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Common Coaching Challenges and their Association with Coach and Contextual Characteristics

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Abstract

This study asked a group of coaches about the major challenges they encounter in their coaching experience. The study was conducted with a group that had recently completed an introductory coaching course, but they had widely varied coaching experience, and coached male and female athletes in a variety of sports at multiple levels. We were interested in the extent to which the challenges were specific to the coaches' context, or varied according to the age, education or experience of the coach. Our results showed that coaches face multiple challenges, but dealing with parents was commonly cited as the most challenging in all contexts, indicating that a generic coach education program on this topic could be effective. Other challenges tended to be associated with specific contexts and generic coach education programs may not be able to effectively prepare coaches for those challenges.



Common Coaching Challenges and their Association with Coach and Contextual Characteristics

Coaching science is generally concerned with understanding what skills and preparation are associated with coaches' success within their specific domains, whether the domain is community, developmental or high performance sport. Research has focused on aspects of the coaching process such as communication (Bloom, Schinke & Salmela, 1997; Lyle, 2002) and decision-making (Jones, Housner & Kornspan, 1997; Chelladurai & Quek, 1995), specific technical and tactical knowledge (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995), knowledge of sport science in general (Demers, Woodburn & Savard, 2006; Abraham & Collins, 1998), and on personal characteristics of coaches such as education and experience (Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006; Reade, Rodgers & Hall, 2008).

Recently, there has been an emphasis in coach education on personal reflection and mentoring (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Gilbert & Trudel, 2005) that tends to focus on the issues and challenges faced by coaches, and on the coaches' ability to problem-solve. Gilbert and Trudel (2005) stated, "As coaching issues appear to be important triggers for reflection, time could be spent in coach education programs on reviewing coaches' current or past coaching issues, and how the issues are addressed. In this sense, coach training programs could take an issue-based approach to development," (p.38).

Partially in response to the trend toward reflection as a learning tool, there has been an emphasis placed on problem solving or problem-based approach in the delivery of Canada's National Coaching Certification Program (www.coach.ca)¹. Coach education courses are currently conducted with much less emphasis on direct content provision (lecturing), and more time is spent on problem solving. Coach education programs are offering specific courses to different groups of coaches to fulfill their distinct needs, which will allow coaches to specialize at a particular level (Lemyre, Trudel & Durand-Bush, 2007). One step in effective problem-solving is the discovery and elucidation of the problems themselves. There has been relatively little attention paid to the major challenges that coaches face, how current training programs relate to these challenges, and how these challenges might vary by the coaching context (e.g., recreational versus elite sport) or with coach characteristics (e.g., inexperienced versus experienced coaches).

Research about coach preparation alludes frequently to the challenges faced by coaches, but these challenges are often presented as though they are indisputable common knowledge, often based on expert opinion or anecdotal evidence, and are claimed to be ubiquitous. One exception is Gilbert and Trudel (2005) who were able to identify some challenges in youth team sport coaches that included: "(a) athlete behavior, (b) athlete performance, (c) coach profile, (d) parental influence, and (e) team organization," (p. 32). Otherwise, there seems to be no broad-based, comprehensive description of the range of challenges coaches in a variety of coaching contexts say they face.

¹ Canada's National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) includes three contexts (community, competition, instructor) with various levels of coach education within each context. Each national sport governing body has a NCC program for their coaches. See www.coach.ca for details.



A better understanding of challenges and whether or not they vary by context would enhance the effectiveness of the problem solving approach to coach preparation. As Cushion, Armour and Jones (2003) suggested, “if future coach education programs are to improve in terms of individualizing the coaching process to the situation, then social contextual factors that influence and impinge upon the lives of the coach and athlete, and the relationship that exists between them, must be taken into account,” (Potrac & Jones, 1999; Jones, 2000, p.96). Additionally, beyond application to formal coach education, a better understanding of the challenges coaches face could lead to subsequent research on specific challenges and potential evidence-based solutions to those challenges.

When examining the challenges faced by coaches, there are two distinct components to consider that may influence the types of challenges that coaches confront: (1) the individual characteristics of the coach, and (2) the descriptive characteristics of the coaching context. The first component, the individual characteristics of the coach, includes age, gender, experience as an athlete, total years of coaching experience, and the coach’s level of formal education. Research has suggested that characteristics such as these are related to coaching behaviors (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006; Reade, Rodgers & Hall, 2008) and coaching efficacy (Maleté & Feltz, 2000). By extension, it is reasonable to believe that there would also be a relationship between coach characteristics and the identification and management of challenges.

