Ethical Predisposition and Decision Making of High School Coaches: A Mixed Methods Approach on Gamesmanship

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In addition to teaching the fundamentals of a sport, prep sport coaches are charged to serve as models for ethical behavior to the more than 7 million high school athletes in the United States (NFHS, 2011). It is an expectation that coaches not only adhere to the cultural ethical norms of society, such as not putting an athlete in danger, but they are additionally charged by both school administration and the National Federation of High School’s to adhere to a code of conduct. Passmore (2009) states that ethical codes originate from one of two positions; consequential or deontological. He states that these two points operate on a continuum and moral reasoning is based on whether a decision brings forth the “right” consequence (consequential), or based on a duty to fulfill what is commonly thought of to be “right” (deontological). While Passmore (2009) believes that coaches commonly fall in between these points, how coaches determine what is right and wrong in the context of a sporting event has yet to be researched.

Decisions made by coaches that blur the line between right and wrong are attributed to the concept of gamesmanship. Gamesmanship is defined as “the art or practice of winning games by questionable expedients without actually violating a rule” (Marriam-Webster, 2011). While rule books may not address these gray areas, coaches often develop gamesmanship strategies through mentors, by watching the sport, or through sport-specific publications. In a recently published basketball coaching magazine, an article discussed a game strategy instructing a coach without remaining timeouts to designate a player to fake an injury to allow for an injury timeout (Winning Hoops, 2011). While this example may not specifically be against a sport rule, it is clear that there may be a breach of ethics and clearly falls into the category of gamesmanship.

There is no shortage of research on ethics, gamesmanship, and sport. Strand and Ziegler (2010) utilized the Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in Sport Scale to measure perceptions of student-athletes on what is right and wrong within a sporting contest, and found that females had a “deeper commitment to honesty and fair play” than their male counterparts (p. 1). While the researchers found that blatant cheating was prevalent in high school sport, a deeper understanding of ethical predisposition was not addressed. How ethical dilemmas are viewed differently between collegiate student-athletes and their coaches was explored by Drewe (2000), and it was suggested that when coaches provide a greater level of autonomy to student-athletes to make ethical decisions, often times the “right” decision is made. However, the concept of gamesmanship was not explored in the context of the dilemmas presented, and an ethical predisposition was not presented. Raakman, Dorsch, and Rhind (2010) explored ethical behaviors of coaches related to abuse, neglect, and violence, but also did not explore how the ethical predisposition of the coach can lead to his or her behavior. Certainly there is a plethora of research related to ethics in the sport in the coaching context, yet there is a dearth of literature on the ethical background of coaches and how their ethical views affect decision making in contests.

The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of how ethical predispositions of coaches affect decision making. Additionally, this study aims to explore whether there is a delineation between a strict interpretation of the rules and the concept of gamesmanship. In an effort to provide a positivist and a constructivist approach, a mixed methodology utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research will be employed. Tashakkori and Teddie (2003) describe combining both methodologies provides a better world view and clarity to a complex question. A positivist approach will first be taken by surveying high school boys and girls varsity basketball coaches in a large, Midwestern city (N=138) utilizing a modified version of the Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in Sport Scale developed by the Josephson Institute of Ethics. The 50-question survey is broken down into two themes: ethical beliefs and concepts of gamesmanship. To adapt the scale for coaches, the survey items were changed to relate to the coaching perspective. The survey uses a 4-point Likert scale presenting an ethical situation and questioning the subject on the level of appropriateness (e.g. It is appropriate to use a stolen playbook from an opposing school). Additionally, demographic information on the subjects will be collected. Results from the survey will be statistically compared with the demographic data, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, and gender of team coached, utilizing measures of central tendency and correlations. Data will also be compared using chi-squares to determine group differences between gender of coach, gender of sport, and age of the coach.
Following the survey, a constructivist approach will be taken by recruiting ten basketball coaches in the same geographic region to participate in semi-structured interview. The purpose of structured questions is to afford researchers the ability to create a framework for theoretical comparisons among the subjects and their responses (Patton, 2002). The question guide is focused on the two themes of the survey. The first theme addresses the ethical belief of the coach through the use of ethical vignettes to determine whether he or she bases decisions on a consequential or deontological perspective. The second theme will present sport-specific scenarios where the coach must differentiate between adherence to the rules of the sport and gamesmanship. Through the use of a question guide related to the primary themes of the survey, theoretical comparisons can be made between numbers and narratives. Additionally, due to the use of a semi-structured question guide, subjects have the freedom to elaborate their ideas and provide a much richer description of their thoughts and perceptions to each question (Creswell, 2003). Interview data will be recorded and transcribed verbatim utilizing an “iterative process” including axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Data will be coded based on the two categories addressed above. Member checking will be employed to allow subjects to review their transcripts for accuracy (Patton, 2002).

Thus far, survey results have not been collected at the time of submission. The survey was sent to the entire population of coaches in the geographic area via e-mail, and a follow-up message will be sent to increase the response rate based on recommendations for increasing response rates by Dillman (1999). The researcher has acquired and scheduled the ten subjects for the semi-structured interviews. Comparisons in this mixed methods design will be made between the survey results and the themes uncovered in the interviews. It is believed that those coaches that are found to be more consequential in their disposition will be more likely to be open to gamesmanship behavior since the means justify the end, while those coaches that lean towards deontology will have a clear line between right and wrong. If this hypothesis holds, the survey results will mirror the themes found in the interviews, thus providing validation for the findings. Having a richer understanding of how coaches make decisions in contests can aid both athletic administrators and state athletic associations refine codes of conduct and develop clearer understanding of sportsmanlike behavior. Further discussion and implications will be highlighted in the presentation.