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Females Serving as the Head Coach of Competitive Elite Male Sports

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Abstract: *The recent coaching employment of Becky Hammon and Kathryn Smith in the NBA and NFL inspired the discussion of the potential of witnessing the first female head coach hired in men's professional basketball and football. Despite the presence of female leaders in many business and political realms, there still seems to be a lack of gender equality in the employment of female administrators and coaches in the male-dominant sports. This study investigates how women were perceived as ideal head coaching candidates in a male dominant sport based on 132 student-athletes' responses (70 males and 62 females). An exploratory factor analysis was performed to address four areas of responses: (1) participants' belief in female coaches' competency, (2) disadvantages and stereotypes faced by the female coaches, (3) the traditional dominant thoughts, (4) preference toward female coaches, and (5) female coaches' unique traits and strengths. In general, the respondents moderately agree that females have the adequate abilities and knowledge as male coaches do to handle the coaching tasks; however, they still don't feel very comfortable about having a female as their head coach. In agreement with several findings, the research showed that male athletes are more likely to show disrespect toward female coaches and question their desire to win. Additional constructive strategies were provided to support future females overcoming the perceived barriers for becoming a head coach and improve existing hiring practices.*

Keywords: coaching, gender equity, male sports

Major professional sports in North America are arguably at their pinnacle in terms of their popularity and economic growth. These popular and cash infused sports, such as football, basketball, baseball, and hockey, are also coached and managed by males. In other words, the compositions of their players, coaches, referees, trainers, owners, and administrators are predominately males (Anderson, 2009; Burton, Borland, & Mazerolle, 2012; Flanagan, 2017; Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989). Since the enactment of the Act of Equal Employment Opportunity, we have witnessed the

the increase of female employment in various fields such as business, science and technology, higher education, medical, and even military. The recent MeToo movement further inspired more women to speak out for their rights and actively engage in public and civil services (Johnson, 2018; LaMotte, 2017; Seales, 2018). There were drastic increases in the numbers of female sports participation after the Title IX era. However, females' involvement in coaching and administration of elite male sports has remained staggeringly low (Flanagan, 2017; Stark, 2017). Not only are there a limited number of teams (i.e., about 30-32 teams per professional league) and positions for the coaching and administrative jobs but also women have an extremely difficult time getting on the elite list of the candidate pools (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod, & Anjorin, 2012). Despite the presence of female leaders in many business and political realms, there still seems to be a lack of gender equality in the employment of female administrators and coaches in male-dominant sports (Magowan, 2015).

Many collegiate and professional sports coaches have accumulated an abundance of playing experience in the past. It is common to see elite male players move to professional or collegiate coaching ranks after their retirement. There are several females playing at a high level of competition that wish to obtain a coaching career in sports as well; however, collegiate and professional sports teams/organizations rarely hire females as coaching staff. In Canada, only 25% of sports coaches are females (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women & Sport [CAAWS], 2018). The gap is even greater in many high-performance settings, including in university sports and national team coaching (CAAWS, 2018). The percentage of women coaches at the college level has dropped precipitously after the Title IX era. Women coached 90% of all women's teams in the 1970s (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Stark, 2017). In 2014, that number dropped to about 40% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The number of women coaching men's teams is minuscule with fewer than 300 nationwide (less than 2%) (Benbow, 2015).

With a low representation of women coaching in the elite male sports, it is intriguing to know if there is any rationale as to why female coaches are not hired in the elite male-dominated sports. Recent coaching employments of Becky Hammon and Kathryn Smith in the National Basketball Association and National Football League inspired the discussion of the potential of witnessing the first female head coach hired in men's professional basketball and football in this paper (Hanzus, 2016; Springer, 2015). This study investigated the perception of women as ideal head coaching candidates in male-dominant sports. The researchers sought opinions on this issue from the intercollegiate student-athletes based on two assumptions. As more females successfully demonstrate their ability and potential to coach at the collegiate level, there will likely be a natural progression for them to be evaluated and considered as a head-coaching candidate at both the professional level and with national teams.

