Who’s Coaching our Kids? From Athlete to Head Coach

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As evidenced by the growth across the USA, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are creating or expanding their Sport Management and coaching programs as more students are applying to and majoring in these areas (NASSM, 2015). While employment in professional sports has remained relatively constant, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) reported that between 2012 and 2022, the employment of coaches in the United States is projected to grow 15 percent. This level of growth is faster than the average for all occupations and is due in main part to the increasing sport participation levels (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In the coming years, understanding sport coaches and their training will become increasingly important as an increasing number of coaches are needed. For example in the USA, in 2014, there were approximately 193,000 unique coaching opportunities solely at the interscholastic level (Clell-Wade, 2014). Based on the aforementioned labor statistics, across the USA nearly 30,000 additional coaches could be needed. Because many coaches oversee multiple teams, the amount and level of experience and training each coach has in a particular sport is unclear. Therefore, it is important to endeavor to understand the career path coaches have taken to achieve their current positions.

Based on such high growth projections and the importance coaches have on the developmental skills and abilities of youth (e.g., Bailey, Armour, Kirk, Jess, Pickup, & Sandford, 2009; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2011), hiring qualified and experienced coaches should be of the utmost importance. National organizations such as the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) and the National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education (NCACE) have devoted extensive resources over the last 30 years to providing training and education of sport coaches. Côté and Gilbert (2009) stress that coaches need to have a well-rounded repertoire of professional and continuing educational experiences to tap into when working with youth athletes. One of the most important ways a coach can improve their coaching ability is through gaining experience in multiple roles (e.g., head coach, assistant coach, manager, administrator, volunteer, intern, and athlete) within the sport management and coaching environment (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001, 2005). As such, this study endeavors to explore and examine the background and experiences of coaches from all high school state athletic associations in a state in the Northeastern United States. By understanding how coaches move through their career and how much time and experience they gain in each role and environment, further understanding of the skills that are needed (to be successful) can be garnered.

In this study, the authors partnered with State high school sport organizations to survey members’ experiences as sport coaches (N = 206). For the coaches, 65.3% were male, 91.0% classified themselves as Caucasian, 70.5% were married, and 77.0% had completed graduate-level education. In terms of their sport coaching experiences, 38.6% classified themselves as a full-time coach and 52.6% as a part-time coach; while 51.1% primarily coached high school sports, 22.9% primarily coached middle/junior high school sports, and 7.5% primarily coached college/university sports. The sport coaches reported a total of 895 separate coaching experiences in basketball (n=193), soccer (n=126), softball (n=100), football (n=76), baseball (n=67), track and field (n=62), volleyball (n=62), lacrosse (n=56), and the remaining 153 in sports such as bowling, golf, swimming and diving, tennis, weightlifting and wrestling. In an effort to track coaches’ experiences, respondents were asked to list their role, sport, level, and whether they coach boy’s or girl’s teams/athletes. The coaches ranged in age from 21 to 73 (M = 42.99, SD = 12.03) and reported on average over 20 years of athletic playing experience (SD = 12.44) and just over 11 years as a head coach (SD = 9.61). Respondents also indicated additional experiences as an assistant coach (M = 5.50, SD = 5.27), manager (M = 1.56, SD = 4.40), administrator (M = 3.55, SD = 6.61), volunteer (M = 5.24, SD = 6.97), and intern (M = 0.53, SD = 0.89). When laid out in chronological order from being an athlete to achieving a head coaching opportunity, a “roadmap” of an average coach begins to form. Moreover, similarities and differences between the roadmap for coaches from different sports are also available and informative. Due to factors such as specialized
knowledge and experience, in addition to the general popularity of the sport, the roadmap for coaches in sports like lacrosse, swimming and diving are different from more “mainstream” sports like basketball and soccer.

The significance of this study to the field of sport management is twofold. First and foremost, the background of all high school coaches should be as transparent as with any other educators or individuals charged with working with youth on a daily basis. Coaches should be held to a higher standard in regards to seeking professional and educational development opportunities and gaining more experience. Second, within sport management and coaching education programs, many students indicate their strong desire to become a “successful” head coach of a “famous” team. Based on the initial results of this research, a potential roadmap appears which provides information about what roles the student needs to undertake over the course of their coaching career, and how much time an “average” coach spends in each role. For sport management and coaching programs, these results can be connected to the local, state and national coaching requirements, and signposts can be added to the roadmap suggesting that, for example, during university studies, state-level requirements (e.g., coaching licensure courses) should be taken, while if one’s goal is to become a collegiate head coach, national sport-specific coaching education and related clinics and training programs must be undertaken before such a position can be earned. Providing more information to sport management and coaching students about how to enter and succeed in the expanding, yet increasingly competitive world of sport coaching assists both the students in terms of elucidating what training and experience they need, but also the sport management and coaching programs faculty and administrators in terms of building a program and offering courses and training which meets and exceeds the needs of their students.

Future research should explore the impact professional development opportunities available to coaches throughout their career, and the opportunity for these educational and professional experiences to accelerate their coaching career. In addition, further research can begin to create parallel or overlapping roadmaps which can be used by coaches who have different goals about the eventual level (e.g., interscholastic, intercollegiate, professional, Olympic) at which they wish to coach.