Learning to Coach: A Qualitative Case Study of Phillip Fulmer
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore former NCAA FBS National Champion football coach Phillip Fulmer’s biography to understand how his knowledge and practices were learned from various sociocultural experiences. The participant, Phillip Fulmer, former head football coach of the University of Tennessee (UT; 1992–2008), participated in multiple sports as a youth, played football at UT, and coached for over 30 years. A qualitative case study design with in-depth interviews was used to understand his experiences and developmental path as he learned to coach. The findings reveal four key developmental stages: athlete, graduate assistant, assistant coach, and head coach. Fulmer’s earliest learning experiences would later guide his coaching beliefs, values, and actions.

Key Words: development, biography, mentor, reflection
Learning to Coach: A Qualitative Case Study of Phillip Fulmer

Sociocultural methods of understanding sport coaching have grown in recent years (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2008; Jones, Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2011). Scholars have keenly noted that coaching is a complex, value-laden, social act affected by relations of power-knowledge, which are constantly changing (Denison & Avner, 2011). In other words, what coaches know and do is influenced by both psychological and sociocultural factors, some more dominant than others. In order to understand how to educate coaches effectively, researchers and coach educators need to know what knowledge coaches acquire, how they acquire it, and how this knowledge affects their actions (McKenna, 2009). Understanding how coaches learn—such as through formal, nonformal, and informal experiences—has driven much coach education research (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009). With some exceptions, much of the research on elite (i.e., high-performing, collegiate, professional) coaches is devoid of sociocultural factors, such as treatment of how these coaches learned to coach (Lyle, Mallett, Trudel, & Rynne, 2009). The purpose of the present study was to examine how historical and sociocultural forces influenced one long-time, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I-A Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) National Champion football coach.

What is known about performance coaches (Côté & Gilbert, 2009) often comes from single-subject research designs that aim to understand effective coaching practices (e.g., Becker & Wrisberg, 2008; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Gentner, Wrisberg, & Whitney, 2008; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976; Voight & Carroll, 2006; Wrisberg, 1990). A single-subject case study design permits a detailed description of an interesting coach’s experiences that might otherwise be inaccessible (Merriam, 1998). The case study design is an appropriate choice at the NCAA FBS football level, where there are relatively few head coaches. The first example of this approach to studying elite sport coaches was Tharp and Gallimore’s oft-cited 1976 study of former UCLA men’s basketball coach John Wooden. Research on Wooden’s coaching practices determined that diligent planning informed his most frequently used behavior of instruction (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Tharp & Gallimore).

Another example of a single-subject research study was conducted with former NCAA Division I Champion women’s basketball coach Pat Summitt (Wrisberg, 1990). She reported that her effective coaching practices centered on developing an athlete’s self-esteem and the coach-athlete relationship. A follow-up study (Becker & Wrisberg, 2008) showed that Summitt’s most frequently used in-season behaviors were instruction (48%), praise (14.5%), and hustle (10.7%). More recently, results from an interview with NCAA Division III Champion football coach John Gagliardi showed that he believed his most effective coaching practices were goal-setting, having a positive focus, and helping athletes avoid injury and burnout (Gentner et al., 2008). Jones et al. (2003) examined how Steve Harrison, a 48-year-old English soccer coach for Aston Villa, a top club in the highest division of professional soccer in England, constructed his coaching knowledge. Harrison identified several sources of knowledge necessary to be an effective soccer coach, such as playing experience, observing other coaches (mentoring), trial experience, and coaching education.
These types of case studies have contributed to understanding coaches’ perceptions of their effective coaching practices (i.e., detailed instruction, planning, and the importance of the coach-athlete relationship). Learning how these legendary coaches acquired their coaching practices was typically not a primary purpose of these case studies. Literature on coach learning has shown that coaches learn from (a) athletic experience, (b) formal education, (c) coaching experience, (d) other coaches, (e) athletes, and (f) reflection (Callary, Werthner, & Trudel, 2012b; Werthner & Trudel, 2009). Furthermore, mentoring has been identified as a potentially critical learning experience. However there is risk of naively repeating what the mentor does without knowing why, or assuming that what works for one coach will work for another (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Cushion, 2006; Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Werthner & Trudel, 2009). Furthermore, although coaches may share some similarities in their developmental pathways and learning, these processes have also been described as idiosyncratic, which complicates matters (Erickson et al., 2007; Werthner & Trudel, 2009).

