It Takes A Village: Exploring the Under-representation of Women Interscholastic Coaches

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Management - Diversity (Youth Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2019-164

Friday, May 31, 2019
8:55 AM
Room: Napoleon D3

Current research has focused on the gender composition of intercollegiate sport and professional sport organizations; neither showing gains for women with 43% of women’s teams have women as head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), and only five women as head coaches in the WNBA in the 2016 season (Lapchick, 2016). What we do not know much about is the gender composition of interscholastic coaches. This study seeks to begin the conversation about the importance of women coaching at the interscholastic level. After my experience in coaching high school athletics, I was surprised to find how few women were coaching at the high school level. While nearly eight million students currently participate in interscholastic sport in the U.S. (NFHSA, 2017), there is tremendous ability to influence the next generation of coaches and sports professionals. The coach-athlete relationship can positively affect young girls self-perceptions (Lockwood, 2006), and may cause athletes not to choose coaching as a potential career (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Madsen & Bruening, 2016). At the level of interscholastic sport, student-athletes perceptions and career aspirations are beginning to form and having women role models could impact their career choices in the future.

Women coaches have been found to have many barriers to their experience and longevity in their careers. Lavoi (2016) captured levels that barriers and support women face in coaching from individual and interpersonal to organizational and societal. In particular, the balance of mother coaches have due to the time and travel constraints of coaching positions (Bruning & Dixon, 2008) has been a common narrative for young coaches. Understanding the complexity of these barriers and support are important to unpack and hopefully change the scope and diversity of candidates for coaching positions at the high school level.

Method

The data for the current study comes from a snowball sample of current and former high school coaches during the 2017-2018 school year. The lead author was a coach at a high school that provided access and legitimacy of the study to the participants. In total 20 women were interviewed on their experience as a coach, and if they left, what were the reasons. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings are showing that women acknowledge the need for a village to support them in order to make coaching a reality. Women described their experiences of why they got into coaching, and the importance that role models had on them choosing to coach as well as the type of coach they want to be. Many were able to pinpoint barriers and challenges they faced into furthering their coaching career and credibility.

Implications for practice and for future research

This study begins to explore the unique nature of interscholastic sport coaches, where meager salaries, high turnover, and minimal training are required to begin coaching. Future studies should examine what is the gender composition of interscholastic coaches in various states and to discuss with athletic directors what they do to recruit, hire, and retain women coaches.