Review of Literature

Past literature has addressed the possible reasons and causes for a lack of female representation in the coaching profession (Female Coaching Network, 2016; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Misasi, Morin, & Kwasnowski, 2016). The traditional role of a female coach is working with children and young people at recreational levels or as an unpaid volunteer; males dominate high-performance coaching fields (Flanagan, 2017). Certain social constraints and biases tend to hinder women from pursuing a coaching career in male-dominant sports. People questioned female coaches' abilities, knowledge of the games, qualifications, commitment, and toughness in handling conflicts and difficult situations (LaFoutaine & Kampphoff, 2016). According to Francesa, a television commenter, if it were not for Coach Popovich of the San Antonio Spurs, the most dominant coach in the NBA, who hired Coach Hammon, men's teams would possibly not even currently discuss hiring a female coach (Grautski, 2017). To further discuss the potential and concerns of women being a head coach of male dominant sports, the authors reviewed the past literature based on two approaches: (1) examining the past experience of female coaches who have coached or are currently coach male sport teams, and (2) examining the athletes' preferences and thoughts on female coaches.

Past Experience of Female Head Coaches in Men's Sports

LaFoutaine and Kampphoff (2016) studied the experiences of female coaches who coached high school male sports. Female coaches were solicited to offer their views on perceived barriers that stood in the way of women joining the coaching ranks in male sports. The "glass ceilings" appeared to be a common theme throughout many responses. Other highly identified barriers included themes such as "disrespect from the athletes," "an unsupportive administrative environment," and "the need to prove their physical competence to their male athletes" (LaFoutaine and Kampphoff, 2016).

Blom et al. (2011) conducted a similar type of study at the collegiate and professional minor league level. Six female head coaches of men's teams qualitatively described their coaching experiences through a series of interviews. Blom et al. (2011) performed a cross-case analysis to tag data and determine themes. Their studies identified five major themes. It was noted that all coaches appreciated their diversified athletic experiences and credited their experiences in preparing them for many of the problems that arose during their tenure. They also pointed out the importance of having a positive male coach as a mentor to help them better understand their male athletes. Evidently, female coaches also reported a need to use an intense coaching philosophy to carry out discipline, maintain the structure, and earn athletes' trust so they could naturally embrace a more "masculine" personality to act out. Most importantly, female coaches all received substantial support from both

their family and the athletic administration. All of the coaches suggested that the lack of support systems, mentoring, and networking were the main reasons the number of women coaching men was so low (Blom et al., 2011). If our society is sincere about promoting female candidates coaching in male sports, future research should focus on combating the aforementioned social stigmas in sports administration and coaching. their family and the athletic administration. All of the coaches suggested that the lack of support systems, mentoring, and networking were the main reasons the number of women coaching men was so low (Blom et al., 2011). If our society is sincere about promoting female candidates coaching in male sports, future research should focus on combating the aforementioned social stigmas in sports administration and coaching.

Athletes' Perceptions of Female Coaches

One of the most intriguing viewpoints regarding this topic is learning about an athlete's perspective on female coaches' competency and qualities. Many discussions focused on athletes' viewpoints on expected and desired qualities and leadership style of coaches. In a study by Misasi et al. (2016), 290 student-athletes from Division-I and Division-II institutions were interviewed and surveyed about their expectations of their coaches. Athletes' coaches were also invited to respond to the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) and Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS). In addition to these two surveys, athletes further completed the Coaching Behavior Scale for Sports (CBS-S) alone. The results showed female coaches seemed to be less likely to provide positive feedback than their male counterparts. Gender differences were also found based on athletes' responses on two CBS-S subscales: competition strategies and personal (negative) rapport. The level of competitive division appeared to play a role in athletes' perception of their coaches and the coaches' perceptions of themselves as well. The practical implication of these findings is that no ideal leadership comes in a simple universal process. The leadership style of male and female coaches may vary. Athletes of different genders may have varying preferences toward a specific coaching style. However, all of the athletes wanted to be understood and cared about. Coaches are a meaningful person in the lives of athletes, and they play a vital role in the athletes' sport experience. Regardless of gender and coaching style, a coach can always try to know their athletes better by understanding their goals, motivations, and needs (Misasi et al., 2016).

