Coaching Knowledge and Success: Going Beyond Athletic Experiences

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This study explored the development and acquisition of coaching knowledge by university coaches who have surpassed their personal athletic achievements. Six successful Canadian male university team sport coaches participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Results of the analysis revealed commonalities between the coaches in terms of their personal characteristics and current coaching knowledge. Some similarities and differences emerged in their acquisition of knowledge. Many of the current findings were similar to previous studies on expert coaches' knowledge development and acquisition, despite the fact that university coaches in our sample did not compete at an elite level as athletes. This article explains how these individuals acquired their coaching knowledge and provides a more complete picture of the development and acquisition of coaching knowledge for aspiring coaches.

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Since the early 19th century, coaches have played an important role in helping athletes develop and succeed in the sporting world (McNabb, 1990). Coaches perform various duties such as guiding the practice of skills, providing instruction and feedback, and monitoring learning and performance; all of which are designed to help athletes realize their potential. Furthermore, coaches fulfill multiple roles such as teacher, motivator, strategist, and character builder (Gould, 1987). For these reasons, it is not surprising that coaching has received extensive empirical attention in the sport literature (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). In general, the research results have indicated that expert coaches relied on their education, organizational skills, experience, work ethic, and knowledge to further their coaching careers and successfully perform their job at the highest levels (e.g., Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Côté, 1998; Cregan, Bloom, & Reid, 2007; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995; Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

In a study directly related to knowledge acquisition, Werthner and Trudel (2006) suggested that coaches acquired knowledge through mediated (e.g., attending clinics), unmediated (e.g., observing other coaches) and internal (e.g., reflecting on their experience) learning situations. They postulated that coach development was idiosyncratic and that successful coaches actively sought out these three different learning situations. Therefore, they concluded that a wide variety of learning opportunities were available for coaches to acquire and refine their coaching knowledge.

Werthner and Trudel’s (2006) findings are supported by previous research which has highlighted a number of learning opportunities that appear to be consistent amongst expert coaches (e.g., Anderson & Gill, 1983; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Cregan et al., 2007; Schinke et al., 1995). For example, Anderson and Gill found that many expert coaches acquired fundamental coaching knowledge while studying for an undergraduate degree in physical education. Similarly, expert coaches have been shown to have consistently gained knowledge through initial coaching experiences as head coaches at the high school level or as assistant coaches at the university level (Cregan et al., 2007; Schinke et al., 1995), as well as through mentoring by more experienced coaches during their careers (Bloom et al., 1998; Cregan et al., 2007). As such, expert coaches appear to have been exposed to similar experiential factors from which they may have developed and acquired important elements of their coaching knowledge.

A small body of research which has identified the career development patterns of expert coaches (e.g., Cregan et al., 2007; Erickson et al., 2007; Gilbert, Côté, & Mallett, 2006; Gould, Giannini, Krane, & Hodge, 1990; Schinke et al., 1995; Werthner & Trudel, 2006) has concluded that previous elite-level athletic experiences were viewed as a valuable source of coaching knowledge acquisition. For example, Schinke and colleagues analyzed the career progression patterns of elite Canadian University and Olympic team sport coaches and found that coaches passed through a number of developmental stages during both their athletic and coaching careers that provided them with the necessary knowledge and experience needed to reach the pinnacle of the coaching profession. More specifically, the coaches felt their elite athletic experiences helped shape how they trained and developed athletes, formed a coaching philosophy, and interacted with athletes. In another study, Gilbert and colleagues interviewed 15 successful coaches working at different elite levels within the United States and found that these coaches acquired a minimal threshold of athletic experiences (e.g., a minimum of several thousand hours or 13 years). They also found that expert coaches perceived themselves as having been ‘above average’ athletes during their playing careers, although this was often occurring at the highest levels of their sport. Erickson and colleagues furthered this line of research by conducting retrospective interviews with 19 high performance coaches and found that the majority of coaches had accumulated expert athletic experiences in the sport they now coached. Consequently, previous research seems to indicate that expert athletic experiences played an important role in both a coach’s career progression and development of expert coaching knowledge.

