

Experiences of Female High School Head Coaches

Kathleen A. McInnis

Lars Dzikus (advisor)

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Abstract

Female coaches are underrepresented in all levels of sports. There is a considerable body of work on women coaching in intercollegiate sport, but very little is known about the phenomenon at the high school level. Analyzing existing international research on female coaches at all levels, LaVoi and Dutove (2012) developed an ecological model of barriers and support for female coaches. The current study applies this model to explore the experiences of female varsity head coaches in one East Tennessee School District, where less than 25% of the head coaches are women. We conducted three semi-structured interviews with women in this region who have coached for over ten years. After analyzing the transcribed interviews, we identified three common themes: (a) having to prove yourself, (b) feelings of isolation, and (c) fighting gender norms. The results of our study confirmed LaVoi and Dutove's findings for female coaches at other levels. The participants advised female coaches to form supportive relationships, to stand their ground and not be intimidated, and to build support networks with other female coaches. From this study, future research could involve interviewing more participants in this school district, arranging interviews in other regions of the country, and conducting research on female coaches who have "dropped out."

Keywords: coaching, gender, women, sport, high school, equity

Experiences of Female High School Head Coaches

The problem we are addressing in this study is the underrepresentation of women at all levels of coaching (Coakley, 2015). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) examined three decades of research on female coaches and created an ecological model of the barriers and supports for female coaches at the levels of individual, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural context. However, the creation of this ecological model also revealed some glaring gaps in the literature to date. These gaps include a lack of research on female coaching experiences at the interscholastic level, a lack of understanding how female coaches are supported, and little consideration of intersecting social identities. Therefore, through this study we begin to address these gaps in the literature. The purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of female high school head coaches in a large, South-eastern school district through qualitative interviews.

During the mid-nineteenth century, modern sport had originally been developed primarily for the benefit of men, but women soon began to carve out their own opportunities to participate in physical activities for exercise and leisure (Grundy & Rader, 2015). High school sports quickly became a major cultural phenomenon in the United States where, during the early twentieth century, educators lobbied for the inclusion of physical education and sports in formal education due to the believed benefits of developing mind and body (Coakley, 2015). In the second half of the twentieth century, women's participation in American high school and college sports grew rapidly, in part due to Title IX legislature, which was passed in 1972 (Coakley, 2015; Grundy & Rader, 2015). Since then, participation of girls in high school sports has grown from 0.29 million in 1971-72 to 3.29 million in 2014-15. Boys, however, continue to outnumber girls in high school sports with 4.52 million in 2014-15 (Coakley, 2015).

In sports, women are generally underrepresented in terms of power and leadership positions (Coakley, 2015; Grundy & Rader, 2015). According to Coakley (2015), “men today coach the majority of women’s teams, they occupy the top positions of power in women’s sport programs, and they make most of the decisions that impact girls and women in sport” (p. 195). In American intercollegiate sports, as of 2014, 22% of all head coaches (for both women’s and men’s sports) were female (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Commenting on the lack of women in leadership positions in sport, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) noted, “access to female role models in positions of decision making and leadership is particularly important for females. Females have fewer such role models in their lives than do their male counterpart” (p. 18). These comments underscore the importance of studying the experiences of female coaches, not only at the college level, but also in high schools.

Methods

Prior to data collection, we received approval for our study from our university’s Institutional Review Board (UTK IRB-16-03348-XP). In this section, we describe the participants and their recruitment process, as well as data collection and data analysis.

Participants

The participants for this study were female interscholastic head coaches in a large, South-eastern school district, where women represented about 20% of all varsity head coaches at the high school level. To find eligible participants, we created a database of the contact information for all interscholastic head coaches in this region. For this, we used information on high schools’ websites, as well as directly from school administrators. Because Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) does not consider cheerleading as a sport, we did not include any cheerleading coaches in our database. A recruitment email was sent to the thirty-four female

head coaches on this database (see Appendix A). At the time we created this report, two other female head coaches volunteered to participate in our study, in addition to the female coach in the pilot interview.

