



Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Excellence: Insights From Accomplished University Team-Sport Coaches

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Winning several national championships is an extraordinary feat that very few university coaches have accomplished. The objective of this study was to investigate how some of Canada's most accomplished university team-sport coaches created and sustained a culture of excellence in their programs. **Method:** Six university coaches who had won more than 30 national titles participated in this study. Each coach participated in a semistructured interview, and the qualitative data were inductively analyzed using a thematic analysis. **Results:** The coaches noted that hard work and daily attention to detail, effective emotional management of themselves and their athletes, and continuous self-assessment (self-reflection and seeking mentors) were crucial elements that led to sustained excellence in their programs. **Conclusions:** This study offers one of the first empirical accounts of how highly successful university coaches developed and maintained a culture of excellence and success in their high-performance sport setting.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 September 2016
Accepted 16 August 2017

KEYWORDS

Emotional intelligence; high performance; leadership; mentoring; sports coaching

From 1970 to 2008, 872 articles were published in the field of coaching science, including 113 devoted to coaching effectiveness. Côté and Gilbert (2009) defined coaching effectiveness as the “consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes’ competence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts” (p. 316). Researchers have noted that effective coaching occurs both on and off the field of play; off the field, coaches use sport as a way to teach and instill life skills (Bloom, Falcão, & Caron, 2014), and on the field, coaches use their knowledge and organizational and teaching skills to influence their athletes’ performance and satisfaction (Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, & Chung, 2002; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). Moreover, effective coaching skills have positively influenced team success at all levels of sport, including city, provincial/state, national, and world levels (e.g., Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). Specific to university/college sport, winning one national championship is a difficult task for any coach, but winning several national championships is an extraordinary feat that very few coaches have accomplished.

During the course of a 35-year tenure, Coach Russ Rose has had a career-winning percentage greater than 85% and has won six national championships,

including four consecutive titles from 2007 to 2010. Yukelson and Rose (2014) reflected on the factors that contributed to Coach Rose’s ongoing excellence in the American university sport setting. Among their conclusions, they stated that Coach Rose’s continuous success was attributed to athlete accountability and to getting athletes to buy in to his yearly plan. In a similar manner, Vallée and Bloom (2016) described the factors that helped a Canadian university women’s basketball team win five consecutive national championships. The authors attributed Coach Vallée’s success to four “keys,” which included enacting a coaching vision, empowering athletes, teaching life skills to athletes, and lifelong learning and personal reflection from the coach. Specific to the coaching vision, Coach Vallée created a blueprint for her team that outlined how to create a culture that would produce a national championship. The blueprint detailed information both on and off the court that would lead the program to success, including but not limited to recruiting and developing the skills of talented athletes and ensuring that all athletes grew as people while they were part of the program. Although both reports presented insightful and practical coaching information, they focused on the perspective of just one university coach and the factors each coach felt enhanced both the regular-season and postseason success of their programs.

Related to coaching success, Becker (2009) and Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, and Russell (1995) proposed models that conceptualized the knowledge and behaviors of effective coaches. For example, Becker (2009) interviewed 18 elite-level athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] Division I, national, and/or international) from various sports in the United States to understand their perspectives of great coaching practices. Becker's (2009, 2013) work has revealed that great coaches are positive, supportive, fair, and consistent and that they are equally focused on developing athletes *and* human beings. Côté and colleagues' (1995) coaching model (CM) explained how coaches establish guidelines to create optimal conditions for athlete performance and development. The coach's mental model of the athlete's potential is influenced by the peripheral components of coach and athlete characteristics and contextual factors. The CM posits that coaches integrate these peripheral components into three primary components (organization, training, and competition) to maximize the development and success of their athletes/team. In particular, organization involves the use of the coaches' knowledge in planning and creating a vision for the program, while taking into consideration other aspects of their job such as working with staff members and helping athletes with personal problems (Côté et al., 1995). Although existing theories have provided a conceptual understanding of the knowledge and behaviors of effective coaches (Becker, 2009; Côté et al., 1995) and case reports have outlined ideal coaching practices (Vallée & Bloom, 2016; Yukelson & Rose, 2014), much still remains unknown about what effective coaches do to maintain consistent success at the highest levels of sport for extended time periods and throughout both the regular season and postseason.

