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To cite this article: Charles-Antoine Sinotte, Gordon A. Bloom & Jeffrey G. Caron (2015) Roles, responsibilities and relationships of full-time university assistant coaches, Sports Coaching Review, 4:2, 99-114, DOI: 10.1080/21640629.2016.1158542

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2016.1158542

Published online: 15 Mar 2016.

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Roles, responsibilities and relationships of full-time university assistant coaches

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ABSTRACT
Little empirical research has focused specifically on the assistant coaching position. The purpose of this study was to explore the roles, responsibilities and relationships of assistant coaches in Canadian university football. Six full-time assistant coaches were interviewed and the results from the inductive thematic analysis revealed the importance of coordinating one of the team's units and recruiting prospective student-athletes. Additionally, participants stressed the value of building relationships in all aspects of their profession, including with their head coaches and student-athletes. Findings from this study provide a preliminary understanding of the assistant coaching position, and could help inform research, theory and practice regarding the assistant coaching position, as well as assist in the development of coach education geared specifically towards assistant coaches.

Coaches play a crucial role in the development of athletes of all ages (Bloom, Falcão, & Caron, 2014). Coaches’ roles and responsibilities range from providing detailed and accurate feedback and motivation (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013), to teaching technical, tactical, physical and mental skills (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), to developing personal relationships with their athletes (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008). For example, former American university head coach John Wooden believed the fundamental principles of teaching were the same in the classroom and on the playing field and he often spoke about the personal relationships he developed with his athletes away from the basketball court (Nater & Gallimore, 2010). In order to fulfil their numerous roles and responsibilities, head coaches often rely on their assistant coaches (e.g. Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Nater & Gallimore, 2010; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughead, 2014; Solomon, 2001, 2002). For example, Gilbert and Trudel (2004) noted that coaches often rely on their assistant coaches for player evaluations, competition strategies, and the organisation and planning of practices. Likewise, Rathwell and colleagues (2014) found that university head
coaches said their assistant coaches were involved in preparing the game plan before competitions and modifications during competitions. Assistant coaches have also been shown to bring a different perspective than head coaches regarding athlete evaluations (Solomon, 2001, 2002) and interactions with their athletes (Rathwell et al., 2014). Consequently, there is evidence to suggest that assistant coaches have many roles and responsibilities which impact athlete satisfaction and team functioning.

Despite this, research on the assistant coaching position is in its early stages of development. Gilbert, Rangeon, and Bruner (2012) developed a reference list of over 900 coaching articles published between 1970 and 2008. Only 18 of these articles included assistant coaching as one of the main topics, which represents less than two per cent of this database. Eleven of these articles addressed the gender and race of assistant coaches in relation to career opportunities and discrimination (e.g. Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). The other studies focused on topics such as athletes’ perceptions of the type and quality of social support provided by assistant coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001) and the impact of head coaches’ leadership and mentorship on assistant coaches (Williams & Quartersman, 2008). One study focusing on Canadian university (Canadian Interuniversity Sport; CIS) gridiron football from Rathwell and colleagues (2014) examined the selection and development of assistant coaches from the head coach’s perspective. Findings indicated that head coaches looked for loyal assistants who cared about their student-athletes, understood the importance of education, and possessed strong leadership skills and football knowledge.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that assistant coaches must possess strong relational skills (e.g. Nater & Gallimore, 2010; Rathwell et al., 2014). As a result, Jowett and colleagues’ 3+1Cs Model, which was designed to specifically address relational aspects of the coach-athlete relationship via the concepts of closeness, complementarity, and commitment and co-orientation (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Jowett & Lavallee, 2007), could be used to direct research in this underdeveloped area. The 3+1Cs Model suggests that a close, committed and complementary coach–athlete relationship leads to the maximisation of athlete potential in training and competition. Although this model was developed with the intention of studying the ‘head’ coach–athlete relationship, researchers have suggested that assistant coaches might have closer personal relationships with athletes (Rathwell et al., 2014; Solomon, 2001, 2002; Solomon et al., 1996). Specific to CIS football, assistant coaches must develop personal and professional relationships with the student-athletes on their team, prospective student-athletes and their family members, as well as their head coaches and other members of the coaching staff. Consequently, gathering a better understanding of the relational aspects of the assistant coaching position is worthy of further inquiry, and the 3+1Cs model could help guide these efforts.