At the time of the study, Amy, the participant in our pilot interview was married with one child. She explained that sports had always been a part of her life. She played a winter team sport for seven years (two years in middle school, four years in high school, one year in college) and a fall team sport for nine years. Amy became involved in coaching during graduate school when she was hired as a coach for a fall team sport in her hometown. She was the head coach for 7th and 8th grade before becoming the junior varsity coach at the local high school. Her first job was as the varsity coach for a fall team sport at her hometown high school. After moving, Amy became the middle school coach for a spring individual sport. At her fourth and current school, she had coached an individual spring sport for six years and coached a fall team sport for four years.

Lucy was married with no children. She worked full-time in social work, while her husband worked in the school where she coached. Lucy had played a fall team sport during high school and at a small liberal-arts, religious college. At the time of the interview, Lucy had been coaching for nine years. Throughout college, she had volunteered and coached at a nonprofit youth organization. After graduating, Lucy coached for two years at her alma mater. Then, the position to be the varsity coach of a fall team sport at an inner city high school became available. At the time of the interview, Lucy was in her fourth year of coaching at the current school.

Victoria was also married with no children. She expressed that sports had always been in her life. She had played an individual fall sport and an individual spring sport during high school and college. Victoria began coaching after she started her teaching career. She had been an

assistant coach for two years at two different schools. When she spoke to us, she had been a head coach at a suburban school for 11 years. Victoria was the head coach for an individual fall sport and an individual spring sport for eight years, for both boys and girls. Due to excessive time demands, she had recently reduced her commitment to coaching the individual fall sport.

Data Collection

After conducting a pilot interview, we combined information from previous literature with the results of this interview to create a final semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B). All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C). We used pseudonyms for the three subjects to ensure confidentiality. We also removed other identifying information from the transcripts and this report. Each of the three interviews lasted approximately sixty to seventy-five minutes. They were conducted in public places conducive to interviewing and privacy agreed upon by the participant. We audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of all interviews and their transcription, all recordings will be deleted.

In qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness has taken the place of the traditional notions of validity and reliability in research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1995). To improve accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, prior to completion of the full project a copy of the transcription will be sent to the respective participant to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions and allow participants to add or revoke any comments. This process is known as member checking (see Merriam, 1995; Morrow, 2005).

Data Analysis

After transcription, we identified themes from our data by analyzing the three interviews for commonalities and differences. Due to the small number of interviews, we did not engage in

a formal coding process. Instead the primary author of this study and her advisor both independently read through the transcripts several times, took notes on commonalities and differences, and compared those notes in several face-to-face discussions. Together, we came to an agreement regarding the major themes we identified and compared those themes to previous literature (LaVoi and Dutove, 2012). We looked for how the findings of our interviews confirmed, contradicted, and/or expanded the findings by LaVoi and Dutove (2012). In the next section, we will present the three themes we identified as commonalities across all three interviews.

Findings

Theme 1: Having to Prove Yourself

One of the themes we found in the three interviews was that female coaches in this study felt they had to prove their coaching abilities to a greater extent than male coaches do. For example, Victoria indicated that one of the greatest difficulties in her coaching career has been trying to prove herself to parents. After acknowledging that being female has contributed to this challenge, she described how some of the fathers of her players were,

challenging my authority over the team, questioning every tiny incident that happened, how I handled it, to the point that I felt like I was just being kind of micromanaged from afar when they didn't know the situations. But I kinda just always felt like it was because I was who I am. You know, I was a girl and they didn't think I was handling it right.

Lucy agreed that, compared to their male counterparts, females have to perform better to gain credibility as a coach. Elaborating on this, she explained that to earn the position of an athletic

director, “I’d have to do a lot of proving myself ... to try and be in charge of all that would be tough probably as a woman ... my team would have to start winning more games.”

Theme 2: Feeling Isolated

In addition to feeling that they must prove their coaching skills more than males, female head coaches in this study reported feeling isolated and described a difficulty in connecting with male coaches. For example, in describing the setting of a typical faculty in-service day, Victoria revealed how she has experienced exclusion as a female coach at her school: “it tends to end up being all the male coaches sort of sit in their little area ... and I would never go over there ... I think they would all just wonder what did I need .” Amy also described the challenges of being a female head coach among a predominantly male coaching staff. After explaining, “there is no female coach that I know of that I could go to and talk to, there's definitely no male coach, the athletic director definitely not,” Amy further described how the dearth of female coaches has impacted her as she expressed, “I think as a female coach, especially female head coach, you do feel alone, quite alone, because there is not that many of us.”

