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Intercollegiate coaches’ experiences and strategies for coaching first-year athletes*

Jeemin Kim a, Gordon A. Bloom b and Andrew Bennie c

aDepartment of Kinesiology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada; bDepartment of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, Montréal, Canada; cHealth and Physical Education, School of Science and Health, Western Sydney University, Kingswood, Australia

ABSTRACT
University student-athletes have reported difficulties balancing the rigours of academic study, athletics, and their personal lives. These challenges may be exacerbated for first-year athletes who are transitioning from secondary school into university. Given that coaches significantly influence their athletes’ experiences, their coaching styles and support may ease this transition process. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to investigate university coaches’ experiences and strategies used with first-year student-athletes. Eight highly successful and experienced university coaches of men’s team sports participated in individual semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis revealed that coaches created a supportive team environment for first-year athletes by building trusting relationships with them, showing patience with their development, and encouraging leadership from senior athletes. To further facilitate first-year athletes’ success in and out of sport, coaches helped them accept their role on the team and improve their physical conditioning. Coaches also monitored their academic progress and advocated the use of available university resources such as tutors and support programmes. The current results benefit both coaches and athletes by highlighting the common challenges of a first-year university athlete, as well as by offering useful coaching strategies that can help this transition.

Introduction
Participation in athletic competitions at the post-secondary level (i.e. intercollegiate athletics) has offered opportunities for student-athletes to learn and develop important life skills such as self-confidence and leadership that help them grow as individuals (Miller and Kerr 2002, 2003, Vallée and Bloom 2005). Despite these benefits, there are also several drawbacks. Due to the high levels of time and energy committed to their athletics, student-athletes struggle with the balance of academic study, training, and personal needs (Heller et al. 2005). Additionally, they may experience social isolation from outside of their athletic environments and over-identify themselves as athletes rather than as students (Miller and Kerr 2002, 2003). As such, research has found that intercollegiate student-athletes reported more academic problems than their non-athlete counterparts (De Knop et al. 1999), were less able to develop careers outside sports (Murphy et al. 1996), experienced social anxiety (Storch et al. 2005), distress (Kimball and Freysinger 2003), and fatigue (De Knop et al. 1999). Taken together, the unique
demands of participation in intercollegiate athletics can potentially disrupt their academic achievements, social network, and career development outside sports.

One person who has a significant influence on the student-athletes’ experience is their coach (Vallée and Bloom 2005, Bloom et al. 2014). In previous research, intercollegiate coaches’ jobs have been shown to extend beyond simply improving the athletic performance of their athletes to include supporting matters outside of sport and promoting their academic and personal growth (Jowett and Cockerill 2003, Vallée and Bloom 2005, Duchesne et al. 2011). For example, Vallée and Bloom (2005) found that highly successful university coaches invested in the personal development of their athletes rather than instilling a winning-at-all-costs attitude. Caring for the person and communicating regularly with their players helped form healthy working relationships, which ultimately led to better long-term results for the athletes. These findings align with the idea that a coach should not solely be judged on the quantity of wins they have, but also on the quality of relationships they develop with their athletes (Duchesne et al. 2011). In fact, these ideals demonstrate that to be considered truly successful, university coaches must also help their athletes develop to their full potential on and off the court or field (Vallée and Bloom 2005, Duchesne et al. 2011).

First-year university athletes face several stressors and challenges related to their transitions from secondary school (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004). Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) described how athletes experienced normative and non-normative transitions as they moved through various phases of their career. Moving from junior to senior level competitions reflect normative transitions, while non-normative transitions are unanticipated events that take place in an individual's life such as injury or termination from a team (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004). Age may be the normative factor when progressing from secondary school to university. In this scenario, secondary school athletes have been at the top end in their age group before transitioning to university where they become part of a larger group of senior athletes. This places them at the bottom end in terms of athletic achievement within the university context (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004), and may have negative implications for athlete confidence during this transition phase.

Various qualitative studies revealed that adjusting to university involved many sources of stress and potential disruptors to their academic and athletic development (Miller and Kerr 2002, Giacobbi et al. 2004, Bennie and O’Connor 2006, MacNamara and Collins 2010, Brown et al. 2015). For instance, Brown et al. (2015) and MacNamara and Collins (2010) examined the experiences of male and female first-year athletes at British universities and found that they experienced numerous transitional challenges including increased training and academic demands, managing relationships with new coaches and peers outside sports, and looking after their personal well-being despite decreased parental support. Similarly, first-year female swimmers competing in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I also reported difficulties with balancing academic study and athletics, training intensity, high performance expectations, and being away from home (Giacobbi et al. 2004). If these types of stressors become overly burdensome, coaches run the risk of losing athletes from sport participation altogether (Bennie and O’Connor 2006, Crane and Temple 2015). For example, a lack of support from coaching staff, pressures associated with university study, and the culmination of a variety of new social experiences were influential factors when athletes decided to withdraw from elite athletic participation altogether in the transition years between secondary school completion and university graduation (Bennie and O’Connor 2006).

