Considerations Perceived by Coaches as Specific to Coaching Elite Women's Soccer Teams

Line D. Danielsen[1], Arne Martin Jakobsen[1], Derek M. Peters[2] and Rune Høigaard[3]

[1]Nord University, Faculty of Education and Arts, Department of Physical education, Sports science and Outdoor education, Bodø, Norway, [2]University of Worcester, School of Allied Health & Community, Worcester, UK, [3]University of Agder, Faculty of Health and Sport Sciences, Department of Sports Science and Physical Education, Kristiansand, Norway.

Corresponding author: Line D. Danielsen
E-mail: line.danielsen@nord.no
Department of Physical education, Sports science and Outdoor education, Nord University
Bodø, Norway

Abstract

This study investigated challenges perceived by coaches when working with elite women's soccer teams. Six men and four women coaches with experience in the first Norwegian League or Norwegian national team participated. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, and the data was analyzed using thematic interpretational analysis. Participants identified professionalism, early-career termination, mental characteristics, intrateam communication, romantic relationships, access to the locker rooms (men only), and team selection (women only) as the specific challenges they face when coaching these teams. The findings are discussed in relation to ensuring that good performance and development are achieved when coaching elite women's soccer teams and helping future coaches optimize their coaching techniques when working with elite women players.

Keywords: *Coaches, Football, Female players, Elite sport, Interviews*

Coaches have a profound and lasting impact on their athletes and teams (Jowett, 2017). They are responsible for developing athletes' mental, physical, technical, and tactical abilities, and in addition contribute to positive and optimal group functioning (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that considerable research has been conducted on understanding the coach's role and the coaching process (Gómez et al., 2021). One major finding when investigating coaching is the complexity of the coaching role (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Cushion and Jones (2006) state that coaching can be viewed as a three-way interaction between the coach, the players, and the context. To increase the quality and impact of coaching, it is crucial to have knowledge about these factors (e.g., coach, player and context) and the interactions between them. Therefore, investigating the coach role, the coach-athlete relationship, in a given context, and in particular the associated challenges can provide a better understanding of the coaching role, relationship, and process and subsequently contribute to improving the coaching process and the athlete's development and performance. High-performance sports environments (e.g., professional athletes and teams) require intense commitment and a long-term, high-quality relationship between the athletes and coach (Jowett, 2017). High-performance coaching is challenging and demands that coaches are knowledgeable about performance variables and obstacles that influence them (Lyle, 2002). Although studies have investigated

female athletes' experiences with male and female coaches and their preferences for effective coaching, less focus has been placed on coaches' experiences with female athletes (Norman, 2015). Furthermore, research on sport coaching has according to de Haan and Norman (2020), one critical blind spot: it is "gender-blind" or at least gender-neutral. Considering gender (or at least gender that is assumed) when investigating coaching and the coach-athlete relationship can partly be done through a biological lens, but more important is the potential power imbalances perceived between the genders and the fact that coaches and players are social actors within a social context (de Haan & Norman, 2020). Norman and French (2013) state that male coaches' understanding of the social construction of gender may impede their professional practices and relationships with female athletes. For example, they argue that male coaches may have lower expectations of women's physical abilities and thus do not invest sufficient effort in their skill development. This was also supported by Felton and Jowett (2013) who found that male coaches who work with male athletes strive to win at all costs but, when working with female athletes, they simply aim for the athletes to "try their best". De Haan and Norman (2020) subsequently claimed that research has consistently highlighted how male coaches adjust their coaching practices to the detriment of their female athletes based on erroneous and different expectations about female athletes. Focusing on the specific needs of coaches who

coach women, MacKinnon (2011) found that coaches need to pay close attention to who they coach and not just what they coach. Moreover, she argues that when working with female athletes, it is especially effective to use positive reinforcement, develop a personal relationship, and teach in a variety of formats. These findings are consistent with Norman (2015), who argued that female athletes want their relationship with their coach to be more equal when it comes to power. Female athletes want their coaches to communicate positively and take the time to understand and support the person beyond the athlete. Other studies also underline this (de Haan & Norman, 2020; Dohsten et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of the coach respecting and valuing the players, listening to them, and supporting them as fellow human beings, not just as athletes. Fasting and Pfister (2000) also reported that female players prefer a communication style based on understanding and caring, and that they experience such relationships more often with female coaches. Longshore and Sachs (2015) find also that female athletes are more likely to want a decision to be justified and want to be more involved in the decision-making process than male athletes. Gleaned from the former research, investigating coaches' perceptions of specific challenges when coaching female athletes could provide important information that may be useful to develop healthier and more effective coach-athlete relationships to and contribute to increased player satisfaction and performance. Combining the increasing popularity of women's soccer and a growing number of players (FIFA, 2019) with the apparent prevalent ideologies of male superiority and dominance in the sporting context, it is appropriate to investigate both male and female coaches' perceptions of the additional considerations in performing their role as elite female soccer team coaches. Therefore, this study aimed to addresses the following research question: What specific challenges do coaches perceive in their coaching practices when working with female players in elite soccer teams?

