

Intercollegiate coaches' experiences and strategies for coaching first-year athletes*

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ABSTRACT

University student-athletes have reported difficulties balancing the rigours of academic study, athletics, and their personal lives. These challenges may be exacerbated for first-year athletes who are transitioning from secondary school into university. Given that coaches significantly influence their athletes' experiences, their coaching styles and support may ease this transition process. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to investigate university coaches' experiences and strategies used with first-year student-athletes. Eight highly successful and experienced university coaches of men's team sports participated in individual semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis revealed that coaches created a supportive team environment for first-year athletes by building trusting relationships with them, showing patience with their development, and encouraging leadership from senior athletes. To further facilitate first-year athletes' success in and out of sport, coaches helped them accept their role on the team and improve their physical conditioning. Coaches also monitored their academic progress and advocated the use of available university resources such as tutors and support programmes. The current results benefit both coaches and athletes by highlighting the common challenges of a first-year university athlete, as well as by offering useful coaching strategies that can help this transition.

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Introduction

Participation in athletic competitions at the post-secondary level (i.e. intercollegiate athletics) has offered opportunities for student-athletes to learn and develop important life skills such as self-confidence and leadership that help them grow as individuals (Miller and Kerr 2002, 2003, Vallée and Bloom 2005). Despite these benefits, there are also several drawbacks. Due to the high levels of time and energy committed to their athletics, student-athletes struggle with the balance of academic study, training, and personal needs (Heller *et al.* 2005). Additionally, they may experience social isolation from outside of their athletic environments and over-identify themselves as athletes rather than as students (Miller and Kerr 2002, 2003). As such, research has found that intercollegiate student-athletes reported more academic problems than their non-athlete counterparts (De Knop *et al.* 1999), were less able to develop careers outside sports (Murphy *et al.* 1996), experienced social anxiety (Storch *et al.* 2005), distress (Kimball and Freysinger 2003), and fatigue (De Knop *et al.* 1999). Taken together, the unique

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