To build on our understanding of the coaches’ perspective about athlete transition to university sport, Duchesne and colleagues (2011) interviewed American intercollegiate coaches who had substantial experience coaching international athletes transitioning from their home countries into American universities. They found that coaches helped these athletes adjust to their new environments by building personal relationships and providing support for matters both inside and outside the athletic setting. Similarly, Benson et al. (2016) interviewed coaches and athletes of Canadian intercollegiate teams regarding socialisation strategies used to integrate new members into the team, and found that clear and honest communication from the coaches helped their athletes understand their roles and the norms of
the team. These studies collectively suggest that the coaches’ guidance and support have a significant influence on the athletes’ entry experiences into a new team and ease this transition process.

Despite the promising attention that athlete transition has received in recent times, few studies have focused solely on the head coach’s perspective within Canadian university team sport contexts. To our knowledge, Duchesne and colleagues (2011) and Benson et al. (2016) are among the only studies that included the coach’s perspective to generate new knowledge about athlete transition. Thus, more empirical research on the strategies that coaches can employ to support first-year athletes is warranted to develop a broader understanding of the coach’s role with athlete transitions.

One theoretical model that could provide insights on coaching first-year student-athletes is Chelladurai’s (1993) multidimensional model of leadership (MML), which explains that effective coach leadership involves interactions among the coaches, athletes, and situational elements. Importantly, coach behaviours are the most effective when they match the preference of individual athletes and the situational requirements in their coaching environments. For example, coaches may need to provide more instructions and performance feedback for less experienced athletes compared to more experienced athletes (i.e. preference of athletes), while intercollegiate coaches may be required to acknowledge their athletes’ high educational demands (i.e. situational requirement; Chelladurai 1993). The outcomes of effective coach behaviours are the high levels of athlete satisfaction and performance.

In line with the MML, one important factor that influences the preferred coach behaviours is the athletes’ skill/experience level (Eys et al. 2003, Beauchamp et al. 2005, Hoigaard et al. 2008). For instance, Hoigaard and colleagues (2008) used the MML as the conceptual basis to examine the types of coaching behaviours preferred by a sample of elite Norwegian soccer players. They found that younger, less experienced players reported a greater preference for social support behaviours from their coaches. The authors explained these results by suggesting that these athletes may have not built the necessary social networks in and out of their team environments, and thus relied more heavily on their coaches’ social support to fulfill their social needs in comparison to more experienced players on the team. Another group of researchers (Eys et al. 2003, Beauchamp et al. 2005) studied Canadian intercollegiate athletes’ experience of role ambiguity, defined as a situation where athletes do not understand their roles and responsibilities in their teams. Interestingly, they found that first-year athletes experienced a greater degree of role ambiguity (Eys et al. 2003), and that coaches’ feedback helped reduce role ambiguity experienced by non-starting players, but not starting players (Beauchamp et al. 2005). Collectively, these results indicate that those athletes with lower skill and experience levels tend to prefer their coaches to provide more social support and feedback in comparison to more experienced athletes.

Purpose of the study

In sum, participating in intercollegiate athletics poses unique challenges and stressors that may be particularly demanding for first-year student-athletes. The purpose of the current study was to investigate university team sport coaches’ experiences and strategies used with first-year student-athletes who are making transitions from secondary school to university. Previously, little research has focused on the head coaches’ views on coaching first-year athletes. The current results may be used to enhance the experiences of first-year student-athletes by discovering practical strategies to ease their transition process into university. Additionally, we anticipate that other coaches may draw upon the findings and apply some of the strategies employed by the experienced university coaches involved in this study.

Methods

Participants

The current study purposively selected some of the most experienced and successful Canadian intercollegiate head coaches in the team sports of men’s basketball (n = 3), volleyball (n = 3), and ice hockey (n = 2). Each participant was currently a head coach of a Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS)
interdependent team and had accumulated a minimum of 10 years of experience (cf. Ericsson et al. 1993) as a CIS head coach at the time of the interview. Additionally, since expertise is context-specific (Côté and Gilbert 2009), the sample only consisted of sports that had similar seasonal schedules and team roster sizes. The eight head coaches all came from different universities in the CIS. Their average years of experience as CIS head coaches were 19.63 (SD = 8.62). During their coaching careers, the participants received numerous honours and awards that highlight their achievements including a combined total of 27 coach of the year awards. The coach of the year awards were distributed relatively equally among the coaches with a mean between 3 and 5 awards per coach.

CIS is the national governing body of intercollegiate athletics in Canada and offers 21 national championships in 12 different sports to 55 member universities represented by over 11,000 student-athletes (CIS 2013). CIS’s mandate is to promote excellence in both athletics and academic study by enhancing student-athlete experiences and satisfaction (CIS 2013). By participating in intercollegiate athletics, student-athletes are offered opportunities to build supportive and trusting friendships with their teammates, while developing life skills and values such as self-confidence, communication, and leadership that will help them grow as individuals (Miller and Kerr 2002, 2003, Vallée and Bloom 2005). As such, intercollegiate student-athletes in Canada are provided with quality education and opportunities to train at high-class facilities and with experienced coaches.

