An Examination into the Reasons Mothers Enter into Coaching and Why They Withdrawal from Coaching

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The number of female coaches in youth sport is relatively low. Specifically, Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) stated that only 13.4% of head coaches in a youth sport league were female. Thus, it may be increasingly important to explore why women are underrepresented in the youth sport coaching role. Moreover, exploring the factors that influence why mothers of participants in particular choose to coach and why they withdraw from coaching positions may help increase understanding regarding the current lack of female coaches in youth sport.

Entry into and withdrawal from the role of parent-coach have not been fully examined in the literature; however, preliminary research with male coaches has shown that the role of parent-coach is influenced by their children’s participation in sport (Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007; Weiss & Sisley, 1984). Additionally, stressors, such as time commitments, and conflicts with job (Weiss & Sisley, 1984; Weiss & Fretwell, 2005), have been reported as reasons fathers’ withdraw from their role as parent-coach. These factors may be relevant to mothers’ who coach their children, yet empirical support for this claim is non-existent. As such, exploration of the factors related to entry into and withdrawal for mother-coaches could provide valuable practical and theoretical knowledge regarding the recruitment and retention of mothers in the volunteer coaching role. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence a mother’s decision to enter the position of coach for a youth sports team and the factors that affect the consideration of leaving the role of female parent-coach.

A qualitative study was undertaken to uncover factors that influence a mother’s decision to enter the role of coach in youth sport. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who were coaching their daughters on a recreational (n=8) or competitive (n=2) youth sport team. The interview guide focused on entry into, experiences during, and potential reasons for withdrawal from the position of mother-coach. Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed using a manifest content analysis (Berg, 2009) to identify “meaning units” (Cote, 1993) and higher order themes.

A number of findings were revealed within the data. First, the participants indicated that they chose to coach because of external factors. These external factors included the influence of other league members who encouraged participation and lack of others willing to coach a team. As one mother said, “...we were just talking to the people in the league...I think because I said I would [serve as] head coach if they didn't have one. Then I was the head coach.” Furthermore, the participants commented that their daughters prompted their choice to coach, and that previous experience (i.e., assistant coach, coaching in high school or college, and coaching in a recreational league prior to moving to a competitive league) affected their willingness to step in and be involved with their daughter’s team. Interestingly, previous coaching experience was linked to the participants being able to learn the ropes of coaching from a “mentor”.

Second, participants commented on personal reasons for choosing to coach their daughters. These factors could also be classified as affective reasons for coaching as they included the opportunity to spend time with the participant's child, to influence others, the benefits of a social support system created within the volunteer coach community, and the desire to overcome stereotypic bias (i.e., mothers can’t coach) through coaching. Specifically, in an attempt to overcome perceived gender bias, one participant stated that she began coaching “when [her] daughter was associating coaching with dads.” She went on to explain, “I thought, how would she know that girls play sports too if she didn’t know that I did it, if I didn’t show her that.”

Concerns about coaching were also discussed, with mothers noting that their perceived limitation in athletic ability and athletic knowledge was an issue they considered prior to taking on the role. Moreover, participants were also asked to comment on whether they had considered leaving their coaching role in the future. In response, all participants indicated that they had at least considered leaving. One reason for discontinuing as a parent-coach was their own perceived lack of qualifications. As one participant indicated, “at some point...I just won’t be able to...that’s
where the cutoff will be." Additionally, mothers noted that the time commitment, their child’s discontinuation in the
sport, not wanting to hear criticism from others, wanting to give their daughter’s space or independence, and not
wanting to deal with perceived politics as factors influencing continued participation as a parent-coach.

Participant entry into the role of coach was influenced by their daughter’s involvement in sport, which is supported
by previous findings (Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007; Weiss & Sisley, 1984). Researchers have noted that
the role of parent-coach was often entered into with a sense of apprehension, as parent-coaches reported the new
roles and relationships specifically related to the dual role of parent-coach created a sense of uneasiness (Jowett,
Timson-Katchis & Adams, 2007). A feeling of uneasiness prior to coaching was echoed in this study, although the
apprehension was related in part to their perceived abilities and lack of knowledge of the sport they were
coaching. This creates questions regarding the role of gender identity when analyzing perceptions of “fit” for females
within the parent-coach role.

Limited research concerning the reasons for withdrawal from the coaching role include the reported time
commitment, conflict with one’s job (Weiss & Sisly, 1984; Wiess & Fretwell, 2005), organizational issues, and the
child’s discontinued participation (Weiss & Sisley). While previous research was conducted mostly with men, the
participants in the study expressed similar reasons for discontinuation, but added the feelings of building their
daughter’s independence and not feeling qualified as reasons for leaving their role. Similar across both reasons for
entering and leaving the mother-coach role is the notion of perceived lack of competence and autonomy. These
findings may suggest that components of social identity (Turner, 1982) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan,
2002) help explain the predetermined societal factors that classify women (mothers) as outsiders in the role of
coach, thus influencing their choices to get involved and stay involved as parent-coaches. More research that focuses
specifically on factors within these theories is suggested to corroborate these findings.

In sum, previous research has found that daughters perceive fathers as overly critical in their feedback as parent-
coaches (McCann, 2005) and that fathers provide less support than mothers (Martin, Richardson, Weiller, & Jackson,
2004). Thus, increasing understanding regarding the factors that influence entry and retention of mother parent-
coaches may increase the quality of experience for female youth participants. Furthermore, as youth sport
organizations continue to strive for lifetime involvement in sport, understanding how to involve the best coaches
will continue to be a topic of concern for sport managers; especially when attempting to recruit women who may
have unique reservations related to ability, influences, and knowledge. Additional implications for research and
practice will be presented.