Mallett and Lara-Bercial (2016) recently published one of the most comprehensive studies on the practices of successful coaches. More specifically, their study profiled 14 elite (professional and Olympic) "serial" winning coaches from 11 different countries who have won a combined 128 gold medals and major trophies in both individual and team sports. Mallett and Lara-Bercial provided an in-depth understanding of who these people were and how they successfully guided athletes and teams to the highest levels of achievement in their sports. More specifically, the qualitative interview data revealed three key themes among serial winning coaches: (a) They had a "big picture" *vision* for their teams that they simplified into manageable components; (b) they developed and surrounded themselves with high-performing and cohesive *people* (i.e., team members); and (c) they cultivated a high performance

environment (i.e., culture), in which team members bought into and committed fully to the communicated vision to maximize the chances of success. In sum, although the personality and individual make-up of these coaches varied greatly, they all created and maintained high-performance environments that led to success for extended periods of time. Given Mallett and Lara-Bercial's conclusion about the importance of creating a sport environment that facilitates high performance in professional and Olympic settings, it appears timely to explore this topic in the university setting as a way to extend our understanding of effective coaching. The objective of this study was to investigate highly successful Canadian university coaches' insights into how they created and sustained a culture of excellence in their programs by preparing themselves and their teams for continuous appearances at national championship tournaments.

Methods

A qualitative design was selected for the present study. Qualitative research is considered an interpretive approach where the main goal is to understand how individuals interpret their lives through interactions with their surroundings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Qualitative researchers are encouraged to identify the *assumptions* that underpin their research as well as the *approach* used to frame their study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As such, the philosophical assumptions of epistemological social constructivism and ontological relativism guided the present investigation of coaches' perspectives on creating and sustaining a culture of excellence in their university team-sport programs. That is, we assumed the coaches' insights and perceptions were cocreated and influenced by the physical and social environments in which they worked and lived. Additionally, the approach that framed our study was an instrumental case-study design. More precisely, Stake (2005) noted that an instrumental case study is often used when a "case" is studied as a way to understand a "broader issue." Accordingly, the case was identified as our sample of highly successful university coaches and the broader issue being explored was how they created an environment and culture that facilitated continuous appearances at national championships.

Participants

Homogenous purposive sampling was used to recruit six of the most successful Canadian university coaches. Participants for this study were the head coaches of interacting male and female university sport teams.

They had each been in their current coaching position for at least 5 years, participated in at least 4 national championship tournaments, coached in at least 3 national championship final games, and had won at least 1 national title. Together, the participants had won more than 30 national titles and 15 coach-of-the-year awards. The participants' average age was 47 years at the time of the interviews. Due to the relatively small number of Canadian university coaches who have attained this level of success, adding more demographic information about them could potentially risk exposing their identities via deductive exposure.

Data collection

Approval was obtained from our university research ethics board prior to contacting participants. Coaches who agreed to participate in this study selected a time and location for a face-to-face meeting with the lead investigator. Prior to gathering data, investigators verbally explained each participant's rights to them as a research participant and gave them information about the procedures of the study and methods of data collection. All participants read and signed a consent form. Each coach participated in one face-to-face, semistructured interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Four of the interviews took place during the coaches' competitive seasons, whereas two of the interviews occurred after the season. All interviews were conducted in quiet locations, typically the coaches' offices.

