

Head Coaches' Perceptions on the Roles, Selection, and Development of the Assistant Coach

Scott Rathwell

University of Ottawa

Gordon A. Bloom

McGill University

Todd M. Loughead

University of Windsor

The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics head coaches looked for when hiring their head assistant coach, the main roles and responsibilities assigned to assistants, and the techniques and behaviors used to develop them. Data were obtained through interviews with six accomplished Canadian University head football coaches. Results indicated head coaches hired loyal assistants who possessed extensive football knowledge that complimented their own skill sets. Once hired, head coaches had their assistant coaches help them with recruiting, managing a major team unit, and developing athletes. They helped advance their assistants' careers through personal mentorships which included exposure to external sources of knowledge such as football camps and coaching conferences. These results represent one of the first empirical accounts of head coaches' perceptions on hiring and developing head assistant coaches.

Keywords: coaching, leadership, mentoring

In North America, coaching university football is a full-time job that involves organizational tasks, preparing and training athletes for competition, scouting opponents, community work, fundraising, recruiting student-athletes, and working with several assistant coaches (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; Davies, Bloom, & Salmela, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Specific to the current study, the role of the assistant coach is to support the head coach in all parts of the job (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Côté & Salmela, 1996; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). For example, Côté and Salmela (1996) noted that head coaches worked closely with their coaching staff to plan practices and delegated responsibilities to their assistant coaches according to their strengths and weaknesses. Further, Carter and Bloom (2009) found that head coaches relied heavily on their assistants' expertise and knowledge for teaching various technical and tactical skills to their athletes. Finally, Lemyre and colleagues (2007) showed that head coaches

strategized with and sought advice from their assistant coaches. Taken together, this body of research has alluded to many of the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches. However, the primary focus of these studies was to better understand the roles and responsibilities of the head coach, who in turn discussed the importance of their assistant coaches. Research specifically focusing on the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches is largely underdeveloped.

Between 1970 and 2008, less than two percent of coaching science research specifically focused on assistant coaches (Gilbert, Rangeon, & Bruner, 2012; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004), and there has been no systematic line of research established on this topic. The studies that have been carried out addressed the impact of gender and race on assistant coaches' career opportunities (e.g., Cunningham, Doherty, & Gregg, 2007; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2003; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005). Although there is limited empirical research on assistant coaches' roles and responsibilities, there is a wealth of anecdotal literature from well-known coaches on the importance of assistant coaches' (e.g., Billick, 2001; Gilbert, 2012; Parr, 2006). For example, National Football League head coach Bill Belichick provided a comprehensive account of his many years as an assistant football coach and the influential roles his mentor coaches had on his

Rathwell is with the School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Bloom is with the Dept. of Kinesiology & Physical Education, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Loughead is with the Dept. of Kinesiology, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

career progression and success (Gilbert, 2012). Similarly, former National Football League head coach Brian Billick discussed his assistant coaches' instrumental roles in implementing game day strategies (Billick, 2001). Finally, former National Basketball Association assistant coach Tex Winter described his career progression and how he created his famous "triangle offense" that helped the Chicago Bulls win six national championships in a seven year span (Parr, 2006). The current study seeks to extend the literature by providing the first account that focuses specifically on the roles and responsibilities of Canadian university assistant coaches.

In addition to understanding the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches, it is equally important to know how they acquired their knowledge and expertise so that training opportunities can be developed for these individuals. In many cases, head coaches began acquiring their knowledge as athletes and continued throughout their tenure as assistant coaches (Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006; Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995). During these stages, their knowledge and expertise was enhanced through formal methods such as coaching clinics and coach education programs, and informally by interacting with and observing other coaches (Bloom, 2013; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006).

Coach mentoring is a particularly important source of informal learning in a coach's career (Bloom, 2013; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Côté, 2006; Erickson et al., 2007, 2008; Gould, Giannini, Krane, & Hodge, 1990). For example, Erickson and colleagues (2008) found that experienced coaches who were enrolled in a coaching certification program identified mentorships among their most preferred method of learning. In addition, Bloom et al. (1998) found that a key to the career development of aspiring expert coaches was the mentoring they received from established coaches. Furthermore, their coach mentor shaped their personal coaching style and philosophy through discussions and positive role modeling. To date, literature on mentoring in coaching is still limited with a call for structured coach mentoring programs (Bloom, 2013; Bloom et al., 1998; Gould et al., 1990). In addition, coach mentoring research has focused primarily on coaches' recollections of their own experiences as mentees rather than as mentors (Gould et al., 1990; Jones et al., 2003). As such, more research is needed examining mentoring from the perspective of head coaches who served as mentors for younger aspiring coaches. This study will address this gap in the literature by describing how head coaches developed their younger protégés, which may include mentoring.

