Path to Head Coach in Revenue and Non-Revenue Sports: Implications for Athletic Administrators

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The hiring process of an intercollegiate head coach requires athletic administrators to consider a variety of factors, including the coach’s ability to recruit student-athletes, raise funds, build a program, and work with the campus and the local community. O’Brien (2017) states that hiring coaches is the most important task an athletic director does. At the NCAA D1 level the stakes are higher, as it is expected the coach will win (Read, 2017) and performance in the win column is an important determinant of dismissals (Holmes, 2017).

While the selection process of a new coach can present numerous challenges, the aspiring head coach is also fraught with an uncertain path to follow. The career progression of coaches is largely ignored by many sport organizations (Dawson & Phillips, 2013) and coaches tend to focus on their current role, rather than engage in career planning (Hesse & Lavallee, 2012). In addition, research on career development of coaches often centers on professional (McCullick et al., 2016; Occhino et al., 2013) or elite sport (Blackett et al., 2018; Greenhill et al., 2009). Whereas, studies on collegiate coaches tend to focus on the role of a coach (Harvey et al., 2013; Rathwell & Young, 2018) compared to career aspirations (Machida-Kosuga et al., 2017).

Thus, the research question is two-fold, do current head collegiate coaches share a similar career path and is there a difference between revenue and non-revenue sports on the career path of a head coach? Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the career path of current collegiate head coaches from first coaching position to collegiate head coach. Five national coaching associations (i.e. AFCA, NABC, NFCA, United Soccer, and WBCA) assisted in the distribution of an online survey instrument to member head collegiate coaches. This included two revenue sports (football, men’s basketball) and four non-revenue sports (women’s basketball, softball, men’s and women’s soccer). 1,270 collegiate head coaches participated in the study.

Respondents in NCAA Division I revenue sports indicated they spent twelve (M = 12.48, SD = 6.32) years as an assistant and had four (M = 4.01, SD = 2.74) coaching stops. Whereas in non-revenue NCAA Division I sports, head coaches spent seven (M = 7.33, SD = 4.89) years as an assistant and made three (M = 3.11, SD = 2.63) coaching stops. Forty-six (45.83) percent of NCAA D1 head coaches in revenue sports played professionally compared to 28.4% of non-revenue sports. Additional information shared in this presentation will include the first coaching role, level of the first coaching position, and sport by sport comparisons across all levels examined. This research contributes knowledge on the career path of intercollegiate coaches, with implications for athletic administrators at the collegiate level in the manner in which they train, hire, and evaluate the position of head coach. In addition, this research may help further the understanding of how coach development can be better aligned with career progression.