The second component is the coaching context. The coaching context is difficult to specifically define from a research perspective because it is extremely complex (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2006; Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2004). Sports, at the advanced level, require very specific technical knowledge. The coaching process may be similar (Lyle, 2002) between sports, but the detailed technical information required by the athletes definitely differs. However, context includes the competition level, age and gender of the athletes, the organizational structure of the program (e.g., school, club, national team), the organizational structure of the coaching staff (e.g., head or assistant coach), and the type of sport (e.g., winter/summer, team/individual).

The purpose of our study was to ask a large sample of coaches in a wide variety of coaching contexts about the challenges they face in an attempt to understand the extent to which these challenges are related either to the individual characteristics of the coach, or the coaching context.

Methods & Procedures

Participants

The population for the study was coaches being trained in the Competition-Introduction context of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) of Canada. Our strategy was to study a group of coaches with similar NCCP training and within a similar time frame. Coaches who had completed all or part of the Competition-Introduction program of the NCCP within a 12-month period were included. The known similarity of the



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individuals in the population was their attendance at one or more coach education workshops with Part A and/or Part B of the NCCP program comprising the workshop content.

Coach and Context characteristics:

The following individual coach characteristics were considered: coach age (six categories: 16-18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+), coach sex (two categories, male or female), highest level of formal education (six categories: Grade 8, High School, College, Undergraduate, Master's, Doctoral), highest level ever coached (four categories: community, city, provincial, national), coaches' highest level of competition as an athlete (five categories: community, city, provincial, national, international), years as a coach (eight categories: less than 1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-5, 5-7, 7-10, 10+). To assess the coaching context, the following items were considered: team or individual sport (three categories: team, individual, or both), current coaching level (community, city, provincial, national – these were assessed separately to allow for responses to indicate multiple levels of current involvement), hours trained per week (five categories: none, 1, 2, 3, more than 3), weeks in a season (less than 4, to 24+), age of athletes coached (young children; children, pre-pubertal, puberty stage 1, puberty stage 2, young adults, adults) again these were assessed separately to allow endorsement of multiple age groups, sex of athletes coached (three categories: males, females or both), and the number of competitions per week (less than 1, to 3+) for a total of 21 characteristics of the coach and the coaching context scored categorically.

Description of participants and their coaching contexts

A total of 820 coaches (438 men and 371 women, 11 no response) with 488 coaching only male athletes, 160 coaching only female athletes and 159 coaching both, provided at least partial information. The coaches came from across Canada (20% from BC, 16% from AB, 4% from SK, 5.5% from MB, 30% from ON, 12% from QB, 5% from NB, 1% from PEI, 1% from NF, and 1% from the territories combined), which shows fairly good regional representation given the population of the country. Coaches ranged in age from 16 years old to 55+, with the largest age category being 35-44 (27%), and the smallest category being 55+ (3.7%). The next smallest category was 16-18 (13.5%). Their coaching experience ranged from less than one year (8.8%) to more than 10 years (15.1%), with the largest category being 3-5 years (23.6%). Only 4.4% had never competed as an athlete. For the coaches' highest level of competition as an athlete, 11.6% competed at the community level, 19.3% at the city level, 37.6% at the provincial level, 17.2% at the national level and 9.2% had competed at the international level. Their coaching levels covered all options from community (30.3%), to city (32%), to provincial (28.6%), to national level (9.1%), representing the full competitive spectrum. They ranged in formal education from Grade 8 (7.7%) to doctoral degree (1.2%), with the largest categories being high school diploma (32.8%) and undergraduate degree (30%).

Design and Procedures

All study procedures were approved by an institutional research ethics board. A census survey method was used to collect the data. All coaches who had completed NCCP Part A and B (www.coach.ca) training in the



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previous 12 months were contacted. The coaches were sent a link by email to the web-based questionnaire. In the e-mail, coaches were informed about the nature of the study and were asked to consent to participate by completing the on-line research survey.

Measures

A list of things believed to ‘challenge’ coaches was developed in consultation with groups of experts from the Coaches Association of Canada staff; NCCP master learning facilitators; experienced Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) Coaches; and sport scientists familiar with sport, coaching and psychometrics. A questionnaire assessing these challenges was developed, including both checklist and open-ended questions that were included among the instruments used in a larger study about coach education practices. The list of 17 challenges is presented in Table 1.

Participants were asked to choose from a list of the “single biggest challenge as a coach.” After responding to this question, they were then asked to rate the extent to which each of the listed items was a challenge.