Erickson et al. (2008) found interacting with other coaches was another preferred source of informal learning for developing coaches. Further to this, Culver and Trudel (2008) proposed that sustained interactions among opposing coaches could potentially foster learning through the collective sharing of ideas and strategies that are designed

to improve athlete and team performance. Despite Culver and Trudel's ideas, Erickson et al. found coaches who wished to coach at higher competitive levels preferred coach interactions less than coaches who preferred coaching at lower levels. This may be a result of competitive coaches being reluctant to share information with rival coaches for fear of losing a competitive edge (Lemyre et al., 2007; Occhino, Mallett, & Rynne, 2013). As such, there has been a call for research to examine whether it is possible to create an environment where competitive coaches feel comfortable sharing their knowledge and experiences with their peers (Culver & Trudel, 2008; Lemyre et al., 2007). The current study may provide insight into this topic.

While it can be argued that assistant coaches are critical to all team and individual sports, the need for assistant coaches may be particularly important in North American football (referred to as football in the remainder of the manuscript) due to the large roster sizes (approximately 80 athletes per team), the specialization of many positions (e.g., quarterback, linebacker, and receiver), and the independence of team units. There are typically between two to five assistant coaches earning a full-time salary on each university football coaching staff in Canada. Taken together, these factors make it particularly difficult for head coaches to manage every element of the coaching process, and the importance of their assistant coaches cannot be undervalued.

Given that coaching is an enormously complex undertaking (Bush & Silk, 2010), it seems important to organize and understand the different elements of the job. One effective heuristic regarding the knowledge and roles of coaches is the Coaching Model (CM) (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al., 1995). This applied model provides a framework which describes coaching behaviors. It helps explain how coaches structure their knowledge in the development of athlete and team potential by focusing on a series of primary and peripheral components. The CM implies that coaches create a mental model which helps them evaluate their plan of action and consequently maximize their team's potential. The CM is influenced by three peripheral components, labelled as *coach characteristics*, *athlete characteristics*, and *contextual factors*, which helps to explain how the athlete, coach, and environment interact, and how all three must be in unison to create a successful sport environment. More precisely, coaches integrate these components into their coaching plans in order to define how the three primary categories (i.e., organization, training, and competition) can be used to produce athlete development and team success. *Organization* involves optimizing conditions for training and competition by creating a team vision, selecting athletes, setting team goals, working with parents and support staff, and attending to administrative duties (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al., 1995). *Training* is described as the knowledge transfer between coaches and athletes with the goal of improving athletes' skill acquisition and performance (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al., 1995). *Competition* involves the use of knowledge

to maximize athletes' performances during competitions (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997). The competition component includes coaches' roles prior to, during, and immediately following competitions. This study will be the first to provide an in depth description of head assistant coaches' roles and responsibilities within the coaching process.

The purpose of the present study was to describe how head coaches selected, developed, and utilized their assistant coaches using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods are appropriate when there is a need to provide a complex detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2013) and is beneficial for exploratory studies where there is little known on the subject of interest (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Method

Participants

The current study used four criteria to purposely select some of the most successful Canadian university football head coaches. First, they were currently a head coach of a Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) football team. Second, they had been a head coach for a minimum of five years. Third, they had a career winning percentage over .500. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they were recommended as an exceptional head coach by a panel of six experts that included current and former head and assistant athletic directors and current and former head CIS football coaches. For their recommendations, the panel was asked to consider equally the accomplishments of head coaches on the football field, as well as their reputations off the field (e.g., student-centered, involvement in the community). The criteria for coach selection were in agreement with Côté and Gilbert (2009), who defined coaching effectiveness as "the consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts" (p. 316).

The six participants in our study accomplished many milestones during their athletic and coaching careers. All reached elite levels in their athletic careers which ranged from playing football in the CIS to playing professionally. During their coaching careers, they were recognized with coach of the year awards and led their teams to various conference championships, including four who led their teams to a national championship. Additionally, the participants were recognized for having football programs that produced student-athletes who demonstrated proficiencies in both the classroom and their communities.

Data Gathering

The current study used a semi-structured open-ended interview format, which is similar in style to an ordinary conversation with the interviewee doing most of the

talking (Patton, 2002). This allowed the interviewer to focus the topic of discussion but allowed the interviewee the freedom to answer openly without restrictions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It was advantageous for interviewees to answer without restriction because it allowed them to dictate which subject matter was most important to them. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place at a mutually agreed upon time and location.

