I am honored to have the opportunity to comment on the manuscript titled: Coach Evaluation from Three Perspectives: An Athletic Director, a Coach, and a Consultant. Gillham, et al. address a topic of interest to athletic directors and coaching educators, but often approached hesitantly by coaches. Ideally, the implementation of a systematic coaching evaluation system at the collegiate level is necessary. Countless professions employ a systematic approach in evaluating their employees. In higher education, faculty and staff are evaluated annually on performance measures and congeniality, which leads to recommendations for continued employment. The evaluation process is uniform across departments and units on campus to ensure accountability and consistency. Although, I was never in a position to formally evaluate a coach, I participated in annual evaluations as an employee of a collegiate athletic department. In addition, when working closely with coaches and athletic administrators I was privy to conversations and observed coaches behavior towards the evaluation process.

In my experiences, coaches were evaluated in the same manner as all employees at the institution. This was a systematic process involving a documented performance review and recommendation for continued employment. Often the annual evaluation process was preached as an opportunity for professional growth. Undoubtedly, coaches considered it nothing more than a task for retaining their current position. Furthermore, the institutional employee evaluation procedure was unsuccessful in distinguishing the specific skills and challenges coaches face compared to their colleagues on campus. As addressed by Gillham, et al., the current methods adopted at collegiate institutions to evaluate the coach fail to provide the positive benefits of a systematic coaching evaluation process, focused on the assessment of coaching performance and the enhancement of educational opportunities for coaches.

Questionable actions by collegiate coaches in recent years (e.g. Joe Paterno, Penn State University; Jim Tressel, The Ohio State University; Mike Rice, Rutgers University) and ensuing media pressure have challenged institutions and athletic departments to address the role and responsibility of coaches on campus. Balancing the pressure to produce winning athletic programs and speak to the growing concerns of college administrators, boosters, alumni, and the local community regarding a stronger culture of accountability, the athletic director would likely welcome a systematic evaluation process to aid in hiring, developing, and retaining coaches. Nonetheless, questions persist that a systematic approach to evaluating coaches in collegiate athletics has a high hurdle to clear in overcoming the realities of a “win-now” culture and a growing philosophical gap regarding a coach’s role in higher education.

Due to my training as a sport ethicist and passion for the intrinsic values of sport, I can easily be swayed by an idealist perspective of what role a coach plays in higher education. Hereby, recognizing the coach as a teacher, one that provides effective instruction and guidance for the growth and development of the student-athletes. While an honorable mindset may provide the ethical framework for administering sport at the collegiate level, an athletic director unwavering in a more principled approach to leading an athletic department will likely fail amidst the complexities of today’s collegiate sport. Failure by the coach to win consistently is grounds for immediate removal and any action by an athletic director to support or retain a losing coach is met with resistance, even if the coach is providing an educational experience for the student-athletes and modeling ethical leadership.

Unfortunately, the “win-now” culture of collegiate athletics seems to be in direct conflict with the implementation of a systematic coaching evaluation system focused on campus. As addressed by Gillham, et al., the current methods adopted at collegiate institutions to evaluate the coach fail to provide the positive benefits of a systematic coaching evaluation process, focused on the assessment of coaching performance and the enhancement of educational opportunities for coaches.

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on the development of the coach. Research on expertise and effectiveness in coaching clearly identifies that the path to mastery as a coach takes time (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). In coaching, expertise and effectiveness can be demonstrated by the coach’s ability teach sport skills, maintain positive relationships with student-athletes, and learn from one’s practice throughout their career (Gilbert & Côté, 2013). Will the key stakeholders (i.e. athletic directors, university administrators, boosters, alumni, and the local community) involved in a collegiate athletic program give the coach time to acquire the mastery needed to sustain longevity as a coach?

Duke University men’s basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) has won over 1,000 games and is often considered a master teacher. Coach K spent over 40 years developing his craft. He became an expert on the sport of basketball by deliberately seeking opportunities to learn the game and hone his effectiveness in leading and teaching student athletes by building relationships through reflective practice.

I learned that the things you teach do not necessarily apply to everyone in every situation. And it was a lesson I had learned from an eighteen-year-old freshman point guard! ... I always remind myself that you learn forever and from everyone. That is why, with everyone I meet, I try to listen with an open mind and the willingness to learn. You never know when or from whom your next great lesson will come. (Krzyzewski & Spatola, 2006, p. 103-104)

It’s well documented that early in Coach K’s career, he was considered an average coach according to the scoreboard, amassing a paltry record of 38-47 his first three years at Duke. Would he have been given the same opportunity today after three seasons and a losing record? In regards to a systematic coaching evaluation system, will a coach have time to implement the feedback given during an evaluation period to gain expert knowledge and develop effectiveness as a teacher?

Interestingly, many coaches have a utopian view about the purpose of athletics within higher education. As a general rule, the more secure and comfortable the coaches felt in their coaching and employment status, the stronger their personal agency appeared to be...the individuals’ perceptions of the workplace are critical to learning, it is perhaps unsurprising that coaches are most reluctant to engage during periods of threat or insecurity...This might be viewed as highly problematic given that coaches may require the greatest learning assistance when in positions where they feel threatened or insecure. (Mallet, Rynne, & Dickens, 2013, p. 468)

In addition, the philosophical foundation of the institution and the context (i.e. level of competition) in which the sport is played will likely influence the role of collegiate athletics on campus. Logically, institutions with similar enrollment numbers, geographic location, and funding would define the purpose of collegiate sport comparably. For example, in the United States many NCAA DIII schools may tend to focus on athletics as part of the traditional educational mission for developing a well-rounded student, whereas a NCAA DI school may lean towards a model built on winning and generating revenue. Interestingly, while the level of competition an institution is affiliated with may indicate the philosophical view of college athletics at that institution, in my experiences this is not the case. When climbing the professional ladder in collegiate athletics I held positions at numerous institutions, each affiliated athletically at a particular level of competition (i.e. NCAA DI, DII, etc.). Beyond a few subtle similarities related to level of play (i.e. scholarship limits), collegiate sport operated on a continuum regarding it’s importance to the educational mission and seemed to be unrelated to level of play, enrollment numbers, or geographic location. The only constant was the coach’s perception that winning equals job security and career advancement.

In sum, implementation of a systematic coaching evaluation system would have to overcome a perception by coaches that winning is the key criterion in evaluating their employment and account for the differences between institutions in regards to the role of athletics on campus. Thus, I argue that each collegiate institution must clearly establish the purpose of athletics within higher education on campus before embarking on a systematic evaluation process for coaches. The vision for athletics on campus, driven by collegiate administration, should match the reality of the environment and must mimic the vision felt by the athletic director, coaches, faculty, and support staff. Operating under a shared vision, the athletic director will likely feel supported in developing and implementing an evaluation process that matches the purpose of athletics on campus. Furthermore, when hiring a coach, the athletic director will have the ability to clearly communicate the expectations associated with employment, providing a standard for retention and professional development. Consequentially, a more stable and supported approach to evaluating coaches will positively impact the student-athlete’s experience, as the coach will be less conflicted in how they are being evaluated. Thus, allowing them to concentrate on their role as a coach.

In closing, I suggest coaching educators, scholars, scientists, and practitioners collaborate to provide the athletic administrator a systematic coaching evaluation system they can implement. Armed with a template the athletic director could acquire the use of a coaching consultant, as needed, to help customize the evaluation process to match the purpose of athletics at the institution.