.

The qualitative responses were analyzed using Wolcomit's (1994) four step approach. First, the data was organized using HyperResearcher 2.6. Second, the researchers read and reread the qualitative responses of the participants' answers to the open-ended questions. Third, categories were developed through the constant comparative analysis. This categorical strategy of analysis helped "identify similarities and differences among the data through coding and sorting into appropriate categories" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pg. 273). Finally, the researchers coded the data looking for themes that emerged through intensive analysis and categorization of the data.

The findings of the study revealed several themes for each research question. First, four themes were identified as important characteristic of the head coach as a mentor including being a role model, acting as a leader, the ability to communicate, and nurture assistant coaches.

Second, four themes were identified as professional preparation tools provided by the head coach to the assistant coach including professional conferences, networking, handling student athletes, and a variety of job responsibilities.

Third, the assistant coaches identified three themes of the benefits of having the head coach as a mentor including knowledge, experience, a nurturing relationship, and networking opportunities.

Finally, the barriers or challenges of a mentoring relationship between the head coach and the assistant coach identified three themes including cross-gender mentoring, lack of diversity, and differences of opinion.

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The findings suggest specific aspects of the mentoring relationship between the head coach and the female assistant coach may increase head coaching desires of female assistant basketball coaches.