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Tough Love for Underserved Youth: A Comparison of More and Less Effective Coaching

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The following study explored coaching behaviors and youth coaches' justifications for their actions by comparing more effective and less effective coaches from an underserved setting. Reasons for their coaching behaviors were also explored. In-depth interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted with 12 coaches from 6 different youth sports. Support for each theme from the analysis was compared between the 6 more effective and 6 less effective coaches. Less effective coaches tried to create a sense of family within the team, but used very negative, militaristic coaching strategies that were not developmentally appropriate. Less effective coaches justified the negative approach because of the perceived dangers in the inner city and attempted to toughen their players through harsher methods. More effective coaches challenged players while being supportive, attempted to develop close relationships along with a positive team climate, and promoted autonomy and the transfer of life skills from sport to life. More effective coaches appeared to be more open to coach training and others' ideas—they could be described as lifelong learners. The results from this study not only reveal how more and less effective coaches differ, but provide possible insight as to why they differ. The study provides unique insights for researchers and coaching educators interested in particularly underserved settings and in developing less effective coaches.

Keywords: effective coaching, underserved youth sport, positive youth development

There has been renewed interest in positive youth development (PYD) research in both sport and nonsport settings (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004). The mission of PYD is to enhance the general psychosocial development (e.g., prosocial behavior) of youth, as well as to enhance specific skills such as self-esteem, problem solving, and leadership (Gould & Carson, 2008). Of any youth demographic, underserved youth—i.e., those living in poverty and violence, with lower quality health care and education, and less socioeconomic mobility—are most lacking and in greatest need of PYD support (Martinek & Schilling, 2003; Walsh, 2008). The purpose of this study was to examine the actions and perceptions of coaches considered to be either more or less effective in terms of their ability to develop psychosocial skills of youth in underserved settings.

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Positive youth development, either through sport or nonsport vehicles, is a vital means of improving health, well-being, productivity, and for reducing violence and crime in underserved populations (Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt, 2008; Martinek & Hellison, 2009; Walsh, 2008). Within the umbrella of PYD there are a plethora of psychosocial objectives, such as: initiative and motivation (Gawler, 2008); responsibility and self-actualized leadership (Hellison et al., 2000; Martinek & Hellison, 2009); and social-emotional learning, life skills, and character education (Danish, Fazio, Nellen, & Owens, 2002). In keeping with the positive psychology foundation of PYD, Martinek and Hellison (1997) recommended that a preventive approach is more successful than a reactive approach. For instance, by developing resiliency, children can become more autonomous and are more likely to develop optimism and hope. These attributes are particularly important in underserved areas, where many children grow up impoverished, lack positive models, and too often turn to gangs for the support they do not receive from home (Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009).

While researchers have made progress in determining what attributes should be included in youth develop-

ment programs, and have studied outcomes of participation in sport and nonsport programs (Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007; Danish et al., 2004; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Larson et al., 2004), limited empirical data exists to explain how coaches can most effectively promote psychosocial development. An exception comes from the recommendations made by Martinek and Hellison (1997) for how to develop psychosocial skills and attributes in youth. These recommendations include, but are not limited to, developing a sense of values and empowerment, respecting diversity, looking to the future, providing safety, and using small groups with committed, supportive adult leadership. Sport programs have the potential to fulfill many, if not all, of these characteristics.

In an effort to close this gap in PYD coaching literature, Gould and colleagues (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006; 2007) studied 10 male football coaches identified as being highly effective at developing life skills in high school athletes. The authors found that these coaches had intentional PYD strategies, carefully considered philosophies for working with youth, excellent relationships skills, and were considerate of contextual factors such as previous players' behaviors and a players' emotions'. Gould and Carson (2010) explored youth athletes' perceptions of their sport experiences and attempted to correlate them with perception of their coaches' behaviors using the Youth Experience Scale (YES-2, Hansen & Larson, 2005) and Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (Côté, Yardley, Hay, Sedgwick, & Baker, 1999). When youth felt that their coach related sport lessons to life, had good rapport with them, and provided more competition strategies and goal setting, they reported a higher emotional regulation, cognitive skills, feedback, prosocial norms, and linkages to community (Gould & Carson, 2010). While these studies provide valuable information about the practices and beliefs of effective coaches, they did not examine underserved settings or compare effective with ineffective coaches.

To extend the literature reviewed up to this point, the current study examines younger populations (older children rather than adolescents) from more diverse athlete backgrounds (underserved and mostly African American youth), and includes both male and female coaches from a variety of sports. In addition, while the studies described above provided insight about highly effective coaches, none of the studies examined less effective coaches.

Coaches' priorities and needs depend largely on what they are asked to do. For instance, Bradley (2001) found that volunteer coaches placed less importance on win/loss records, final competitive ranking, and enforcing team rules than did paid coaches. As such, the contextual demands of coaching inner-city youth can and should have a strong influence on how coaches develop their young players. Underserved populations—characterized by poverty, violence, and abuse—face different challenges than those of the middle class, including issues such as pregnancy, incarceration, depression, and suicide. These youth often feel vulnerable and powerless as a result of their unstable environment (Wilson & White, 2001). League administrators must tailor their sport programs, mission, and coaching education to the unique needs of underserved youth. This means providing structure and stability in a commonly dysfunctional lifestyle (Martinek & Schilling, 2003). To this end, research should further examine how coaches promote youth development within the context of underserved settings.