When Light (2013) examined athletes' perception of female coaches, 314 participants' responses showed that they did not negatively perceive female coaches. Athletes from the Division-I level did not report differently from those of Division III. The study also indicated that male football players would prefer female trainers or coaches to handle their psychological issues. The conclusions suggested student-athletes prefer to have an understanding, relatable coach, and both these traits are qualified as more feminine (Light, 2013).

The overwhelming impressions among the general public is that females cannot succeed in male-dominated sports because (1) they do not know enough about sports, and (2) they would not be able to handle the egos and attitudes of the male athletes. According to a study conducted by Frey, Czech, Kent, and Johnson (2006), even the female players would prefer having a male head coach due to their certain gender-specific coaching qualities. The female athletes shared that female coaches were both unorganized and non-authoritative when compared to male coaches they had worked for. They consistently highlighted a lack of discipline and structure as the primary weakness of female coaches. Female athletes expressed throughout the practice they would not produce maximum effort because of the lack of fear of being disciplined by the female coach (Frey et al., 2006). Testimonies such as these are the damning reason that many female coaches seldom earn chances to become a head coach. A male head coach is perceived to be a competitive, no-nonsense disciplinarian.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

This study investigated the perception of women as a head coach candidate in male-dominated sports based on 132 student-athletes' responses (70 males & 62 females). The authors attempted to examine the student-athletes' views on their preference of having a female head coach, ideal qualities of a head coach, and challenges that women coaches may face in holding a coaching job in male elite sports. Among the 132 student-athlete respondents, about 54.3% were White and 37% were African American. The rest of the respondents were either identified as biracial (5.5%) or others (Hispanic or Asian-Americans). There were slightly more underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores, 48%) than upperclassmen (juniors and seniors, 45%). The researchers adopted a purposeful sampling method to target the student-athletes as the main respondents. These participants were invited to participate in the survey from a regional public institution in central Kentucky. The total number of the institution's student-athletes was about 350. Our sample represented nearly 38% of the total population, which provided a 93% confidence level and +7% of variability (Andrew, Pendersen, & McEvoy, 2011).

The sample of this study included athletes from various sports such as basketball (both male and female), football, baseball, golf, softball, track and field, and male and female cheerleading. With the support of the director of athletics and the sports coaches, the researchers were granted permission to approach the athletes on several occasions and in a variety of locations to explain the purpose and intent of the study and solicit their opinions on the topic. The survey responses were collected in classrooms, dining areas, practice facilities, and dormitories. The data collection process started around mid-September of 2017 and ended the first week of December 2017. Participants were given an informed consent form to learn about the

purpose of the study and their rights for participation. The completion of the survey indicated each participant's consent in participating in the study. It generally took less than 10 minutes for each participant to complete the survey questionnaire.

The final data were keyed into the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software program for quantitative analyses. Each participant's open-ended responses were typed and reviewed by the researchers. Each researcher separately analyzed the written responses into a few key themes and tabulated the frequencies of occurrence of various themes. Then the researchers compared the frequency tabulations, reviewed the themes, and counted again to reach a final agreement.

Instrumentation

The self-created survey questionnaire of this study contained a total of 21 questions. The survey covered three specific sections: (a) demographic information concerning participants' gender, race, academic classification, and type of participatory sport; (b) 13 Likert Scale items regarding perceptions on females serving as a sport head coach; and (c) two open-ended questions addressing challenges and obstacles female head coaches may face and special coaching qualities that female coaches may present. The formation of 5-point Likert-scale rating items was based on the theoretical concepts of many studies including works of Blom et al. (2011); LaFontaine and Kampphoff (2016); LaVoi and Dutove, (2012); Light (2013); and Misasi et al. (2016). The participants rated their agreement on each of the statements with a numerical value ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). An exploratory factor analysis (see Table 1 of Results) further grouped all of the Likert-scale responses (13 items) into five categories: (1) participants' belief in female coaches' competency (4 items), (2) disadvantages and stereotypes faced by the female coaches (2 items), (3) the traditional dominant thoughts (3 items), (4) preference toward female coaches (2 items), and (5) female coaches' unique traits and strengths (2 items). Based on the reality test, the Cronbach Alpha value of all the Likert scale items exceeded .700. This indicates that the participants' answers on all the rating questions show strong internal reliability.