Theme 3: Fighting Gender Norms

The last theme we identified from the three interviews was that female head coaches in this study felt they received push-back when they resisted traditional gender roles. All three participants acknowledged gender norms as a factor in the underrepresentation of female head coaches. Amy insisted, “it’s easier for males to coach, socially. It’s more acceptable. If you want to have a family, it’s hard to coach, [especially] if you have a baby as a female.” Lucy and Victoria agreed that it would be very difficult to have children while also coaching. With traditional gender roles, it seems that society has also assigned certain personality traits to one gender or another. Unfortunately for female coaches, many of the necessary traits for being a

successful coach are deemed more acceptable for males. Lucy illustrated how these types of gender expectations have affected her: “the ref ... said ‘I know how you like to get wound up’ ... like it’s just part of it ... I don’t know how I get wound up is any different than how somebody else gets wound up.” Lucy acknowledged that it is socially appropriate for males to assert themselves in any setting, while a female is often discouraged from exhibiting the same traits. Victoria agreed that there are certain aspects of a woman’s coaching persona that she feels she should shut off in certain circumstances, while a male coach would not have to because it is more accepted for him to act in that manner. Next, we turn to a discussion regarding connections with the work of LaVoi and Dutove (2012), as well as limitations and recommendations.

Discussion

As described above, Victoria expressed feeling micromanaged by parents due to being a female. This confirms LaVoi and Dutove’s (2012) findings that, compared to their male counterparts, female coaches often feel more prone to scrutiny (p. 18). In addition, Lucy’s insistence that she would have to win many more games before becoming an athletic director over her male colleagues reinforces LaVoi and Dutove’s (2012) affirmation that compared to their male counterparts, female head coaches feel they have to work harder or be more successful to prove their abilities (p. 18).

Victoria had shared with us her experience with male colleagues who seclude themselves at faculty in-services. She did not feel comfortable approaching the group of male colleagues. This situation illustrates Lavoï and Dutove’s (2012) findings that at the organizational level in particular, being so outnumbered leaves female coaches feeling intrusive when they try to connect with the male coaches (p. 26). Amy described that the lack of female coaches and the poor support she received from male coaches led to feelings of isolation. This confirms LaVoi

and Dutove's (2012) assertion that female coaches feel alienated as a consequence of their minority status (p. 18).

Amy, Lucy, and Victoria all agreed that one of the primary reasons for the few number of female head coaches is the traditional gender roles that society has assigned for men and women. Amy explained that it is more culturally acceptable for a male to coach while having a family. Furthermore, Lucy and Victoria found it hard to imagine having the time to coach with children. This supports LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) revelation that career advancement for female coaches is challenged by family obligations, while their personal lives are simultaneously compromised by the time requirements of their coaching profession (p. 23). Lucy and Victoria both felt that some of the domineering personality characteristics that are often beneficial in coaching are always acceptable for males to portray, but only circumstantially accepted for a female to exhibit. This confirms LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) findings that female coaches are challenged to maintain socially appropriate female traits while also adopting the male attributes that are seemingly necessary for a successful coaching career (p. 28).

In summary, the experiences described by the three women in this study confirm LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) conclusions for female coaches at other levels. Our most significant finding was that at the interscholastic level, the scarcity of female coaches and alienation from male colleagues leaves female head coaches feeling unsupported. The participants of this study provided several recommendations for fellow or future female head coaches: (a) Do not be intimidated, (b) stand your ground and do not back down, (c) establish support networks with female coaches, and (d) build supportive relationships. A major limitation of this exploratory study was the small number of participants. In part, this was due to the busy schedules of our participants for whom coaching is a significant time demand on top of a full-time job and

personal life. Several coaches who had expressed interest in participating in the study could not commit to an interview. This was particularly true for those coaches whose sports were in season during the time of the study. Thus, we suggest to schedule further interviews during the summer vacation, which might allow for more participation. For future research, we suggest increasing the number of participants from this school district, administering interviews with female coaches in other regions of the country, and conducting research on female coaches who have “dropped out.”