The current study examined "Kids' Hope" (pseudonym) sports teams. KH is a youth sport program devoted to teaching the core values of respect, responsibility, discipline, leadership, teamwork, and diversity through sport. The children who participate on KH teams live in a large Midwest American city, and are typically living in poverty. Nearly 13,000 children between the ages of 9–14 participate in their programs. Those children who are interested in sport can choose from a variety of sports—including baseball, softball, basketball, volleyball, football, cheerleading, and track and field—and academic programs. All coaches are volunteers who donate their time and resources to help develop the organization's core values and sport skills in children. They must pass a criminal background check and attend coach education training. At the time data collection for this study was completed, the city had the following unfortunate distinctions in America: most dangerous city (Greenburg, 2009, April); highest unemployment (15.4%; Burueau of Labor Statistics, 2009); among the lowest average home prices ($18,513; Associated Press, 2008); lowest graduation rates (24.9% with a national average of 51.8%; Toppo, 2008, August 1); lowest income ($28, 097; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007); and highest poverty rates (33.8%; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to describe and compare the practices and perspectives of more and less effective volunteer youth coaches in an underserved sport setting (where 'effectiveness' refers to the coach's reputation for fostering youth development). Three research questions drove the design of the study and our interview guide. First, how do coaches develop character and teach life skills? Second, what are the differences in how more and less effective coaches develop character and life skills in youth? Third, why do less effective and more effective coaches use the techniques they use?

Method

Participants

Two coaches (one more and one less effective) represented each of six sports: football, cheer, coed soccer, boys and girls basketball, and girls volleyball. The sample included six males and six females. Criterion for participant selection into groups was based on experience and effectiveness, which produced the following four groups of three coaches: effective-experienced, effective-inexperienced, ineffective-experienced, and ineffective-inexperienced. This 2 × 2 design enabled us to compare more and less effective coaches while controlling for

coaching experience. More and less-experienced coaches were operationalized as having 7–10 and 2–4 years of coaching experience (respectively), and were described in another paper (See, Flett, Gould, Griffes, & Lauer, 2012).

Selection. Coaches were selected for this study with assistance from the KH administrators (maximum variation sampling; Patton, 2002, p. 243). KH directors for each sport identified potential participants based on the forthcoming requirements. Over 30 coaches were recommended and descriptions were provided for 20 participants that were deemed most appropriate based on how well their description conformed to the definition provided below. League directors were told that effectiveness "is about coaches who have the most/least positive influence on their players' character and life skills. It is not an issue of good people, bad people, or likeable people." Directors were given the following definition of more and less effective coaching:

> Based on KH's mission and coach training, consider the following. Character Attributes: "Most effective" coaches do a great job of teaching, role modeling, and creating settings that promote responsibility, integrity, perseverance, compassion, and purpose in players. "Least effective" coaches do not promote these, or closely related values. Points of Excellence: "Most effective" coaches attend to detail, teach sportsmanship, create fair opportunities for youth, help to maintain facilities, and they support a positive family environment. "Least effective" coaches do not attend to these details, or promote these values.

Participant Demographics. Less effective coaches were slightly older than more effective coaches (Mean ages of 34.5 and 30.7 years respectively). More effective coaches averaged 6.3 years of coaching experience, compared with 5.0 years of experience for the less effective group. All coaches completed at least one KH training course. All six more effective coaches had Level 2 training, but only three less effective coaches participated in the Level 2 course.

Three coaches had been in the military—all three were in the less effective group. Three coaches had high school education or less—all three were in the less effective group. All other coaches had a postsecondary degree or were currently enrolled in college. Five coaches described themselves as being single and as having at least one child. All five single parents were in the less effective group. The authors were not aware of these demographic patterns until after the interviews were conducted, and KH staff did not mention demographics of participants.

All coaches described their players as being predominantly African American. One coach described 67% of her team as African American, another described 90%, another 98%, and all other coaches stated that their team was 100% African American. Nine coaches described themselves as African American. The three Caucasian or other coaches happened to be in the more effective group. Because no demographic information was known during selection and recruitment, patterns or trends in participant demographics existed randomly and without bias.

Procedure

Before collecting data, several steps were taken that helped us to negotiate the unique cultural context of the study. KH staff helped to recruit coaches and recommended questions for the interview guide. A focus group of volunteer coaches from the city also helped to prepare our interviews. The interview guide was pilot tested with a KH staff member who had experience both as an administrator and as a coach. The pilot/bracketing interview helped to identify leading questions (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Because of the cultural diversity in this study, these precautions improved the quality of the data collection.

Twelve volunteer coaches agreed to participate in an in-depth interview and to be observed in either a game or a practice context. The Institutional Review Board approved the project and coaches provided informed consent without being informed of the study's purpose, but were told that we wanted to understand their experiences and their players' needs. Coaches were offered compensation in the form of a $20 gift card. The average interview was 1 hr 23 min. In total there were 14 observations (five practices and seven competitions) of 10 coaches. Two coaches were not observed (because they cancelled scheduled observations that could not be rescheduled), and four coaches were observed more than once (because those coaches cancelled interviews that were scheduled immediately after a practice or game).

The semistructured interview schedule included six major sections: basic information about the coach; what skills coaches try to develop; how they develop life skills and character in youth; coaches' views on performance and competition; opinions about KH; and reflection on their development as a coach over time. Ethnographic observations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Emerson et al., 1995) provided freedom from structured observation forms that enabled the first author to focus on any event that seemed relevant and triangulate interview results. Ethnographic observations informed the analysis of each interview. Because two coaches were not observed and four coaches were observed more than once, results are primarily based on the analysis of the interviews.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Open codes were independently identified by two coders before reaching consensus (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). One coder also conducted the interviews and observations, while the other was blind to the identity and grouping of each coach throughout the analysis. Similar open codes were grouped into lower-order themes, which were in turn grouped into higher-order themes and general categories (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989). As a supplement to the generally grounded approach, records

were kept that allowed coders to identify the number of participants and raw units supporting each theme. Microsoft word and excel were used to facilitate open coding and the organization of themes.