Results

The frequency of endorsement of the single biggest challenge, as well as endorsement of each specific challenge, is presented in Table 1. When forced to choose, the most frequently endorsed challenge is *dealing with parents*. The next most frequently endorsed challenges, overall, are *motivating athletes*, *securing funding* and *other resources* and *teaching technical parts of the sport*.

When allowed to endorse each item on the list as a major challenge or not, one more challenge emerged – *preparing athletes mentally* – which was endorsed by a greater percentage of coaches than *teaching technical parts*. Taking both methods of assessing the impact of the challenges into consideration, there are five major challenges that appear to affect at least one quarter of the coaches surveyed: *dealing with parents*, *securing funding*, *motivating athletes*, *preparing athletes mentally* and *teaching the technical parts*. The results also show that, on average, coaches identified 2.7 major challenges each, which would reinforce the idea that coaching is generally challenging and there is a need to understand whether coach-training can be improved to better prepare coaches for meeting these challenges. Based on the ranking, it appears that coaches find *managing their own stress at competitions* and *dealing with officials* and *assistant coaches* as least likely to be major challenges. The results also indicate that physical preparation is less of a challenge for coaches than mental preparation or motivation of athletes.

Challenge 1: Dealing with parents

In order to better understand what individual coaching characteristics were most associated with the challenge *dealing with parents*, a series of chi-square analyses was conducted considering a number of the characteristics of the coaches, including: the age of the coach, the gender of the coach, the coach’s level of formal education and the coach’s total years of experience. The characteristics of the coaching context that were considered



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included the current role of the coach (head coach, assistant coach, both), whether it is a team or individual sport coached, the level of competition of the athletes, the age groups of the athletes, the sex of the athletes and the number of competitions per week. Five of these variables were found to relate to an endorsement of parents as a major challenge. These were the gender of the coach, the highest level of formal education of the coach, the age of the athletes (young children and adults) and the competitive level coached.

The gender of the coach was found to vary significantly with females more likely to endorse parents as a challenge, $\chi^2(1)=3.89, p<.05$. Male ($n=133$) and female ($n=137$) coaches were found to comprise 50% each of the total coaches, indicating that dealing with parents is a challenge ($n=270$). However, this number represented a significantly higher proportion (36.9%) of the female coaches (total $n_{\text{female}}=371$) than of the male coaches (30.4%; total $n_{\text{male}}=438$).

The distribution of coaches endorsing *dealing with parents* as a major challenge was examined in consideration of the ages of the athletes coached. This is a difficult category to interpret because the coaches were free to endorse multiple age categories. Thus, the age categories cannot be considered continuously, but can only be considered separately. Separate Chi square analyses were conducted for each age of athlete category. A disproportionately large number of coaches of 3-5 year olds (42%) indicated that dealing with parents was a major challenge, $\chi^2(1)=5.37, p<.05$, whereas a disproportionately small number of coaches of over 22 year olds (26%) indicated that it was a problem, $\chi^2(1)=6.14, p<.01$. The percent of coaches of all the other age groups was between 30.7 and 35.6%. It is of interest that of all the coaches indicating *dealing with parents* was a challenge, the highest proportion saying yes (64.3%) coached the 12-15 year old group, compared to the respondents to that question saying no (35.7%). This reflects that the largest number of coaches work with that age group. The counts and percentages within columns are presented in Table 2.

A sport-by-sport examination of the data was performed to determine the extent to which *dealing with parents* might be sport-specific beyond the non-significant finding of the distinction between team and individual sports. A total of 44 different sports are represented in the data. Of the 272 coaches indicating that parents were a problem, the highest number was in gymnastics, representing 38.8%. The highest percentage within a sport was hockey, with 54.4 % ($n=33$) of hockey coaches saying this was a problem. For sports where there were more than 20 coaches responding, the median proportion was about 34%, with a low in martial arts (17.4%) and curling (26.1%) – these being the only two sports below 31%. Highs were observed in hockey (54.4%), gymnastics (38.8%), horseback riding (38.1%) and swimming (37.5%).

The coach's level of education was also found to vary significantly with the endorsement of parents as a major challenge, $\chi^2(5)=23.49, p<.0001$, also with a larger effect size than that seen for the other significant variables. The main distributional difference was that a disproportionately large number of coaches with high school education endorsed parents as a challenge compared to the other education-based groups. The frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 3.



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The last factor relating to endorsing parents as a major challenge is the level of competition the coach was working at, $\chi^2(1)=6.96, p<.01$, where there was a disproportionately high number of coaches endorsing dealing with parents as a challenge who were working at the community level (60.7%). The frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 4. This variable is also difficult to interpret because coaches could respond that they coach at more than one level.