An interview guide was created for this study. The first section included opening questions based on the evolution of the coach's career, which helped to establish rapport with the participants and allowed for the interviews to have a smooth transition to the key questions. In the second section, key questions explored the coaches' knowledge and experiences while preparing for and at national championship tournaments (e.g., "Tell me about your personal planning and preparations that have led to your program's ongoing success [i.e., regular season, playoffs, and national championship tournaments]"; "Over the years, what have you learned and/or believe is important for coaches to consider leading up to and during the national championship tournament?"; and "How did you know how to prepare your team the first time you qualified for a national championship tournament? In what ways did the first time differ from the following times you qualified?"). Follow-up probes were used after the participants' responses to gain a better understanding on topics that required elaboration (e.g., "Can you give me an example of what you are talking about?"; "What was that like?"; "Can you tell me more about

that?"). The third section included a summary question, which was meant to allow the coaches to summarize the main points they believed were necessary to prepare for a national championship tournament. The fourth and final section of the interview guide allowed participants to clarify and/or add any comments they had pertaining to the interview or the study.

Data analysis

Interviews ranged in length from 50 min to 100 min. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcriptions were sent to both Authors 2 and 3 before Author 1 initiated the analysis. This process allowed Authors 2 and 3 to begin formulating their own interpretations and meanings of the data. The data were analyzed inductively following Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines for thematic analysis, which involved six phases: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing results. Author 1 led all stages of the data analysis. The first four phases are described in this section, while the fifth and sixth phases are described in the "Results" section. Familiarization with the data involved the lead investigator listening to the audio recordings of the interviews several times and making minor changes to the participants' names, years they won national championship tournaments, affiliations, etc., which could have compromised their confidentiality. In the second phase, the lead investigator began organizing the interview transcripts into data extracts, which are segments of text that encompass the same idea or piece of information. A code was then assigned to each data extract, and similar data extracts were assigned the same code. The lead investigator met with a peer debriefer after coding the first interview to discuss the initial list of codes prior to having a separate meeting with Authors 2 and 3 (more information about the role of peer debriefer is provided in the "Trustworthiness" section). Once all three authors agreed on the initial list of codes for the first interview, a master list was created and the lead investigator coded the remaining five transcripts. Generating codes was an iterative process, whereby new codes were mapped onto the master list and consensus was reached before moving on to the next stage of the analysis. The third and fourth phases, searching for themes and reviewing themes, were conducted simultaneously. More precisely, the lead investigator began by identifying patterns (i.e., themes) within the master list of codes (i.e., across all six transcripts). Braun and Clarke (2013) noted that themes should "represent

some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 224). Five higher-order themes initially stemmed from this part of the analysis. However, similar to Phase 2, the lead investigator then met with the peer debriefer prior to meeting with Authors 2 and 3 to discuss and co-construct the higher-order themes, which will be further described in the “Results” section.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are encouraged to demonstrate the quality of their findings by outlining their decisions throughout data collection and analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In the present study, *researcher reflexivity* and *peer debriefing* were used to establish the trustworthiness of our findings. Researcher reflexivity allows researchers to consider and report on personal beliefs and background that could shape the outcome of the study. It also allows readers to understand the researchers’ experiences and positioning, and how these factors influenced the interpretation of the data. This study evolved from the lead investigator’s experiences as a competitive athlete and assistant coach. As a result, the lead investigator followed predetermined questions during the interviews to decrease the possibility of leading the participants and to decrease the risk for any unintended biases based on her experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Peer debriefing was also used to establish trustworthiness. The role of the peer debriefer is to act as a sounding board by challenging the primary coder’s assumptions and interpretations, as well as to encourage reflexivity throughout the analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A graduate student at the lead investigator’s institution who was not otherwise involved in the study met with the lead investigator at each stage of analysis (and before meeting separately with Authors 2 and 3). Researchers have suggested that members of a research team often share similar theoretical backgrounds and interests (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). As a result, having a peer debriefer who was not an author of the study helped ensure the research team did not unintentionally overlook or overemphasize certain findings, which assisted in providing a realistic account of the coaches’ perceptions of creating and sustaining cultures of excellence in university sport.

Results

Three higher-order themes stemmed from the thematic analysis: “fostering a culture of excellence,” “effective emotional management,” and “experience is overrated until you have it.” These themes will be illustrated by using quotes from the coaches. Each coach was

assigned a label (e.g., “Coach A,” “Coach B,” etc.) to credit their quotes and to protect their confidentiality.