Data collection

Once approval from the institutional ethics review board was received, nine candidates that fit the recruitment criteria were contacted via e-mail. Eight coaches agreed to participate and identified a convenient time and location for individual face-to-face interviews. Seven of the eight interviews took place in private offices, and one took place in a quiet cafeteria at the participant’s institution. During interviews six-to-eight, it became clear that these data failed to extend the understanding of previously identified concepts and a point of data saturation had been reached (Patton 2015). As a result, no further recruitment or data collection occurred.

The first author conducted all the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow the interviewees to openly discuss their experiences and perspectives with relatively little restrictions and elaborate on any ideas that they consider important within the interview (Braun and Clarke 2013). This type of interview helps understand the meaning of the participants’ experiences and perspectives (Braun and Clarke 2013). The interview guide consisted of three sections with eight questions (see Appendix A). The first section contained two introductory questions that asked coaches to briefly comment on their athletic and coaching career developments. These questions aimed to build initial rapport with the participants and learn about their sporting history. The second section contained five key questions to gather information directly related to the study purpose. The key questions were created based on the tenets of the MML (Chelladurai 1993) and related coaching literature. These questions explored the coaches’ knowledge regarding first-year athletes, and how they adjusted their behaviours and strategies to effectively coach first-year athletes in comparison to more senior athletes. The final section allowed the interviewee to provide any final questions or comments. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 60 and 100 min (M = 80.88, SD = 14.95).

Data analysis

The present study utilised a social constructivist approach to understand the participants’ views and interpretations of their experiences within their particular contexts, rather than trying to find a universal ‘truth’ that is independent of human interpretations and social meanings (Creswell 2013). This theoretical lens has been used in similar sport research to understand complex phenomena such as coach development (Stoszkowski and Collins 2014). The current study explored the participants’ views of coaching first-year athletes in their specific context of Canadian university sport, and assumed that their knowledge and perspectives were co-created with daily social interactions within their settings.
The current study utilised a thematic content analysis to analyse the interview data (Braun and Clarke 2013). Thematic content analysis involves identifying and reporting recurring themes within the data. Braun and Clarke’s (2013) descriptions of conducting a thematic analysis were closely followed. First, the principal investigator familiarised himself with the data by listening to the audio-recordings of the interviews, transcribing the interviews verbatim, and reading the transcripts multiple times. Second, the coding processes began where the researcher divided the interview data into chunks of text related to the research questions. A code was assigned to each chunk of text that concisely summarised its content. For example, a quote that related to the importance of establishing a team atmosphere that was conducive to the development of first-year athletes was coded team environment. After reviewing the first interview in full, the first author discussed codes with the second author to establish a list of codes that were created and applied to subsequent interviews. Third, the researcher grouped similar codes together to create themes, which entailed general and broader concepts that the codes collectively illustrated. For example, codes such as team environment, culture of excellence, and senior athlete support were combined to create a theme called supportive atmosphere. After consultation between first and second authors, a final list of themes were generated where any discrepancies were resolved by discussion. Finally, a review process took place to ensure that the central message of each theme was in agreement with all of the codes included in the theme.

Quality standards

All researchers take appropriate measures to ensure their work meets quality standards. With respect to qualitative research, scholars have suggested there are no universal criteria (Smith et al. 2014, Sparkes and Smith 2014). As a result, different criteria and techniques have been applied to the temporal and situational context of each qualitative research study. The present study followed the guidelines established by Smith et al. (2014), which are identified in the next sections in italics.

In order to achieve substantive contribution and width, a sample of elite coaches who had extensive experience coaching first-year athletes in the Canadian university contexts were purposively recruited. Throughout the results, their direct quotes were provided to allow the readers to judge the quality of the data. In attempting to achieve aesthetic merit and coherence, the authors opened up the text for interpretation through the multi-layered thematic analysis process. This occurred before shaping the results in a specific manner to create a story from the coaches’ perspective about the nature and challenges of coaching first-year university athletes. The in-depth quotes and comparison to existing leadership theory also provided readers with the ability to engage in meaningful discussions about the way the current coaches interpreted their daily experiences of coaching first-year university athletes.

According to Creswell (2013), pilot testing can be used to ‘refine and develop research instruments, assess the degrees of observer bias … and adapt research procedures’ (p. 165). The lead author conducted two pilot interviews with individuals who had experience as both athletes and assistant coaches in the CIS. Following this, the interview questions were refined to ensure they were more contextually appropriate and relevant to the purpose of the study. This aimed to add rich rigour to the present study. Next, an experienced qualitative researcher unrelated to the current study reviewed the data analysis procedure to ensure transparency. This qualified peer examined the coding processes and suggested alternative interpretations of the data, which helped assess the principal researcher’s potential bias during data analysis. Finally, the principal investigator had been a member of a varsity badminton team during his first year as an undergraduate student at a Canadian university. These experiences assisted in developing the research topic and familiarity with the research context; however, the principal investigator also attempted ongoing self-reflexivity, which involved critically reflecting on his own views, ideas, and biases to enhance transparency and sincerity in the research process (Smith et al. 2014).
Results

Three higher-order themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data: coaching style, supportive atmosphere, and development of first-year athletes. Development of first-year athletes was the largest theme that included the greatest number of codes and was further divided into three sub-themes: athletics, academic study, and personal life. Quotes that illustrate the coaches' experiences and views of coaching first-year athletes are provided below as C1–C8.