Conclusion

Women are underrepresented in the coaching profession. Previous research examined the phenomenon in intercollegiate and professional sports (Coakley, 2015; LaVoi and Dutove, 2012). Little is known, however, about women who coach in high school. In this study, we explored the experiences of three female varsity head coaches in one East Tennessee School District, where less than 25% of the head coaches are women. Examining semi-structured interviews, we identified three common themes: (a) having to prove yourself, (b) feelings of isolation, and (c) fighting gender norms. These findings confirmed LaVoi and Dutove’s (2012) work on female coaches at other levels. When asked what advice they would share with women who are interested in coaching, the participants in our study recommended forming supportive relationships, standing your ground, and not be intimidated, and to build support networks with other female coaches.

This exploratory study could serve as a starting point for more in-depth research that will draw on a larger number of participants, both in the same school district and other regions of the country. We also recommend conducting research on female coaches who have “dropped out” to examine contributing factors and recommend solutions. Findings of such future studies can help

challenge the hegemonic gender norms the participants in the current study reported. Addressing the lack of women in leadership positions in sport, Coakley (2015) asserted,

people in the [sport] programs must critically assess the impact of male-dominated/identified/centered forms of social organization on both males and females. Unless this assessment takes place and changes are made, gender equity will never be achieved in coaching and administration. (p. 198)

We hope this exploratory study and future research will contribute to such critical assessment.

References

- Acosta, V. R., & Carpenter, L. J. (2014). Women in intercollegiate sport a longitudinal, national study thirty-seven year update. Retrieved from <http://www.acostacarpenter.org/>
- Coakley, J. (2015). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* (12 ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Grundy, P., & Rader, B. G. (2015). *American sports: From the age of folk games to the age of televised sports* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lavoi, N., & Dutove, J. (2012). Barriers and supports for female coaches: An ecological model. *Sports Coaching Review*, 1(1), 17-37.
- Merriam, S. B. (1995). Whan can you tell from an *N* of 1?: Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 4, 51-60.
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 250-260.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert coach's name],

We are conducting a research study to explore the experiences of female head coaches at interscholastic institutions in East Tennessee. You have been identified as a potential participant for the study.

If you decide to participate in the study, we will schedule an interview for a date and time that is convenient for you. The interview will take between 30 and 90 minutes. The interview will take place on the University of Tennessee campus, another public location you agree to, or on the phone, as long as the location is safe, conducive for interviewing, and provides reasonable privacy.

The researchers are flexible and are happy to accommodate your schedule for the interview.

Please let us know if you are or are not interested in participating in the study. If you are no longer in the head coach role, we would appreciate you notifying us.

Sincerely,

Lars Dzikus, PhD

Associate Professor, Sport Studies
Director of Graduate Studies

University of Tennessee
Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies
1914 Andy Holt Avenue
335 HPER Building
Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-2700
P. 865.974.0451
F. 865.974.8981
E. lars@utk.edu

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Tell me about your coaching career.

How long have you been coaching?
What sports have you been coaching and at what levels?
How much longer do you think you will coach?
What might contribute to your decision to quit coaching?
Have you been coaching boys, girls, or both?
Do you also teach at your school? If yes, what subjects and levels?
How did you get into coaching?
Why did you get into coaching?
Tell me about your coaching **role models**.
Who influenced you to get into coaching?
Did you have any female role models?
Have you ever considered coaching in college? Tell me about your decision.

Tell me about your athletic background.

How did you get involved in sports?
What sports did you play, for how long, and at what levels?
Tell me about your experiences as an athlete with female coaches.

Tell me about your work-live balance.

On average during the season, how much time do you devote on coaching?
How long is your season?
How do you balance the demands of coaching and work with your private life?
How do your friends and loved ones support you in your commitment to coaching?

Tell me about your life as a coach.