A three-section interview guide was created specifically for the current study by members of the research team (see Appendix). Head coaches were instructed to answer questions about their lead or head assistant coaches. Head assistant football coaches who are hired on a full time basis typically have the largest roles and responsibilities of the assistant coaching staff. The first section of the interview guide contained opening questions intended to introduce the topic and to initiate discussion. The second section addressed the main questions concerning why the head coach selected their head assistant coach, what roles and responsibilities they assigned to them, and how they developed them. This section covered information based on Côté, Salmela, Trudel, and colleagues' (1995) CM. Specifically, the questions were designed to provide insight on head assistant coaches' role in organization, training, and competition, the initial qualities and experiences needed to be hired for their roles, and how head coaches prepared them for their roles. Finally, the third section contained concluding questions that allowed participants the opportunity to include additional information they felt was relevant. To ensure consistency all participants were interviewed by the same interviewer.

Data Analysis

The current study used thematic content analysis to identify, analyze, and report emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995). First, each interview was transcribed verbatim making minor edits. Edits were made to correct for grammar or to ensure participant confidentiality. This process allowed the primary researcher to become immersed in the data and familiarized with the depth and breadth of its content. Second, each interview was analyzed line by line and broken down into meaning units. Tesch (1990) described meaning units as a segment of text composed of words, sentences, or entire paragraphs that convey the same idea and relate to the same topic. Meaning units were organized and stored using the NVivo 8 (NVivo, 2008) computer software program. Third, each meaning unit received a tag that was relevant to its content. Once tags were assigned to each meaning unit they were examined for similarities and grouped together forming properties. Fourth, each property received tags on the basis of commonalities shared by the meaning units. Finally, each property was examined and grouped into similar units called categories. This was done in a comparable fashion to the creation of properties, however, it required a higher and more abstract level of analysis (Côté, Salmela, &

Russell, 1995). In addition, the data were examined until data saturation occurred and no new tags, properties, or categories emerged at each level of classification in the inductive analysis.

Validity

Yardley (2008) described validity in qualitative research as an attempt to enhance the accuracy of the findings described by both the participants and the researcher through four principles: *sensitivity to context*, *commitment and rigor*, *transparency and coherence*, and *impact and importance*. *Sensitivity to context* refers to the methods used by researchers to capture the appropriate context of the phenomenon being studied (Yardley, 2008). The research team created an interview guide using existing relevant theoretical and empirical literature, as well as feedback acquired in separate meetings with both the head and assistant football coaches at one of our institutions. Furthermore, each participant was sent a full verbatim transcript of the interview and was invited to add, modify, clarify, or exclude any comments or ideas made during the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were also sent a summary of the results and were asked to state any concerns, questions, or comments regarding the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Commitment and rigor* involves ensuring an in depth engagement with the topic, applying sound methodological competence, and completing a thorough data analysis (Yardley, 2008). The research team ensured commitment and rigor by carefully selecting participants based on criteria relevant to the research question. In addition, the primary researcher underwent training in qualitative interviewing by conducting pilot interviews under the supervision of an experienced interviewer. *Coherence and transparency* involves disclosing the research process to all readers (Yardley, 2008).

The current study provided a detailed account of the procedures undertaken during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, a paper trail of the analysis was kept which included themes, sample quotations, and tables representing each step of the analysis. *Impact and importance* is a principle for assessing the quality of research that demonstrates the usefulness of the study (Yardley, 2008). The current study presented data on the lived experiences of some of the country's most successful university head football coaches' experiences selecting and developing their head assistant coach. Therefore, the results will directly impact head coaches by providing guidelines for selecting their head assistant coach and establishing successful football programs. Furthermore, this study provides information for assistant coaches on the knowledge and experience they need to acquire to be competitive when applying for an assistant coaching position in university sport. Finally, these results add to the coaching science literature by providing information about assistant coaches, which remains an under-studied population in coaching science literature.

Results

The purpose of the study was to understand the characteristics head coaches desired when hiring their head assistant coach, the main roles and responsibilities they assigned their assistants, and the techniques and behaviors they used to develop them. Quotes from the six coaches are provided below and are listed as C1 to C6.