Coaching style

This theme relates to the participants' general approaches to coaching, including their coaching goals, recruitment strategies, and emphasis on positive coach-athlete relationships. Coaches agreed that their ultimate goal was to give their athletes the information and tools that would help them succeed during and after university. Their coaching style focused on the athletes' personal growth, athletic, and academic achievements:

I've done my job when these guys come in as freshmen and they leave as seniors. You can see the development of them as young men. They are going to go out there and [will] be functional and successful in society. … Wins and losses are nice, but watching these young guys grow up to be young successful men is much more rewarding. (C1)

Coaches explained that effectively developing first-year athletes started with recruiting athletes who had athletic talent, academic competencies to excel in their institution, and athletes who fit with their current team. To accomplish these goals, coaches initially sought to select athletes described as hard working, positive, and persistent:

I like to look at how the young guy deals with adversity. When things are not going well for them in a game, if he is struggling in a game, how he faces and deals with that. We are looking for young men that are not going to sit around, point fingers, and blame others. (C1)

Once the athletes entered university, coaches made deliberate efforts to forge positive personal relationships with them. They felt the relationships built early in their athletes’ tenure served as a foundation of effective coaching in their subsequent years:

The biggest thing about coaching is relationships. You got to get guys on board in their first year. If you can make the first-year guys ‘your guys,’ that sets everything up for the rest of their career there. I think that’s a big part of it. (C3)

If you don’t make that contact with the kid in his first year, then he will never have that confidence to come to you in years later. That’s why it’s important that you have that contact with your first-year players on a regular basis. (C4)

Building relationships with first-year athletes was mainly achieved by communicating with them on a regular basis:

I certainly talk to all the first-year kids every day. Constantly I ask them, ‘How is everything going? How is school going?’ Even in practice I might pull a kid over beside the ice and people think I am explaining a drill to him, but I may just be asking him how things are going. That’s the opportunity, that’s the connecting part for me. I think that’s extremely important. (C4)

The biggest thing [I do for first-year athletes] is that I will ask them, ‘How are you doing today?’ If they have an injury or something, I will have a quick, 30 second conversation with them regarding that. ‘Did you go see the therapist? Oh good, alright.’ I don’t have to do that with the veterans, but I will take the 30 seconds to say [to first-year athletes], ‘How’s it going? Did you get your results back?’ (C7)

Regularly communicating with first-year athletes also offered opportunities for coaches to monitor their personal well-being outside athletic settings:

I recall one player who had on-ice discipline issues, a lot of penalties … I brought him in my office one day. That was the day I was going to let him go. Instead of getting into the conversation about letting him go, I just happened to ask him what was going on in his life. He actually broke down and shared that his parents were going through a tough time at home with their marriage. It had been bothering him, he had been carrying this around and frustrated. I often think, ‘Had I not ask that question …’ Anyways, he ended up having a very good career with us. I think he ended up being the captain in his last year. It goes back to having that cup of coffee. (C8)
I have interviews with players every other week … Some of my first questions to the first-year guys are, ‘How are things going in residence, are you getting enough to eat, are you finding it ok to get sleep, can you get any work done, do you need to go to the library?’ (C2)

**Supportive atmosphere**

The focus of this theme relates to how coaches created an optimal team atmosphere that was conducive to supporting first-year athletes in their new environment. All the coaches set high standards for their athletes regardless of their tenure, but also showed patience with first-year athletes’ development:

For some of first-year athletes it’s overwhelming because they are learning so much so quickly. As a coach you need to be patient because they are going to make lots of mistakes … You have to be patient. (C1)

As such, coaches created environments where first-year athletes felt supported through the early stages of their transition into university life:

My job is to create an environment so they feel accepted with their weaknesses. They have to be aware that it is okay to have weaknesses and focus on their strengths, what they are bringing to the team, the potentials that I see in them, and the kind of system I have to use and methods to make them blossom. (C5)

Coaches also used senior athletes to help the first-year athletes. For example, the role of team captains was particularly important for establishing a positive team culture and norms:

We have three captains. They are the extensions of me, our values, and the team culture. They have been proven in different areas: somebody good academically, maybe someone [who is] a role player on the team, or somebody who is a team player. He wants the best for the team. He is putting the team first in front of himself. (C5)

Other senior athletes served important functions as mentors and informal leaders. They helped first-year athletes more on an individual basis compared to formal team captains:

… we have tried to implement what we call anchors … What we try to do is say, ‘Hey, find someone on the team that you respect, you trust, you feel comfortable with. Let them be your anchor. When times are tough, go to your anchor. Your anchor is there to try and help you, make you better.’ (C6)

Coaches deliberately asked senior athletes to communicate with first-year athletes, and often paired up senior and first-year athletes based on common areas of interest:

Another resource is older, upper-year players who are seniors and juniors … I pair them up based on the academic programs for peer support … It’s like inching on each other. (C5)

Sometimes [peer pairing] is informal. Sometimes it’s very formal. We often have unilingual players that come and their first language isn’t English. We are going to make sure we pair that first-year player up with a veteran player. That’s something that I am very hands-on with. (C4)

**Development of first-year athletes**

In the final theme, coaches discussed various issues related to first-year athletes’ athletic, academic, and personal endeavours. These ranged from adjusting to the level of university athletics, to building confidence, and filling lower-status roles within their teams. Additionally, the coaches mentioned that first-year athletes faced challenges around meeting academic requirements, managing their time, and homesickness.