Taken together, the variable most strongly related to coaches indicating that parents are a major challenge is first, having high school level education is second, coaching at the community level is third, coaching adults (which reduced the probability) is fourth, coaching 3-5 year olds is next and finally, being female.

To better understand the potential combined influence of these variables, the correlations among them (Spearman's rho, ρ) were examined. Significant correlations were observed between gender and coaching at the community level, $\rho=-.250, p<.0001$, indicating women are more likely to coach at the community level; between coaching at the community level and coaching 3-5 year olds, $\rho=.274, p<.0001$, as well as with coaching adults, $\rho=.112, p<.0001$, indicating that community level is positively associated with coaching young children and coaching adults; between coaching at the community level and highest level of education, $\rho=.168, p<.0001$, indicating that not coaching at the community level is associated with higher education; between highest level of education and gender, $\rho=-.165, p<.0001$, indicating that men are more likely to have higher education; between gender and coaching young children, $\rho=-.297, p<.0001$, such that women are more likely to coach young children, and there was a weaker association between gender and coaching adults, $\rho=-.073, p<.05$, also indicating women are more likely to coach adults; and between coaching young children and highest education, $\rho=.191, p<.0001$, indicating that those with higher education do not coach young children (because $n=2$, and education goes up). Taken together, we can understand that community level coaches are most likely to work with young children and adults, and are likely to be women and have lower education. These coaches would likely benefit from additional training regarding dealing with parents.

Challenge 2: Securing funding and other resources

Again, a series of chi-square analyses was undertaken to determine for which groups of coaches seeking funding was a major challenge. Examining the same variables examined for the previous challenge, years of coaching experience, $\chi^2(6)=15.81, p<.02$ had a noteworthy effect size. A disproportionately large number of coaches who have coached for 3-5 years or 10+ years positively endorse seeking funding as a major challenge. Gender of the coach showed a marginally significant relationship; $\chi^2(1)=4.16, p<.05$, such that men found it to be more challenging than women.

Three coaching context variables showed marginally significant relationships: coaching 16 – 18 year-olds, $\chi^2(1)=5.05, p<.05$, coaching 19-22 year-olds, $\chi^2(1)=4.01, p<.05$, and coaching at the provincial level, $\chi^2(1)=3.94, p<.05$. The frequencies and percentages for years of experience are presented in Table 5. Forty one percent of coaches indicating that funding is a major challenge ($n=205$) coach at the provincial level ($n=84$). A



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total of 55 coaches (26.8%) who say funding is a major challenge coach 19-22 year-olds while 100 (48.8%) coach 16-18 year-olds.

Taken together, coaches most concerned with securing funding are male, coach 16-18 year olds at the provincial level and could be either early career (3-5 years) or late career (10+ years), which seems to once again show that major challenges are shared by coaches regardless of their coaching experience.

The highest percentage of coaches within any one sport endorsing *securing funding* as a major challenge was observed in volleyball with 34% of 41 coaches agreeing, followed by hockey (33.3% of 33 coaches agreeing), baseball (30.6% of 108 coaches), and figure skating (30.3% of 33 coaches agreeing). The modal response reflected these scores in the 30-34% range. The lowest percentage was bowling where none of 23 coaches endorsed this as a challenge, followed by swimming where 8.3% of 24 coaches agreed. The rest of the percentages for the sports with more than 20 coaches responding ranged from 17.4% (martial arts) to 26.1% (curling).

Challenge 3: Motivating athletes

The individual coaching characteristics found to relate significantly with endorsement of *motivating athletes is a major challenge* were the age of the coach, $\chi^2(5) = 12.83, p < .05$ and the highest level of education of the coach $\chi^2(5) = 13.21, p < .05$. The frequencies and percentages for the age categories are presented in Table 6. It can be seen that there is a disproportionate number of coaches aged 16-18 who report that motivating athletes is a major challenge compared to the other categories. Regarding the level of education of the coach, 38.4% of those indicating that motivation is a major challenge also reported high school level education. The frequencies and percentages are reported in Table 7. Also, a disproportionately large percentage of coaches with grade 8 education report that motivating athletes is a major challenge compared to the proportion of coaches in other education categories.

For the coaching context, the coach's current role, $\chi^2(2) = 7.14, p < .05$; if the athletes were 19-22 years old, $\chi^2(1) = 13.50, p < .0001$; if the athletes were 22+ years old, $\chi^2(1) = 8.93, p < .003$. Of the 200 coaches who indicated that *motivating athletes is a major challenge*, only 12.5% reported coaching 19-22 year-olds and 16.5% reported coaching athletes 22+ years old, suggesting that motivating athletes tends not to be a major challenge for coaches of older athletes.