Using a lifelong-learning approach guided by Jarvis’s (2006) constructivist psychosocial epistemology, a recent study examined how primary and secondary socialization influenced the career choices and subsequent coaching approaches of five experienced and certified Canadian women coaches (Callary, Werthner, & Trudel, 2011). The findings revealed that these coaches’ decision to enter the field and how they learned to coach were heavily shaped by their athletic participation, family, and childhood coaches and teachers. The researchers concluded that coach educators could use reflective thinking in order to facilitate coaches’ ability to question how they had been socialized into particular ways of knowing and doing.

Given the varying requirements to be a coach (i.e., formal education, certification, experience), it may not be surprising that coaches’ experiences share similarities and differences. From a sociocultural perspective, it makes sense that coaches learn and develop differently, because as society changes (i.e., in relations of power, ways of knowing and doing, social norms), its coaches too will change. Additionally, what is known know about elite coaches is that many constantly change by learning new knowledge and practices and developing their own identity and style (Becker & Wrisberg, 2008; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Gentner et al., 2008; Voight & Carroll, 2006).

The purpose of the present study was to explore former NCAA FBS National Champion football coach Phillip Fulmer’s biography to understand how his knowledge and practices were learned from various sociocultural experiences. To date, no research has studied how an NCAA FBS National Champion football coach learned to coach. This is an interesting omission because American football is quite popular and elite coaches often serve as models for youths and other school-based coaches. The findings of this study could be used by coach educators to develop
effective sociocultural pedagogical strategies for preservice and current coaches. For example, Gilbert, Gallimore, and Trudel (2009) suggested that descriptions of coaching issues could be used for problem-based learning materials (i.e., contextually rich, lacking clear answers, and authentic to the individual) for other coaches.

Methods

Participant

The participant was former University of Tennessee (UT) head football coach Phillip Fulmer. Tennessee is a member of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and competes at the NCAA FBS (formerly Division I) level. Fulmer’s accomplishments as a player and a coach are numerous: football scholarship and co-captain (1971) at UT, head football coach at UT for 17 years (1992–2008) with an overall record of 152-52, two SEC championships, six SEC Eastern Division championships, and a 1998 national championship. He also had 92 players make a National Football League (NFL) roster, 18 players earn All-American honors and 68 players selected to the All-SEC team. All of these on-field accomplishments were achieved without any NCAA investigations or major infractions—a rarity in the NCAA’s top competitive level (Lederman, 2011).

Moreover, Fulmer’s “family approach” and “players-coach” philosophy earned him the respect of numerous players, coaches, fans, and supporters (Staff, 2007). Fulmer is the co-author of two books on coaching (Fulmer & Hagood, 1999; Fulmer & Sentell, 1996), a 2012 inductee into the College Football Hall of Fame, and former president of the American Football Coaches Association. He is a long-time supporter of several service organizations such as the Jason Foundation, Boys and Girls Club, and Friends of the Smokies (mountains).

Research Design

In order to understand how Fulmer learned to coach, the research design combined methods from case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) and biography (Denzin, 2001). The purpose of a single case study is not to seek statistical generalizability, but rather to explore the unique, to gain “knowledge we would not otherwise have access to” (Merriam, 1998, p. 33). Case study helps to develop a “petite generalization,” akin to what coaching scholars call idiosyncratic learning (Werthner & Trudel, 2009), which for the present study is an understanding of how Fulmer learned and developed coaching knowledge and practice (Stake, 1995). With respect to biographical research, a detailed description of Fulmer’s story is presented to tell his experiences (Denzin, 2001).