As Creswell (2007, p. 67) explained, "The theory emerges with help from the process of memoing, a process in which the researcher writes down ideas about the evolving theory throughout the process of [coding]." Accordingly, a journaling process of identifying and comparing salient themes was conducted after interviews and observations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Emerson et al., 1995). Once the axial coding was completed and thematic categories were established, researchers compared more and less effective coaches across each theme.

Trustworthiness of the data were enhanced by the neutral empathy of the interviewer-observer, and coders. Along with the use of observations, this neutral approach reduced bias and facilitated rapport—which, in turn, foster trustworthiness. Systematic interview schedules also improved the dependability of the process. The pilot interview with a coach and administrator from KH helped to remove bias from the interview guide as well as to better understand the perspectives of others. Finally, the combination of interviews with observations, and the use of two independent coders with a critical reviewer provided various types of triangulation. All of these factors improve the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Patton, 2002).

Results

The results are presented in two sections. The first section describes how coaches develop youth's life skills and character, and in doing so, provides a comparison of more and less effective coaches' actions and perceptions. This first section provides answers to the first two research questions. The second section explains why coaches use the techniques they use. This second section therefore addresses the third research question. Major themes and examples of supporting lower-order themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of General Themes, Higher-Order Themes, Lower-Order Themes, and Examples of Raw Meaning Units.

How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: More effective coaches: **Positive, intentional, autonomy-building strategies**
Used teachable moments to emphasize developmental lessons; team life-talks and special huddles to teach lessons and discuss topics outside of sport; build up the person, encouraging players, reinforcing optimism, and teach positive thinking; promote active learning and allowing youth to make mistakes; teach players to think for themselves and develop independent decision-making skills.
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: **More effective coaches: Implicit strategies and environment**
Develop positive relationships with players and foster a positive team climate; lessons integrated into the practice plan, how the coach delivered technical feedback, and reaction to adversity; role model and develop strong relationships with players; Need to be a credible authority figure to players (strong yet positive); mutual trust, lead by example; described specific benefits from modeling life skills; aware how influential peers are, so coaches shape positive peer pressures and group dynamics; team climate must be fun and supportive.
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: More effective coaches: **Transfer life skills into the real world**
Described the potential that sport has to teach and transfer life skills; detailed and specific strategies for facilitating the transfer of life skills and lessons learned from sport into life.
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: More effective coaches: **Challenge but support**
Pushed their players to be better athletes and better people by having explicit, high expectations; enforcing consequences for bad behavior; exhibiting consistency/repetition of values and rules; balancing challenge with positive, supportive actions; intentionally reinforcing positive changes in life skills.
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: Less effective coaches: **Harsh, negative coaching**
Harsher strategies, demeaning, less justification for using negative techniques; Few specific positive strategies (e.g., having older players mentor younger ones and the importance of accountability); strict military styles; negative strategies: require players to earn respect to get "freedom," pick on kids' weaknesses, sarcasm, get kids to quit by breaking them down; motivate by embarrassment, allow hazing, and excessive physical punishment (e.g., pushing a child to the ground).
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: Less effective coaches: **Implicit strategies and environment**
Some coaches felt that they must show respect to their players to establish mutual respect, others described a slow process where players earn respect over time; displayed exceptional caring for their players; recognized the need to be a positive example to their players, but did not describe the importance or strategies as much as more effective coaches; more effective coaches advocated for stronger peer leadership and autonomy in young athletes, but less effective coaches focused on a family-oriented team climate with less independence
How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills: Less effective coaches: **Different perspective on issues of transfer**
Less effective coaches lacked detailed descriptions and specific strategies for how lessons in sport could be transferred into nonsport settings.

Why Coaches Do What They Do: Similar competition, caring, and effort: **Competitive goals**
Both groups offered similar support for the notion that developing life skills can be beneficial to team performance and for the belief that losing can enhance character (i.e., as a teachable moment).
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Similar competition, caring, and effort: **Equal caring**
Less effective coach in particular sacrificed their personal resources and social lives to coach. Both more and less effective coaches described that the coach's role was: to care for and support youth; to monitor nonsport activities; to give back to the community and invest in the city's future by coaching youth; to attend to player's emotions; to be honest, genuine, relatable, and kind; to have academic goals and minimum standards for players; and to develop the person and not just the player.
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Similar competition, caring, and effort: **Take on too much**
Less effective coaches took on more "special projects"; Underutilized assistant coaches; Described being overwhelmed more often; Did not describe removing players from the team (for misconduct) as often.
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Explanations from less effective coaches' perspectives: **Perceived challenges and threats for youth**
More effective coaches cited more "suburban" concerns: over-involved parents, negative peer influences, dating, schools, and materialism; Less effective coaches identified barriers for players' development: gangs, crime, abuse at home, disengaged parents, single-moms and estranged fathers, violent and dangerous neighborhoods, drugs.
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Explanations from less effective coaches' perspectives: **Future needs of youth**
Less effective coaches explained their strategies in terms of the need to make kids tough now and for the future to prepare them for a tough world with a future filled with adversity.
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Explanations from less effective coaches' perspectives: **Negative coaching is justified**
Less effective coaches perceived that their methods were justified because they were effective. They observed short-term changes in players' behaviors and improvements in sport performance. Former players reinforce the coaches by sharing things like "I should have listened to you more."
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Explanations from more effective coaches' perspectives: **Open to training and others' ideas**
Stronger support for formal coaching education/training; Talked to other coaches, teachers, "experts," and family members to get new ideas; Read books about youth development and coaching
Why Coaches Do What They Do: Explanations from more effective coaches' perspectives: **Coaching knowledge and flexibility**
Better able to identify specific attributes of a good coach (e.g., focus on actions, not words; don't bore kids, have fun; influence kids early and often); described developing better skills and strategies for youth development over their careers (e.g., did not have as many strategies initially; learned by trial and error; taught the same content but with improved strategies; brought in new strategies from outside of sport; more developmentally sensitive to player's age and abilities).