Assistant Coaches' Background

The participants indicated that all of their head assistant coaches had previous elite athletic and coaching experiences before assuming their current positions. Athletically, five of the head assistants were talented university football players while one played in the Canadian Football League (CFL; the only professional football league in Canada). From a coaching perspective, two had distinguished careers as assistant coaches in the CIS prior to their current appointment as head assistant and one was an assistant coach in the CFL:

My assistant was an all-star quarterback in the CIS. He understands what you can and cannot do as a player. He doesn't pretend a certain read is possible when there is no way of predicting what will happen. We build our system around our athletes' strengths and the quarterbacks he has worked with always rank amongst the most efficient passers in the nation. His athletic background has been absolutely critical for that. (C6)

My assistant's athletic experience was very important for his ability to coach. He was able to take what he learned as a player and use it to develop, coach, teach, and manage an offense that was ready to compete every Saturday. (C3)

In addition to their athletic careers, head coaches discussed the importance of previous coaching experiences. One coach noted, "If you can get an assistant with coaching experience, a guy who knows the ropes, who has been around the block a few times, that puts you way ahead of the pack." (C5). Another coach said:

It is very important that my assistant has past coaching experience. We find the best kids and design a system around their talent. My assistant has a wealth of knowledge and a coaching background where he has been exposed to a whole bunch of systems and strategies. This allows him to change and adapt his offense year in and year out. (C6)

In the current study, five of the six head coaches hired head assistants from within their own program. Specifically, three head coaches hired their previous athletes and two promoted one of their position coaches. Thus, it appears that the head assistants made important impressions on their head coaches during their time as athletes and assistant coaches.

Despite selecting assistant coaches who were skilled football players and had previous assistant coaching experience, all participants believed it was possible to be a successful coach without having a decorated athletic career. They stressed the importance of coaching knowledge and strong pedagogical skills, as indicated by the following quotes: “You can be a good coach without having been a high profile athlete. Having that profile helps you establish credibility, but being a good coach really comes down to what you know and how you teach it.” (C4)

An assistant coach can be effective without having played at a high level. It might take longer for a guy who hasn't played to gain players' trust, but in the end it still comes down to your assistant's knowledge and ability to teach and communicate with athletes. (C3)

Assistant Coaches' Personal Beliefs and Behaviors

The participants indicated that they purposely hired assistants who cared about developing a respected football program on and off the field:

It is important that my assistant believes that we put the student-athlete ahead of our personal goals and aspirations. You can't have a guy here who only cares about winning a championship, or who doesn't care if somebody embarrasses the program. You are destined for failure if you have those kinds of people on your coaching staff. (C2)

My head assistant coach has the capacity to say 'no'. He does not just make the decisions that will make him popular with the kids. He understands that he has to make the right decisions for our athletes and our football program. (C4)

In order to put the well-being of the program ahead of any personal agendas, head assistant coaches must be loyal to their football program. For example, one coach said, “Your assistant's loyalty to the program is incredibly important. I want my assistant to be loyal to the institution and do what is best for the football program at all costs.” (C6). Another coach said:

Loyalty is the biggest thing when hiring a coach because a lot of stuff we do is confidential. I mean it is not war but you keep your secrets for yourself. Your techniques and other tactical aspects need to remain a secret. (C4)

Athlete Development

To create a respected football program, the coaching staff developed their student-athletes' individual skills both on and off the football field. Head assistant coaches had unique roles in the development of their players. Specifically, they were closer with athletes, interacted

more frequently with them, and provided different types of knowledge and training compared to head coaches:

My assistant is definitely closer to the players than I am and that is the way that we want it. You set the guidelines as the head coach and your head assistant is there to monitor them during day to day operations. He is kind of like a foreman in a shop. You tell him how you want him to do things, and then he basically runs the show. (C4)

Head and assistant coaches have different relationships with players. Most players are more comfortable going to my assistant coach because he deals with them more hands on than I do. Usually the head coach is only involved when there is a big problem. You want the day to day issues to be handled by your assistants. (C2)

Head assistant coaches also complemented their head coaches' knowledge and leadership skills and provided a different perspective and coaching style for the athletes:

You need to have an assistant who complements you. That is probably the most important thing. If all you are looking for is a mirror image of yourself then your team's coaching staff will never be any better than you are. I don't want my capacity for excellence to be a limitation to our program. I want to surround myself with people who are better than me. I want an assistant who continues to raise the bar and forces me to become a better coach. (C5)

You have to have some good cops and bad cops. My assistant can play more of a bad cop role than I do. I think it's important that the second in command be different than the head coach in a variety of perspectives. (C1)

In addition to developing their athletes' football skills, all the participants spoke at great length about using football as a tool to develop skills that would help them succeed in life:

Pursuit of excellence inside and outside of the classroom is important. I had twelve athletes recognized for their scholastic excellence last year. I will make sure we have at least twelve recognized in a Vanier Cup (the national championship game) year to really signify that academics and athletics complement each other. We are better on the field because we have bright kids. Their success on the field is actually correlated with their success in the classroom. (C6)

I make a commitment to my players' families that their sons will come out of here a better football player, as well as a better citizen. It is important that he comes out with great values and an education. You know, courtesy, politeness, punctuality, teamwork, I could go on. (C4)

Although my vision for players involves success on the field, it also involves success off the field.