Data Collection and Analysis

Access to Coach Fulmer was secured through the first author, who worked as a strength and conditioning coach at the University of Tennessee during Fulmer’s tenure. Data were...
collected via one, three-hour interview with Fulmer in May of 2009 and his personal website (www.phillipfulmer.com). A semistructured, reflexive interview protocol was used, which began with a grand-tour question, “Tell me about your experience of coaching” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Probing and subsequent interview questions (e.g., “Tell me more about how your childhood experience influenced your coaching career? How did you learn to care for and work with players?”) were used to explore how he learned to coach and his coaching career. In November 2009, the first author transcribed the interview verbatim, which resulted in 24 pages (535 lines) of double-spaced text. The first author analyzed the data and used Microsoft Excel to manage the analysis. In order to reveal meaningful patterns of Fulmer’s learning and developmental processes, data were analyzed consistent with the tenets of the constant comparison method (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which involved drawing out meaning units, comparing them within the transcript, and categorizing them based on similarities. The second author acted as a peer debriefer in order to challenge and assist the first author’s analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to detail how the data were coded and to make the process transparent (American Educational Research Association, 2006), a code map (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002) was constructed (see Table 1). As a way of member checking (Merriam, 1998), Fulmer reviewed a copy of the transcript to make any amendments, but made none. He was also given a draft of the present manuscript to make any changes. He made a few minor changes to the Findings section, which helped to provide a more thoughtful and authentic story.
Table 1. 
**Code mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up) (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Iteration: Initial Codes/Meaning Units</th>
<th>Second Iteration: Clusters of Similar Meaning Units</th>
<th>Third Iteration: Coach Phillip Fulmer's Developmental Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a Fun</td>
<td>1a Friends and Family</td>
<td>Theme 1: Youth Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a Played multiple sports</td>
<td>1b Coaches</td>
<td>Theme 2: A Graduate Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a Supportive parents</td>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 3: An Assistant Coach</td>
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<td>1a FCA</td>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 4: Head Coach</td>
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<tr>
<td>1b Relationships</td>
<td>2a Turning Point</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Respect</td>
<td>2b Meaningful Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Committed to youths</td>
<td>3a Broaden Horizons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Quality time outside sport</td>
<td>3b Self-directed Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Energetic</td>
<td>4a Consistent and Constant Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c Work ethic</td>
<td>4a Never fully prepared</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c Overcoming adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c Balance school and sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c Travel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Initial codes or meaning units were given a number and letter (i.e., 1a, 1a, 1a, 1b, 1b, 1b…) based on their similarities from the raw data. The second iteration involved clustering the initial codes (i.e., 1a, 1b, 1c), and the third iteration involved categorizing these clusters (i.e., theme 1, theme 2).
Findings

Consistent with qualitative research in general and case study methods (Stake, 1995) in particular, the findings present an in-depth description of Fulmer’s meaningful learning experiences. Due to the extensive quotes included in this section, the findings may be considered a “modified realist tale” (Sparkes, 2002), which is fitting given Stake’s (1995) assertion that a case should be distinctive. As recommended by Hinchman and Hinchman (1997), the findings are presented chronologically and overlay Fulmer’s meaningful learning experiences across four stages of development (athlete, graduate assistant, assistant coach, and head coach).

Stage 1: Athlete

The most meaningful learning experiences that Coach Fulmer reported within the developmental stage of his youth in sport were with family, coaches, and friends. In these experiences he developed important values that helped him grow. Fulmer stated that he played multiple sports because it was fun and that his parents supported his sport endeavors:

I played football, basketball and baseball as a youngster. Baseball was probably my favorite sport at that time. I was blessed to have great, loving parents. We were poor as could be, and Dad worked two jobs all of his life, but there was always love in our house. Dad came to see us play when he could and mom was a stay-at-home mom. Even though athletics was only a small part of what they did as parents, they were always supportive. With all this support around me, sports turned out to be a very fun experience, a real positive experience, and a big part of my life.

Early on, Fulmer learned that sport was very positive. Furthermore, he talked about the coaches that he had when he was a boy. He said that the coaches were energetic and that was part of the reason why sport was fun:

I was really fortunate when I was a little guy to have a lot of really neat, positive, and interesting people coaching me in little league baseball and little league football. All the credit goes to the coaches who taught me. Those guys approached coaching young people by making it fun, exciting, and personal.