While it may seem reasonable to postulate that most expert athletes were once expert athletes, this certainly does not represent everyone in this group. For example, current or recently retired professional coaches Ken Hitchcock (hockey), Bill Parcells (football) and Jose Mourinho (soccer) have all coached at a higher level (i.e., professionally) than they reached as an athlete. Currently, little empirical research has investigated the development of knowledge of coaches who have surpassed their athletic achievements. This is unfortunate as coaches who have exceeded the level of excellence they achieved as athletes may share the same knowledge and skills as coaches who were once expert athletes, but may have acquired this in different ways. Identifying how they acquired their knowledge would add information on an overlooked aspect of coaching development and coach education and provide a more complete picture of the development of coaching knowledge for aspiring coaches to follow.

In order to identify how expert coaches developed and acquired their coaching knowledge, it is important to understand what knowledge they possess. With Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, and Russell’s (1995) Coaching Model (CM), a theoretical framework exists that allows for the examination of expert coaches’ knowledge. The CM suggests that coaches construct a model of their knowledge of their athletes’ potential. This mental model dictates how the coach applies the primary components of organization, training, and competition to their athletes. The mental model is influenced by three peripheral components: the athlete’s characteristics, the coach’s characteristics, and contextual factors. These primary and peripheral components need to be compatible for a coach to provide the optimal environment for athletes to fully
develop (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, et al. 1995). A small group of researchers have begun to explore
different elements of the CM (e.g., Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997; Davies, Bloom, &
Salmela, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). For example, Bloom and colleagues investigated the pre-
and post-competition routines of expert Canadian coaches and found that prior to competition
coaches mentally rehearsed their game plan and stressed only key points to their teams,
whereas after competition, coaches worked on controlling their emotions and adopting behav-
iors that represented the best interests of the team given the outcome of the game. Likewise,
Davies et al. investigated the role of contextual factors on expert coaches and showed that
financial constraints and excessive administrative duties placed on Canadian University coaches
increased job dissatisfaction. The CM framework was used in the current study as being
representative of the coaching knowledge of expert team sport coaches, and thus allowed us
to explore the main components of their coaching knowledge, including how it was acquired.

Method

Participants

Six Canadian male University coaches from basketball (n = 4), volleyball (n = 1), and ice
hockey (n = 1) participated in this study. Of the six coaches, three were coaching men’s teams
and three were coaching women’s teams. The participants were purposefully chosen based on
a number of criteria. First, they must have been coaching at a higher level (e.g., University)
than they themselves competed as an athlete. Second, they must have accumulated at least 5
years experience as a head coach at the University level. Third, they must have had an overall
winning percentage greater than .500 while a head coach at the University level. Fourth, they
were recommended by their peers as one of the top coaches in their sport. Overall, our criteria
are in agreement with Côté, Young, North, and Duffy’s (2007) definition of an expert coach.
Table 1 includes a list of these coaches’ accomplishments and highlights their success at this
level. It is important to note that the table does not adequately reflect the accomplishments of
C5. He received unanimous support from both his peers and the Coaching Association of
Canada for inclusion in this study. C5 has one of the most consistent winning percentages of
all the coaches in our sample, with only 3 losing seasons in the past 15, including a recent
season winning percentage of nearly 79%. As well, the year after we collected our data, C5 led
his team to a conference title.

Table 1. Coaching Accomplishments of Each Coach at the University (CIS) Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C4</th>
<th>C5</th>
<th>C6</th>
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<td>Years head coaching</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearances at national championship tournament</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference coach of the year</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS coach of the year</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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Interview Technique

The coaches were interviewed individually for a period of time varying from one to two
hours in their city of residence. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were carried out using
a three-section interview guide that was specifically created for this study. The first section
included an opening question designed to introduce the main topic of the study and to help
initiate discussion (e.g., ‘Tell me about your evolution into coaching’). Another opening ques-
tion was created to extract information regarding the coaches’ athletic experiences. The sec-
ond section consisted of key questions based on the CM. Each of these key questions was
designed to learn about the participants’ knowledge and how this knowledge was acquired.
For example, questions focused on how coaches applied the three primary components of the
CM to their athletes (e.g., ‘How might a typical training session run?’, ‘What type of goals do
you set for yourself, your athletes, and your team?’). This was followed by a question that
focused on how they had learned to do this. The format was chosen because we felt it was first
important to understand what knowledge coaches had before asking how they acquired it. The
third section of the interview guide included a summary question which recapplied the topic of
the study and afforded the participant an opportunity to add any comments they felt were
relevant. Probes were used throughout the interviews to help the researcher explore the com-
ments provided by the participant (Patton, 2002). Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested that
probes increase the richness and depth of responses, and allow for further expansion of those areas considered relevant. Finally, the participant's confidentiality was protected through the use of a coding system that replaced each name with a number (i.e., W1-6); as well, any potentially identifying information (e.g., name of University, home town) was also replaced or disguised.