Note. Higher-order themes are separated by horizontal lines and lower-order themes are presented in bold.

How Coaches Develop Character and Life Skills

This section describes how volunteer coaches develop character and teach life skills to youth in sport. The theme is organized into two subsections, describing more and less effective coaches separately. By comparing the patterns of results for each coaching group, this section provides answers for the first two research questions.

More Effective Coaches. The following section describes how more effective coaches used specific positive coaching strategies, had implicit strategies and attended to the environment, promoted the transfer of life skills beyond sport, and challenged but supported their players.

Positive, Intentional, Autonomy-Building Strategies. A variety of specific strategies were described and observed by these coaches that were very positive and empowering to their players. Coach 7 was very aware of the negative impact that coaches can have on children: "I am very careful what I say to players. I think if I was to, you know, be negative towards them, I think it could scar them for life." Coach 6 had a positive attitude and he encouraged player input:

> I trust my kids. I want them to make good decisions. If they make a stupid decision, I point it out and, like, what do you think you could have did in this area? "Well maybe I coulda did this." Good job. You know. . . I also want them to think on another level, you know? What happens if this goes on? Start planning everything out!

Implicit Strategies and Environment. Participants described explicit strategies for developing life skills and character in youth, but also described implicit (almost covert) techniques such as developing positive relationships with players and fostering a positive team climate. These coaches also emphasized the need for

mutual trust, leading by example, and they described specific benefits from role modeling life skills. Coach 9 explained, "If you don't have a good reputation with your players or students, they're not going to respect you; they're not going to do what you want them to do." Coach 4 agreed:

> They have to believe I care about them. Trust, respect, and believe [that] I like and care about them…believe I really do have their best interest at heart. First of all in a relationship, you have to earn their trust. You also have to make sure that you're someone they respect. If they don't respect me, why are they going to put any credence to what I'm trying to teach them?

Coach 6 supported the maxim "kids don't care what you know until they know that you care": "You gain respect from the kids by listening to them. Respect is a big thing. If you listen to the kids, it shows that you care. They're kinda like, "okay, my coach isn't just here to be here."

Coaches explained that the team climate has a strong influence on youth, so it can be used to facilitate positive development. Coach 6 described the influence of team norms and how the climate becomes internalized, "They know what's expected when they come to practice, sooner or later that grows on them and becomes a part of their character, it becomes a part of them."

Transfer Life Skills Into the Real World. Effective coaches recognized and prioritized the transfer of psychosocial development beyond sport-settings. Half of the effective coaches described intentionally transferring life skills into nonsport contexts as an objective.

Coach 4 was clearly interested in more than just athletic development in sport, "I think that sports is a vehicle to be used for several things. I mean it's an outlet, yes absolutely. But it should be used as a vehicle for character development." Her perspective was supported by Coach 3, "Although we in sports are stressing fundamentals of sports, it's really: how you can get kids to transfer that to real world, and every day, experiences?" Coach 3 later expanded that sport can impede the development of life skills if parents and coaches forget to prioritize and balance sport goals with life goals: "You can somewhat even the playing field by producing through sports. But here is the catch: you've gotta transfer this work ethic to your academics…a mom or a dad, they're seeing a goldmine just as much as coaches and other people in society see it." Coach 4 explained that a lot of nurturing and time are required to develop true, transferable life skills:

> I think it takes a long time before you see whether you had any effect. I can see short term that the kids aren't swearing around me, but are they swearing at school? I would love to see all these kids ten years from now…You can see changes, yes. Are they superficial, or are they indicative of a character improvement? I don't know…You're hoping that they're gonna internalize it. I mean that's the goal: that they ultimately internalize it and don't need this external factor, or motivation.

Challenge But Support. More effective coaches preferred strategies that seemed supportive while challenging players to improve. One of the most interesting trends for this coaching group was their ability to balance strong (even tough) coaching methods with very positive styles. Establishing high standards were important both inside and outside of sport, as Coach 6 explained, "Being young ladies, they need to have standards. They need to not just settle for the status quo." Coach 3 expressed the importance of challenging and supporting children:

> If you demand a lot from your better kids, it always works out better than if you let them pass on things...I know a lot of the former players wish their coaches challenged [them] more, or would have told them the importance of expectations, work ethic, and stuff like that. That's what I try to do, but I try to do it in a loving way where they can see that you don't have to be the best player, just give it everything you got.

Coach 4 had high expectations and tried to connect lessons from sport with life outside sport:

> It sets forth my expectations, the behavioral expectations, the expectations in terms of practice, attending games, calling me in advance if they can't be there. Basically it's just how you would want a young adult to behave as he or she is growing up.

Less Effective Coaches. The following section describes harsh negative coaching practices, implicit strategies and the environment, and their perspectives on the issue of life skills transfer.

Harsh, Negative Coaching. While most coaches in both groups described various forms of punishment, the importance of accountability, and consequences for inappropriate behaviors, less effective coaches used harsher strategies, presented them in more demeaning ways, and had less justification for using these negative techniques. Coach 8 provided several of the most powerful descriptions of harsh, irrational coaching. She began by saying, "He's a natural leader, but he sometimes he's a crybaby…I pick with him to make him cry. But then I tell him like, 'look how you gonna cry and you gotta lead the rest of your team?'" She continued later:

> Sometimes it gets to the point where I may knock them down and knock them down, but I will always pick them back up. You know? Just like it may happen in the world: You may get knocked down, but, you gotta be able to pick yourself back up.
>
> I told him, "I'm gonna make you quit. I'm never gonna kick you off the team—I'm gonna make you quit! You're gonna quit before I kick you off." And it

> got to the point where I was yelling at him so much, where he would cry. And I would continue to yell at him, "Awe, you gonna quit? I'm gonna make you quit. I'm gonna make you quit." But by the end of the season and when he did something good: "Dante, good job boy! You know? I'm proud of you, you did it." So by the end of the season, he stuck it out to the end of the season he was in my starting lineup.