**Athletics**

Coaches emphasised how the level of competition for most of their first-year athletes was higher than they had anticipated. Coaches also discussed that many first-year athletes were physically not strong or fast enough to play against university athletes, and thus used individualised training programmes to improve their physical capabilities:

Usually first-year athletes have some sort of muscular imbalances or impingements, unless they have been really well coached through their club career and have been in the weight room properly. So we often spend a good part of their first year getting them strong enough to play with 22 and 23 year olds … They are boys who are playing with men when they come in. It takes them a little while to adjust to the strength and the speed. (C2)
Another area of concern for first-year athletes’ physical development related to appropriate nutritional practices and injury prevention strategies that they were previously unaware of:

First-years have to learn to take care of their bodies … Many of them run into chronic injuries because they are unaware of how to take care of their bodies. They don’t ice after practice. They don’t stretch. They’ve never been through a situation where they are practicing or playing six days a week. (C6)

I had a kid who didn’t believe in eating fruits and vegetables. He wanted to go to McDonald’s before games … I am still working with the nutritionist and him … It’s a special treatment. I wouldn’t go to my 5th year player and say, ‘What are you eating?’ (C7)

Given that many first-year athletes were not ready to compete at the university level, they were often relegated to filling lower-status roles early in their tenure:

High school has a certain speed of the game. When you get up to this level, because university players are stronger and maybe a little bit faster, the first-year athletes’ speed level has to adjust. It takes them time, it’s just normal. (C7)

The significant increase in the competition level and subjugation to lower-status team roles led to first-year athletes losing confidence in their athletic ability:

It is rare that a first-year athlete is good enough, and confident enough, as much as physically good enough, that they can contribute in meaningful games early on. (C2)

Kids tend to lose some confidence. These guys have been successful their whole lives and now they are struggling, so they don’t know how to struggle, or how to deal with struggles. That’s not a basketball thing, that’s a mental thing. (C1)

To help validate first-year athletes as valuable team members and to assess their athletic progress, coaches tried to provide them as many playing opportunities as possible. This typically occurred under less-stressful situations such as exhibition or pre-season games to help build their confidence levels:

You can train three hours, five days a week, but if you don’t put it in real life game situations, you don’t know whether the training is successful or not. They have to play. You put them in competitive situations where you can measure whether the training is working and whether they are recovering from an injury. (C1)

Being able to give them match feedback during the first two weeks in their first year is important. You try to create some exhibition playing time to validate them as members of the team and not just practice dummies. (C2)

Interestingly, coaches believed that some first-year athletes overestimated their abilities and had unrealistic expectations regarding their role on the team.

When you get recruits you are usually trying to get the best player of their high school team. So they are used to ‘being the man,’ as we say. And when you come here, now we are trying to get him to fit into a team concept and you are not going to ‘be the man,’ you are not going to get the ball every time, you are not going to shoot the ball every time. (C1)

A lot of kids come in their first year and obviously they don’t have the same perspective that the coaches do. They think they know more and they are better than they really are because … They don’t understand their deficiencies because they haven’t been exposed to that level of competition or coaching before. (C3)

In this situation, coaches tried to keep them motivated and interested until they were ready to make significant contributions to the team:

You don’t want to take away the passion from that guy. You want to develop a skill set to see that he can get to that next level, not encourage his frustration to quit. That’s the difference when you are dealing with a first-year athlete. (C4)

You don’t want to lose kids after their first year because they think they are not important. That’s a big thing. Retention is important. If you are not going to keep kids after their first year, they are never going to turn into 3rd, 4th, or 5th year kids. It’s like, ‘planting a tree and cutting it down before the tree is old enough to produce fruits,’ kind of a thing. (C3)

Academic study

All coaches strongly believed that their athletes’ academic achievements were critical for building their careers after graduating from university, and thus discussed several ways to facilitate their athletes’ academic success. Related to their actions mentioned in the Coaching Style theme, coaches regularly
communicated with their first-year athletes to monitor their academic progress since they tended to be unreliable in reporting this information, unless prompted:

One of our philosophies, and something that we've mentioned quite a bit with the coaching staff is, 'Gentle rain soaks.' We always keep on giving the same message. It's not a thunderstorm where we scream at them. But it's, 'How are you doing in school? It's important you go to every class. Are you going to every class? Are you on top of your work?' (C6)

We have to keep our eye on the first-year kids because of [their potential struggle with academic study], but it's not the easiest thing. As a coach you don't have access to the academic system. We don't get to see their grades on a regular basis. We have to wait till transcripts are produced and we can get copies, or till you have someone who come in and say, 'Coach I am really struggling in that class.' That takes the initiative from the athletes to step forward. (C4)