Data Analysis

The goal of the data analysis was to build a system of categories, which emerged from the unstructured data, regarding the knowledge of expert coaches who have surpassed their athletic achievements and how they acquired this information. This inductive approach followed the guidelines suggested by Côté and colleagues (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995).

Each verbatim transcript was divided into 552 meaning units which Tesch (1990) described as segments of text comprised of words, phrases, or entire paragraphs that conveyed the same idea and related to the same topic. Next, each meaning unit received a tag according to its content. Meaning units that described similar topics received the same tag. Following this, a similar process was employed to group similar tags into properties. Each newly formed property was also tagged according to the common features of their shared meaning units (Côté et al., 1993). Lastly, the properties were examined and grouped into similar collective sets named categories. Three categories emerged from this process. The data were examined until saturation was reached and no new level of information emerged at any classification level (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995).

Trustworthiness

Just as quantitative research strives for validity and reliability, qualitative research seeks to diminish the possibility for misinterpretation or mishandling of data through means that enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, the current study followed methods of trustworthiness suggested by some prominent researchers (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

First, member checks were used to ensure the validity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the current study, member checking occurred at three different times. At the end of each interview, the participant was given the opportunity to alter any comments he had made. Second, all six participants received a full verbatim transcript, and had the opportunity to eliminate, add, or clarify any comments made during the interview. Lastly, each participant was sent a summary of the results and was asked to comment on the accuracy of the findings. Of the six summaries sent out, four coaches changed nothing and two did not reply.

Second, peer review was carried out in the current study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A random sample of 140 meaning units (25%) were presented to a peer reviewer who placed them under the appropriate tags that best identified each meaning unit using the complete list of 55 tags. A reliability rate of 81% was achieved for this phase of data analysis. The same peer reviewer was also asked to classify the 53 tags into the eight properties. A 96% accuracy rate was obtained. Finally, the peer reviewer placed the eight properties into three categories and achieved a 100% rate of reliability. By conducting these peer reviews, it can be argued that a more accurate representation of the coaches' knowledge and experiences was formed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, prolonged engagement was used by the researcher to learn the culture and build the trust of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The current researchers had competed at varying levels of team sports and were aware of the culture and dynamics of expert team sport coaches. In addition, the researchers had read biographies of many expert team coaches. Finally, both researchers had worked as sport psychology consultants with university teams. Consequently, the research team had a good working knowledge of expert team sport coaches.

Results

In total, 552 meaning units resulted from the analysis of the six interviews. From these meaning units, three higher-order categories emerged entitled career path, personal factors, and coaching knowledge. Each category will now be examined in the following sections.

Career Path

Career path pertained to the coaches' progression from their earliest sporting experiences to their current coaching positions. Included here were their career experiences, including the influence of family.

All participants played sports in their childhood, which likely sparked their long-term interest in sport:

- I know it was part of my early upbringing that initiated my interest in sport. And for whatever reason, playing with balls and sport was just part of my personality even at a young age. So my first memories are in sport, not academics. And my parents were set on me doing whatever I wanted to do; sport was my first choice. (C5)
- I have been playing some kind of sports or games all my life. I remember when I was a youngster all I wanted to do was spend my days playing sports and games. I would always be thinking about sports. (C1)
Interestingly, three of the coaches played different sports during their youth compared to the one they coached at university:

Soccer and hockey were the competitive sports I played as a youth, although towards the end of high school I stopped playing hockey and tennis took over as my 'second' sport. And strangely volleyball (which I now coach), was not a big part of that. I played a little bit, but it was not part of what I enjoyed as a kid. (C5)

Although each coach maintained an interest in sport, none of them played beyond the high school level. Four of the coaches felt they simply were not good enough, while two suffered injuries which prevented them from competing:

I got seriously injured in a pre-season practice and I couldn't play hockey at that level any more. I had a huge concussion and temporarily lost some memory. My vision was also impaired. (C1)

Having been unable to compete as athletes at the university level, all six participants turned to coaching, although they began coaching at different competitive levels. For example, two participants were head coaches at the high school level, two were assistant coaches at the University level, and two were simultaneously a head high school coach and assistant university coach:

I was coaching senior high school boys while I was in university. Then in my 2nd year of university I talked to the women's coach and I asked her if she wanted an assistant; she said yes, so I became an assistant coach. I was also coaching high school boys and high school girls at the time, in addition to the assistant coaching; so it was really busy. (C2)

Just as the competitive level of these initial coaching experiences varied, so too did the amount of time it took each coach to reach the University level as a head coach. Notably, one coach spent two years as an assistant coach before moving into a head coaching position with the same team, while another coach spent 29 years at the high school level before taking a head coaching position with a University team:

When I graduated from University, I had completed two years as an assistant coach with the women's Varsity team and they offered me the head coaching job. They had fired the head coach partway through the season and asked me if I would take over for rest of that year. I said I would do it for a year. Little did I know that year would actually stretch to about 20 years. (C2)

I coached at the high school level for 29 years and I loved it. In those 29 years, I think I had only one losing season, which was the first one. After that, every year was a winning season. But 29 years is a long time and I was ready to test myself at a higher level. I had previously been asked many times to come to this University to be the head coach and had always refused. However, at that point in my career I was ready for the challenge and I accepted their offer. (C1)

Although the career paths of the coaches were idiosyncratic, all of them mentioned family members who played an important role in helping them reach their current coaching positions. For example, five coaches talked about the role their parents had played in their development:

My father was my role model. When he needed to do something, he did it. There were no excuses, he would do it and that taught me a lot about responsibility. The example he set for me highlighted the kind of coach I wanted to be. (C1)

Likewise, five of the coaches referred to the support given from their wives and children: Having family support is crucial. I might say 'let's go to Norway because it's either coaching pro in Norway or coaching junior B in Canada for $1000.' It is really important knowing I have their support in making that type of decision. (C6)

**Personal Factors**

Personal factors focused on how the coaches’ career paths had been influenced by who they were. More specifically, how their personal characteristics impacted their own growth and development.

All six coaches discussed the importance of possessing effective communication skills: Communication is huge. If I had to think of the number one priority in coaching I would say it is communication. If you cannot communicate with your athletes, I don't care what your knowledge is, you will fail. You have to be a really good communicator. (C2)

In addition to communication, all the coaches noted that flexibility and open-mindedness were crucial characteristics for coaching success:

If you are just one way and rigid you are in trouble; you have to be very flexible. For example, you have to accept that perhaps one of your athletes has class until 5:00; therefore he can't get to practice until 5:10. It is important to be adaptable to these types of situations. (C6)

The participants also emphasized the importance of being passionate about coaching, suggesting that this led to job satisfaction:

I am a huge fan of the game and believe that to be successful you have to be passionate about the game. I'd still go and watch high school kids play even if I wasn't coaching basketball and I didn't have to recruit them. (C4)

The six coaches also discussed why they chose this profession, including the sacrifices made and barriers overcome. Interestingly, while four of the participants said they became coaches to stay involved in sport, two coaches entered the profession by chance and enjoyed their initial experiences so much they decided to pursue coaching as a career:
I started to think about what I wanted to do with my life and I thought that coaching would be very interesting. I knew deep down that I was not a great player so I thought coaching could be my way to remain involved in sport. (C6)

It [coaching] was not something I ever thought of doing competitively. I got into it as a volunteer coach. My high school program required some kind of community activity so I thought I'd give coaching a stab, and I found I started to enjoy it. In particular, I enjoyed the teaching and tactical aspects of it so I decided to pursue it. (C3)

Notably, each participant cited several significant obstacles they faced as young coaches, particularly not being an elite athlete. Some coaches believed they lacked tactical awareness, while others suggested they lacked an instinctive understanding that coaches who played possessed:

It wasn’t easy [to coach without having played] because I didn’t instinctively understand things that coaches who were players did. And even now, I’ll sit around with other coaches in the conference who played at the University level and we will talk about basketball and sometimes I don’t understand what they’re talking about. (C3)

Interestingly, coach C3 also suggested that while not playing was an obstacle for him, it also provided him with a unique perspective of coaching that he has used to his advantage:

The advantage of not playing is that I’ve learned basketball from every position. A lot of coaches who played at high levels focus on coaching from their own position. Likewise I’ve known a lot of very, very good players who have tried to be coaches and have just been abysmal at it, largely because they couldn’t understand at a visceral level why someone couldn’t do what they themselves were able to easily do. So not playing has also been an advantage. (C3)