The purpose of this study was to understand the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of full-time assistant football coaches. The specific research questions
guiding this study were: What are assistant coaches’ football-specific roles and responsibilities? What are assistant coaches’ perceptions of their relationships with student-athletes and their head coaches?

**Methods**

CIS gridiron football is similar to collegiate football in the United States (i.e. National Collegiate Athletic Association; NCAA) in some aspects, but is different in others. For example, the CIS game is played with 12 players on the field per side compared to 11 in NCAA football and CIS football receives considerably less spectator attendance and media coverage than NCAA football. As a result, CIS teams have smaller operating budgets and less full-time members of the coaching staff when compared to NCAA teams. CIS football teams are typically comprised of 80 to 100 student-athletes, 10 or more assistant coaches and a head coach. Because CIS football teams are divided into three distinct and independent units (offence, defence and special teams), each unit is coordinated (i.e. managed) by one of the assistant coaches and overseen by the head coach. It is not uncommon for CIS football teams to employ the head coach and all of the unit coordinators on a full-time basis.

**Participants**

A panel of experts familiar with CIS football recommended participants for this study. The panel included current and former CIS head football coaches, a CIS athletic director, as well as members of the research team. Criterion-based sampling was used to select participants for this study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). First, participants must have been paid on a full-time basis for their role as a CIS assistant football coach. Second, participants were all CIS assistant football coaches for at least five years, which was the minimum amount of time that the research team felt participants needed to be able to reflect on their coaching roles and responsibilities, as well as their relationships with their athletes and head coaches. Third, participants’ respective head coaches must have identified them as their ‘head’ assistant coach. ‘Head’ assistant coach refers to the full-time assistant coach who has the most responsibility, authority and who likely receives the highest salary among assistant coaches on their staff. Although the participants in this study were ‘head’ assistant coaches, they will be referred to as ‘assistant coaches’ in the remainder of this article to keep the terminology consistent within the coaching science literature.

After receiving approval from our university research ethics council, the lead investigator contacted participants by e-mail and sent them information about the current study. Those who expressed interest in participating in the study were asked to identify a time and location for a face-to-face meeting. Six full-time assistant coaches agreed to participate in this study. The participants all had elite-level
experiences playing football: three played at the CIS level, while the other three
played football professionally in Canada. At the time of the study, participants
had between 6 to 18 years of coaching experience and had been working with
their current head coaches for at least two years. Additionally, all six participants
indicated they coordinated one of the team’s three units.

Data collection

Each coach participated in one face-to-face interview that ranged from 60 to 120
min in length. The interviewer’s role was to guide the discussion with participants
yet allow them the freedom to answer questions openly without restrictions (Rubin
& Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are designed to replicate a generic
conversation, whereby the interviewer and interviewee are actively engaged in
the discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method has previously been used to
capture the essence of expert CIS coaches (e.g. Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

The interviewer

Providing background information about the interviewer (lead investigator) for
this study is particularly relevant because the interviewer is a former CIS football
player and part-time assistant coach with a CIS football team. The lead investi-
gator’s experiences as a player and coach enabled him to effectively build rapport
with participants. However, due to his experiences, steps were taken to ensure the
lead investigator’s experiences were bracketed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). That is,
the interviewer conducted two pilot interviews that were examined and evaluated
by the other members of the research team in order to provide feedback on the
interviewer’s proficiency, including ensuring that he was able to effectively bracket
his prior experiences and focus on the participants’ experiences and insights.
Additionally, at the conclusion of both pilot interviews, participants provided
feedback about the format of the interview questions and lead investigator’s inter-
viewing behaviours.

