

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **The Examination of the Mentoring Relationship between the Head Coach and Assistant Coaches of Women's Basketball Teams**

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**A number of studies have examined the decreasing number of female head coaches of women's teams. Researchers have consistently demonstrated the mentoring relationship has provided substantial benefits in helping women advance within leadership positions within the sport industry. The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coach of women's basketball teams who aspire to become a head coach. More specifically, the mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques were two areas of focus. Findings suggested mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques may provide recommendations on mentoring women who aspire to become head coaches.**

**Key words:** mentoring, women, basketball, coaches.

## **Introduction**

Most Title IX advocates have focused their energy on female athletes, thus creating increased opportunities for women to participate in high school and college sport. Following the enactment of Title IX in 1972, female athletes playing college sports has risen from 16,000 in 1972 to 180,000 in 2006. In addition, the number of women's teams per school has grown from 2.5 in 1970 to the highest number at 8.45 in 2006. While there are increased opportunities for women to participate in sport, the percentage of women's teams coached by women is at an all time low. The number of female head coaches of women's teams has dwindled from 90% in 1972 to 42.4% in 2006. Over the past three decades, nearly every sport has seen a steep decline in the proportion of teams coached by women. Of the five most popular sports - basketball, volleyball, soccer, cross country, and softball - all but soccer, has seen a decrease in female head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006). Why has obtaining a head coaching position for women's teams remained a struggle?

A number of studies have examined the decreasing number of female head coaches of women's teams and discovered several themes for this phenomenon. These themes have included work and career related variables (Hums, Bower, & Grappendorf, 2007; Sagas & Ashley, 2001; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004), the social context of female coaches operating in a predominately male environment (Kilty, 2006), lack of leadership confidence (Lough, 2001), financial inequity

(Acosta & Carpenter, 2006; Pastore, 1991), career-related burn-out (Pastore, 1991), and discriminatory hiring procedures (Lovett & Lowry, 1994). In addition, some researchers have indicated female assistant coaches have less desire and are less likely than male assistant coaches to apply for a head coaching positions (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2003; Sagas, Cunningham, & Ashley, 2000). This lack of desire is discouraging considering female assistants have the largest candidate pool (57.2%) for women's head basketball coaching positions within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006). However, it must be noted there are barriers that exist and have contributed to this "lack of desire" of women applying for head coaching positions including financial inequity (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006); gender disparity (Kelly & Sagas, 2005) and work and career related variables (Knoppers, 1992, 1989; Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006; Yiamouyiannis, 2007). These barriers are very similar to the reasons why the number of female head coaches continues to decline. Therefore, strategies need to be examined to help in the development of female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams who aspire to become a head coach. One strategy that continues to emerge on a consistent basis within the literature is mentoring. Researchers have consistently demonstrated the mentoring relationship provides substantial benefits in helping women advance within leadership positions within sports (Bower & Hums, 2007; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002, 1999; Young, 1990).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Formal mentoring has been linked to increased satisfaction, personal growth and career mobility of many protégés within sport organizations (Pastore, 2003; Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2001, 1999). The mentoring relationship can also be a critical factor in recruiting, educating, and retaining female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams. The head coach has a definite influence on the female assistant by serving as an expert facilitating learning.

### **Mentoring**

Defining *mentoring* and *mentor* is problematic due to inconsistent definitions and ungrounded theory (Merriam, 1983). For the purposes of this study, mentoring is defined as "a process in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (i.e., the protégé), and sponsors that individual's career progress" (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999, p. 25). The term *mentor* is defined as "an individual who has taken a personal interest in an individual and has guided, sponsored, or otherwise had a positive influence on their professional career development" (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997, p. 2). This definition was chosen because it was the description used on the *Profile of Mentors in Sport Survey* to help the female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams identify whether their head coach was a mentor. In addition, to eliminate inconsistencies in terms the head coach has been identified as the mentor and the female assistant head coach of Division I women's basketball teams has been identified as the *protégé* throughout the study.

### **Mentoring Characteristics**

The mentoring relationship constitutes a reciprocal, interactive process of giving between the coach and the protégé in helping each other reach their goals. The reciprocal, interactive process may best be explained by the social exchange theory. The social exchange theory "views the interaction between two people as an exchange where the cost of participation in the relationship is compared to the perceived benefits. The basic premise of the social exchange theory indicates that if an individual perceives greater rewards than cost, he or she will be more inclined to develop the relationship" (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993; pg. 2). The social exchange may include material benefits along with psychological benefits of approval, respect, affection and esteem. For example, a protégé may select a mentor based on certain desirable attributes and/or competencies with the anticipation of receiving career and psychosocial benefits in becoming a head coach. The mentor may choose a protégé based on performance. If the protégé is a high performer the mentor may perceive the protégé and the organization will be successful.