To determine if this challenge was specific to certain sports, the frequency of endorsing this challenge was examined by sport. Thirteen sports with more than 20 coaches each responding were specifically examined. The highest percentage of coaches was observed in swimming where 50% of 24 coaches said motivating athletes was a major challenge. The lowest percentages were observed for horseback riding (14.3% of 21 coaches) and basketball (16.9% of 65). The modal response was about 21% reported by bowling coaches, curling coaches and volleyball coaches.



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Challenge 4: Preparing athletes mentally

The level of competition was the only variable relating to coaches, indicating that preparing athletes mentally was a major challenge. Coaches indicated whether they did or did not coach at each of the possible competition levels, so the 196 coaches responding 'yes' to this challenge could coach at more than one of the competition levels. Therefore, results are presented in terms of the proportion of coaches at each level endorsing this challenge. Of the 196 coaches who indicated that mental preparation was a major challenge, 48% coached at the community level, and represented 21.2% of coaches who coach at the community level ($\chi^2(1)=3.97, p<.05$). There were 56.6% of the respondents that coached at the city level, $\chi^2(1) = 6.56, p<.01$, representing 27.8% of city level coaches. There is a disproportionate number of city level coaches indicating this challenge. There were 41.8% of the coaches that coached at the provincial level, representing 28.4% of the total number of provincial level coaches. There was no observed relationship at the national level, with only 9.7% of national level coaches endorsing this as a challenge and 25.7% of the total number of national level coaches.

The highest percentage of coaches endorsing *preparing mentally* as a major challenge within any one sport was horseback riding with 42.9% of 21 coaches, followed by curling (39.1% of 23 coaches). The modal percentage was about 25% which was observed for baseball, basketball and volleyball. The lowest percentage within a sport was observed for swimming, with 12.5% of coaches agreeing.

Challenge 5: Teaching the technical parts

Only three variables related to this challenge. These were coaching athletes 16-18 years old, $\chi^2(1)=4.67, p<.03$ coaching at the community level, $\chi^2(1) = 5.46, p<.05$ and coaching at the provincial level, $\chi^2(1) = 7.68, p<.006$.

Among the 162 coaches who endorsed this as a major challenge, 34.6% (n=56) coached 16-18 year-olds, and 65.4% did not coach this age group. Furthermore, these 56 coaches represented only 16.2% of the total number (n=345) of coaches of this age group, revealing a disproportionately small number of coaches in this age group.

Among the 162 coaches who endorsed this as a challenge, 62.3% coach at the community level (n=101), representing 22.7% of community level coaches (total n of community coaches = 444), which reveals a disproportionately high number of community level coaches who find teaching the technical parts a major challenge. Only 16.2% of the non-community coaches (total n=376) endorsed this major challenge. Relatedly, of the 162 coaches endorsing this challenge, only 42 are provincial level coaches. This represents only 14.5% of the 289 provincial level coaches, revealing a disproportionately small number of provincial level coaches.

Of the 13 sports for which more than 20 coaches responded, the highest observed percentage endorsing *teaching the technical parts* as a major challenge was gymnastics with 22.4% of 85 coaches citing this challenge. The modal percentage was about 20% which was the case for baseball, basketball, horseback riding and soccer. The lowest percentage was observed for curling with 8.7% of 23 coaches citing this challenge.



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Discussion

Our results reveal some interesting insight into the challenges faced by coaches, but the intent of this paper is to not only understand more about the challenges, but also to use this knowledge to question whether coach education is preparing coaches to successfully confront the identified challenges. The discussion that follows provides some thoughts as to how the Canadian NCCP program and the National Standards for Sport Coaches (NSSC) which has been designed in the United States have incorporated these challenges into their designs.

From the list of challenges given to the coaches, the one pervasive major challenge that dominated the results for all coaches was *dealing with parents*. The challenge of dealing with parents appears to persist regardless of the age or gender of the coach, their education, coaching experience or experience as an athlete. The challenge is more frequent among female coaches and coaches with a high school education. Although the challenge is more frequent in the coaching context for community coaches, coaches of children 12-15 years old and those who coach young children, it is the top ranked major challenge for every group. Admittedly, our results do not indicate that every coach has a problem in dealing with parents, but we have presented strong evidence that, for those coaches having challenges with parents, it would be impossible to explain the problem by suggesting that the coaches are just young or inexperienced or coach certain types of athletes in certain contexts or sports. According to these results, experienced coaches are just as likely as inexperienced coaches to feel that dealing with parents is their major challenge. For every coaching characteristic we measured, dealing with parents was identified as the single greatest challenge.