Interview guide

Members of the research team created an interview guide1 for this study. The
current study used semi-structured, open-ended interviews, which are situated
on a continuum between structured (e.g. pre-established questions and limited
response categories) and unstructured (e.g. open discussion of a topic with few
questions in mind; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview guide contained three
types of questions: introductory, main and concluding questions. The first sec-
tion contained introductory questions designed to initiate discussion (e.g. ‘Briefly
describe your progression into coaching, up to your current position’). The second
section contained the main questions concerning the roles and responsibilities
(e.g. ‘Describe some of your roles and responsibilities specific to coaching football’
and ‘What do you think your current head coach was looking for when he hired
you?’) and relationships (e.g. ‘Describe some of your interactions with athletes’ and ‘Describe your interactions with your head coach and other coaches on the staff’) of assistant coaches in CIS football. The final section of the interview guide contained concluding questions to clarify some topics covered in the interview (e.g. ‘Do you have any other comments you would like to add?’). Concluding questions afforded the interviewer to clarify areas of the participant’s knowledge and experiences that might have been overlooked and offered participants the opportunity to voice additional comments (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used in the current study to identify, analyse and report patterns (or themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Braun and Clarke’s (2013) guidelines for conducting a thematic analysis were followed, which included six steps: (a) familiarising yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The first five steps will be described in this section while the sixth will be detailed in the results section.

Data were transcribed verbatim and stored using the NVivo 10 software package (QSR International, 2014). The first stage of the analysis involved gaining familiarity with the data by reading every transcript in its entirety several times while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings. Listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts afforded a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences because points of emphasis could be heard in their voices. The second step, generating initial codes, involved highlighting blocks of text that had the same meaning. Similar blocks of text were assigned the same code. Once the initial codes were generated across all six transcripts, a master list of codes was developed. Steps three and four (i.e. searching for themes and reviewing themes) were conducted simultaneously. More precisely, using the master list of codes, the research team began searching for themes (i.e. patterns) across the codes. Four themes emerged from the interviews and were labelled Planning, Recruiting, Athlete Interaction and Development, and Head Coach Relationships. The research team carefully evaluated each theme to ensure it accurately represented participants’ experiences and meanings attached to those experiences. The four themes were then grouped into two higher order themes (a) Coaches’ Roles and Responsibilities (i.e. Planning and Recruiting) and (b) Personal and Professional Relationships (i.e. Athlete Interaction and Development and Head Coach Relationships). In the fifth step, the research team named and provided a brief definition for each theme, which captured the essence of the quotations it encompassed.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are encouraged to demonstrate the quality of their findings by being transparent throughout the research process (Sparkes & Smith,
Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) parallel criteria have been the most commonly used trustworthiness technique in sport and exercise psychology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). However, there has been some debate about using these criteria (see Sparkes & Smith, 2009 for a discussion). Consequently, qualitative researchers have been encouraged to select trustworthiness techniques based on the context and purposes of their research rather than adhering to specific criteria (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Two trustworthiness techniques were used in the current study: (a) researcher triangulation and (b) audit trail (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Researcher triangulation was accomplished by having the authors of this study converge on the same results and conclusions. The lead investigator conducted the first level of analysis for each of Braun and Clarke’s (2013) steps. Following the first level of analysis for each step, the lead investigator met with the other authors to triangulate the findings. This process helped to ensure the analysis was rooted in participants’ meanings and experiences as CIS football coaches and to minimise any unintended biases related to the lead investigator’s background in football. The second trustworthiness technique used in this study was an audit trail, whereby the research process was outlined in detail so readers can inspect and assess the merit of the findings as well as the researchers’ interpretations of the results and conclusions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The research team was careful to be transparent throughout data collection and analyses, including identifying the interviewer’s background and experiences as a player and coach in CIS football, which were articulated to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings.

Results

Two higher order themes emerged from the analysis of the six interviews and were labelled Coaches’ Roles and Responsibilities and Personal and Professional Relationships. These themes will be explained using quotes from the participants. Participants were all assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities and credit their comments.