Punishing players after baiting them was another tactic used by this coach.

> Somebody cursed and I asked them who did it. At first they wouldn't tell me, so I made them run. So they ran, got back to the baseline, and I said "now tell me who did it." They still wouldn't tell me—I made them run again. So finally when we got back this time they said, "well, Mike did it." So I made them run again 'cause it's like, "you don't snitch on your teammates. You don't do that, that's your teammate!" That may end up sometimes being a bad thing, but I'm just trying to put a security in them.

From the ethnographic notes, Coach 2 and his staff were observed insulting players, forcefully pushing and shaking kids, angrily referring to some 11- to 12-year-old Black players as niggers and yelled, "Put your shit on! What the fuck!" Coach 2 commented on positive coaching styles:

> By supporting them like that, when they get into the real world, they think somebody's gonna come and tell them "it's gonna be alright—just don't be late no more." You know that's not gonna happen. You're gonna get fired! So you need to discipline yourself tough right now. . . A lot of people say we're a bunch of militants over here.

Implicit Strategies and Environment. Ineffective coaches emphasized the need for respect and caring. Although less effective coaches recognized the need to be a positive example to their players, they did not describe the importance of, or strategies for, effective role modeling nearly as much as the more effective coaches. Where the more effective coaches advocated for stronger peer leadership and some degree of autonomy in young athletes, less effective coaches tried to foster a family-oriented team climate with less independence.

Less effective coaches did not value the importance of peer influences as much as more effective coaches did, and accordingly, they also did not try to regulate peer influences and team climate as much. While fun was not a priority for less effective coaches they constantly described their team as being a family. In accordance the role of the coach was more often likened to being a parent. Coach 12 wanted her players to be "just looking out for each other, like a brotherhood" and thought that this brotherhood could teach kids to be more compassionate and helping: "I think if we can get at least one child to see that helping others is very important, 'cause if one sees it, then others will see it." Not only can teamwork teach helping and support skills, but it can also transfer beyond sport in Coach 12's view, "I feel that off the court and in life, they will look at it and be like if I can do it on the team, I can do it in life, I can do it off court, I can do it later on down the line, if I help this person." Coach 2 explained the effect that a sense of family and love has on his players in a very somber tone: "They don't get it at home. They don't get it at home. So, when they do get it, they fall in love with it!" Finally, Coach 8 had players from her team act as big brothers for even younger kids in the school, "…to make them feel like they're really doing something—nd they like it too. They actually come and watch the little kids play and they see them at school."

Different Perspective on Issues of Transfer. Both groups of coaches emphasized that experiences in their players' lives outside of the team had a strong impact on their sport experiences. But, more effective coaches frequently provided detailed descriptions about how lessons in sport could be transferred into nonsport settings. Only one less effective coach described specific transfer strategies for sport to life.

Why Coaches Do What They Do

This section provides justifications/explanations for why less effective coaches were less effective, and why more effective coaches were more effective. Surprisingly, both groups appeared to share similar beliefs and practices with respect to competition, caring for players, and working hard to help their players. However, there were considerably different patterns of results in how coaches described challenges and threats to their players, the future needs of their players, and the justification for negative coaching strategies. There were also stark differences in the coaching-groups' openness to new information.

Similar Competition, Caring, and Effort. The following section describes similarities between coaching groups in terms of competitive goals and caring for their players, as well as the notion that less effective coaches often took on too many responsibilities.

Competitive Goals. The theoretical importance of competitiveness in explaining negative coaching warrants the inclusion of this, admittedly, more difficult theme to corroborate. Based on the interviews and observations in this study, there did not appear to be substantive differences in how coaches viewed competition and the importance of winning. Where four more effective participants cited competitive success as a season objective, only two less effective coaches said the same. Coach 4 provided an excellent explanation: "I firmly believe—and I tell my parents and my players whenever we lose—I really think there are better lessons to be learned in losing. Doesn't mean that we all want to lose everything, but..."

Equal Caring. The two coaching groups did not differ in how much they cared for their players as people (rather than exclusively as athletes). An example of participants' beliefs that coaching was an investment in the future came from Coach 11's story about having to drive players to and from practice because their parents would not or could not do it.

> The child stayed in a real rough neighborhood. That made me mad with her mom. The child is 11, 12 years old and you going to tell her to catch the bus home if she wants to play volleyball. I tell her mom, "No, I don't think so. Practice is over at 5, its dark—I'll bring your child home. I don't mind going out of my way for my future."

More so than for effective coaches, less effective participants felt that volunteer coaching detracted from their social life and that coaching required a great deal of sacrifice. The majority of less effective coaches also described investing personal resources such as time, money, driving players to and from practice, and feeding players. Coach 8 shared how much time she spends with her players as a teacher and a coach, "I see them more than I see my son, you know? I'm here so much I see them all day, every day. From 7 to 7 I see them." Coach 11 described the sacrifices she made, which often exceeded the sacrifices of players' parents:

> Like I told you, I have to take a loss in my pay to be able to give the girls the time that they need—ya know—to be able to have a volleyball team. Do I suffer? Yeah, I do. Do they know that I suffer? No, they don't. Like I have one parent tells me, "I can't be leaving work." But I do. You can't make a sacrifice for your own? I'm making a sacrifice for all of your children. I was like, "You don't know if me and my daughter at home are hungry, but I know your children was smiling when they left practice today. That is what I do know."