Fostering a culture of excellence

This theme describes how coaches created and sustained a culture of excellence in their programs. All six participants demanded a high level of commitment and excellence during all parts of their program as a way to prepare athletes for the pressure and stress of the national championship tournaments:

It all boils down to creating championship habits over the course of the whole season. With the coaching staff, we talk about developing everyday habits for performance, success, and excellence. Everything that we do is to make us better for when we get to the end of the season. We try and approach every game and every practice like it is a playoff game. (Coach A)

You have to build the culture of determination and toughness from Day 1. The culture has to come from within the team. The players have to push each other. We try to get better every day and be as good as we can be. (Coach B)

As a coach, I have won several championships, but I am still hungry to win more. I ask my players, ‘What are you going to leave in this program? What legacy are you leaving as a player?’ This program is not for everyone—you need courage and confidence to play here. (Coach C)

We have not lost many league games in the almost 20 years that I have been coaching here. We go to training camp as if we are going to [qualify for] nationals. So, the players start competing against each other. The players set the standard. I have heard it so many times in training camp when someone is being lazy; the other players say, ‘That is not the way we do things here.’ (Coach D)

As noted by all six coaches, an important part of their culture of excellence involved instilling daily practice habits that revolved around hard work and discipline:

You want to prepare your whole season for the national tournament. Our philosophy is to be the ‘best,’ which is an acronym for ‘better every single time.’ So, every practice should be the best of the year. I don’t talk about winning the national championship—I talk about being the most improved team. (Coach C)

Winning a national championship is everything to most of the players on our team. Hard work during practices is how we accomplish it. If a player is not going to work hard during practice, then I would ask, ‘Why are you here if you are not going to work hard? On this team, you are training and playing with people

who want to work extremely hard and want to win a National championship.’ Every player who comes to this team knows we are going to train hard. (Coach B)

We practice every day. I have to keep my players interested. You have to change things up as a coach. You have to challenge them and make things tougher on them. By adapting and challenging them, keeping practices competitive—every drill we do is competitive—that is what makes us good. (Coach D)

Overall, this theme presented how the coaches created and sustained a championship culture by instilling habits such as hard work, discipline, and consistent focus and improvement during all facets of their program, beginning with the 1st day of training camp and continuing everyday throughout the season.

Effective emotional management

This theme presents coaches’ perceptions on how they managed both their own emotions and those of their athletes during national championship tournaments. Not surprisingly, all six of the participants noted that playing at national championship tournaments was far more emotionally demanding for both players and coaches:

There is more stress involved during the national championship tournament. There is more stress because we all want the medal. We are all nervous. Playing at nationals is different. I know people in the media will say, ‘Oh it’s just another game.’ Yes, but the nationals are times 12—it’s the same game, but the emotions are not the same. (Coach E)

Because of the stress of participating at the national championship tournament, five of the six coaches implemented team activities that were designed to keep their athletes as relaxed as possible and to instill confidence in them:

Our alumni host a supper for us the Friday night at nationals. After dinner, the rookies do a skit where they get to make fun of the senior players. This has been going on for 10 or so years. It’s a tradition. It’s hard to keep [the players] motivated when they’re in a hotel for 4 or 5 days. So, we do these types of activities. (Coach D)

My team has a positive winning attitude (PWA). We have activities to encourage PWA before playoffs and before nationals. These activities include things like doing a community skate and reading e-mails from our alumni. Also, we try to have different themes every year. For example, 1 year, we had a theme of three. We had threes all over the place and we talked about why this theme is important: three games to win a national championship; it will be our third national championship. We had 6 days to train, so there were

two sets of practices in 3 days, and we had three drills in each set. We have all these activities to build the confidence of our group. It is the biggest thing for players. (Coach C)

Along with managing athletes’ emotions *before* games, the coaches also described the importance of managing athletes’ emotions *during* games at nationals:

Certainly at the beginning of the game [at nationals], if you can get [players] to focus on simple things to start the game, like keeping their feet moving, having a short shift, and communicating well. Regardless of the circumstance, regardless of their ability level, those are things they can do. So, if they have success on those simple things at the beginning of the game, then that success will build and grow as the game goes along. (Coach A)