The coaches built a foundation through close relationships and respect. They were committed to their athletes and went the extra mile to develop their athletes’ love of sport:

The coaches were really committed to us and, because of that we were really committed to them. These were high school coaches who did not make a lot of money, but they went out of their way to expose us to college athletics. They took us to games at local colleges and paid for everything, as none of us could afford it.

The coaches showed commitment by spending quality time outside of sport with their athletes to ensure that they were developing not only as athletes, but as good citizens:
The coaches would have us over to their house for cookouts and spent a lot of quality time with us outside of sport. My positive childhood experiences were combined with these little league coaches—I respect them and appreciate them so much. My high school coaches were some of the most influential people in the school and community. They really made a difference in my life and taught me and my teammates how to practice, prepare, and play, but also how to love and appreciate each other.

Through these experiences, Fulmer learned that coaches’ commitment to sport and to athletes enabled athletes to have the best possible experience. Fulmer also discussed spending countless hours practicing:

I can’t tell you the hours that we spent lifting weights, running, and hitting dummies in the off-season. The same with baseball, we were taking batting practice when other guys were at the lake or doing something else. The football team had a great tradition at the school, but when we got to high school the team was not very good.

From these experiences, Fulmer developed a strong friendship with his teammates:

I played with a group of guys that really bonded together and had a lot of fun with each other and supported each other. We made FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) a big part of what we did. From a success standpoint, we ended up having 27 guys off that team over a four-year period that played college football, which was really an unusual number, and nine of us played in the Southeastern Conference.

From spending time in and out of sport with his friends, his family, and his coaches, Fulmer learned values including a hard work ethic, how to overcome adversity, and how to balance sport and school:

I learned a lot of values from these coaches…We were taught to never quit and to work really hard and find a way to win…I learned to fight back from adversity and turn everything into a positive learning experience. I always knew that I was going to get my education and do the very best I could from an athletic standpoint…When I got to college, I knew how to practice, work, and prepare mentally. Our high school coaches had taught us that. We were committed in the off season and I learned how to manage the time that we had…the balancing act between school, athletics, and social time.

Fulmer ended up going to UT with a football scholarship and, based on the values that he had learned in youth sport, was determined to work hard and get his education. As a collegiate athlete, Fulmer went to UT to play linebacker, but soon found that he would not have the chance to play much. So, he switched positions and was able to play:
I went to Tennessee as a linebacker. I wanted to be the next great linebacker. They already had multiple great linebackers, so I ended up moving to the offensive line… and learned to play the position. Changing positions ended up being one of many great learning experiences I had in sport… because I found a way to accomplish my goals. I was a pretty good athlete, very determined, and I made the most out of my opportunities as a player.

Fulmer stated that he had a very good experience as a football player and graduated with a double major degree (history and political science). From his athletic experiences, Fulmer learned a great deal about the importance of athletes getting support, developing friendships, and balancing sport and school. He also learned that as a coach, he wanted to be committed both on and off the field, work hard, and find solutions to achieving his goals.

Stage 2: A Graduate Assistant.

After graduation, Fulmer did not yet know his career path. He then had a major turning point in his career:

I thought about being a lawyer, going into real estate, corporate sales, or even becoming a principal or a high school teacher. I decided to go to graduate school and at that particular time I was very fortunate that my coach gave me a chance to be a graduate assistant. It was really a turning point from a career standpoint.

Fulmer had the opportunity to work with the team and learned a great deal about how to coach during this time:

Being a graduate assistant was a great learning experience. It was thrilling for me to dive into football and dive into recruiting, scouting, practicing, and planning. I did well, and they gave me more and more responsibility. I learned a lot that I used all the way throughout my career.