### **Primary Functions of the Mentoring Relationship**

Mentoring relationships are critical for the career success of women wanting to advance within leadership positions within sports (Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006), sport and physical

activity academic disciplines (Bower, 2007), intercollegiate athletics (Lough, 2001; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002), and interscholastic athletics (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). Kram (1985) identified mentoring as a relationship between two individuals. According to the mentor role theory (Kram, 1985), mentoring relationships usually occur when a senior employee takes a junior employee "under his or her wing" and provides career and psychosocial functions. Kram (1985) theorized five specific career development functions including sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments; and four specific psychosocial functions including role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship.

The career-related functions of sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments (Kram, 1985), are important for an effective mentoring relationship between the head coach and the female assistant coach. The sponsorship function allows the mentor to help build the reputation of the protégé by highlighting his or her potential; and exposure and visibility allow the head coach to introduce the female assistants to other coaches within the field. These relationships assist the protégé in developing relationships and allow for greater advancement opportunities. The mentor also provides knowledge and skills, as well as productive feedback on coaching. Often, the protégé makes the mistake of overwhelming themselves, not realizing when to say no. As a protection function, the mentor shields the protégé from taking on too many responsibilities. Finally, challenging assignments are given by the mentor to prepare the protégé for greater responsibilities (Kram, 1985).

The psychosocial functions identified by Kram (1985), include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Role modeling consists of the head coach efficiently performing organizational tasks while the protégé observes these behaviors, attitudes, and values. In acceptance and confirmation, the mentor expresses confidence, creates mutual trust, confirms individual abilities, and lends encouragement and support. Counseling allows the mentor to help the protégé investigate and solve personal conflicts they might detract from effective performance. Finally, friendship is a social interaction allowing the protégé to share personal experiences and escape the pressures of coaching.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coach of women's basketball teams who aspire to become a head coach. More specifically, the mentoring characteristics and the advancement techniques were the two areas of focus, which veered the following research questions:

1. What mentoring characteristics of the head coach were important to the female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams?

2. What advancement techniques were used by the head coach to prepare the female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams to become a head coach?

The possible benefits of this study include the potential to bridge theory and practice and contribute to knowledge in the profession in several ways. First, the study provided information on the importance of the mentoring relationship in the development of female assistant basketball coaches of women's teams who aspire to become a head coaching. These findings will provide recommendations on ways to mentor women who aspire to become head coaches. Second, the study provided insight on facilitating a prolonged and useful mentoring relationship. Finally, the study added to the body of scholarly research in the sport management literature which is limited in the area of mentoring women within intercollegiate athletics.

## Method

### Participants

Approximately 650 Division I female assistant basketball coaches from 325 universities in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) were invited to participate in the study. The *National Directory of College Athletics* provided a mailing list which contained all of the addresses for the assistant coaches. The study focused on female assistant basketball coaches for two reasons: (a) the decrease from 80% to 61% in female head coaches of all Division I, II, III women's basketball teams over the last three decades, and (b) basketball is considered by many as the flagship sport of female athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006). Of the 650 female assistant coaches who were mailed a survey, one hundred and sixty four (n = 164) responded.

Of the 164 responses, 89.6% (N = 147) identified their head coach as a mentor and indicated he or she has played a big role in their desire to become a head coach. The gender of the mentors identified consisted of 65.3% female and 34.7% male. The majority of the assistant coaches were between the ages of 35-44 (54.4%), followed by 28.6% between the ages of 45-54; 8% between the ages of 25-34; 7.4% greater than 65; and 2% less than 24. All respondents held a Bachelors degree, 60% of the respondents held a Masters and 1% held a Doctorate. The majority of respondents were White females (65%), followed by African American (26.6%), Hispanic (2.8%), other (4.2%). There was at least one respondent from all 32 conferences with 6.99% coming from the Big 10 and Atlantic 10 conferences.

### Procedures

Following recommendations by Dillman (2007), a letter and a modified version of the Profile of Mentors in Sport survey (Bower, 2007) was mailed to all participants in April (following March Madness and before recruiting camps began). All non-respondents were mailed a postcard two weeks following the first mailing. Two weeks later an additional

postcard was sent to all remaining non-respondents. The post cards asked the participant to go to a website and submit the survey online.

### Instrument

The *Profiles of Mentors in Sport Survey* was developed and piloted by Bower (2007) through extensive research of previous studies in the area of mentoring and sport (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Bower, 2007; Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006). A panel of experts examined the survey to make sure the instrument displays content validity and avoids biased items and terms. The survey elicits responses from the mentor experience, the protégé experience, and the reflection of the meaning of the mentoring relationship. Modifications of the survey language were completed to primarily address the protégé experience of Division I assistant women basketball coaches.