All the coaches discussed how they worked harder to either learn or overcome the gap in knowledge caused by not playing. Sometimes this meant practicing drills themselves to help them understand what they were asking of their athletes. Other times it meant communicating frequently with their athletes to better understand their thoughts:

If I want to try something in training then I might first take it to the floor myself. I like to see if the drill makes sense. Since I’ve started doing that I have developed a new appreciation for how hard it is to do what your coach is telling you to do. (C3)

I recognize that since I never played I have to work extra hard to understand how my athletes feel. I’ll try to consult the guys to see what they are feeling and what their thoughts are. I try to respond to their feelings. (C6)

Four coaches also revealed that assistant coaches were consulted because they had instinctive knowledge of their sport that the coaches felt they lacked:

I hire some assistant coaches on purpose to make sure I have coaches who have been University athletes, who have done what I’m asking my athletes to do. And they will have a unique perspective on things I can never offer. (C5)

Coaching Knowledge

Coaching knowledge pertained to the participants’ beliefs and philosophies as well as their approach to elements of competition, training, and organization. Perhaps more importantly, this category also focused on how they acquired this knowledge.

Interestingly, while they never competed beyond the high school level, many of the coaches felt their athletic careers played a role in their acquisition of coaching knowledge:

Playing the game at high school [was a source of knowledge acquisition]. I played Lacrosse right up to Junior A and I developed really good court awareness because of that. (C2)

Not surprisingly, the four coaches who studied kinesiology and physical education at University attributed part of their knowledge acquisition to their university classes and experiences:

My human kinetics degree has impacted my knowledge base. Certainly from the biomechanics, kinesiology, and biology side of things - the science part of it. That [University education] provided me with a really good foundation to become a coach. (C5)

The six coaches also suggested that valuable knowledge was acquired from their initial coaching experiences. These experiences helped them acquire important tactical knowledge and exposed them to different coaches who each had unique coaching styles:

I started working as an assistant coach with some really great coaches. I learned a lot from them. Being their assistant coach was a great opportunity to watch how to do and how not to do things. (C3)

Additionally, the coaches agreed that the process of learning was ongoing and did not end once they had established themselves at the University level:

When I first started coaching, a day off for my players was unheard of. There was no damn way that I would have a day off; eventually, you get smarter through your experiences, because you realize that you can’t bury the kids. (C2)

Aside from learning from experience, all six coaches acquired knowledge from other coaches:

I was a teenager when I started coaching and a lot of coaches that I worked with would take the time to sit down and talk to me about what I was doing right and what I was doing wrong. I was mentored very well. I was very fortunate in that regard. (C3)
Observing other coaches was another source of knowledge acquisition. In particular, coaches often attended other teams’ practices and games and observed the coaches’ behaviors: 

When I watched a game, I always had a special eye on the way the coach was behaving and what he was doing. I looked for the non-verbal cues that I could pick up and I just put that in my knowledge base. Shortly afterwards, I incorporated what I had seen with the rest of my knowledge to draw up a model of how I wanted to coach. (C1)

While all six coaches had attended coaching clinics, their opinions regarding the effectiveness of these clinics as learning tools was mixed. Specifically, four of the coaches supported regularly attending clinics, while two coaches believed they held little educational value:

You’re always learning, especially from coaching clinics, at least I am. I always tell people that. I believe that if you think you know the game, you’re a fool. There is always something new coming up that needs to be learned. I go to clinics every year. (C4)

I’m not a person who is big on clinics; I’ve been to a few. The problem I have with most standardized basketball clinics is that most coaches come in and tell stories. It’s more about funny anecdotes than it is about basketball. (C3)

As well as illustrating the various sources of knowledge acquisition, the participants also talked about their current coaching knowledge, including their overall beliefs and philosophies. For example, all six coaches acknowledged the importance of supporting their athletes’ academic aspirations:

The reason I enjoy working in an academic environment is that I get to coach student-athletes and not just athletes. I have loved coaching the national team but I don’t know if I would do it on a daily basis. What I love about University coaching is that you coach people and part of our goal is to help our athletes become better students and achieve academic success. (C5)

Likewise, all six coaches viewed sport as a vehicle for learning life lessons and improving personal discipline:

I teach them [athletes] the same values that are taught in education. I think sport is a great way to learn some of life’s key lessons, because it’s enjoyable but at the same time you learn about teamwork, communication etc. I believe that sport is a great education means. (C1)