Coach 2 described the small things he does that most people take for granted:

> I had kids at my house last night. At my house just eating up all the food, watching TV, you know. Heat is on—I got the heat on 80! [both laughing] Just to make sure they was warm. Like, "Dang coach it's warm in here." It's warm in here? It's regular heat to me. You know? To them, they're like "Ooh, this is warm coach!" What we consider everyday, *whatever*, is *luxury* to somebody else—you know? [Giving] them a taste of that might make them [say] "Look I can do this, I can get through school. I can do this. I can live like this."

Coach 2 makes sure that his players understand how they can have better living conditions: "I work every day. They know where I work, they know what I do." This story is a great example of how less effective coaches sacrificed, cared for, and developed relationships with their players. It is as an example of how many of these coaches believed that *showing* underserved kids a better lifestyle than what they see at home was critical. For many coaches, the goal was not getting their players to college; it was helping to keep them warm, safe, and fed.

Take on Too Much. In both groups, most participants identified that "special projects" and allocating a lot of attention to a few players were significant barriers for them (as coaches) in nurturing life skills. The less effective coaches provided especially strong support for this theme. More effective coaches were the only participants who chose not to take on too many "very high-risk kids." Half of the more effective coaches removed players from the team and did not allow others to join if they had the potential to undermine the coach or to mislead peers (i.e., they cut players with bad attitudes). Though some of the less effective coaches described having policies against gang member on their teams, less effective participants were much more willing to coach very troubled/trouble-making youth.

Explanations From Less Effective Coaches' Perspectives. The following section describes differences in how less effective coaches perceived: challenges and threats to their players; the future needs of their players; and how negative coaching behaviors were believed to be justified.

Perceived Challenges and Threats for Youth. Half of the participants in the more effective group felt that threats from the streets and related urban issues were very low or not applicable for their players. On the contrary, less effective coaches provided an overwhelming number of examples of how inner-city issues make it difficult for youth to reach their potential. Though some of the more effective coaches shared these concerns, their stories were less severe and applied to fewer players on each team. The following quotes illustrate the hardships of poverty, ineffective parents, negative peer influences, coaching 11-year-olds who have had to resort to crime, and the risk of teen pregnancy and failing to complete high school.

> [Poverty] is what it is. In this world that we're living in today, in the city that were living in—it's making it kind of hard, hard on children. It can break a child down, whether a parent knows it or not, not having the necessities or the things that the other kids have. (Coach 11)

> How do you teach the kid positive values when they have teachers that are telling them that they are no good? …Unfortunately you have parents that probably were too young when they were parents and haven't fully grown up themselves. So you're dealing with some cases, not all, but some cases, parents really aren't fully prepared to be effective parents … At the rate this kid is going, she's gonna be having her own kids before she's 16, and she's not gonna finish school. (Coach 4)

> Some kids live right in it, some kids live just around it. What you gotta know if you're around it [is] you gonna get a whiff of it...You smell a little bit of it, you might want a taste, and you go off and do some crazy stuff. We've had kids up here that stole cars and stuff...The streets? They got more stuff than we got. You could put both our salaries together—it ain't matching what the streets are. And if they can't pay for it, they probably steal it. (Coach 2)

Future Needs of Youth. Less effective coaches explained that tough treatment of their players would help to prepare youth for the challenges of adulthood as well as the current challenges from their neighborhoods. "Cut your crying. Nobody's gonna pick your clothes up and pat you on the back when you're grown. Suck it up and do your job." Coach 2 began: "You can baby these kids and baby these kids, and when they grow up, they're boss isn't gonna baby them."

Negative Coaching is Justified. In addition to perceptions of threat to their players' well-being and the sincere effort to protect players from those threats while simultaneously preparing them for future careers, less effective coaches were proud of their methods because they believed that they were highly effective. For instance, Coach 8 stated that, "One of my boys was acting a fool all day…So I just ran them until they literally threw up. Today he came in and he didn't have one bad behavior mark." Coach 2 felt similarly, "[former players] come back and say 'Dang, coach if I had listened to you, you know we'd be that much more better.'"

Explanations From More Effective Coaches' Perspectives. The following section describes what made more effective participants more effective. In short, more effective coaches were lifelong learners (knowledgeable and flexible) who were open to training and others' ideas.

Open to Training and Others' Ideas. Coaches deemed to be more effective at developing youth were much more open to formal and informal learning opportunities (e.g., coaching training, sharing ideas with other coaches). Coach 4 believed that coaches could not have enough knowledge, "Talk to your resources. My oldest sister—eighth grade teacher—talk to her about various issues. Not everyone will have that, but everyone has some resources." She continued by offering this advice, "Reach out to them. Don't think that you have to figure this all out on your own." Later in the interview, she explained how coaching education has helped her: "I didn't recognize the opportunities as quickly as I recognize them now…I can talk to any kid about any issue." Coach 9 described the benefits of training and experience, "it made me break down the skills to the bare minimum. Even be able to make up things on the spot." Coach 3 emphasized knowing your values and knowing how to teach them to youth, "…to instill values…you need to prepare yourself for that. Meaning that you need to read some books, take on some classes, really look at the needs of your kids, and really try to find the time to instill those things."

On the contrary, the less effective coaches were more critical of the coaching education offered by the league-organization. Coach 8 critiqued the lack of support and training, "I don't think that they give enough…They take the money that you owe to be in the program and, I mean, I don't know what it goes towards…I think they need to do more for the programs." The following quote is from a less effective coach who will not be identified (for confidentiality):

> A lot of this stuff that we get in the [coach] training is telling me how to deal with my children, and anybody's group of children are different. You know? If I'm living over in [community], one of the richest communities in [city], of course you're going to be, "Oh Johnny, are you okay? It's all right. It's gonna be better." That's how they are livin'! Come over here and telling that, "Johnny it's okay, alright," I go to my car, my radio might be gone!

