Research Proposal, 1-3 Final

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WSLA Mental Health Survey, Intervention, and Education Development.

Introduction

The coach to student-athlete is one of the most important relationships in sports and one of the five most important adult-child relationships outside of one's family (Wall, 2019). Since 2015, the Washington Schoolgirls Lacrosse Association has required coaches to earn USA Lacrosse Level 1 coach certification. The problem is we do not know how effective the certification is, what outputs the coaches perform, their literacy with mental health, and the resources needed to help them learn and improve. Assessing learning outcomes and current practices will help WSLA and USA Lacrosse update and effectively add a mental health curriculum.

Since 2000, research into mental health (MH) has received increased attention in sports. Awareness skyrocketed with Simone Biles's difficulties at the 2021 Summer Olympics. Studies show that 5 – 35% *(Perry, 2020)* of athletes are affected by MH issues. The debate about the MH of female athletes continues to do limited research, with inconsistent definitions, measures, and stigmas. 16% (Sue, 2019) of professional women soccer players reported they currently need or want psychotherapy. Multiple studies reported that 16% or more elite-level female athletes reported problems with disordered eating. Do these issues surface during teenage years and left untreated incubate into more destructive behavior? What percentage of high school-age lacrosse players would benefit from coaches' increased MH literacy?

Due to the paucity of data, experts recommend studies be done in single sports to discover athlete risks and develop interventions & support. Lacrosse-specific data will provide direction for new interventions and education in these sports, and then provide a template for other team sports like basketball, volleyball, and soccer. Increasing MH literacy of 100 coaches

in year one will have an impact on more than 2,000 student-athletes. 300 coaches in year two, will impact more than 6,000 student-athletes.

Literature Review

Coaches can be sorted into three groups, *recreational*, *developmental*, and *elite*. Most of the research has been done with *elite* coaches. According to the Department of Labor, there are over 292,000 high school coaches in the U.S. Dr. Ryan Hedstrom of the American Coaching Academy estimates there are more than 2.5MM volunteer coaches, and more than 90% of these coaches do not have any formal training. He notes that this results in massive unintentional damage to students-athletes self-esteem. Compounding the impact is that coaches are recognized as one of the five most influential adults in adolescents' lives. Without education and perspective, new coaches repeat the behaviors they experienced from their coaches; all too often they repeat the sins of the past. There is a lack of information on what are the most damaging negative coach behaviors. Future studies could include assessments of what is needed to give first-year coaches tools to be successful out of the gate and avoid the top five researched negative behaviors.

Studies show coach training can be viewed through three levels*; formal, non-formal*, and *informal.* The most at-need group is first- and second-year recreational coaches with an estimated 90% being untrained. In a Canadian study, 42% of recreational coaches had formal certification in contrast to 95% of developmental coaches. Developmental and elite coaches average more years of coaching, have more peer-to-peer sharing, and bring experience from the job.

Formal, Non-formal, Informal

Formal certification has been problematic for new, recreational coaches for several reasons. Studies document that the time investment in formal training is a significant barrier to recreational coaches. (Rocchi, 2017), documented that 77% of volunteer youth coaches have a child on the team. Curriculum-driven, classroom-style training has the accessibility challenges of timing, time commitment, location, and insulation from real-life coaching. Training topics can be compartmentalized in a classroom and are difficult to execute in the dynamic on-the-field environment. Most studies have been conducted with elite-level coaches. This leaves a gap to what information recreational coaches need and the specific challenges less skilled athletes present. Future assessments could ask what is important to coaches and what are contexts of success they can use throughout the season. The most popular form of learning for new recreational coaches is books because they can learn at their own pace and refer back to the information. Future research can ask what books are helpful and important to new recreational coaches. To get coaches up to speed quickly, time investment, and ease of use qualities should be tracked.

Online certifications have been documented to present a grip of problems, (Thrower, 2019), with attrition rates of 50-70%. Design difficulties include material being impersonal, lack of interaction, tedious tests, reduced feeling of engagement & purpose, and lack of practical components. One study went so far as to suggest extrinsic incentives for continuing education units or an iPad, but design, delivery, and material would be a variable to success. What are the standards for certification? Would lessons come with a PDF and videos of practical application tools for coaches to use in the field? A Canadian study cited Club Coaching Courses provided on their league website as the most popular online source for information (Pankow, 2020). Can learnings here can be applied to organizations in the U.S.?

Non-formal education is an underdeveloped asset available to coaches and organizations. In the US applications could include sports leagues and member organizations formalizing mentoring programs, creating reading lists, YouTube videos, and reflection programs. Roffchi (2018) found mentoring to be significantly more beneficial for *female developmental* and *male recreational* coaches.

A gap in information is from understanding and listing what books are the most useful. What sites and what parts of the sites are the most useful? With 77% of coaches coaching their children, tools for transitioning into and out of coach roles with their young children would be beneficial for new recreational coaches. I wonder if recreational coaches would embrace and use an online community to ask and share ideas? Would coaches use and value a weekly community meeting where they care share learnings and ask questions?