Interestingly, many of the coaches felt that similarities existed between coaching and teaching and thus believed that coaches needed to have excellent teaching skills to be successful:

The complicated part of coaching is teaching the athletes to execute the principles; it’s not understanding what the principles are. So I wouldn’t call myself a real X’s and O’s coach, because I think that’s pretty rudimentary. Anybody can get a pretty decent grasp of that. The complicated part is teaching effectively and that’s where I spend a lot of time trying to get better. (C3)

Many of the coaches highlighted the importance of organizing each training session so that athletes arrived already prepared for both practices and games which gave them an edge over their opponents:

Because of how we train I don’t think there is a team in our league that is better prepared for games than us. I believe that’s why we win games. This year we finished .500 and we got to the final. We should have never been to the final and we played teams that were much better than us but not as well prepared. (C2)

Likewise, the coaches recognized the need to utilize experts to help with the different types of training involved in their sport:

I always reach out to people for help. I have someone that does the physical drills and another person who comes in to do some mental sessions with my team. I’ll keep myself informed of what is happening but they will be responsible for teaching the guys what they need to know. (C4)

There was also consistency between the goals that coaches set for themselves, their athletes, and their teams. Many of the coaches set the goal of becoming the best program in the country, and winning either provincial or national championships:

When you come to a winning program such as ours, people come here because there is an understanding that you’ve won and you expect to win. And that expectation to win has a huge effect on the goals we set. (C4)

Likewise, the coaches appeared keen to set academic and personal goals for their athletes:

We set goals to make sure all our guys graduate and are successful in school and that they all develop as people. So its not just athletic goals we worry about here; it’s athletic, academic, [and] personal [goals] as well. (C6)

In sum, the current results highlighted how a collection of expert coaches developed and acquired coaching knowledge that likely enabled them to achieve success at the Canadian university level. Given that none of these coaches had competed at the University level as athletes, these findings support the notion that sources of knowledge acquisition are accessible for aspiring coaches, regardless of their athletic background. Perhaps this point was best summarized in the following quote:

Not having the experience as a player was tough on many occasions, at least for me. But overall, I hope that I am living proof that you can succeed. (C1)
Discourse

The results of this study demonstrated that the knowledge of our coaches was similar in many ways to elite coaches who had competed at elite athletes, despite some differences in the way their knowledge was acquired. For example, some important factors affecting their acquisition of knowledge included a long-term interest in sport that was triggered by early sport participation as children, studying kinesiology and physical education at University, and starting to coach at either the high school level or as an assistant coach at the University level (cf. Cregan et al., 2007; Schinke et al., 1995). Additionally, the coaches also mentioned the importance of acquiring information from and observation of other coaches (e.g., Abraham & Collins, 1998; Bloom et al., 1998; Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Gilbert & Trudel, 2005; Werthner & Trudel, 2006).

Not surprisingly, several aspects of the interviewed coaches' career progression were different from other elite coaches (e.g., Cregan et al., 2007; Erickson et al., 2007; Gilbert et al., 2006; Salmela, 1994; Schinke et al., 1995). While it was not the central focus of those studies, elite athletic experiences were an important aspect of expert coaches' career development and perhaps even career success. For example, Salmela suggested that expert coaches drew upon their expert athletic experiences to help develop their coaching knowledge, philosophy, and beliefs. Similarly, Gilbert and colleagues argued that becoming a successful University coach required a minimum threshold of several thousand hours of athletic experiences. Contrary to these findings, the current sample of coaches developed their coaching knowledge and achieved success without drawing upon expert athletic experiences.

While the developmental paths of the current coaches demonstrated that it was possible to become an expert coach without accumulating elite athletic experiences, the participants suggested that their lack of elite athletic experiences was an initial hindrance to their development. To overcome their lack of athletic experiences they purposely worked harder to either acquire or overcome any gaps in their knowledge. For example, several coaches practiced drills alone to gain an appreciation of what they were asking their athletes to do; others sought feedback from athletes to understand how it felt to compete at the University level, while others purposely hired assistant coaches who were former University athletes. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that although elite athletic experiences were viewed as an important resource for acquiring coaching knowledge, our participants demonstrated that there are other ways to acquire this knowledge.