Coaches’ roles and responsibilities

Participants all felt that planning was an important part of their role as an assistant coach. More specifically, they described planning as an ongoing and evolving team process that starts during the off-season and continues through training and competition. Seasonal planning began with a team vision that was created by the head coach and relayed to all the assistant coaches:

I would consider myself to be involved in the development and implementation of the team direction and the team vision. I give suggestions but our head coach makes the final decision. I’m involved both formally and informally. Whichever message our head coach is selling, it’s my job as an assistant to help implement that vision. A good assistant coach has to help his head coach implement that vision no matter what. If the
assistant disagrees with that vision, then the head coach either has to find someone else who believes in that vision or the assistant has to leave. (Adam)

My head coach and I had developed a plan on how to run a university program and our experience and background helped us implement that vision. We split the team into ‘departments’ like physical preparation, academics, and recruitment. All we do now is adjust that plan according to what happens. (Frank)

The vision influenced every component of the team. More specifically, a university football programme is composed of three units (offence, defence, special teams) and every participant was a unit coordinator on their team:

My biggest football role is to be the special teams coordinator. I’m in charge of creating and initiating the plan. I’m in charge of watching all of our films, trying to figure out the teams we’re playing against, their areas of weakness, what we need to work on, our game plans, etc. As well, not only do I need to plan and run our meetings but I also manage the roster and the depth chart. (Brian)

I’m a defensive coordinator. That’s what they pay me for. Basically, I make sure that everything about the defence is done and done well before doing anything else. Whether it is the development of the game plan, video analysis, and development of schemes and game strategies. This is what accounts for the bulk of my position throughout the season, and makes up 95% of my job. (Eric)

In addition to coordinating a unit, four of the coaches were in charge of a specific position on that unit:

During practice I’m still the QB coach. That’s a big part of what I do because it’s the hardest position to play. I try to be hands on with them. I think that working with these guys on a day-to-day basis and making sure they understand what we’re trying to do are very important roles and therefore I will never give up this position. (Adam)

As coordinators and position coaches, the participants talked about the preparation involved in practice planning: ‘We organize the practice as a whole coaching staff’ (Collin).

I’m responsible for most of the practice planning on a day-to-day basis. Examples include helping with the pacing of practice and ensuring that the other coaches receive the daily practice plans. We try to practice at a high tempo, so I make sure that things are going quickly, smoothly and moving at the right pace. (Adam)

Apart from their coaching-specific duties, participants said that recruiting prospective student-athletes was a core component of running a university football programme, and an important part of their role.

My head coach undoubtedly looks for someone with recruiting abilities when hiring. At the university level, recruitment is the ‘name of the game’. It is very important and it is an important part of my job. If I was not a good recruiter I’m not sure I would have my job. But in fact, I consider that when you are a good coach, you’re a good recruiter. Bad recruiters, generally, are not good coaches. (Frank)

More specifically, assistant coaches explained how their team went about recruiting and the system developed to facilitate that process:

In terms of what I do in the recruiting process, we break it down into three main parts: identify, evaluate, and personalize. You identify everyone, you evaluate and then you
personalise your approach according to the guys you think are the best. We feel that these are the three most important things to do. I’d say that the defensive coordinator, the head coach, and myself are involved in all three areas. Identification falls more for our assistants, who then pass it on to us for evaluation. Then, we decide who we like and where they will fit. Finally, we personalise our approach for every kid. (Adam)

We have a system where the recruiting coordinator does the initial calls to kids and verifies the information we have on him. On my side, I make a few calls to reinforce the recruiting process. I have to focus on how to attract a player. I have to show them the attractions of [name of city], my game system, and where I see him in my defense. (Frank)

As mentioned in the quote above, talent identification is a key element of recruiting. A majority of the coaches emphasised the importance of not only bringing in good players, but mainly good student-athletes that fit their team’s needs and philosophy:

Recruiting is the most important thing we do other than play football. If you don’t get the right kids, you can’t win. You can’t coach pylons. You need the right kids that you can work with and mould into your system. There’s a lot of work put in recruiting. It’s important to us and we dedicate a lot of resources and man-hours to make sure we do it right. (Adam)