The questions for the *Profile of Mentors in Sport Survey* included demographic information of age, educational background, income, and race. The open-ended questions focus on characteristics and the professional advancement techniques of the head coach (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Bower, 2007). The following definition of a mentor was used to help assistant coaches identify whether their head coach is a mentor: "An individual who has taken a personal interest in an individual and has guided, sponsored, or otherwise had a positive influence on their professional career development" (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997, p. 2).

### Data Analyses

Means and standards deviations were calculated for the demographics using SPSS 16.0. Wolcott's (1994) four-step approach was used to organize the qualitative data. First, the researchers organized the data by utilizing HyperResearcher 2.6. Second, the researchers read and reread the qualitative responses from the participants' answers to the open-ended questions. Third, categories began to develop through a categorical strategy of analysis called the constant-comparative analysis. The constant-comparative analysis was used to "identify similarities and differences among the data through coding and sorting into appropriate categories" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pg. 273). For classification purposes phrases were used because some sentences contained two or more divergent ideas. For example, the comments, "Coach them once in the field area and give feedback..." And, "Offering feedback and suggestions based on my personal experience" were grouped under career function "coaching." Each phrase was assigned to a single category. Finally, the researchers coded the data looking for themes that emerged through intensive analysis and categorization of the data.

### Trustworthiness of the Data

The researchers used multiple strategies introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility (internal validity) was established through

“authenticity”. Authenticity was described by Neuman (2000), as a “fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint who lives it every day” (p. 31). The constant comparative analysis provided strength for the validity by establishing categories and developing themes from the open-ended questions.

Transferability (external validity) was provided through the “thick description” of comments provided by the assistant basketball coaches supporting the themes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The examples of the “thick descriptions” are found in the results section of the paper. Dependability (reliability) was supported by researcher debriefing. Each researcher examined the data and met to discuss themes and categories. Following many meetings amongst the researchers a final conclusion of the themes and categories were determined. Confirmability (objectivity) was based on the researchers’ ability to limit bias by not making any premature conclusions on the themes and/or categories, by using the constant comparative analysis, reading and rereading the data, and the researchers debriefing.

### **Limitations**

The researchers identified two limitations for the study. First, the return rate was 22.6% (N = 147) which seems significantly low; however, this may be due to the aftermath of March Madness or the limited time due to athletic recruitment. The study also was limited to females working as Division I assistant women basketball coaches.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coach of women’s basketball teams who aspire to become a head coach. The qualitative responses led to some interesting results in terms of head coaches mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques. The feedback from the mentoring experience was deemed important to these protégés who aspire to become a head coach.

### **Research Question #1 - What Mentoring Characteristics of the Head Coach Were Important to Division I Assistant Women’s Basketball Coaches?**

There were four themes identified as important characteristics of the head coach as a mentor including being a role model, acting as a leader, having the ability to communicate, and to nurture the protégé. The protégé viewed their mentors as role models because they led by example and were willing to serve in any way possible to the basketball team. A protégé conveyed, “He sets a positive example on and off the court. He has demonstrated his ability to be a successful coach.” Other women indicated their head coach acted as a leader. For example,

My head coach is a leader and has the ability to teach lessons while allowing her players and assistants to have a lot of responsibility. She allows us to have ownership with the team and guides us along the way and teaches us to be gracious.

The mentor also acted as a leader as a protégé mentioned, “Ability to lead without comprising values, educator of the game and its history, shares knowledge and helps develop his staff while allowing us to be individuals.” The protégés also stressed how important it was for the mentor to be able to communicate. For example, assistant coach responded, “She communicates well, great teaching skills, personable, straight forward and disciplines.” Finally, nurturing characteristics were apparent within the head coaches, “concern and involvement in helping me make decisions about my career. . . caring and sharing her wisdom. . . ability and willingness to nurture my talent. . . support of your goals.”

### **Research Question #2 - What Advancement Techniques Were Used by the Head Coach to Prepare the Female Assistant Basketball Coach to Become a Head Coach?**

There were five themes were identified as advancement techniques used by the mentor prepare the protégé to become a head coach which included attending professional conferences, providing networking opportunities, stressing the importance of specific personality indicators, opportunities to learn day-to-day operations, and provide “hands-on” experience. Attending professional conferences was most often mentioned as an advancement technique the head coach used to prepare the protégé for a head coaching position. For example, an assistant coach mentioned, “He provides me with continuing education opportunities...stresses leadership conventions such as the WBCA, clinics, seminars, and workshops. At conventions he guides me toward the important forums to attend.” Networking opportunities was an advancement technique geared toward the working with other coaches. The protégé explained that solid networking was the coach, “Selling me to other universities and working with other coaches to receive more information on effective use of their resources in coaching”. Personality indicators were mentioned by many of the women. A protégé mentioned the coach stressed the importance of “Confidence assertiveness, patience, and the ability to motivate players.” Opportunities to learn day-to day operations was illustrated through an assistant coach, “The coach taught me skills of organization, budgeting, administration, public relations, marketing, scouting, recruiting, breakdown of film, practice planning, scheduling, travel arrangements.” Finally, the ability to gain “hands on” experience was extremely important. A woman mentioned,