All of the current participants agreed that the process of learning through experience was ongoing and did not end once they had established themselves as successful University coaches. Gilbert and Trudel (2005) reported that coaches often examined their coaching behaviors and the subsequent consequences to determine which elements of their coaching repertoire were successful and which ones needed to be refined. Likewise, Bloom and Salmela (2000) noted that elite coaches felt that learning to coach was part of an ongoing developmental process throughout their careers. Werthner and Trudel (2006) suggested that an important source of learning came through informal and unmediated learning situations, such as watching other teams practices or discussions with other coaches. Similarly, Bloom and colleagues (1998) found that mentoring by more experienced coaches allowed younger coaches to acquire knowledge and helped shape their coaching philosophies and beliefs. It is reasonable to suggest that the current participants would continuously strive to acquire coaching knowledge throughout their careers, given their lack of elite athletic experiences. Of particular interest was the different ways they went about this task.

The findings from this study also revealed similar traits and characteristics between our sample of coaches and other expert coaches. For example, our participants believed that elite coaches require excellent teaching skills to be successful. In some instances, our coaches chose to work harder on improving their teaching skills than their sport-specific knowledge. Nonetheless, these results are similar to the coaching literature which has interpreted the role of the coach as being synonymous with an expert pedagogue (e.g., Abraham & Collins, 1998; Chelladurai & Kuga, 1996; Jones, Houssner, & Kornspan, 1997; Lyle, 2002). Additionally, the coaches in this study noted the importance of flexibility, communication, and openness, which are characteristics reported previously by expert coaches (e.g., Bloom, 2002; Côté, Salmela, Trudel et al., 1995; Giacobbi, Roper, Whitney, & Butryn, 2002; Saury & Durand, 1998). Finally, participants' views on the acquisition of knowledge and the important role that sport plays in athlete personal development echoed expert coaching perspectives (e.g., Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Côté, Salmela, Trudel et al., 1995; Cregan et al., 2007; Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

Similar to their knowledge base in organization, many commonalities emerged with respect to coaches' knowledge in training (e.g., Bloom, 2002; Côté, 1998; Côté, Salmela, Trudel et al., 1995; Durand-Bush, 1996; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004). For example, coaches put a lot of time and effort into practice preparations, often brought in experts to carry out physical and mental training with their teams, and designed their practices to create effective training sessions and positive learning environments for their teams. Consequently, it appears that although the current coaches never participated in training as expert athletes, they developed the knowledge to run training sessions in a similar way to those coaches who had accumulated training experiences as expert athletes.

The current study is of interest to the entire coaching community because it provides an outline of how a number of expert coaches were able to develop and acquire the necessary coaching knowledge to achieve success at the University level. More specifically, the current
study can be used by the International Council for Coach Education (ICCE), which oversees the provision of formal coach training and education throughout the world, to illustrate the key ways in which coaches acquire knowledge. In particular, increased awareness that learning occurs most frequently through coaching experiences and interactions with other coaches may encourage member organizations within the ICCE to add more practical elements to their coach training programs or arrange for their coaches to have regular access to other successful coaches through mentoring programs or focus groups and clinics. This is in accordance with previous research (e.g., Bloom et al., 1998; Cushion et al., 2003; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Saury & Durand, 1998) which has suggested that formal coaching education programs fail to provide adequate practical experience and mentoring opportunities for aspiring coaches.

The objective of the current study was to address the gap in the literature pertaining to how expert coaches, who surpassed their own achievements as athletes, developed and acquired their coaching knowledge. Since this was a new area of exploration, there are a number of suggestions for future research. To begin, it may be interesting to explore both gender and potential sport differences in coaches who were not elite athletes. Similarly, it may be interesting to compare the job satisfaction of coaches who have surpassed their athletic experiences to those coaches who were once expert athletes. Future research could also compare athlete perceptions of coaches who have surpassed their athletic experience with their perceptions of coaches who were once expert athletes. Finally, since this study was exploratory and the dynamic nature of coach development seems idiosyncratic and complex, research supporting an existing conceptual framework (such as Moon’s 2004 model of learning) or progressing towards the development of a new coaching knowledge framework could be a valuable addition to research on this topic.

In sum, the current results provide encouragement and advice to the many aspiring coaches who hope to surpass their athletic achievements. This study explained the ways in which a group of individuals acquired coaching knowledge without accumulating expert athletic experiences. The current results may be used to increase the awareness of the different sources of knowledge acquisition available to coaches who lack expert athletic experiences. As mentioned previously, little to no empirical research has yet examined the development of such coaches. Therefore, the current study provides some insights into understanding this understudied population.

References