At nationals, the players are nervous and anxious, but at the same time, they are excited. So, I try to use their emotions in a positive way. For example, I laugh during regular-season games if there is something to laugh about. That’s the way I am. So, at nationals, I am not going to suddenly be serious behind the bench. Even if we are losing in the national final, and if I feel like making a joke, I will make it. The players are used to that and I think that’s what makes them feel less anxious. (Coach E)

Five coaches also felt it was necessary for them to manage their own emotions. Some of the coaches explained how they mismanaged their emotions during their first coaching appearance at a national championship tournament. For example, Coach E noted, “The first time we participated in the national championship, I was nervous and scared. I did not do a very good job handling my own behaviors and I think it [adversely] affected the outcome of the game.” Another coach added:

During our first championship, I was emotional and stressed. I started to yell at my girls. I tried to light a fire under them. I was aggressive—a dictator and very controlling. I thought all those behaviors were important in the national championship. But at a championship, you cannot have those types of behaviors. I believe we lost because I was so emotional. (Coach F)

Based on their past experiences, the coaches shared the strategies they used to manage their own emotions leading up to and throughout the national championship tournament. For example, Coach F noted, “In our second championship, I was physically exhausted. I had shingles. I was itchy everywhere. Now I walk my dog, listen to music, read, pray, and meditate. These are important things I do to keep me sane during [nationals].”

There are other types of stresses [at nationals]. Everybody expects you to win, which is stressful in and of itself. I have learned it is important to cut off as much *noise* as possible at nationals. For example, I do not like to be around the media. So, I have learned how to deal with the media intelligently and how to deal with the unnecessary high behind those types of situations. I stay out of their way as much as I can. I do not get caught up in what is going on around me. I do not like being around anybody else except for my players [during nationals]. The more you go to nationals, the more you understand how to stay focused on the things you need to be focused on, which is your group. (Coach B)

Four coaches also provided information on how they controlled their own emotional states during games at the national championship tournaments. They demonstrated positive body language and attitudes around their players, even if they were feeling nervous about the upcoming game:

The players are going to be nervous [at nationals]. So, as a coach, I have to know how to manage that. Even if I am very nervous internally during the national championship, I am very conscious that the players don't see that. I want them to see that I am relaxed but focused. The same way I would want them to be relaxed and focused. (Coach A)

I think having positive body language helps me. Your body talks to your mind. If I look confident and happy, I behave as usual behind the bench even if I am nervous. I think it helps me feel good and I transmit that to my players. (Coach E)

We have to control our emotions as coaches. In order to control my emotions, I have become a pretty good actress. It is like theatre. I feel like a maestro of a big play [...] I tell myself, 'This is *my* show; look what we have created!' The first couple of times I coached at nationals, I was aggressive; I used to yell and go all over the place during games. Now, I enjoy the moment, I laugh, and I have fun. My job is to keep the players relaxed, but to do this, I have to be relaxed, too. (Coach F)

Once the tournament starts, we do not have downtime. We do not have time to rest. Once you are there, it is just a case of, 'Are you better than everybody else?' So, I think what helps me during the tournament is having confidence and being more laid back and relaxed during that time. The players will be dealing with [so] much outside *noise* at the tournament and you [as a coach] should not complicate things for them. (Coach B)

Overall, this theme addressed the varying emotional states for athletes and coaches leading up to and during championship tournaments. To help offset the inevitability of nervous emotions during national championships, the coaches discussed a variety of strategies they

implemented to manage their athletes' emotional states and their own emotional states to facilitate optimal team performance.

'Experience is overrated until you have it'

This theme describes the continuous forms of knowledge acquisition these coaches used. More specifically, the participants believed that engaging in self-reflection on past experiences at national championship tournaments, reading books, attending conferences and interacting with other coaches, and having a more experienced mentor were all sources that helped them modify their coaching behaviors, improve their coaching skills, and enrich their knowledge to prepare their teams for a national championship tournament.