It is extremely important to let everyone know our priorities. We tell recruits and their parents that the number one thing we want from their son is for him to graduate, so education is parallel. My goal is for them to graduate and then go on to become successful in whatever field they have chosen. Then, along with their education and personal success, they will also have had a successful football career where they competed for and won championships. (C3)

At the end of the day very few of our athletes are going to play professional football. Therefore, as a coach it is up to us to teach the core values required for their success in academics and in life. If we can instill those values they will have the tools to be successful in all of their life experiences. I want them to have a great experience here, for them to get their degree, and I want them to leave here with a good set of core values. If we can accomplish those goals, then professional football is a bonus. (C2)

Assistant Coaches' Coaching Requirements

Head assistant coaches were given full responsibility for a major team unit (e.g., offense, defense, or special teams), and spent significant time organizing and managing practices:

The prep work for practice is big. At the end of every practice we come together immediately in the staff room and talk about what we just did, our personnel, and how we felt practice went. From our discussion, my head assistant and I create a practice plan for the next day. We go through every position and create a practice schedule that is broken down to the minute. It is scheduled and organized so that everyone knows what to do and where they have to be at all times. (C3)

My assistant head coach is responsible for creating the practice plan and relaying it to each of the coaches. He meets with the offensive staff and directs them according to his needs throughout the practice. He supervises our film coordinator to make sure the film is up and in the right place after practice. He instructs the positional coaches where they need to be on each drill. Then, at the end of the day, he is responsible for film sessions and post-practice feedback for our offensive portion of the team. (C6)

Furthermore, head assistants coached athletes during games and were responsible for creating game plans and calling plays: "As a defensive coordinator, my assistant coach makes every defensive call. While the defense is on the field he's the guy signaling to 12 guys what our next defensive play will be." (C1)

My assistant prepares the game plan by taking information from all the coaches and putting it together.

Our game plans can be 25 to 30 pages long. They not only consist of our plays, but also have the statistics of our opponent's last six or seven games. To do this, he has to watch all of their game films and break down their tendencies. All the coaches give some input, but he has to pull it all together and figure out the percentages and relay that information back to us. (C2)

Head assistants also had important administrative roles off the field. This included creating and maintaining relationships with alumni, fundraising, organizing football camps, and handling team needs:

Off the field my assistant spends a considerable amount of time dealing with administrative duties. For example, he is very involved in our major award committees, has a lead role in our sports camps, and has a great relationship with our alumni. (C6)

My assistant purchases all of our team's training equipment, organizes our football camps for the kids, and runs the football coaches clinic. Also, because he is the strength and conditioning guy, he reserves the gyms and rooms needed for training. (C4)

All of the participants felt recruiting was essential to the success of a CIS football program and was a primary part of the job requirements for both head and assistant coaches. For example, one coach stated, "Right now we are in the recruiting process which is the most important time of the year. If you don't win now you are not going to win in the fall." (C3). In fact, four coaches said recruiting was their most important task:

At this level of football your priorities are recruiting, coaching, recruiting, fundraising, and then recruiting. Every second thought had better be about recruiting and making good impressions on young athletes. We are all pretty smart at the X's and O's, therefore, it really comes down to who has the best athletes. (C6)

Coaches noted that recruiting was so important that their entire coaching staff was involved: "Recruiting is a seven-headed monster and every full-time member of our staff is heavily involved. That's a good thing because the young assistants here understand that recruiting is the lifeline of the program." (C5)

Although all members of the coaching staff recruited, head assistant coaches held a central role in attracting talented athletes:

When it comes to recruiting my head assistant is the main face of our program. He is young, energetic, and relates well with the kids who are coming in. He relates to them even better than I can. His face and his role in recruiting are very important. (C3)

Head assistants' main roles in recruiting involved either identifying top athletes or creating personal relationships with recruits and their families. Assistant

coaches with strong social skills approached recruits, sold their program, and established meaningful relationships with athletes and their parents. For example, one coach stated, “To recruit effectively you need great people skills. Kids like and trust my assistant. He also works really hard on follow-ups and stays connected with these kids. My assistant does that very well.” (C1). Another said:

Once we have decided who we are going to recruit, we have to create a personal relationship. My head assistant coach is hands on with a lot of the offensive recruits and will be in a lot of the living rooms talking to moms and dads. That is a huge part of his job. (C6)

On the other hand, some head assistants were in charge of identifying talented prospects for other members of the coaching staff to recruit:

I have no problem with the personal part of the recruiting; getting involved with the family, finding out what the recruit wants to do, and closing. Therefore, it is great that my assistant is good at doing the research. He finds out who they are, where they are, and what their marks are. It is important to me that he is excellent at that. (C5)