He allowed me the opportunity to take in huddles during games, lead drills during practice, and more importantly he let me coach a game to see what it is like real time...these opportunities allowed me to “think like a head coach.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coach of women's basketball teams who aspire to become a head coach. The results of the study provided specific mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques the protégé thought were important for the mentoring relationship.

### Mentoring Characteristics

The protégé identified the important characteristics of the head coach as being a role model, acting as a leader, having the ability to communicate, and to nurture the protégé. All of these themes supported the psychosocial functions provided by the mentor that were deemed important to the protégé. The coach acting as a role model was mentioned throughout the responses. The protégé was able to observe behaviors, attitudes, and values of the mentor. These mentors were able to set a positive example and displayed characteristics of leadership qualities and communication skills which were deemed necessary traits by the protégé. The mentor provided acceptance and confirmation by having the ability to nurture the protégé by showing concern, providing guidance and support, and offering encouragement. These characteristics along with communication skills may also overlap with having the ability to counsel

which is needed to help the protégé solve personal conflict that may detract from effective performance. It is interesting to note that friendship did not develop as a theme.

### Advancement Techniques

There were five themes identified as advancement techniques used by the mentor prepare the protégé to become a head coach which included attending professional conferences, providing networking opportunities, stressing the importance of specific personality indicators, opportunities to learn day-to-day operations, and provide "hands-on" experience. All of these themes supported the career functions provided by the mentor that were deemed important to the protégé.

The networking opportunities at conferences and other events provided a form of sponsorship where the mentor help build the reputation of the protégé. These opportunities also led to exposure and visibility. The mentor introduced the protégé to learn from other coaches. Coaching and challenging assignments were supported as the mentor provided opportunities to learn day-to-day while providing hands-on experiences through coaching actual games and/or leading practices. Throughout these challenging assignments the mentor was able to provide the protégé with a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills, as well as productive feedback to consider when she becomes a head coach. Protection was the only career function that did not get enough support to constitute a theme.

### The Mentoring Connection

The majority of the mentoring characteristics were examples of

psychosocial functions while the advancement techniques were examples of career functions. However, the combination of the psychosocial and career functions supports the social exchange theory (Olian et al., 1993). From a leader-member exchange perspective, successful mentoring can be viewed as an relationship (characterized by a high quality of social exchange) that develops when potential mentors are perceived as having certain career and psychosocial attributes (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975). The mentors and protégé developed a reciprocal relationship which constituted an interactive process of learning, thus connecting the mentors to the protégé. The reciprocal relationship allowed the protégé to view the interaction between them and the mentor as an exchange where the cost of participation in the relationship was related to perceived benefits of becoming a head coach.

### Implications

The results of the study provided implications that are specific to mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques that have the potential to provide female assistant coaches of women basketball teams with the tools in the development of a mentor that may provide advancement opportunities. First, the protégé needs to consider whether the mentor has the characteristics and necessary career and/or psychosocial skills necessary to achieve their goal of becoming a head coach. If the head coach is not the best mentor for the protégé, she may need to look elsewhere to avoid frustration of not receiving the necessary career and psychosocial skills in becoming a head coach. Second, the study provided advancement techniques useful in becoming a head coach. These advancement techniques may be useful to other head coaches wanting to provide additional ways to help the woman to excel within the profession. Third, career and psychosocial functions were important to the development of the mentoring relationship. Thus, sport organizations may benefit from implementing formal mentoring programs that encompass career and psychosocial functions fostering career development for the female coach aspiring to become a head coach. These formal mentoring programs may provide insight on helping both the mentor and protégé develop guidelines and interventions for facilitating a prolonged and useful relationship.

### Future Research

The results suggest directions for future research. This study was examined from the perspective of the protégé. A study should be replicated to study an effective mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentor within Intercollegiate Athletics. The study also focused on Division I assistant basketball coaches of women's teams. Additional studies should focus on Division II, and III.

### Conclusion

The examination of the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coaches of women's basketball teams provided some valuable information about mentor

characteristics and advancement techniques. Findings suggest these mentoring characteristics and advancement techniques may provide recommendations on ways to mentor women who aspire to become head coaches.

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