We had one of the best defenses at [name of university], mainly because we would bring in the right athletes. We were always able to keep up with the other teams because of recruiting. It’s the phase of the game that some coaches overlook, because they think X’s & O’s are most important but realistically recruiting is what matters. (Collin)

In order to be an efficient recruiter, coaches talked about the importance of interacting and relating efficiently with the prospective student-athletes and their parents:

To be a good recruiter, you need to enjoy talking. You have to enjoy connecting with people and you need to be interested in more than just getting a kid into your school. You need a genuine interest in talking on the phone and finding out more about the young men. Recruiting is all about relationships building. You also have to be a bit of a salesman. To some extent, you’re selling a product; your school and your program. You also have to be persistent. You need to be willing to make 20 to 30 phone calls to get one kid. You have to do that over a long period of time. You have to build long-term relationships with them. Some coaches don’t have the patience to do that. (Brian)

I found out that when you talk to the kids upon recruiting them, you should be as honest as you can be. That’s what they’re looking for. You build the relationship/rapport with them and they’ll feel that trust with you. Also, I feel what makes a good recruiter is one who gets to know the parents. Make the parents certain that the coaching staff will look after their kid. They have raised their children for 17 to 18 years and now they are passing them off to us for four or five years. They want to make sure they are going into good hands. As a recruiter, you have to feel that out with the parents and get a feel for what they are like and what they are looking for. (Collin)

Lastly, academics were mentioned as another core component of the recruiting process:
You have to know the academic side as well as the athletic side when recruiting. You’re missing half of the equation if you’re only preaching football. There has to be an academic fit as well. Understanding what faculties/programs/graduate schools are offered. That knowledge is extremely important. (Adam)

**Personal and professional working relationships**

Participants offered information about their interactions and relationships with student-athletes and their head coaches. Assistant coaches said they were in constant communication with their student-athletes. The participants explained that assistant coach-student athlete interactions have many different contexts and purposes:

No player intends to make mistakes. But football is a sport of mistakes. When a player makes errors it doesn’t bother me. Sometimes I’ll be tough with a player towards his performance, not towards the individual. I will not reach for his integrity or his desire to improve. We must make better people. It goes beyond the victory. (Frank)

I interact differently with players on game day. Seeing the kids I coach now, I can joke with them before the game starts and drop some lines on what they did the night before. This makes you realize that they’re kids. If you teach them what to do when it’s go time, then on game day your relationships don’t need to change whatsoever. In between those 60 min, they know it’s all business even though they’re having fun. (Collin)

Other than their football-related interactions with the student-athletes, all coaches talked about the personal interactions with them:

I try to prepare the athletes for when they grow up, become adults, and start a family. I interact with them about my daughter, my family, and the importance of family. I try to build relationships with them and be like a mentor. I talk about my life experience, what I’ve been through, my experiences as a player and as a father after playing ... I try to make them understand what the values are in life. At the same time, I try go down to their level and joke and mess around with them. It makes them feel like: ‘Man I can go to coach and interact about anything. He is real’. (Collin)

I have daily interactions with athletes. It’s nice because our offices are near the locker room so the athletes often pass by. This happens from morning to night. We arrive early so the guys come say hello, inform us about how they’re doing in school, their schedules, and their personal lives. (Frank)

The coaches alluded to the importance of trust and honesty in developing relationships with their student-athletes:

The key is to be as genuine as you can. Being honest with athletes is the basis for your entire relationship with them on and off the field. We have a good separation here where we are firm with our guys on the field. Off the field, the line moves a bit. That has created a nice environment around here. When I was a player here, our coaches almost never talked to the players. I did not think they were approachable. But since [name of head coach] has been here, he has fostered a family-type of environment. The door is always open and players will come in and talk about anything. But we have managed to
keep that separation on the field so that kids know that there's a time for a football and a time for small talk. (Brian)