My assistant was able to find kids who understood they were coming to work hard as a student as well as a football player. He was able to find and reach out to kids who had good enough grades to be accepted but were absolutely die hard football people. With his help, we have done a better job recruiting that kind of individual. (C1)

Career Development of Assistant Coaches

Head coaches were instrumental in the career development of their head assistant coach, indirectly preparing them for future head coaching positions. They exposed their assistants to numerous football camps and conferences, as well as the National Coaching Certification Program in Canada in order to increase their knowledge and provide them with different perspectives. In addition, they mentored their assistants to become autonomous leaders, which allowed head coaches to focus on other areas of coaching and simultaneously prepared their assistants for future employment as head coaches. For example, one coach stated, “Coach certification is part of developing coaches and you should try to get all of your coaches certified.” (C3). Others said:

I think it is important for my assistant’s development to send him to other teams’ football camps. He knows what I believe in because we have been together for so long. Therefore, I think it’s really important that he sees other ways of doing things and is exposed to different concepts, programs, and coaches. That way he can improve our team by incorporating the things he likes from each camp. (C1)

In order to develop my assistant I send him to different coaching conventions. He just went to the American Football Coaches Association convention to listen to clinics given by the coaches who had the most success in bowl games this year. In addition, I send him to the East-West Bowl game every year where he meets all of the head coaches from coast to coast and attends a number of presentations performed by National Football League and Canadian Football League coaches. (C1)

In addition to acquiring external sources of knowledge, the participants provided their head assistants with guidelines and offered feedback on their performance:

I expect my assistant to motivate not criticize or belittle. I taught him to coach people not football. I expect him to be organized and had him master the basics and skills required to teach players. I expect him to teach hard work, integrity, values, and morals. These are some of the guidelines I set for my assistant coach. (C2)

I develop my assistant by working together with him and critiquing game film. Asking him what he did and why he ran certain plays. I offer suggestions regarding other plays and get his opinion on them. That is the kind of dialogue I like to have with him. I give him feedback and try to understand why he made his choices. (C3)

Head assistant coaches were developed over a continuous process, through which head coaches increased the number and difficulty of their responsibilities as their skills increased:

To develop your assistant you need to give him an ascending order of increased responsibilities. You need to ask him to do more, but you don’t sort of dump it all on his desk at once. Little by little you give him projects in a structured environment where he can prove himself to you and you can prove things to him. (C5)

Progression and keeping my assistant engaged is important for his development. To give him a static job would bore him to death and I would lose him. So we keep expanding his roles and getting him to do more and more until ultimately I can step aside and become his special team’s coordinator someday. (C6)

Although the participants monitored their assistants’ work, they provided them with autonomy to lead and make important decisions regarding their football unit:

When developing my assistant I let him do his thing. I provide guidance and he knows that he can come in here at any time and discuss anything. It is a very open relationship. The main thing is to be there for him and just let him go. He needs that freedom to grow. You need to let him learn and make mistakes while helping him along the way. (C3)

I provide my assistant with autonomy to foster his development. This allows him the opportunities to develop his leadership. If you never give him the opportunity to take control then he will become dependent on you. He won't develop any leadership competency. However, if you put him in a leadership position you are now developing his skills in that area. (C5)

Discussion

While coaching science research has increased significantly in the past four decades, the majority of research has focused on the knowledge and behaviors of head coaches (Gilbert et al., 2012; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). The purpose of this study was to understand the characteristics head coaches looked for when hiring their head assistant coach, the main roles and responsibilities they assigned their assistants, and the techniques and behaviors they used to develop them. Six very successful head university football coaches participated in the current study and the results provide one of the first empirical accounts on this topic.

Selection of the Assistant Coach

The first quality head coaches looked for when hiring their assistant coach was experience as both an athlete and assistant coach. Previous research has shown that university coaches generally began their careers as skilled athletes and then progressed through the ranks as assistant coaches as they earned promotions and gained new responsibilities (Erickson et al., 2007; Gilbert et al., 2006, 2009; Schinke et al., 1995). All of the current assistant football coaches' were talented university and/or professional football players. Also, two had distinguished careers as assistant coaches before taking their current position. Furthermore, three of the six coaches hired head assistants who played for them as athletes and two promoted one of their position coaches. These results suggest that assistant coaches' athletic and coaching experiences not only afforded them football knowledge, but allowed them to make important impressions on their head coaches that may have influenced the decision to appoint them as head assistant coach.