Results

Five specific factors concerning participants' perceptions of females as head coach candidates were identified based on the exploratory factor analysis. The analysis yielded a relatively high value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (.720) and consistent correlation among all items, which reflected a strong degree of content validity. Overall, athletes' views on female coaches' competencies were positive ($M = 3.89$ on a five-point scale). This means participants tended to agree that females have adequate abilities and knowledge to male coaches to handle coaching tasks. On the surface, the participants did not value highly ($M = 2.76$) the traits and

strengths that are traditionally possessed by female head coaches (i.e., being compassionate or less strict). They moderately agreed that female coaches do face disadvantages and stereotypes in their profession ($M = 3.14$). They also disapproved some of the male-dominant thoughts such as women cannot handle the coaching jobs like men do ($M = 2.34$). Even though participants may think that female coaches are “up to the job”, they still did not prefer a female as their head coach ($M = 2.42$).

Table 1

Factors Concerning Perceptions on Female Coaching Candidates (KMO value = .720; Loading 74%)

Factors and Items	Mean
Factor 1 Belief in female coaches competency (4 items)	3.89
1. I believe a female head coach has the ability that equals to their male counterparts	3.87
2. A female head coach knows as much about sports as male coaches	4.07
3. I would feel comfortable with a female as my head coach	3.84
8. A female head coach could have a successful and winning program	3.79
Factor 2 Disadvantages and stereotypes faced by female coaches (2 items)	3.14
6. Female coaches do not receive the same opportunity as male coaches	3.25
7. Female coaches are not respected in the athletic world	3.03
Factor 3 The traditional male-dominant thoughts (3 items)	2.34
9. I believe that female coaches receive plenty of employment opportunities in sports	2.78
10. Male coaches are more competitive than female ones	2.22
12. Female coaches will not have time to handle a lot of athletic responsibilities because of their family role	2.02
Factor 4 Preference toward female coaches (2 items)	2.80
11. Female head coaches could be successful in elite male sports (including football)	3.17
13. I would prefer a female head coach	2.42
Factor 5 Female coaches' unique traits and strengths (2 items)	2.76
4. Sometimes male coaches are too strict	2.53
5. Female coaches would be more compassionate towards athletes	2.99

Significant differences in certain specific factors were found based on diverse demographic variables. In general, both female and white participants had a higher rating in “Belief in female coaches’ competency” ($p < .01$). Female athletes also had a higher rating in “Preference toward

female coaches” ($p < .01$). Upperclassmen (senior) athletes exhibited the lowest rating in “Disadvantages and stereotypes faced by female coaches” ($p < .01$). Athletes’ response in “Belief in female coaches’ competency” also varied based on their chosen sport. Those who played in team sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and softball gave a lower rating on that factor than those who participated in individualistic sports (i.e., track and field, cross country and golf).

The open-ended responses yielded seven key themes concerning the perceived obstacles and barriers faced by the female coaches. They are shown below in Table 2 in ranked order. The participants also expressed their most valued coaching quality by selecting from the available given choices. Knowledge of the game ($n = 37$) and Desire to win ($n = 25$) received the most votes. The two least important qualities were Compassion ($n = 20$) and Fairness ($n = 14$).

Table 2

Perceived Obstacles and Barriers Faced by the Female Coaches

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency Counts</i>
Disrespect	40
Sexism and sexual harassment	20
Connecting with guys	7
Intimidated by players	7
Entering the locker room, & stereotypes	4
Lack of creditability	4
Lack of equal pay & no playing experience	3
Not getting the chance	1

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The results of this study reflected that both females and males seemed to be comfortable with having a female head coach ($M = 3.84$). However, the research does not indicate if the respondents were just attempting to be politically correct by answering to demonstrate they are not biased about the issue. Support for females being head coaches seemed to fade when the athletes continued to carefully consider the barriers and the challenges for female coaches and preferable coaching styles. Failure to garner respect from the male athletes and the need to prove female coaches’ desire to win became evidently critical in the open-ended responses. This finding agrees with the findings of LaFoutaine and Kampphoff (2016). Simply put, female coaches were not well respected by male athletes.