Fulmer put into action the values he had learned as a youngster by having a hard work ethic and being committed to the team. For example, he talked about how he put together video:

We didn’t have the technology back then like we do now. I physically cut and spliced the tape together, hung it on the walls. We got back on a Saturday night at 11:00 p.m. and then I had to be ready for a presentation for the coaches the next day at 1:00 p.m. It was an all-night deal putting that thing together. I got a great dose of college football coaching reality at a very young age; I was only 22 years old.

Despite these challenges, Fulmer enjoyed his experiences and asked to be placed on the defensive side:
The secondary coach was a great communicator... Being around the secondary coach was a blessing for me because I learned a lot about defenses, but more importantly, I learned a lot about how to deal with young people. He just had a great way with his position players, all players for that matter. I wanted that kind of experience. From the secondary coach, I saw how he handled people and that it was so positive. I had seen both worlds. The positive route—that was the route I chose to go... That was a crucial time for me being mentored by the secondary coach, having a positive experience and growing as a young coach.

Had it not been for this mentor who modeled a positive approach, one that Fulmer thought to have been incongruent within the collegiate setting, he remarked that he might have chosen another career. The positive approach, which aligned with the values he learned as a youth, showed him this was not only possible, but also a successful strategy with the players. The mentoring experience left such a mark on Fulmer that during the interview he recommended that novice coaches should be selective in finding a quality mentor rather relying on mere “happenstance.”

Stage 3: An Assistant Coach.

In Coach Fulmer’s developmental stage as an assistant coach, he had several experiences learning how to develop individual athlete’s skills, team cohesion, and lay the foundation for a long-term, successful program. When Fulmer was 23 years old, he was offered a job at Wichita State University. He was thrown into experiences where it was sink or swim, from which Fulmer learned and succeeded:

Wichita State had a lot less of everything—facilities, money, staff, tradition—for a young coach it was great because all of a sudden not only was I the coach, but I was the guy who helped paint the weight room and made sure the trash was taken out. I was the assistant academic coordinator and the recruiting coordinator—great learning experience!

Fulmer stated that the team was not successful when he got there, but in implementing all that he had learned, he eventually helped the team to achieve success:

Our team was horrible when we got there, but we had a lot of confidence in what we were doing; we recruited, and built it up. I coached linebackers for a couple years and then offensive line the last three. Our third year we finally had a winning season and our fourth year we played for the [conference] championship game.

Fulmer then moved to Vanderbilt to assist building their program. In 1980, he jumped at the opportunity to return to UT:

We didn’t have a great year, but it was okay, we were still in the building process. My second year, the head coach was on my rear during spring practice. We were not good. I
drew upon my experiences at Wichita and in high school, where we built a program and we stayed the course, got better and better, and almost all of those guys [offensive lineman at UT] ended up playing professional football.

Fulmer noted that he learned that it was important not to get caught without enough high-performing players, and so he took on many players that other position coaches were uninterested in. In addition to learning to develop players’ abilities, he learned the importance of recruiting, stating, “I learned a great lesson—you’re only as good as your players regardless of how good you are as a coach. There’s an old saying that it’s not the Xs and Os so much as it is the Jimmys and the Joes!”

It was in this stage that Fulmer realized that he wanted to be a head coach and that he would learn all that he could to ensure that he was ready for such a position:

My early experience at Tennessee, as an assistant, was great, and I made it a real priority to learn everything I could…I wanted to be a guy that understood tactics and schemes at all positions. I made sure that I wasn’t just defined as an offensive line coach. I knew I wanted to be an offensive coordinator, or a defensive coordinator for that matter. I knew I wanted to be a head coach. There, at 29, I knew. I knew eventually what I wanted to do.

It was a series of learning experiences that helped Fulmer define his career aspirations. Once he became aware of his goal, he proceeded to learn as much as possible to attain that goal. Early on, as a graduate assistant, he had learned that achieving his goal was possible, and he now put that belief into action:

I felt like I was preparing myself the whole time for a chance to be a head coach. So, clinics were important to me—to go study other people, visiting other pro camps, college campuses. I made those things a significant part of planning, and I think you have to really work at it and study the game and stay current, but I also had to make sacrifices—family and social time were precious.