One of the most important skills for balancing the heavy workload in their first university year was time management. This was a skill that coaches believed many first-year athletes needed to improve:

I think it's a case of managing the time. This isn't just related to hockey in my opinion. You have practice time from here to here, there is amount of time before practice you spend getting ready for practice, and there is amount of time after practice you spend finishing up practice … You've got your classes that go from 10 to 11 am or 2 to 3 pm. It's outside of those times where … you need to prepare for whatever is coming up the next day academically. I think fitting all that in can be challenging for anybody. I would think that is the one thing that is most commonly shared among first-year student-athletes. (C8)

Coaches strongly advocated the use of seminars and support programmes designated for first-year student-athletes that provided helpful resources and taught useful skills for achieving academic success:

[The freshmen mentoring program] starts off at the beginning of the year when all the freshmen meet and they go over policies, expectations, a clinic or workshop on nutrition, time management, [and so on] … Each student-athlete is provided with one of these booklets. It includes what to expect, personal counselling services, and what's available for them. Every week there is something that they are going to do: organisations, keys to classroom success, goal-setting, test-taking, test anxiety, motivation strategies, academic scoreboard, campus resources, important dates, and a to do list. So you can see there is a process here. If you follow the process, you are going to be successful. (C6)

**Personal life**

In addition to their academic and athletic involvement, the coaches also attended to their first-year athletes' personal interests and issues. For example, coaches noted a number of problems associated with athletes who were living on their own for the first time and dealing with much greater responsibility and independence:

In general, after this awakening and being on your own away from parents, [they need to] start making all decisions and [carry out] all the chores: cooking, cleaning, and [so on]. (C5)

I think there is so much going on. You have kids who haven't been away from home for the first time in many cases … They got to cook for themselves and pay bills … You've got to pay your rent. You got to make sure things happen … You have to have those life skills … learn to deal with that stuff. I think that's important. Again, it's his responsibility. (C3)

Some coaches discussed how homesickness could negatively influence the first-year athletes who were living alone away from family and significant others. The coaches indicated that social support from their teammates alleviated some of the homesickness:

There are some kids who struggle with anxiety being away from their families. They have their support network at home that they don't have when they come to university in their first semester. A lot of times the team takes on that structure for them. It takes some kids a little bit longer to integrate into that. (C4)

On the other hand, three coaches said that homesickness was not a major factor for their first-year athletes, which they attributed to staying in touch with their families and significant others through technology such as long-distance calls, Skype, and FaceTime. Additionally, several coaches also explained that homesickness was not a major issue because their first-year athletes had lived alone away from their families prior to coming to university:

I do not think [homesickness is] much of an issue with the people that I coach. Some of the guys who come in to us at 20 or 21 have been away from home since they were 15. They go to another city every winter to play Hockey. For a majority of them, I could almost say all of them have been away from home before coming to university. (C8)
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate university coaches’ experiences and strategies for coaching first-year student-athletes. Eight highly successful university coaches discussed their perceptions of coaching first-year athletes, including the common issues athletes faced in their academic, athletic, and personal endeavours.

Coaching style

The university coaches in this study all felt that the ultimate goal of their job was to provide their athletes with the tools that would help them succeed in their lives during and following university. As part of this goal, coaches purposefully recruited well-rounded people who possessed athletic talent and academic competencies. They also made concerted efforts to build positive relationships with first-year athletes to ensure success while at university. Previous coaching literature in North American university sport has found this holistic perspective was critical for building a successful university athletic programme (Miller and Kerr 2002, Vallée and Bloom 2005) and for coaching international athletes who were adapting to a new environment (Duchesne et al. 2011). Similarly, this holistic approach to coaching may be particularly relevant with coaching first-year athletes because they are experiencing a greater degree of freedom and challenges as a result of transitioning from secondary school to university (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004).

Supportive atmosphere

All of the coaches described specific behaviours they used to help their athletes feel supported during their first year in their new university environment. Coaches set high standards yet were patient with athletes and offered direction to seek support from within their team and the university. Vallée and Bloom (2005) also found that highly successful university coaches in Canada built positive and supportive environments with their athletes and cared for their personal needs. Similarly, Høigaard and colleagues (2008) used the MML to help demonstrate that less experienced players reported a greater preference for social support behaviours from their coaches when participating in elite levels of Norwegian soccer. The current results extend these findings, as the present coaches believed that forming positive relationships with first-year athletes served as a foundation for creating a supportive environment, and in subsequent years, yielded better long-term results for their athletes.

The most significant finding in relation to how coaches promoted a positive and supportive team environment was to utilise their senior athletes to guide each new ‘batch’ of first-year athletes. Studies with elite Australian (Bennie and O’Connor 2006) and British (MacNamara and Collins 2010) track and field athletes also suggested that establishing support networks between athletes was central to athletes’ adherence with sport participation and effective adjustment to university during their transitions from secondary school. Similarly, in their examination of Canadian intercollegiate teams’ socialisation tactics for integrating new members into the teams, Benson et al. (2016) found that veteran athletes helped address issues that coaches were not aware of or did not have time to deal with such as teaching social norms of the team and providing social support for newcomers.