In addition to their playing and coaching experiences, head coaches wanted assistants who were loyal to their football programs. These results correspond with literature that has examined interactions and relationships among elite coaching staffs (Potrac & Jones, 2009). For example, Potrac and Jones (2009) conducted a case study on the coaching experiences and perceptions of a semi-professional head soccer coach. The head coach perceived the culture of elite soccer as selfish and ruthless and learned through previous experiences that coaches were often more concerned about their own self-interests than the goals of the organization. Therefore, the coach believed that having members on his coaching staff that he trusted was crucial to his success as a head coach. The

current results indicated that our head coaches also felt it was important to hire assistant coaches that were loyal and trustworthy. This loyalty was anticipated to extend to their entire football program and institution.

Head coaches also looked for assistants who cared about their athletes' personal growth and development. These results coincide with literature examining youth (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006) and university head coaches (e.g., Carter & Bloom, 2009; Duchesne, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2011; Vallée & Bloom, 2005), and are consistent with how Côté and Gilbert (2009) defined coaching effectiveness. Therefore, the current findings suggest that caring about athletes' overall development and possessing strong values such as loyalty helped assistant coaches attain their current coaching position and may be early indicators of the future success of individuals in this profession. Along the same line, the results offer strong support that a peripheral component of the CM, the coach's characteristics and specifically loyalty, may play a significant role in acquiring a head assistant coaching position in football in relation to other sports. Future research is warranted to examine this proposition.

Assistant Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities

Participants in the current study felt team success began with recruiting talented athletes. Head assistants had two important roles in recruiting: identifying top athletes and/or forming strong personal relationships with recruits and their families. Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman (2001) have shown that player-coach relationships were one of the greatest influences on school choice of Division I American athletes. Similarly, studies in business have demonstrated that impressions of recruiters influenced job applicant's decision making (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). For example, Rynes and colleagues (1991) found university students based their choice of job on impressions formed about their recruiters. In the current study, assistant coaches with strong social skills approached potential athletes, sold their program, and established meaningful relationships through numerous interactions with recruits and their parents. However, in some cases the head coach preferred to do the social part of the recruiting and wanted his head assistant coach to identify talented prospects. The results of the present study suggest that recruiting is a dynamic process and that head assistant coaches should be skilled at either identifying talent or forming strong social bonds with recruits.

To date, no research has examined the relationship between recruiting and performance in Canadian university sport. However, recruiting has been shown to influence performance in Division I American football (Langelett, 2003), as well as in large businesses (Terpstra & Rozell, 1993). Langelett (2003) found that division I teams with high recruiting class rankings had better winning percentages the following five years than teams with less successful recruiting classes. Terpstra and

Rozell (1993) discovered that companies that employed more recruiting techniques (e.g., employee referrals, IQ tests) to evaluate candidates had greater organizational performances (e.g., sales, profits). In the current study, head coaches invested a significant amount of time identifying the recruiting skills of their coaching staff before assigning them recruiting duties. In addition, some of the current head coaches described recruiting as the single most important task in CIS football, thus calling for future research to examine the relationship between recruiting and team success in Canadian University sport programs.

Besides their roles in recruiting players to their programs, the participants provided their head assistants with full responsibility for a major team unit (e.g., offense, defense, or special teams). This involved creating strategies, coordinating the support staff during practices, training athletes, and having full responsibility of calling plays during games. According to the CM (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al., 1995), organization, training, and competition are the primary coaching components. Past studies have shown that assistant coaches played a supportive role in organizing and coordinating practices and training sessions, and providing strategic advice to head coaches (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Côté & Salmela, 1996; Lemyre et al., 2007). In accordance with past research, the current head assistant coaches spent considerable time planning and coordinating practices. However, contrary to past research, they were given full authority by their head coach to lead a major team unit. Compared to most sports, the size and specialization of positions on football teams may make it too difficult for head coaches to control all aspects of coaching. The current results indicated that assistant football coaches may have particularly large leadership roles and responsibilities within the coaching process.

In the current study the head assistant coaches were particularly important in the training component of the coaching process (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al., 1995). Specifically, the participants wanted their head assistant to provide athletes with coaching knowledge and a leadership style that differed from their own. Furthermore, the head assistant coaches were more involved with their athletes on a daily basis providing feedback, reinforcement, and encouragement (Solomon et al., 1996). These results suggest that assistant coaches occupied different training responsibilities that may have required different skills and leadership styles than head coaches. As such, athletes may have received better training by having access to multiple coaching styles and sources of knowledge drawing from both the head coach and head assistant coach.