Fulmer noted that he recognized the need to engage in community service, recruiting, and communicating with others. He visited coaches of successful teams to learn from them: “Anywhere I could go to draw on other people’s experiences and knowledge, and study the game, helped me to establish my own way, my style, of how I dealt with players.” Fulmer stated that he was a tough coach who demanded a lot of his athletes, but that he also really cared about them:

I tried to get involved in a player’s world and that was just how I had been taught way back to my experiences in little league and high school. I thought it was important to be demanding, but also positive like the secondary coach who mentored me back when I was a graduate assistant.
Drawing on all his learning experiences, Fulmer set out to become a positive, caring, demanding, and committed head coach.

Stage 4: The Head Coach.

In the developmental stage of head coach, Fulmer continued to learn. In 1993, Fulmer dropped the interim tag and took over as the permanent head football coach:

You think that you’re prepared for that, and obviously I was very excited about the opportunity, but there was so much to learn—often times learning on the run because you hadn’t done it. Shoot, I was staying in the office till 2 in the morning sometimes just to make sure that the I’s were dotted and the T’s were crossed and we were ready for the next day and for recruiting challenges.

Fulmer hired coaches that had positive philosophies similar to his. Despite some adversity, the team was successful for many years. Fulmer attributed the support of the people around him, administration, friends, and trustees, as important elements to the team’s success. He noted that it was important to learn from negative and positive experiences alike and listen to and learn from other individuals whom he respected. Indeed, in search of guidance during this time, Fulmer would reflect on the head coaches he had played for and coached under. Furthermore, he learned from experiences outside of sport that were relevant to his situation:

I think you can go outside the world of athletics and learn a lot. I’ve taken different courses on leadership, management styles, organization, and communication. One of the best experiences I had was a course on how to read body language and another on how to communicate with people at work, and a sales course. One of the best courses I had was ‘closing the deal.’ It didn’t have anything to do with athletics—it was actually a real estate course. Going outside the framework of athletics to learn about people and life… because that’s what coaching is—dealing with people…very much a people business.

Fulmer understood that to be successful he had to learn how to communicate and deal with athletes as people, not just as machine-like bodies:

I think you have to stay current with what’s popular so you can understand young people, but young athletes should have some respect for older, experienced coaches. If a coach can have a little bit of an understanding of what their music is about, what they are reading, or what movies are popular, it helps connect a little better and then you can get your message across.

Fulmer learned to connect with his athletes by understanding their interests. In this way, he could show his commitment to their development not only on the field, but through a caring attitude mindful of their interests. In response to how he wanted his story to be told, he proudly stated:
I didn’t break the rules, and we did it the right way. We did influence kids, communities, a state for that matter, and in a lot of ways college football. We set a standard that will be hard to beat and we did it the right way.

Discussion

Coach development has been defined as “a chain of developmental outcomes and activities that occur in response to personal and contextual requirements over a period of time” (Côté, 2006, p. 218). Previous research has classified the development of coaches into three stages (Salmela, 1995), five stages (Erickson et al., 2007), and six stages (Salmela, Draper, & Desjardins, 1994; Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995). The emergent themes representing Fulmer’s development suggest four stages. We isolated Fulmer’s athletic stage to one stage rather than two (youth and specialized) as some researchers have done, as he did not differentiate the two. In a recent review on quantifying the developmental experiences that contribute to coaching expertise, Young (2013) concluded that high-performing coaches tend to (a) receive minimal formal education, although more successful coaches receive more education than lower-performing peers; (b) obtain vast hours as an assistant before becoming a head coach; (c) receive mentoring and, as they gain experience, give mentoring; and (d) have substantial experience as an athlete. Fulmer’s informal coach education began as a youth athlete, where he formed his beliefs about the value of sport and the role of the coach. Although the present study did not quantify Fulmer’s experiences, results show that he did participate in multiple sports as a youth and in high school; he specialized in collegiate football, was introduced to coaching as a graduate assistant, and then obtained countless hours of experience as a full-time assistant coach for 17 years before becoming a head coach for an additional 17 years.