What is it like to be a coach?
What do you like about coaching?
What do you find challenging about coaching?

Tell me about your experiences as a female coach

What it is like to be a female coach in your school?
How many female coaches are there in your school?
How many female coaches are there in your sport in your district?
Overall, there are far fewer female coaches (in high school, college). In your opinion, why is that?

Tell me about working with other male **coaches** on your team (if applicable).
Tell me about working with other female coaches on your team (if applicable).
Tell me about working with other male coaches on other teams (if applicable).
Tell me about working with other female coaches on other teams (if applicable).

How many female **athletic administrators** are there in your school?

How many female athletic administrators are there in in your district?

Overall, there are far fewer female athletic administrators (in high school, college). In your opinion, why is that?

What is it like for you to work with male (athletic) administrators in your school?

Tell me about your prior experiences working with male (athletic) administrators.

What is it like for you to work with female (athletic) administrators in your school?

Tell me about your prior experiences working with female (athletic) administrators.

Do you think there are any differences for male and female coaches when it comes to working with administrators?

What is it like for you to work with male **referees/officials**?

What is it like for you to work with female referees/officials?

Do you think there are any differences for male and female coaches when it comes to working with referees/officials?

What is it like for you to work with **parents**?

Do you think there are any differences for male and female coaches when it comes to working with parents?

Tell me about your experiences of **coaching boys** (if applicable).

What **advice** do you have for other women who are considering becoming a coach?

Do you want to add **any other comments** about being a female high school coach?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

TITLE: An Exploratory Study About the Experiences of Female Interscholastic Head Coaches in East Tennessee

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lars Dzikus, PhD
Associate Professor, Sport Studies
1914 Andy Holt Avenue
335 HPER Bldg.
Knoxville, TN 37996

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Jonathan Evans, MS (PhD student)
Kathleen McInnis (Undergraduate student)

INTRODUCTION

You are being given the opportunity to participate in this research study. The purpose of this consent form is to help you decide if you want to take part in the research study. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the investigator to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of female interscholastic head coaches in east Tennessee. Most of the research on the experiences of female coaches has been at the collegiate level. Approximately 15 subjects will be participating in this study.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

If you decide to participate in the study, we will schedule an interview for a date and time that is convenient for you. The interview will take between 30 and 90 minutes. The interview will take place on the University of Tennessee campus, another public location you agree to, or on the phone. The interview will be audio recorded and the recording will later be transcribed verbatim. If you wish to stop the interview at any point, you may do so without negative consequences by notifying the interviewer. You are welcome to ask questions at any point during your participation in the study. At a later point, you will receive an email invitation to provide brief, written feedback on the accuracy of the interview transcript and your views on the researchers' interpretation of the data. You will not be required to provide this feedback.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATION

The possible risks to participants are minimal. While discussing your experiences as a female head coach at the interscholastic level, you may experience some discomfort. However, you can choose to not respond to any question you are not comfortable answering.

There is the potential risk of loss of confidentiality. Although unlikely, it may be possible for a reasonably determined person to identify participants due to the small number of participants in the study. Every effort will be made to keep information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

Beyond this, there are no foreseeable risks other than those encountered in everyday life.

Participant's Initials _____

BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATION

There are no anticipated direct benefits to you resulting from your participation in the research. Participating in

this study, however, allows you to express how you experience challenges and/or barriers in addition to any support you receive in this role.

This research may benefit female coaches as a whole because it may further the understanding of female coaches at the intercollegiate level. This research may benefit the society by raising awareness about ways in which female coaches experience their career differently than men and what is needed for female coaches to be successful and sustain their careers.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. That means your actual name will not be linked to written transcripts. You will be asked to come up with a “fake name” (a pseudonym) that will be used in place of your name. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. Recordings will be stored on the researcher’s password protected computer. The recordings will be deleted after the interviews have been transcribed. Signed consent forms will be kept separate from other records in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link your name to the study.

QUESTIONS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Lars Dzikus at lars@utk.edu and 865-974-0451.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or you may leave the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be deleted and destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s Name (printed) _____

Participant’s Signature _____ Date _____