Informal education is the most used and least researched area for *recreational* coach development. If an organization does not facilitate formal mentoring, many coaches have found informal relationships. We do not know what topics are covered and what skills coaches may or may not be developing. Reflective practices should be part of every coach's toolbox. Wall (2019) found that 25% of coaches do not do any reflective practice. Future studies can look at what best practices can be developed for experienced coaches to share their knowledge with new volunteer coaches.

Female Mental Wellness

When it comes to how coaches interact with female athletes there is another layer of mental wellness that is coming into recognition. Mental Health (MH) issues affect 5 – 35% of females and studies show it affects elite athletes with similar numbers. 90% of the studies on female MH have been based on eating disorders (ED), and disordered eating (DE); while only

10% of studies have looked at depression and anxiety. Multiple studies show DE/ED affected more than 16% of elite athletes. It is important to learn what the effects are on high school-age girls, and what early interventions may produce downstream MH improvements.

There is a gap in information about what stresses female adolescent athletes (Rice, 2020). Since 2012 teen depression, anxiety, and self-harm have increased, it is not unrelated that social media came into the mainstream at this time. Teenage girls in particular are affected by social media because of their desire for intimacy & inclusion, and fear of exclusion. How have these dramatic changes influenced athletic performance? Does participation in sports and mental wellness training for coaches prevent anxiety and depression? Further studies on the issues of body image, personal risk factors, weight, and influence from coaches, teammates, and parents would help identify MH education and intervention needs.

Kong (2015) found how coaches communicate about food impacts how the team communicates amongst themselves about weight. Perry (2021) cited that 38.6% of female athletes felt pressure about their weight from teammates, the number one stressor. A gap remains in the understanding of the influence of teammates, coaches, and parents. Articles have called for more qualitative studies on specific risk factors, personality, and sports-specific factors. There is a lack of theory on interventions to promote MH literacy to coaches of female athletes (Hurley, 2020).

Methodology

The purpose of this survey is to understand current mental wellness coaching outputs and then provide direction to increase support via education and interventions. Five themes will be assessed through a 51-question survey using both quantitative and qualitative measures to

provide data and depth. The goal is a minimum of 100 respondents. Data will be housed in a password-protected site and encrypted data tables.

Operational Definitions

The survey will be promoted in person at tournaments and pre-season organizational meetings. Three rounds of survey requests will be sent to WSLA members' emails to complete the Survey Monkey questionnaire. Three extrinsic cash rewards will be offered from surveys completed by the deadline, as well as an intrinsic appeal to, "grow the game & improve mental wellness with high school-aged girls."

Analysis of the data and information will begin with the reference of variables; a) time investment & learning source, b) monitoring of negative behavior & resiliency, c) teaching & evaluation, d) the holistic player, e) mental wellness. From these categories, the empirical data will be reviewed and sorted into categories using (Braun and Clark, 2006) thematic analysis and inductive approach to generate codes for which themes and subthemes will be defined and named with the goal of understanding and interpreting the participants' experiences (hermeneutic phenomenological lens, and based in the constructivist paradigm).

Population

The population will be registered WSLA coaches. The survey will ask; for location, league level, years of experience, education level, required training, certification, amount of compensation, and hours spent coaching per week during the season. Usual measures like age, sex, and others were considered but deemed less important because the primary aim is to measure the coach's behavior outputs.

Sample Information

The information gained will shed light on the five research themes and help give direction to coach education and intervention. Previous studies have suggested sport-specific studies to get more granular details on MH problems facing female athletes in their sport to develop effective interventions. Through analysis and synthesis, more sub-themes may be developed for support as well as further study.

Assessment Methods

Initial assessments of the data will be *formative* based on the feedback provided (Sue, 2019). As information is synthesized, interventions are developed and implemented, future opportunities are created. A longitudinal study would use the *ipsative* method to measure improved outputs and set *norm-reflective* standards to establish individual performance averages. Institutions and organizations may be interested in creating certifications, this study set up *criterion-referenced* assessments.

Plans for data analysis and interpretation.

As a sport & performance consultant, I will use this data to increase awareness of MH issues with high school-aged female athletes, the influence coaches have, and the need to provide easily accessed and digested information coaches can use in the field. Statistics show that 60% of adolescents leave organized sports by 14 years. Education and interventions will help keep high school-aged girls in organized sports, reduce untreated MH issues, and promote positive body self-talk.

Summary

If the existing literature says coach to athlete relationship is the most important relationship in sports, then we need interventions for coach training to maximize their efficiency and promote athlete MH. If most of the youth coaches are volunteers, then we need to meet them

where they are at with engaging training that speaks to their needs and the skill level of their athletes. If informal training is how they learn best, then developing interventions and education through multiple channels will be beneficial. If there is a wealth of knowledge from experienced coaches and a desire to share it, then we need to develop communities and platforms to make access, sharing, and mentorship easy. If female athletes are dealing with DE/ED issues, then we need to create interventions so coaches can be advocates for them. If body image, weight, and aesthetic pressures are coming from teammates, coaches, and parents, then we need to create interventions to educate each level of interaction.

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