While stage approaches to coach development are useful, especially for coach educators and national governing bodies seeking to design formal coaching curriculums, they may not accurately reflect the complex interaction of multiple forces, especially at the individual level. For instance, Fulmer was a history and political science major in college and was thinking about becoming a lawyer or administrator. When presented with the opportunity to be a graduate assistant coach he accepted this position, and as a result of having this positive, challenging experience he continued to coach. Fulmer’s own idiosyncratic path may reflect the lack of a universally required degree, licensure, or certification to coach in the United States during the time of his coaching tenure. Yet, Fulmer did identify the value of formal and nonformal education (e.g., leadership, sales, and body-language courses). The profession of coaching is developing around the world, which should influence coaches’ developmental paths and coaches’ perceptions of the efficacy of formal education.

Most of the research on coach development has looked at coaches’ participation in sport as athletes and their experiential coaching experiences (Callary et al., 2011; Erickson et al., 2007; Gilbert, Lichtenwaldt, Gilbert, Zelezny, & Côté, 2009; Lynch & Mallett, 2006). While research on athletes suggests that family is likely to have a significant direct and indirect influence on their development (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003), the scholarly literature has yet to
extensively explore this area with coaches. Callary et al. (2011) determined that coaches’ experience with their family in their primary socialization does have important implications in their coaching practices. For example, it is often parents who place their children in sport and encourage their participation, which helps individuals to develop a love of sport. With this base value for sport, further learning allows individuals to develop an interest and love of coaching (Callary et al., 2011). Significant to Fulmer’s development was the support and engagement from family and youth/high school coaches, which is consistent with the findings of Nash and Sproule (2009). Indeed, his parents helped him develop a value system that guided his own career path. Other performance coaches have acknowledged the positive influence of their father. For example, John Wooden credited his father for teaching him the values of faith, family, and hard work (Williams & Denney, 2011), and Bill Belichick, head coach for the NFL’s New England Patriots, credited his father for teaching him how to scout, analyze tactics, and work hard (Halberstam, 2012). In contrast, famous American high school football head coach Joe Ehrmann, a former NFL defensive lineman and All-American at Syracuse University, wrote of his struggle over many years to reject, ultimately, the negative influence of his father (i.e., emotionally manipulative, violent, and uncaring; Ehrmann, Jordan, & Ehrmann, 2011). An implication for coach education is to help coaches become aware of how their behaviors and values were shaped by their family, coaches, and sport-related experiences. In so doing, coaches may be better prepared to demonstrate values and behaviors consistent with coaching standards such as those created by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2006).

As an athlete, Fulmer also learned values such as coaches being supportive and committed to athletes both on and off the field, inspiring a hard work ethic, and personally finding ways to achieve goals. While these values may have helped Fulmer to win many contests, they more importantly shaped how he would coach, which he reported as a demanding, caring approach. Callary, Werthner, and Trudel (2012a), in a case study of a female collegiate ice hockey coach, noted the effects that early sport participation had on the beliefs and actions of the coach. Fortunately, Fulmer experienced a positive, fun, learning experience from his participation in youth and high school sports, which he carried to his collegiate coaching career.

Mentoring, too, has been identified as an important milestone for the development of coaches (Bloom et al., 1998; Cushion, 2006). As a 22 year-old graduate assistant coach eager to learn from experienced coaches, Fulmer identified the importance of finding positive coaching mentors that fit his own values. He saw one mentor establish positive, close relationships with athletes, and he realized he could go the “positive route.” Fulmer talked about how he drew on the positive behaviors and values (and came to reject the negative ones) as a guide for his future actions as a coach. The experience of being mentored was so meaningful for Fulmer that he recommended novice coaches be selective when choosing mentors, echoing the sentiments of Gilbert et al. (2009), who called the mentoring process a vital experience. While acknowledging the value of novice coaches patterning themselves after a coach they respect, Fulmer also cautioned to “be yourself.” This seemingly paradoxical sentiment has been found in other case studies of sport coaches (Nater & Gallimore, 2006; Voight & Carroll, 2006). We offer the interpretation here that while these coaches believe learning from others is beneficial, one cannot
reduce the complexities of coaching to mere mimicry or isomorphism (Lemyre et al., 2007) and so learning skills such as self-awareness, reflection, and integrity are paramount to becoming a successful, authentic coach. Indeed, research defining coaching effectiveness and expertise has identified coaches’ intrapersonal knowledge as an essential component (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). An implication for coach education, with many degree-awarding institutions now requiring an internship or practicum experience, is to be aware of the values and actions that preservice coaches observe during their early coaching experiences, while encouraging novice coaches to develop an authentic and ethical coaching style.