All six of the coaches were dissatisfied with their first experience coaching at a national championship tournament. Their dissatisfaction ranged from being unable to control their own emotions to inadequately preparing themselves and their teams for the national championship. As a result, they reflected and shared some of the lessons they learned from this experience that they thought helped their teams perform better at subsequent national championship tournaments:

I was an inexperienced and young coach the first time we went to nationals. I did not have an experienced staff. We lost that championship, and I felt like it was my fault. After that first time coaching at nationals, I went back and wrote notes for myself: 'What *not* to do to win a national championship: panic, feel angry, try to control all [player and support staff] behaviors.' You cannot do these things. (Coach F)

The first time I went to nationals, I didn't do my homework. I should have talk[ed] to people and learned about the teams that we were going to play. After that 1st year, I knew what I had to do. For me, it was an eye opener. (Coach D)

Our team was not particularly experienced the first time we went to the national championship. I was going into it (nationals) by the seat of my pants, and we lost in the final game. This first experience was an eye opener. I thought I knew it all back then. Now I realize that I didn't know it all. Experience is overrated, until you have it. (Coach A)

In addition to the lessons learned from their first experience with coaching at the national championship tournament, all six coaches said they spent considerable time reflecting on each trip to the tournament and how they could improve their coaching skills. This reflection involved a combination of reading books, attending conferences, and interacting with other coaches:

After the first time coaching at a national championship tournament, I started to read books on leadership and successful entrepreneurs. I realized how far away I was from them (successful leaders, entrepreneurs). I thought, ‘Can I learn to be like them?’ It was a very challenging time for me because the more I read and received feedback [from other coaches], I realized how far away I was from becoming a successful coach. (Coach F)

I go to a lot of conferences. The good thing about coaching conferences is that you meet a lot of people. You have to ask questions. A lot of people do not ask because they are afraid. But I tell them, ‘Ask the question!’ I am a fanatic of getting better. I have learned by reading books and by talking with other coaches. (Coach A)

I take notes at each championship. I take notes of things that happened during the tournament so I can go back to them once the tournament is over. I have learned from every national championship... For example, ‘OK, we lost; is there a reason?’ I have also learned by talking to other coaches and reading books. Motivational books or business and leadership books are very helpful. I also use Twitter now. There is so much information there. So, during the summer I take time to make a file with ideas from all these resources to use them during the year. It is a combination of a lot of little things in your ultimate preparation. (Coach C)

Additionally, four of the six coaches highlighted the value and importance of acquiring a more experienced mentor. For example, Coach C noted, “My mentor helped me in so many ways: recruiting, having respect for other coaches, and being hungry to win more championships.” More specifically, the participants thought that the most valuable aspect of having a mentor was that they learned how to manage themselves, which they felt influenced their performance as coaches:

I have a mentor. She has shown me that she really trusts me and that she is proud of what I do. She has mainly helped me to improve myself. Her mentoring has nothing to do with [name of sport]. She has never given me any advice on the game. She makes me feel that what I do is OK. She is always there to answer my questions and to show me she is happy with what I do. I think that really helped me to start coaching at such a young age. With the [limited] experience I had the first time we went to the national championship tournament, I was feeling pretty confident because of my mentor. (Coach E)

After my first time coaching at nationals, I knew I needed a mentor. I was the limiting factor to my team’s success. I thought I had a team that could win a national championship, but I did not know what to do. I had no experience. I could not get it done. So, I asked for a mentor—someone to teach me. It has been an amazing mentor–mentee relationship. He helped me transform myself. He taught me how to manage

myself—the emotional side of the game, how to coach women, and how to deal with my emotions. (Coach F)