Coaching Knowledge and Flexibility. More effective coaches emphasized the need to be flexible with players while maintaining consistency and fairness. For example, Coach 6 learned the value of allowing kids to make mistakes and to use teachable moments, "Like if I see a situation about to, about to, go through, I sit back and watch it. Whatever, don't step in immediately, see how they handle it." He also expressed one of the pillars of KH's training program, "Anything I would tell any coach who is trying to develop character in their kids is, listen to your kids, cuz they have a lot to say too, and they will teach you something." Coach 4 had a pragmatic view on the importance of being knowledgeable so that players respect and trust your coaching message, "Know your subject, if the kids don't think you know what you're talking about they're gonna completely tune you out—you're never gonna get the chance to teach them life skills."

Discussion

The descriptions of more and less effective coaches' actions and perspectives revealed clear differences between the two groups of coaches. More effective coaches use more positive coaching strategies, which supports previous research (Danish et al., 2004; Smith & Smoll, 1997). Furthermore, specific strategies that more effective and less effective coaches of underserved youth adopt were described. Though not exclusive to an underserved population, the emphasis on optimism, esteem, resiliency, role modeling, and teamwork are especially relevant for the needs of underserved youth (Hartman, 2001; Walsh, 2008). The patterns of differences between the two groups may explain *why* less effective coaches use negative coaching strategies. While literature exists that describes the negative experiences of athletes in sport (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould, 1987), these results suggest that almost all

of the coaches believed that their actions were effective and appropriate given the challenges their players face outside of sport. Finally more effective coaches appeared to be more effective, largely because they are open to learning new things.

How Did More and Less Effective Coaches Differ?

An array of positive and negative coaching behaviors and beliefs were identified. More effective coaches engaged in mostly positive coaching behaviors such as: intentionally trying to transfer skills from sport to life; being tough and having high standards without being cruel, punitive, or authoritarian; supporting and building players' esteem; creating a cohesive, supportive, and fun team environment; and allowing players to have more input and autonomy, along with the opportunity to learn from mistakes. Contrarily, less effective coaches engaged in fewer positive actions and more negative ones; they were not just 'tough,' they were demeaning.

A concern for field evaluation research is that coaches could respond in a socially desirable manner. Yet, many of the less effective coaches displayed and voiced negative strategies, prompting the question, "why are they being negative so openly?" An important outcome of this study is the emergent explanations for why some coaches use negative approaches.

Why Some Coaches Use Negative Approaches

The answer to the question posed in the previous section may simply be that from each coach's perspective, whether labeled as less- or more effective, their actions are not "wrong" or "negative" but are justified and necessary. Negative coaching is not being defended, but merely explained. Surprisingly, there were no noticeable differences in either coaching group's emphasis on competition, or in the degree to which either group cared about their players' psychosocial development. Similar to coaches from the more effective group, less effective coaches were exposed to the their players' lives and were aware that their basic psychological and physical needs were not being met, thus limiting their futures (Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). In return they felt compelled to help. All coaches in this study felt responsible to develop life skills and character in their players and believed that their methods were effective. The authors propose three reasons why coaches were less effective in developing youth. First, they perceived a greater threat to youth and more urgent youth needs. Second, they were less open to coach training. Third, less effective coaches lacked a number of life skills themselves.

Less effective coaches described the world as a tough place. In general they were not as optimistic as the more effective coaches. In fact most less effective coaches believed the best way to prepare youth for the challenges of the present (e.g., the streets and at home) and future (e.g., at work) was to bring the harshness and difficulty of adulthood into childhood. This constantly demanding and negative environment most likely limits player-coach rapport, and makes it more difficult for youth to develop the esteem, confidence, and social optimism that are fundamental to positive youth development. This approach is also not developmentally sensitive.

However, it is important to consider the perspective of these less effective coaches. Withstanding the accuracy of their perception of danger, these coaches believed players were on the precipice of a life of poverty and violence. Thus they were willing to use tough, militaristic coaching to keep youth safe. In their opinion it is logical to assume that 'soft' positive approach would endanger children. To this end, it may be true that negative coaching can provide desirable but only short-term effects. The notion that more violent and underserved communities may normalize or even benefit (to some degree) from more authoritarian leadership styles has also been observed by Eamon (2001), who concluded that authoritarian parenting styles reduce antisocial behavior in 10–12 year old children. This finding is not conclusive, however (Pezzella, 2010; Querido, Warner, & Eyberg, 2002). Perhaps positive methods require more time to have an impact than some coaches have patience for, instead opting for the immediate gratification of changing behavior using an authoritarian style. Coaches may also lack confidence in adopting some positive strategies—preferring instead to coach the way they were once coached.

As was mentioned earlier, less effective coaches were not as developmentally sensitive. They were not as open to training and may not be described as life-long learners as coaches. Continual education should provide effective coaches with additional skills. Furthermore, positive coaching approaches such as scaffolding (Larson, 2006; Larson et al., 2004; Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, & Jarrett, 2007), and building responsibility and self-esteem (Martinek & Hellison, 2009; Martinek & Schilling, 2003) are both new and complex. Because coaching methods that empower youth and take some control away from the coach are relatively new, it makes sense that less effective coaches' methods are as much outdated as they are ineffective. The difficult question for researchers and community/sport stakeholders is whether this openness to learn can be developed, or if open-minded coaches must be recruited?