Development of Assistant Coaches

The current study adds to the coaching literature by describing the strategies expert coaches used to enhance their protégés' development from the perspective of coach mentors. Specifically, the participants directed their head assistants to the national coach certification program and coaching clinics as a way to enhance their

knowledge and skills. Moreover, they offered guidance and feedback while increasing the number and difficulty of their assistants' responsibilities to influence the success of the program as well as the career path of their assistant coaches. Research has shown that coaches learned valuable knowledge through coach education programs, attending clinics, interactions with other coaches, and through mentorships (Bloom, 2013; Erickson et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2003; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). The current findings extend these results by describing the methods and behaviors head coaches used to influence the learning process of their protégés, which can be viewed as a unique type of mentoring apprenticeship. In fact, mentoring as a form of coach development is also recommended in the International Sport Coaching Framework (2013) as a core component of the professional responsibilities of more experienced coaches.

Interestingly, the current head coaches sent their assistants to other football teams' camps to learn from their coaches. Past research has shown that coaches often failed to develop communities of practice where they shared their strategies and tactics with other coaches (Culver & Trudel, 2008; Lemyre et al., 2007; Occhino et al., 2013). Contrary to past findings, the assistant coaches were welcomed at either professional (i.e., CFL) or American universities to enhance their coaching knowledge and behaviors. However, consistent with previous research, the current coaches did not send their assistants to rival programs. These results suggest that communities of practice can exist in elite sport with non-rival coaches and are valued by Canadian university head football coaches.

Practical Implications

These results are of interest to both head and assistant coaches. For example, this study described the important characteristics head coaches looked for when hiring their assistant coach, a topic mentioned in the International Sport Coaching Framework (2013) as requiring additional consideration. By hiring assistant coaches who are loyal and who care about athletes' education and personal growth, head coaches may be able to accomplish their team (e.g., winning) and individual (e.g., athletes graduating) goals. This information also provides assistant coaches with knowledge that may help them get hired on a university coaching staff. In addition to providing information on how head coaches selected their assistants, the current results described how they prepared them for their coaching duties. This information may allow head coaches to develop more autonomous assistant coaches, which could provide them with opportunities to focus on other elements of coaching such as recruiting, administration, and developing athletes or other members of their coaching staff.

These results can also be used to help inform the design and delivery of coach education programs. For example, coach education programs at all levels rarely spend time educating and teaching head coaches how to

effectively interact with their assistant coaches. The need for this may be even more important in elite sport where coaching is a profession rather than a volunteer endeavor. In Canada, coach education is governed by the National Coaching Certification Program, which does not currently differentiate between the position of head and assistant coach in its competitive stream. Specific to football, the current results highlight the unique responsibilities that head assistant football coaches have compared to other team sport coaches. As such, coach education programs in football should develop training protocols that address this difference that is specific to their sport.

The current results also revealed many opportunities for future research. First, this study was the first to document the importance of recruiting in Canadian university sport. Future research should examine recruiting success and team performance in Canadian university sports. Second, it would be interesting to replicate this study from the perspective of the assistant coach. Assistant coaches may have different interpretations than head coaches, or could possibly provide more detail on certain subjects that were discussed by the coaches of the current study. Third, future research could examine the views of athletes or the support staff on the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches. Examining the perspective of other members of the coaching staff and team would certainly provide a more global understanding of assistant coaches. Understanding the unique elements of assistant coaching may help sport teams maximize the effectiveness of their coaching staff, which could translate to having athletes who are better prepared to succeed on and off the field. Taken together, the current results are a positive first step to empirically understand the often overlooked but important position of assistant coach.

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Appendix Interview Guide

Opening Questions:

1. What coach has influenced you the most as an athlete?
 - Briefly describe this coach's leadership style.
2. Briefly describe your progression into coaching evolution.
 - Assistant Coach
 - Head Coach
3. Briefly describe the current state and potential of the team you are now coaching in comparison to other elite teams you have coached in the past.

Key Questions:

4. What characteristics or key factors do you look for in your head assistant coach?
 - Age
 - Past coaching experiences
 - Athletic experience
 - Knowledge: Technical, Tactical, Physical, Mental
 - Personality
 - Loyalty
 - Recruiting
5. How does your coaching style influence the selection of your head assistant coach?
 - What are the similarities and differences between the two of you?
6. How does your vision of the team's potential influence the selection of your head assistant coach?
 - Refer to question 3
 - Goals
 - Values
 - Beliefs
 - Expectancies
7. Describe your relationship with your head assistant coach.
8. How do you impact your head assistant coaches' development?
 - What kind of behaviors do you use to foster his development?
9. How do you use him to help with your coaching demands?
 - What responsibilities do you give him?
 - What role does he play during games?
 - Does the role of your assistant coach affect the team dynamics in any way?
 - Feedback: Frequency, Type, Athlete Status
10. How does your assistant coach affect the success of the team?

Concluding Questions:

11. Would you like to add anything else related to our interview?
12. Do you have any final comments or questions?