I know everyone's name and where they are from. I want to make them feel good and important and I want them to know that they can come and see me whenever. I would say that I could be perceived as a players-coach. Not that I'm not hard -- I do push them and I do have high expectations but I also like to have a bit of fun. At the end of the day, it's still a game. We're not performing heart surgeries! No one will die. (Daniel)

Participants noted the assistant coaching position involved a close relationship with their head coach. The participants explained the type of interactions they had with their boss, the influence they had on them, and how the head coach's interactions with student-athletes differed from theirs:

I don't necessarily think that the head coach can be the guy that players can go to all the time. There needs to be a bit of separation between the head coach and his players because he's the authoritative figure. I try to fill that role because they need to go somewhere if they have problems or issues. It can't always be the head coach, nor should it be. (Adam)

When talking about the interactional differences with student-athletes, a majority of the participating coaches referred to the concept of good cop, bad cop:

My message and the head coach's message is the same. Our way of thinking is similar but not identical, while our interactions are not exactly the same. My approach is a little different. It's a little bit like good cop/bad cop. The head coach is usually the bad cop, but it's not always fun to be the bad cop, so sometimes I become the bad cop. But we are harmonious with respect to this. We communicate a lot. (Frank)

The assistant coaches talked about the professional relationships they developed with their head coach and how they interacted at work:

My professional relationship with my head coach is great. He is very easy to work for and he is very flexible. Before I started working with my current head coach, I was required to be in the office six to seven days per week, all year around. I used to devote so many hours to my job and rarely see my family. That's something that my current head coach is good with. He's flexible with hours for all our staff. He could improve with making sure guys are doing their jobs, being organized, and doing follow-ups. But I'm not going to complain because he's better than the guy I used to work with. (Collin)

I also try to be a confidante for my head coach and play devil’s advocate, if necessary. For example, do we want to kick or receive the ball at the beginning of the game? Or, do we want to go for it on third-and-short? I'm there for him if he needs someone to bounce ideas off of. (Adam)

With regard to personal relationships, participants differed on their perception of the level of closeness with their head coach. Some explained becoming good friends off the field, whereas other only had a professional relationship with their head coach:

I think it's an advantage to have a personal relationship with your head coach. If you only know one perspective of a co-worker's life, you may not be able to appreciate a lot of things they do. If you only act in one way because you're the employee and he's the boss, then you will only have one dynamic. With our coaching staff having a personal side to our relationship, there's more of a chance to let loose and the head coach has
the chance to see different strengths you have in other aspects. Your relationships with your coaches are more efficient if you have that personal side to it. (Brian)

I have more of a professional relationship with my head coach. We do talk about things other than football during the week but I would not consider [name of head coach] my friend. I think it's okay that way. At the end of the day, he is my boss and I am his employee. We have a very respectful relationship. I am able to give my opinion even though I am an employee. But I would not want to use our relationship to my advantage. It should not become personal. (Eric)

My head coach and I don't have that much of a relationship. We only see each other for work-related things. We haven't done much outside of football as a staff. Maybe it's just a different style but that's what he likes to do. I think him and I have a great work relationship but there's not much on a personal level. There's nothing wrong with that, I think that's how he likes it as an individual. Not having any personal relationship doesn't affect the dynamics of the team. It doesn't affect the team or myself. (Collin)

Whether they have personal or professional relationships with their head coach, the participants all mentioned the importance of trust in the dyad:

I think part of him hiring me is to have another offensive guy that he trusts. He needed a guy who knows as much as he did. It took a little while because even though he knew I knew what I was doing, he liked to be in control. You really have to earn the trust and respect of your head coach for him to relinquish that. It took a couple of years, but it has happened. (Daniel)

It's been almost 20 years that [name of head coach] and I have been together. What [name of head coach] really looks for is loyalty. We share a few of the same goals and we both want the program to work. We have the goodness of the program in our hearts. We will do what must be done to make sure that things work properly. (Eric)

The interactions, the personal and professional relationships, and the trust between the head coach and his assistant were all part of their job. The participants talked about how they had been influenced by their current head coach:

I learned that you shouldn't always give your opinion and be obnoxious. [Name of head coach] is a tyrant on the field but he takes good care of the coaches and knows that how you are perceived is important. I've learned a ton from him. You coach similarly to how you were coached and who you have coached with. [Name of head coach] is the most driven and competitive guy I know and that's why I love him. I want to be around him. (Daniel)

**Discussion**

All assistant coaches in this study believed their main role was to coordinate one of the three major units on their team. As unit coordinators, they were intimately involved in the planning of practices, as well as the various demands during competitions. The importance of planning has been found in previous research on successful head coaches (e.g. Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Rathwell et al., 2014; Short & Short, 2005). A crucial element of planning is setting and selling the team vision (Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Indeed, the assistant coaches in this study felt that organisational aspects of practices and competitions were shaped by the team
vision, a topic that has only been researched from the head coach’s perspective (Rathwell et al., 2014; Short & Short, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Rathwell and colleagues (2014) found that head university football coaches felt it was extremely important for their assistant coaches to ‘believe’ or ‘buy in’ to their team vision in order for the message to be effectively conveyed to their student-athletes. Although the assistant coaches were unable to directly associate their hiring to ‘buying in’ to their head coaches’ team vision, they felt it was important and that it contributed to succeeding in their current positions. Our results also suggest that it is important for head and assistant coaches to agree on the team vision, an outcome which might also lead to a more cohesive coaching staff (Zakrajsek, Abildso, Hurst, & Watson, 2007). Our findings are unique because it is the first time this result has come from the assistant coaches themselves.

In addition to coordinating one of their team’s units, participants reported that recruiting was as an essential responsibility. In fact, some participants believed their ability to recruit was the main reason why they were hired and/or promoted to their current position, a finding which has previously been espoused from the head coach’s perspective (e.g. Langelett, 2003; Rathwell et al., 2014). Assistant coaches in this study felt that effective recruiting involved building relationships with prospective student-athletes and their families. As a result, our findings suggest that aspects of the 3+1Cs Model could be used to understand the relational aspects involved in recruiting (Jowett, 2003). In particular, the intention to maintain a relationship between assistant coach and student-athlete (i.e. commitment), as well as mutual feelings of trust and respect (i.e. closeness) are two components of Jowett’s (2003) model that appear to be central to better understanding the intricacies of building and sustaining relationships with student-athletes and their families. Our results suggest that researchers should focus on how head and assistant coaches recruit, with particular emphasis on how they build relationships with prospective student-athletes and their families beginning with their initial communications.

Related to recruiting and other aspects of their job, assistant coaches discussed their continuous interactions with student-athletes. The participants valued interactions with student-athletes on both a personal and professional level, believing that strong coach-athlete relationships influenced on-field performances during practices and competitions. According to the 3+1Cs Model, successful and efficient interactions between head coaches and their athletes are optimal when they are emotionally connected, committed to mutual goals, and have similar perceptions of their relationships (Olympiou et al., 2008; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Assistant coaches in the current study stressed the importance of having a trusting and honest relationship with their student-athletes, which Jowett (2003) described as fundamental to the closeness component of her model. Furthermore, assistant coaches believed they had closer relationships with student-athletes than their head coaches, a finding supported by previous research (e.g. Rathwell et al., 2014; Solomon, 2001, 2002; Solomon et al., 1996). More specifically, Canadian university
head football coaches said their assistant coaches interacted more frequently with student-athletes, had an active role in their development, and provided different types of knowledge and training (Rathwell et al., 2014). In the current study, the participants alluded to the concept of ‘good cop/bad cop’, where they were often the former and head coaches were often the latter. While it was not explicitly articulated, it appeared as though the head and assistant coaches had an understanding about who would play the role of good cop and who would play the role of bad cop prior to interacting with athletes. Taken together, results from the current study suggest that it is important for head coaches to insulate their staff with assistants who complement their personality, coaching style, and with whom student-athletes would be comfortable interacting. Moreover, the findings suggest that it might be easier for assistant coaches to develop closeness with athletes, especially when considering that assistant coaches in our study said they more often played the role of good cop than bad cop. It would be interesting to determine if these types of relationships exist between athletes and assistant coaches in other sports.