Our results put the spotlight squarely on parents and their relationship to coaches as a major challenge for coaches, but recent research by Harwood and Knight (2009) should also be recognized. They found that parents find their children's sport participation to be stressful and the researchers list a number of stressors that parents must deal with, including their children's coaches. Taken together, our study and Harwood and Knights' study suggest that coach-parent interactions are stressful for both parties and there is a need to develop positive and collaborative relationships among athletes, parents and coaches.

While the literature (Feltz, Hepler, Roman & Paiement, 2009; Reade, et al. 2008) indicates that experience as an athlete or coach and coach education are important preparation for coaches and improve their coaching efficacy, coaches do not seem to have sufficient preparation for dealing with parents. Experience as an athlete apparently does not lead to expertise in dealing with parents, and coaching experience itself does not seem to automatically lead to competence in solving parent challenges. The NCCP program does not include any specific content on dealing with parents (and all of our respondents had recently completed an NCCP introductory workshop), which may partly explain the commonality of the challenge for all coaches. The NSSC document (www.ahperd.org/naspe/) contains references to parents in domains five (Teaching and Communication), seven (Organization and Administration) and eight (Evaluation), but does not appear to identify parents as being a challenge. It may be that coach educators do address the importance of dealing with parents, and it may be that mentor coaches pass along their strategies for handling parents. However, neither the NCCP nor the NSSC



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make it clear that the topic is important. Since these coach education resources seem to deal minimally with strategies for handling parents, it may be that coaches are never given the necessary tools to effectively handle this challenge, which may explain our findings. Gilbert and Trudel (2005) found that when discussing issues such as parental influence, the coaches seldom referred to their coaching materials for generating strategies, suggesting there are few or not particularly useful strategies provided in those materials. The coaching efficacy literature (Feltz, et al. 2009; Maleté & Feltz, 2000) identifies community and parental support as important for coaches to feel confident in their abilities, and the potential for problems with parents to undermine coach confidence, discourage coaches and negatively impact coach retention. According to Feltz, et al. (2009) “among social support items, perceived internal support (from athletes and parents) was the strongest in predicting coaching efficacy, especially motivation and character building efficacy,” (p. 38). Taken together, the available research suggests that interacting with parents is possibly the most pervasive and most stressful aspect of coaching, and should therefore, probably receive more attention in both NCCP and the NSSC.

By comparison, other challenges appear to be more associated with individual coach or context characteristics. For example, the challenge of motivating athletes seems to vary according to years of experience as a coach and is less of a concern for coaches with more years of experience. This finding is consistent with previous research (Feltz et al. 1999; Sullivan et al. 2006) that showed that coaching and playing experience probably contribute to coaching efficacy, in some but not in all areas of coaching. According to Feltz et al. 2009, “motivation and character building are efficacy dimensions that may become more salient with more experience and higher level coaching when coaches become more competent at these aspects of coaching ... the relationships between the sources of coaching efficacy and the dimensions may vary by coaching level,” (p. 38).

Overall the variety of challenges endorsed suggests that many challenges to coaches are likely to be idiographic and specific to the combination of the coach’s experience and context. It is unlikely, therefore, that formal coach education could effectively deal with coach challenges using a generic approach, which supports the recent suggestions of Lemyre, Trudel and Durand-Bush, 2007. Given that the average number of challenges for coaches was 2.7, and since the challenges seem to vary according to the coaching context, the enhancement of the coach’s efficacy to deal with them through recognized informal education such as mentorship or practical coaching or playing experience (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne, in press; Lemyre, Trudel & Durand-Bush, 2007) would seem to be an effective strategy. As alluded to by Gilbert and Trudel (2005), issues that are initially considered extremely challenging to a coach are later viewed as routine as a coach progresses and gains experience. Therefore, offering more specialized (and less generic) coach education and training to address predictable but sport specific challenges might also be an effective and targeted strategy. However, it is also possible that new coaches might benefit simply from being forewarned about the common challenges coaches experience. In line with Feltz’s work on coaching efficacy, such knowledge would at least provide vicarious information that others have similar challenges, allowing newer coaches to better contextualize their difficulties and thus reducing the undermining influence on their coaching efficacy.