It is encouraging to see the participants of this study rejecting the

stigma and traditional social norm (in the Southern region) that only men go to work to provide for the family while women must stay at home to care for the children (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Rochlen, 2008). Although the participants did not agree with lack of time or heavy family obligations as a key attribute to cause low female coaching participation in male sports, they imposed some unique concerns that female coaches may face. Male athletes showed concern about female coaches getting sexually harassed, their inability to enter the locker room freely, and the excessive sexism they face in the industry. These concerns somewhat reflect the prevalent male-chauvinist cultures and stereotypes (Planned Parenthood, 2018).

The results of this study found male athletes were more likely to be concerned with female coaches' desire to win and knowledge of the game. It was not surprising, perhaps, to find female respondents showing a stronger belief in female coaches' competence. The researchers assume some of them may eventually wish to coach in male sports someday if the opportunity is given. The majority of the females acknowledged the importance of having a strong knowledge of the game to earn the trust of male athletes. Except for the sports of American football and baseball, females are capable of engaging in, playing, and learning sports at a highly competitive level. The researchers were surprised by excuses such as inadequate knowledge of the game or the lack of desire to win used to deny females coaching opportunities. The perception of female coaches not having the desire to win is actually a myth rather than a reality (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

The participants did not value the coaching qualities that are typically attributed to female coaches (i.e., being more compassionate, not being so strict and autocratic) as much either. This means that the phenomenon observed by Light (2013), appreciating feminine coaching traits, was not highly identified in this study. The current study did not intend to convince the audiences whether a more male-dominated (i.e., authoritarian) or a more feminine-associated (i.e., caring) coaching style would lead to great athletic success. However, researchers pointed out that in a male team sport setting players are very accustomed to the strict, well structured, and authoritative style (Misasi et al., 2016). When more males coach in female sports, they also influence female athletes to accept that type of coaching style. The interesting issue is that there are not enough female coaches that can bring that so-called feminine approach (compassion and caring) to influence the male athletes. A practical strategy to actually increase the female coaches in all sports still relies on having either male or female mentors willingly to hire and guide more female coaching prospects (CAAWS, 2018).

Misasi et al. (2016) addressed the importance of athletes' desire to be cared about and understood. There are clear differences in expectations for athletic coaches based on the genders of the athletes. It is when athletes' needs and expectations are not met and addressed that the disrespect and misunderstanding begin to surface. The researchers were perplexed by

the amount of upperclassmen (particularly seniors) that were less likely to agree to female coaches getting less respect and employment opportunities in male-dominant sports. The researchers were unsure if this result was simply because the athletes are naïve about the issue or if they really respect both male and female coaches equally and assume others are doing so as well. Past literature suggested athletes of both genders who participated in diversity training and classes benefited from learning about gender differences and social concerns in sports. These training sessions may help athletes get rid of societal and social stigma regarding both male and female coaches (Poupore, 2007; Withycombe Consulting, 2012). The researchers believe that effective coaching styles can be learned and cultivated. They are not innate qualities that only belong to specific genders. Therefore, athletes can also be trained and educated to embrace coaches' leadership styles and practices. If male athletes can find females working in all types of professions, then females should also be included in the field of sports.

In today's diverse working environments we need more female coaches breaking through male professional sports so they can inspire others to pursue a chance of coaching at the collegiate and interscholastic level as well. Hopefully, more visionary leaders (owners, principals, and athletic directors) can follow Coach Popovich's practice to help female coaches break the glass ceiling in the elite male-dominated sports.

The researchers would like to offer some suggestions for future researchers on this topic. We believe there is a need to communicate with potential female head coaching candidates and administrators (who make the hiring decisions), and interview them for their views on current hiring discrepancies and processes. A major limitation of the study was not having a many responses coming from football players. The researchers believe that a larger sample can also be conducted nationally at the collegiate level or in professional sports to learn more about elite male athletes' thoughts.

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