The coaches also discussed the influence of informal peer leaders on first-year athletes. As opposed to formal athlete leaders who serve designated leadership roles in the team (e.g. captains) and tend to influence the team as a whole, informal peer leaders interact with a smaller number of individuals within the team (Loughead et al. 2006). The current coaches described that senior athletes served as informal peer mentors for first-year athletes who were enrolled in similar academic programmes or shared similar personal interests. This has important implications as intercollegiate athletes in Canada who felt that they were effectively peer mentored reported higher
levels of satisfaction in their teams, relative to their non-peer mentored counterparts (Hoffmann and Loughead 2015).

Collectively, it appears that social support and guidance from the coaches and senior members of the team are important in helping first-year athletes successfully transition into university. The current results suggest that coaches should make deliberate efforts to ensure that effective athlete leadership is present within the team on a consistent basis by using their senior athletes to formally and informally guide athletes during their first year of university.

**Development of first-year athletes**

The coaches in the current study felt there were numerous challenges for first-year athletes during their transition to university. These challenges can be divided into their athletic, academic, and personal matters, and collectively extends previous empirical studies of athletes attending Canadian, Australian, British, and American universities (e.g. Vallée and Bloom 2005, Bennie and O'Connor 2006, MacNamara and Collins 2010, Duchesne et al. 2011, Brown et al. 2015).

**Athletics**

The current sample of coaches discussed how many first-year athletes lacked the necessary knowledge, strength, and skill, and had a difficult time accepting their role as a non-starter when entering university. This has important implications as Benson et al. (2013) found Canadian university athletes who did not accept their roles on their teams exhibited a number of adverse individual (e.g. negative emotions, dropouts from the team) and team (e.g. violating group norms, creating interpersonal conflicts, harming team environment) outcomes. Thus, the current coaches made concerted efforts to help their first-year athletes accept their reduced roles and how this would benefit the team. This aligns with Mellalieu and Juniper (2006) who found that athletes were more likely to accept their roles when they believed it contributed to improved team functioning. Collectively, these results suggest the importance of university coaches communicating the reduced roles with their first-year athletes in order to prevent dropouts and interpersonal conflicts within the team.

Not surprisingly, most of the current coaches acknowledged that many first-year athletes lost confidence in their athletic ability when transitioning into university athletics. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) believed that this often occurred because most high-school athletes moved from being at the top end of talent in their age group before transitioning to university to the lower end in terms of athletic achievement. This has important implications because self-confidence is one of the most salient psychological characteristics affecting athletic performance (Woodman and Hardy 2003) and may decrease during this transition phase. Athletes with low self-confidence have previously viewed their coaches more negatively (Kenow and Williams 1992), and interpreted their anxiety in a more debilitative manner (Hanton et al. 2004). According to the influential work from Bandura (1982), an important factor that can facilitate self-confidence is performance accomplishment. The coaches in the current sample deliberately put their first-year athletes in low-pressure game situations where they were more likely to perform well, and thus feel more confident. Additionally, Høigaard and colleagues (2008) found that less experienced soccer players reported a greater preference for social support behaviours from their coaches because they may have not built the necessary social networks in the early stages of their transition to a new team, and thus relied more heavily on their coaches to fulfil their social needs. Hence, coaches must be strategic when using their leadership skills to create situations to boost athlete confidence during the demanding transition years and positively influence continued athletic participation (Bennie and O’Connor 2006).

**Academic study**

Coaches acknowledged that many of their first-year athletes experienced high levels of stress due to their heavy academic and athletic demands. Studies that examined athletes’ perspectives have also shown that balancing the high volume of academic and athletic workload was a significant source
of stress in their first year (Giacobbi et al. 2004, Bennie and O’Connor 2006, MacNamara and Collins 2010). This is important because stress experienced by intercollegiate athletes can negatively influence their psychological and emotional well-being, as well as long-term athletic participation (Bennie and O’Connor 2006). To address this issue, they carefully monitored their first-year athletes’ academic progress and strongly encouraged them to take advantage of the academic resources provided by their university, which included academic advisors, tutors, and peer mentors. This shows that the current sample of coaches understood the importance of preventing their first-year athletes from forming a high level of athletic identity by constantly reiterating the importance of academic success to them. This is important because Miller and Kerr (2002) found that first-year student-athletes tended to emphasise their athletic identity over their academic study upon entry into university. This is potentially problematic as Murphy et al. (1996) found that high levels of athletic identity inhibited NCAA athletes’ ability to develop careers outside of sport.

**Personal life**

In comparison to athletics and academic study, coaches devoted the least amount of time discussing their first-year athletes’ personal matters. One topic that received attention was homesickness. Studies on the general population of students transitioning into university has revealed that homesickness was associated with loneliness, distress, and difficulty adjusting to the new environment (Beck et al. 2003).