Whereas these patterns of results may not be surprising, they do speak to a need for combined generic coach education (which is currently provided in the NCCP workshops and is certainly alluded to in the NSSC



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material) and sport specific courses on specific issues. For example, it does appear that community level coaches, particularly those with no more than high school education, will have more challenges in their coaching than coaches of higher competitive levels with higher education. This appears to be the case for a variety of challenges. In particular, the clear pattern of *teaching the technical parts* being a challenge for community level coaches suggests that more technical education might be required for these coaches, and presumably, because technique is very sport-specific, it would be best if these education sessions addressed specific sports. For the most part, this is precisely how current coach education programs are designed. One example of a group that might benefit from such training emerging from this study is young, female coaches of community level children's gymnastics. This particular group might benefit from more technical instruction earlier, as well as some strategies for working with the parents of young children.

Such an approach supports existing coach education programs that provide specific technical training courses for coaches. Coaching education programs would then be important for improving competence in areas such as motivating athletes because coaches may not get this information as readily from playing and coaching experience alone, especially if they do not have experience at the higher competitive levels. The "special topics" approach could more easily be targeted to specific needs in specific subgroups. For example, community coaches are statistically most likely to have limited formal education, and so they might benefit from a variety of special sessions. Whereas provincial coaches do not appear to need excessive technical education, they do appear to need support in how to seek funding.

Overall, these results suggest that a modular coach education program addressing specific coach needs and delivered to those most challenged in particular areas might be a more effective way of achieving coaching excellence than a one-size-fits all workshop approach. However, Feltz et al.'s (2009) research has shown that coaches who have participated in a coaching education program are more confident in all aspects of coaching compared with either control groups of coaches who have not taken a course and/or their pre-course confidence levels (Sullivan & Campbell, 2005; Maleté & Feltz, 2000), so a modular "special topics" approach should supplement and not replace generic coach education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore more broadly the challenges coaches say they face in an attempt to determine the extent to which those challenges are generic or contextual. When considering the implications of these findings, it is important to take into account the population of coaches surveyed; these are individuals that have just completed an introductory coach education course but their individual coaching characteristics and their coaching contexts vary significantly. Previous research has shown (Sullivan & Campbell, 2005) that coaches without the benefit of coach education would be more likely to have even more challenges than the coaches in our study.

The challenges that seem to be most difficult are also those that are outside of the coach's control. While coaches can work with athletes and get them ready for competitions, they have little influence over the parents.



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Coaches do not usually control funding or program costs, and coaches can do little to prepare athletes if the athletes are not motivated to train, practice, or to compete strongly.

While there is important information arising from the coaches' contexts in this study, the diversity of the contexts makes analysis more difficult. The range of sports creates sample sizes in each sport that are small. If we were to combine the sport with the various ages being coached in the sport, the sample sizes would be smaller. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that coaches' challenges might be quite different in two different age categories in the same sport, or in two different sports with the same age category. While we can certainly explore these factors in the data, the small sample sizes would be unlikely to yield statistically significant, or more importantly, representative results. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the implications of those possible differences.

The move of sport organizations toward long-term athlete development models stresses developmental age, and competitive stage. Our results, although not conclusive, indicate a need to consider the ubiquitous nature of the challenge of dealing with parents, and the contextual nature of many of the other major challenges coaches face. These findings make an important contribution to the coaching science literature by first providing empirical evidence for the kinds of challenges facing coaches in a variety of settings, and second supporting a move to supplement the generic approach to coach preparation with more challenge-specific content.

Of particular interest when thinking about coach education (NCCP) and coaching standards (NSSC) is that coaches in lower levels dealing with younger athletes appear to have many similar challenges to those coaching at higher levels, and possibly even more challenges. Such results indicate that coaches in lower levels need just as much preparation as those in higher levels for certain challenges. The results simply do not support the idea that coaches at lower levels require only introductory education while coaches of older and/or more competitive athletes need more education. In fact, the opposite may be true, where beginning coaches need more education and experienced coaches require less, recognizing the important influence of experience accrued outside formal coach education. It may be that we are significantly underestimating the importance of the foundational requirements of community level coaches.



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Table 1

Frequency of each major challenge to coaches.