Related to, but outside, the interview data collected for the present study, Fulmer has written that the coach’s first job is as “educator, mentor” (Fulmer, 2008). The main purpose of coaching, for him, is “doing my best to help every player become an educated, responsible adult…[our] foremost priority is the growth of our young men as well as winning football games” (para. 6). Combined with the findings of the present study, we argue that Fulmer’s personal coaching philosophy (Carless & Douglas, 2011) reveals a story of an educator-coach working within the problematic space of “big-time” intercollegiate athletics, which has long faced heavy criticism (e.g., winning-at-all-costs, detracts from academics, exploitation of labor; Coakley, 2008). The belief that sports can be used as an educational activity appears consistent with other theorizing on the educational foundations of effective coaching (Gearity, 2010), holistic coaching (Cassidy, 2013), and coaching programs such as InSideOut Coaching (Ehmann et al., 2011) and Double-Goal Coaching (Thompson, 2003). While the coach’s role regarding problematic issues of intercollegiate athletics warrants further research, Fulmer’s story reveals how he learned to be a quality coach (i.e., positive, supportive, caring, following the rules). These coaching characteristics are increasingly supported in the coaching literature, including Becker’s (2013) review on quality coaching behaviors and Gearity’s (2012) study on coaching behaviors. As society continues to change and youth sports, along with intercollegiate athletics, become more professionalized and commercialized, coach educators need to be mindful of how this sociocultural context will influence the next generation of coaches. Coach educators could use instructional strategies (e.g., stories such as Fulmer’s) to challenge coaches to understand how their beliefs and values were shaped in order to develop ethical and effective ways of coaching.

Fulmer’s reflective and continuous approach to learning is consistent with NASPE standards on coach evaluation and improvement (NASPE, 2006), as well as with other elite coaches who describe their own learning as an on-going process of improvement (Nater & Gallimore, 2006; Voight & Carroll, 2006; Werthner & Trudel, 2009). Finally, consistent with other research, Fulmer reported learning from trial and error (Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004; Sage, 1989), by making changes or adapting (Gould, Gianinni, Krane, & Hodge, 1990), and learning through informal (e.g., coaching clinics) and nonformal means (e.g., meetings, watching film).

As with all research, there are limitations to the present study. Unlike experimental research, biographical research cannot be replicated, and what was presented is a shortened
account of Fulmer’s life experiences. We also did not solicit the voices of other people in Fulmer’s life (e.g., athletes, assistant coaches) who might have provided additional insight or alternative interpretations. Future research could collect data from multiple sources to provide a more comprehensive narrative of a coach’s development.

Conclusion

Coach educators should help coaches to reflect on their sociocultural experiences and to develop personal goals and career aspirations that, like Fulmer’s, align with NASPE (2006) standards on philosophy and ethics, teaching and communication, organization and administration, and evaluation. Understanding to what extent sociocultural factors contribute to coach learning and coaching practices is problematic, as these factors may be considerably different depending on the culture and individual and will inevitably change in scope and dominance as society changes. However, the findings of the present study demonstrate some of the sociocultural influences on how Coach Fulmer learned to coach. In reflecting on their experiences, coaches may develop better awareness of how society influences their values and behaviors (Ehrmann et al., 2011; Gilbert & Trudel, 2006; Noddings, 2003). Indeed, Dewey (1916) noted the worthy goal of preparing educators to learn how to learn. In order to learn how to learn from a sociocultural perspective, coach educators and coaches may find it worthwhile to think about how sociocultural factors influence their coaching practice.
References


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