Some of the current coaches also indicated that their first-year athletes experienced homesickness as a result of moving away from their family and significant others, and identified social support from their teammates as an important coping method. This is similar to the findings of Giacobbi et al. (2004), who found teammates’ support alleviated homesickness experienced by first-year athletes. Interestingly, several coaches in the current sample felt that advanced technology allowed athletes to keep in touch with family and significant others. They also felt that some athletes had already lived away from home and thus had less difficulty with homesickness. Research that emanated from the MML (Chelladurai 1993) has consistently found that coaches’ behaviours led to higher levels of athlete satisfaction when they matched the personal preferences of each athlete (e.g. Chelladurai and Carron 1983, Høigaard et al. 2008). In sum, while homesickness was not a universal concern for all first-year athletes, the current results suggest that coaches should acknowledge each athlete’s susceptibility to homesickness and utilise the members of the team to provide social support for those in need. Moreover, these results also suggest that coaches may need to provide more social support for athletes who have not had previously lived away from family.

**Conclusions**

The current study represents one of the first empirical accounts of coaching first-year university student-athletes from the head coaches’ perspective. Research about university coaching has primarily focused on the general population of athletes, or has been limited to the perspectives of first-year athletes. The results of this study add experienced coaches’ views on the common challenges of coaching first-year university athletes, as well as provide useful strategies to ease this transition process for them.

Various practical implications can be deduced from the present study. During recruiting, coaches should look for athletes who exhibit strong interpersonal skills that would help them build new relationships with the members of their university team, and who can maintain a positive attitude in the face of challenging situations such as adjusting to school, living away from home, and higher levels of competitions. Once in university programmes, coaches should advocate for first-year athletes to utilise academic resources and seek support from the various people that are available within their institutions.

For instance, coaches can encourage senior athletes to serve as mentors for first-year athletes who have similar academic and personal interests. This could provide a more collaborative and holistically supportive environment for new university student-athletes. Without ignoring the needs of senior athletes, coaches should allocate additional time for communicating with first-year athletes. Understanding
first-year athletes’ needs may be a particularly important task because they often remain passive about reporting their struggles and seeking support from others when needed.

Despite the practical information that emerged from these results, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample of coaches of male team sports limits the generalisability of the results. It is possible that university sports with different contexts could necessitate different coaching strategies to accommodate the needs of the first-year athlete. For example, building personal relationships with each of their first-year athletes may be more difficult for football (gridiron) coaches due to its large roster size or for soccer coaches due to its shorter sporting season (i.e. half-season from September to November). Similarly, first-year athletes in the United States may experience different sets of challenges, as the NCAA tends to have a greater amount of generated revenue, provides more resources for coaches and athletes, and involves more media coverage in comparison to those within the CIS. We recognise that some of the findings would be specific to the Canadian university system and may apply differently in other educational systems around the globe. In line with qualitative research protocols, we aimed to provide sufficient depth in reporting of the findings for readers to make their own generalisations from the data presented (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

In conclusion, as student-athletes transition from secondary school to university, they experience a number of challenges associated with the higher level of athletic competition and new academic and social environments. Intercollégiate athletics provides an effective learning arena that teaches student-athletes important life lessons and skills. As such, it is necessary to continue moving forward with this line of research to further promote an optimal environment that lays a foundation for success in life during and after university.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jeemin Kim is a current PhD student at Wilfrid Laurier University. He completed his MA in Sport Psychology at McGill University following a BSc at McMaster University. His current research focuses on group dynamics in sport teams, with an emphasis on role transmission and occupancy within sport teams.

Gordon Bloom is an Associate Professor and director of the Sport Psychology Research laboratory in the Department of Kinesiology & Physical Education at McGill University. Dr Bloom has developed an internationally-recognised coaching research programme that deals with aspects of knowledge, leadership, and mentoring that are employed by coaches to help create a positive environment for excellence and participation in sport.

Andrew Bennie is Director of Health and Physical Education at Western Sydney University. His research interests include sport coaching, physical activity, teaching and learning in Health and Physical Education, and Indigenous sport participation.

References


Appendix A.

Interview guide

Opening questions

(1) Can you briefly tell me about your athletic career?
   (a) Career development as an athlete (transitions to higher levels, achievements).
   (b) Experiences as a first-year athlete in university, or other settings.
(2) How did you get involved in coaching and what paid jobs did you hold previously?

Key questions

(3) What are some common characteristics of first-year student-athletes?
   (a) Struggles, in and out of sport.
   (b) Effect of distance from home.
   (c) Those who drop out.
(4) What do you look for when you recruit first-year student-athletes? (or select players in tryouts?)
   (a) Athletically
   (b) Academically
   (c) Socially, with your team
   (d) Role on the team
(5) What adjustments do you make when coaching first-year student-athletes?
   (a) Based on athlete preferences?
   (b) Based on athlete requirements? (e.g. adjusting to university academically, being away from home etc.)
   (c) Based on team needs?
   (d) Based on athlete performance?
   (e) Example of athletes who adjusted well vs. not well.
(6) How does coaching first-year student-athletes differ from coaching senior, experienced athletes?
   (a) Organisation (seasonal plans player selection, preparing practices, injuries).
   (b) Training (instructions, giving feedback, intervention styles).
   (c) Competition (pre-game preparation, playing time).
   (d) Coach-athlete relationship.
(7) Is there anything that you have changed in coaching first-year athletes over the years? If so, why?
   (a) Views, leadership styles, and behaviours.

Concluding question

(8) Are there any questions or comments you would like to share?