Challenge	Forced to choose one		Free to indicate all challenges			
	Frequency	Percent	Yes	%	No	%
Dealing with parents	174	21.2	272	33.1	548	66.7
Dealing with officials	12	1.5	61	7.4	759	92.4
Dealing with assistant coaches	11	1.3	52	6.3	768	93.5
Dealing with administrators	43	5.2	128	15.6	692	84.3
Scheduling	40	4.9	148	18	672	81.9
Recruiting athletes	53	6.5	155	18.9	665	81
Selecting athletes	21	2.6	95	11.6	725	88.3
Planning practice	45	5.5	128	15.6	692	84.3
Motivating athletes	92	11.2	200	24.4	620	75.5
Teaching technical parts	82	10.0	162	19.7	658	80.1
Provide guidance to prepare physically	12	1.5	93	11.3	727	88.6
Provide guidance to prepare mentally	59	7.2	196	23.9	624	76.0
Support during competition	9	1.1	76	9.3	744	90.6
Competition strategy	35	4.3	111	13.5	709	86.4
Securing funding and other resources	87	10.6	205	25.0	615	74.9
Help athletes manage stress of competition	9	1.1	122	14.9	698	85.0
Managing own stress at competition	11	1.3	61	7.4	759	92.4
Total	820	99.9				



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Table 2

Dealing with parents as a major challenge by age of athletes coaches

	3 – 5 yrs		6 – 9 yrs		10 – 11 yrs		12 – 15 yrs		16 – 18 yrs		19 – 22 yrs		22+ yrs	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	no
YES – parents a challenge	56	216	109	163	139	133	175	97	111	161	55	212	52	220
% of coaches saying yes parents a challenge	21	79	40	60	51.1	48.9	64.3	35.7	40.8	59.2	20.2	79.8	19.1	80.9
% of coaches of age group saying yes	42		35.2		35.6		32.7		32.2		30.7		26	
NO – parents not a challenge	78	470	201	347	251	297	360	188	234	314	124	424	148	400
Percentage of coaches from age group saying no	58		64.8		64.4		67.3		67.8		69.3		74	
total	100 %		100 %		100 %		100 %		100 %		100 %		100 %	



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Table 3

Dealing with parents as a major challenge by formal education level of coach

Education	Grade 8	High school	College certificate	Undergrad degree	Master's degree	Doctorate degree	Total
Yes – parents a challenge	25	116	56	59	11	3	270
% coaches saying yes	9.3	43	20.7	21.9	4.1	1.1	100%
% of education group	39.7	43.1	29.9	24.0	31.4	30	33.3%
No- parents not a challenge	38	153	131	187	24	7	540
% of coaches saying no	7.0	28.3	24.3	34.6	4.4	1.3	100%
% of education group	60.3	56.9	70.1	76	68.6	70	66.7%



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Table 4

Dealing with parents as a major challenge by level of competition of athletes coached.

	<u>Community</u>			<u>City</u>			<u>Provincial</u>			<u>National</u>		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Yes – parents a challenge	165	107	272	125	147	272	89	183	272	20	252	272
% coaches saying yes	60.8	39.3	100%	46	54	100%	32.7	67.3	100%	7.4	92.6	100%
% of competitive level yes	37.3			31.3			30.8			27		
No- parents not a challenge	279	269	548	274	274	548	200	348	548	54	494	548
% of competitive level no	62.8			68.7			69.2			73		
Total	100%		820	100%		820			820			820



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Table 5

Dealing with securing funding as a major challenge by years of coaching experience.

Years	<1	1-2	2-3	3-5	5-7	7-10	10+	Total
Yes – funding challenge	15	27	23	46	18	23	44	196
% of coaches saying yes	7.7	13.8	11.7	23.5	9.2	11.7	22.4	100
% in year category	21.7	20.1	20.7	24.7	18.9	31.5	37.0	24.9
No funding not a challenge	54	107	88	140	77	50	75	591
% in year category	78.3	79.9	79.3	75.3	81.1	68.5	63.0	75.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	787



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Table 6

Dealing with motivating athletes as a major challenge by age of coach.

Age	16-18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total
Yes – motivation challenge	41	37	26	51	36	8	199
% of coaches saying yes	20.6	18.6	13.1	25.6	18.1	4.0	100
% in age category	37.3	22.8	18.8	23.3	22.9	26.7	
No motivation not a challenge	69	125	112	168	121	22	
% in age category	62.7	77.2	81.2	76.7	77.1	73.3	
Total % in age category	100	100	100	100	100	100	



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Table 7

Dealing with motivating athletes as a major challenge by formal education level of coach.

Education	Grade 8	High-school	College diploma	Undergrad degree	Master's degree	Doctoral degree	Total
Yes – motivation challenge	23	76	34	58	5	2	198
% of coaches saying yes	11.6	38.4	17.2	29.3	2.5	1.0	100
% in education category	36.5	28.3	18.2	23.6	14.3	20.0	
No motivation not a challenge	40	193	153	188	30	8	
% in education category	63.5	71.7	81.8	76.4	85.7	80.0	
Total % in education category	100	100	100	100	100	100	810