In sum, the participants believed that engaging in self-reflection on past experiences at national championship tournaments, reading books, and having a more experienced mentor were all sources that helped them prepare their teams for national championship tournaments and succeed in their careers.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate how some of Canada’s most accomplished university team-sport coaches created and sustained a culture of excellence in their programs. The present sample of coaches had all reached a point in their career where they were able to clearly articulate both their knowledge and behaviors that helped them achieve their goals on a yearly basis and for extended periods of time. The coaches felt it was important to instill a culture that facilitated excellence on a daily basis, which has been highlighted by high-performance coaches in other contexts (Hodge et al., 2014; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). For example, in their study of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, Hodge and colleagues (2014) found that the coaches’ and players’ expectations of excellence on a daily basis contributed to their extraordinary winning record. The authors suggested that the All Blacks’ legacy, history, and personal meaning were key underlying factors of the team’s expectation and achievement of excellence, which can likely be attributed to the cultural significance of rugby in New Zealand. In a similar manner, previous research has revealed that an important part of developing a winning culture is establishing behavioral values, such as hard work, discipline, and effort (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016; Schroeder, 2010; Vallée & Bloom, 2016; Yukelson & Rose, 2014). Although these studies have provided important insights into this topic, researchers have noted that more empirical research is needed on groups of coaches who have developed and maintained a successful culture in high-performance sport teams (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016). Results from the present study extend previous findings by contributing to the conceptual understanding of the qualities and behaviors of great coaches (Becker, 2009, 2013) as well as the interrelatedness of the primary components of their job (Côté et al., 1995). Specific to the CM, the coaches’ success was linked to their ability to create an environment and culture (organization) where every practice (training) was designed to be extremely demanding to prepare

athletes for the national championship tournament (competition). The current findings provide specific examples of how a highly successful group of coaches created and fostered a culture of success that emanated from the instillation of core values and daily habits with their athletes and helped them achieve success both during the season and at national championship competitions.

The coaches in this study believed it was important to help their athletes control the wide range of emotions leading up to and during the national championship tournament. This finding appears to be in line with research on emotional intelligence, which involves identifying emotions and using this information to guide one's behaviors (Goleman, 1998). Outside sport, a link has been established between emotional intelligence and capacity to cope with occupational stress (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2004), increased ability to deal with conflicts (Jordan & Troth, 2002), improved work performance (Slaski & Cartwright, 2003), and more effective and successful leadership (George, 2000). Only a few studies have investigated emotional intelligence in sport (e.g., Chan & Mallett, 2011; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016; Thelwell, Lane, Weston, & Greenlees, 2008). For example, Chan and Mallett (2011) found the inability to perceive and manage emotions was detrimental for coach-athlete relationships, as well as individual and team performance. Although Chan and Mallett highlighted the importance of using emotional information to guide behaviors, they did not provide examples of how coaches managed their athletes' emotions before and during a major competition. Participants in the present study noted they were aware of the emotional climate of a national championship tournament. As such, they planned specific activities (e.g., team skits and reading e-mails from alumni) to manage the players' emotions leading up to and during competitions. Thus, our findings suggest that learning how to identify athletes' emotions and how to plan and adjust routines and game plans accordingly are skills that successful coaches value and implement. Based on the insights from the present sample of expert coaches, it appears that developing emotional intelligence is an area worthy of future research and attention that could be integrated into existing coach education curricula, particularly in high-performance sport contexts.

In addition to managing the athletes' emotions, the coaches felt it was important to be in control of their own emotions. Researchers have identified a number of factors that have enabled coaches to enhance their athletes' performance (e.g., Mallett, 2005); however, less is known about coaches as performers (Mallett &

Lara-Bercial, 2016; Thelwell et al., 2008). This finding is somewhat surprising because coaches routinely deal with both player and team conflicts on a regular basis, while being expected to perform optimally and achieve success during competitions (Chan & Mallett, 2011; Nelson et al., 2013). For example, Nelson and colleagues (2013) revealed how one semiprofessional male soccer coach worked on managing his emotions during practices and competitions as a way to optimize his team's performance. In a related manner, coaches in the present study felt it was important to demonstrate effective body language and attitudes, which highlights the need for coaches to consider how their own emotions and behaviors might impact their teams' performance during important competitions.