Participants all felt the cornerstone of their personal and/or professional relationship with their head coaches was based on trust and loyalty; however, they differed on the type of relationships they had with their bosses. While some believed it was important to have a personal relationship, others felt it was not necessary and did not hinder their job. These findings appear related to the complementarity component of the 3+1Cs Model, which can be conceptualised as the level of cooperation in a relationship. For example, Jowett (2003) noted that complementarity included being aware of respective roles and exhibiting friendly behaviours during training sessions. To our knowledge, complementarity between assistant coach and head coach has not yet been investigated. The assistant coaches in this study felt that complementarity was achieved by establishing trust and loyalty with their head coach. That is, participants did not feel that a successful and complementary partnership with their head coach was contingent on developing a close, personal bond with them away from the sporting context.

**Future directions and practical implications**

Although findings from the current study provide a preliminary understanding of the assistant coaching position, more research is needed to better elucidate the intricacies of this profession across a variety of sport and coaching contexts. Given the present findings were gathered using interviews, future research could study assistant coaches using other methods to provide additional information about their roles, responsibilities and relationships. In particular, researchers may consider investigating relational aspects of the assistant coaching position quantitatively, using Jowett and Ntoumanis’ (2004) inventory. Results from this study also indicate that the 3+1Cs Model is a useful framework to investigate the complexities of the assistant coaching position. While it was beyond the scope of the present study to conclude which component of the model was most prominent in the
participants’ coaching practices, the 3+1Cs Model appears to be a useful framework to guide future studies on the assistant coaching position. It would also be interesting to obtain the perspective of athletes and other members of the coaching staff to allow for a more complete understanding of this coaching position. Future investigations could focus on levels of competition that do not remunerate coaches on a full-time basis, which could lead to a different prioritisation of roles and responsibilities. In addition, researchers should examine assistant coaches from other sports and in other countries given that the size of the coaching staff in gridiron football is unique and likely creates different working dynamics and hierarchy amongst coaches. Relationships and group dynamics may be perceived differently in other contexts such as coacting and independent sports, coaching staffs that include males and females, and teams that employ co-head coaches.

Practically, results from this study could be used to help inform coach education. To our knowledge, coach education in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom has yet to incorporate training that is specifically aimed at assistant coaches. This is unfortunate considering that many coaches will be employed (or find themselves) in assistant coach roles at the beginning of their careers. Moreover, for assistant coaches who aspire to obtain head coaching positions, becoming a proficient assistant coach might improve their chances of gaining a head coaching position later in their career. Coach educators should consider teaching all coaches about the importance of ensuring that members of the coaching staff have a unified coaching philosophy, so they can more effectively sell the team vision to current and prospective student-athletes. Additionally, results from the current study highlight the importance for coaches to develop their relationship-building skills, as it is central to all aspects of their job. These skills could be developed during role-playing activities in face-to-face coach education sessions or educational videos featuring successful coaches that describe the ways in which they develop relationships with members of their coaching staffs and student-athletes. Our results also suggested that each assistant coach in this study had different levels of closeness with their head coach. Whereas some believed that having a close personal relationship helped their professional relationship, others felt their lack of closeness outside of work was a good thing as their professional working relationship was never blurred between friendship and work. As a result, coach educators should inform both head and assistant coaches about the value and merit of developing relationships with other members of the coaching staff and how it may improve or detract from their professional abilities. In sum, this study demonstrated the roles, responsibilities and relationships of assistant coaches and how they influenced team functioning. Given the dearth of empirical literature that has focused on the assistant coaching position (Gilbert et al., 2012), we hope these findings will encourage further investigations of the assistant coaching position, given their important role in the development and well-being of athletes at all levels of sport.
Note

1. A copy of the interview guide will be provided upon request.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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