The last explanation for ineffective coaching scrutinizes the general effectiveness and life skills of the less effective coaches. The less effective group included good, well-intentioned people whose developmental coaching skills were not as strong as their intentions. Compared with more effective coaches, less effective coaches were less educated; had less coach training; more authoritarian (e.g., at times short-tempered and demeaning); and coached in poorer, more violent neighborhoods. Ironically, the less effective participants lacked certain life skills that the youth they coached needed. Less effective participants accounted for all eight of the times that a participant missed an interview, cancelled an observation

without notice, or provided the wrong date for a game. It is difficult to develop skills in others that one does not possess or exhibit consistently.

Underserved contexts are unique and may require tougher coaching methods; even the more effective coaches seemed more abrasive and tougher than typical suburban coaches. This tougher, more abrasive style is often labeled as "tough love" in its varying degrees of intensity. In research with high school football coaches, tough love was anecdotally described as being hard (i.e., critical, demanding) on youth while letting them know you are tough because you care about them. Tough love involves criticizing performance, not personality, and letting the player know that afterward (Gould et al., 2006). However, less effective coaches were personal in their criticism and were not observed explicitly letting the player know that they cared about them. Thus, less effective coaches were tough without the love.

Why should less effective coaches change if they are getting immediate results? Hellison and colleagues have shown that a deficit-based approach is not as effective with at-risk children (Hellison, 2003; Martinek & Hellison, 1997, 2009). To be effective these coaches must understand their players' needs and be able to communicate the message in an effective way, but must also provide a positive foundation from which they can build their players up from within. These coaches are missing the benefits of a positive coaching style demonstrated by Smith, Smoll, and Curtis (1979) including enhanced self-esteem and enjoyment. Furthermore, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) asserts that intrinsic motivation emanates from self-determined individuals. Self-determined youth feel autonomous or the originators and regulators of their actions, competent, and related (i.e., secure and connected relationships with others). Ineffective coaches were not facilitating the fulfillment of these needs, but instead controlling youth. When the coach is not present, the child is less likely to transfer the message and be motivated to heed the coach's warnings. Coach 4 talked about how he hoped that the athletes internalized the life lessons, but did not know for sure. It seemed ineffective coaches were not asking whether their style was effective, it was assumed that it was, and instead they were almost dogmatic about their philosophy. It is possible children dropout because of the authoritarian style. However, less effective coaches may focus solely on the kids that survive their coaching methods as support for their coaching methods.

Limitations and Future Directions

This investigation had limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. Ideally, there would have been more than six coaches in each group. However, our sample size was limited because both interviews and observations were conducted and because less effective coaches required more time and expense to collect data from.

Less effective coaches explained that their players faced particularly impoverished and potentially violent experiences in neighborhoods, schools, and within their homes. Although observations support these descriptions, objective support in the form of free/reduced lunch data or household income for these coaches' claims was not obtained. The validity of the results may not only contrast more and less effective coaches but coaches in underserved and very underserved communities. In addition, it would also be interesting to have players across a league rate their own and opposing coaches, in terms of how they promote positive sport climates.

Given the aforementioned limitation, the results are presented merely as distinctions in the general pattern of results across each group of coaches to exploratory open-ended interviews and ethnographic observations. The differences reflect unique patterns of responses and observations, and are not absolute. As is always the case with qualitative designs, readers should make their own judgments about the generalizability of the findings to other contexts and issues in sport.

In terms of future directions, the combination of both interviewing and observing coaches was a valuable method, and should be continued. Both underserved populations and less effective coaches represent important lines of inquiry—in spite of the additional difficulties and expense. To make youth programs more successful, less effective coaches must be understood. Likewise, further research should be conducted to understand coaches' beliefs, and not only their behaviors. This knowledge will inform coaching educators by helping them to understand how to 'reach' ineffective coaches. For instance, can you change the philosophy and behaviors of coaches who believe they have to be negative and demean children to keep them safe? If so, how? These questions desperately require an answer.

Lastly, it would be interesting to study the psychosocial skills of coaches who are trying to develop psychosocial assets in youth. Though potentially controversial and difficult to research, this line of inquiry would be worthwhile. Coaches are people, and their personal lives must influence the youth they coach. If ineffective coaches are, to some degree, less effective people, an intriguing question arises. Should coaching education programs start by developing self-awareness, openness to learn, organizational skills, and other life skills in the *coach*?

Implications

This study has borne several questions that youth sport researchers and practitioners must consider, including: do the threats and challenges described by less effective coaches justify, to any degree, a very strict totalitarian coaching style? It is easy to conclude that coaches should not be sarcastic or demeaning. Extreme coaching behaviors are easy to identify and to judge as being ineffective. However, gray-areas such as very demanding and authoritarian styles may have benefits for some youth.

Disciplinary approaches may be particularly effective over the short-term in an at-risk environment even if it undermines the coach's ability to establish rapport, respect, and trust.

Should leagues remove coaches who are too authoritarian? In this study such coaches showed that they cared about their players and that they had an intimate knowledge of the risks their players face away from sport. With this foundation, ineffective coaches may be worth trying to 'reform' into adopting a more positive approach to coaching. This finding brings to bear the next question; what is an effective coaching style for developing underserved youth? To convince ineffective coaches to change, you will likely need an intermediate style that respects portions of their philosophy while integrating in a positive approach. Change could be achieved if mentorship, testimonials, and evidence of the effectiveness of a positive style were readily available. Furthermore, it would require a positive coaching norm within the league culture. Finally, the positive strategies promoted to coaches in underserved settings must have some short-term if not immediate impact on youth so that coaches can believe in them.

Leagues may also benefit from requiring that each coaching staff have enough assistant coaches; and from not allowing a large number of very troubled youth to participate on the same team. These measures would improve the positive impact that coaches can have by increasing resources and decreasing demands. By respecting the positive things that these volunteer coaches bring to the lives of their players, and by bridging the communication gap, organizations may be able to make less effective coaches more effective mentors and life skills teachers.

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