All of the coaches were dissatisfied with their first experience coaching at a national championship. As a result, they reflected on their experiences and identified areas of improvement, such as their leadership style, where it appears that many of them went from a transactional to a transformational leadership style as they gained coaching experience (Loughead & Bloom, 2016). This finding appears to be in line with the intrapersonal knowledge component of Côté and Gilbert's (2009) definition of coaching effectiveness, which refers to the "understanding of oneself and the ability for introspection and reflection" (p. 311). According to Cushion (2011), reflection ranges from mere descriptions of an issue to deep and critical reflection of the situation. Furthermore, Gilbert and Trudel (2006) noted that reflection requires time, commitment, and effort. Based on the current findings, it appears that self-reflection was an important source of knowledge acquisition for the present sample of high-performance coaches. Additionally, these results demonstrated that even after reaching the highest levels in Canadian university sport, successful coaches constantly engaged in self-reflection to improve their coaching, thereby highlighting its value and importance as a lifelong endeavor.

In addition to self-reflection, four of the coaches highlighted the importance of having a mentor. Although their mentoring experiences were different, all the coaches said they were still in contact with their mentors, who continued to assist them with technical or tactical aspects of the game and with their leadership and management skills. Research in organizational and educational contexts has shown that having a mentor has led to numerous positive outcomes (Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002). However, research on mentoring in sport has received considerably less attention (Bloom, 2013). One of the first studies on mentoring in sport was from Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, and Salmela (1998), who interviewed Canadian Olympic

coaches and found they were mentored during both the athletic and early stages of their coaching careers. Although there was no set path to finding a mentor, trusting relationships were developed with their mentors who provided them with opportunities to access valuable information and create a network of colleagues. Results from the present study add to research on coach mentoring by demonstrating that highly successful university coaches viewed mentoring as a lifelong form of learning and development, which suggests that mentoring should be integrated as part of formalized coach education training. This information may be valuable to sport governing bodies in charge of developing coach education programs. Additionally, it highlights the importance of mentoring across a coach's entire career, even for those who may have reached the highest pinnacles of coaching success. Of particular interest, all four of the coaches were able to articulate the type of knowledge that they received from their mentors and how it helped them either personally or professionally, which suggests that quality mentoring is more crucial than the act of mentoring itself.

Although the current study offered important insights into the knowledge and behaviors of highly successful university coaches, some limitations need to be addressed. First, coaches of coacting or individual sports may face other issues or have sport-specific needs, perhaps resulting from their athletes competing against one another or because of the relative size of their teams. Second, future research could investigate athletes' perceptions on preparing for and participating in a national championship tournament. Obtaining athletes' perceptions could add a more complete understanding of optimal team functioning and performance during championship competitions. For example, Coach D highlighted the importance of athlete leaders helping regulate the behaviors of teammates throughout the season (e.g., "That is not the way we do things here"). Given that individual self-regulation has been identified as an important aspect of high-performance team functioning (e.g., Tamminen & Crocker, 2013), future research might target the roles of athlete leaders in helping control the emotions of their teammates. Third, the current results may only be relevant to head coaches in the Canadian university context. For example, the NCAA in the United States receives far more spectator and media attention compared with university sport in Canada or elsewhere, so coaches and athletes in that setting may experience different (and perhaps more) challenges leading up to and during national championship tournaments. Finally, the current results were based on the perspectives of six coaches who have regularly appeared at national

championship tournaments. It would be interesting to compare the current results to other experienced coaches of programs that have not participated in national championship tournaments.

What does this article add?

The present study contributes to and extends our understanding of what highly successful coaches do to create and sustain a culture of excellence. Results from the current study offer a rare glimpse into the knowledge, behaviors, and self-assessment strategies used by high-performance coaches across an entire athletic calendar (i.e., regular season *and* national championship tournaments). University sport coaches have a short 4-year time frame to develop their players as athletes and people, as well as integrate them into the team culture. Our findings indicate that the coaches in our study, who are some of the most successful in Canadian university sport history, are continuously trying to refine and enhance their knowledge and skills so they effectively manage their teams throughout both the regular season and post-season. Because coaches are the leaders of their teams and are in charge of their players' performance, success, and satisfaction, it is necessary to continue moving forward with this line of research to further understand how coaches maintain programs that achieve continuous success in high-performance sport environments.

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