Method

Sampling and procedure

Data was collected via individual semi-structured interviews with six male and four female elite-level coaches (35-63 years old). The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling procedures to involve information-rich cases (Creswell, 2008). For the purpose of this study, selected coaches were required to have experience a) coaching elite female soccer teams (within the context of this study, elite players are those on identified national performance pathways), b) being head coach for an elite level or national team (elite level is the top national performance level), c) coaching at the elite level for more than five years (a timeframe which would indicate the coaches experienced a major competition cycle), and d) coaching for a soccer team in Norway. The participants had an average of 18 years (range 8-31) coaching experience with an average of 13 years (range 6-24) coaching elite female soccer teams. Six coaches had experience being coaches for male soccer teams on the elite and sub-elite levels. One coach had also been a coach at a top-level abroad. Nine of the coaches in the study were head coaches in the top division, of which three had previously been head coaches for the national team. In addition, five of the coaches had player experience from the Norwegian top division, and four of these coaches were former national team players with an average of 46 international appearances. The coaches held a UEFA Pro License coaching certification (the highest soccer coaching

certificate available) or an advanced coaching certificate (the second-highest soccer coaching certification available).

Data collection

Coaches were approached via telephone call with an invitation to participate, and follow-up occurred via personal contact to establish a rapport between the researcher and the participants. The coaches signed a consent form approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), which evaluates proposals from researchers at Norwegian universities. A semi-structured interview was conducted covering two overarching topics of investigation: (a) identifying considerations the coach perceived to be specific to coaching female players in elite soccer teams; and (b) describing how they accommodated such considerations. Interviews took place in person and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although the participants were guided through the semi-structured interviews, the order of the questions varied according to the flow of the conversation. This flexibility allowed the participants to steer the interview in the direction that they deemed appropriate (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness was established at the end of each interview by allowing all participants to add or change any answers or ideas they communicated during the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants could also look over the interview transcript and revise it to make it more accurately reflect their thoughts. None of the participants made any changes. All approved transcripts were used for data analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic interpretational analysis was deemed the most appropriate approach for analyzing the data (Gibbs, 2007) due to its potential to generate knowledge by identifying and interpreting themes from the interview transcripts (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). This inductive analysis allowed core categories to emerge from the data, and two researchers undertook this analysis independently (Côté et al., 1993). The available answers (raw data) were grouped by name or codes of phenomena and statements (Nilssen, 2012). This process was performed using compare and contrast tags assigned to the various meaning units. In the next phase (axial coding), the codes were grouped into different themes and categories (Nilssen, 2012). In phase 3, selective coding, eight main categories were identified. Collective analysis strengthens the credibility of the findings (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). To ensure credibility of the data analysis, a peer review was used in which an impartial party examined the data coding (Côté et al., 1993). The peer reviewer was a former top-level coach and currently a top-rated sports researcher. He was randomly presented with 30% of the opinion units and asked to place each opinion unit within one of the eight main categories generated by the research group. He placed 75% of the opinion units within the correct category. A brief discussion between both parties led to the peer reviewer agreeing that the researcher's coding was appropriate and that the misplaced opinion units were attributable to a lack of context.

Findings and discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the considerations perceived by coaches to be specific to coaching female players in elite soccer. The findings and discussion are organized in the following seven deductively derived categories: 1. Professionalism; 2. Early-career

termination; 3. Mental characteristics; 4. Intrateam communication; 5. Romantic relationships; 6. Access to the locker rooms, and 7. Team selection. The first five categories include comments from both female and male coaches. Category 6 was identified only from comments made by male coaches, while Category 7 was identified only from comments made by female coaches. Although certain categories were not as highly represented as others, their inclusion was still critical in elucidating the coaches' perceptions of the specific considerations they perceived when coaching in elite female soccer. Furthermore, the number of meaning units does not provide an indication of the relative importance of each category.

Professional reality versus professional expectation

This category concerns primarily the imbalance between the high level expectations of being identified as professional elite players, and the relatively meagre rewards received from competing at this level. The income for playing elite soccer for females is low (Abdul, 2018) and this impacts upon the player's ability to engage in many of the expected 'off-field' professional athlete's non-playing behaviours e.g., not having enough time for additional exercise and training, not having time to prepare for matches and not being able to adopt optimal recovery strategies, due to other demands on their time associated with obtaining additional necessary income. This in turn affect the coach's possibility to work with players individually outside matches and team training sessions. Furthermore, the limited economic condition in female soccer is also related to reduced access to both team and individual training facilities, medical support, training camps and even self-organizing travel to matches.

> No one on the team can make a living of soccer. That is why we have to save time, power and energy where we can... After all, female players must sacrifice much more compared to male players. They need to have jobs or be students to survive, while the best male players can make a living in soccer and exclusively concentrate on it.
> (Participant 4)

This quote highlight that the players are almost forced to have dual or even triple careers to earn enough money. They need to combine their soccer practice with work or studying to have a decent income or get a scholarship for studying. Due to their work and study obligations, they have less time to exercise and train, or they must exercise and train before or after work, or both, which, perhaps most importantly, means they have less time to recover. Participant 2 described it this way: "We are nowhere close to the professional level in male teams. By comparison, 'we are definitely amateurs'. For example, players must bring their own food and transport themselves to tomorrow's cup match." Therefore, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to try to be, and to have the external expectations of being, 'professional', in the sense of having high-quality, high-intensity, and consistent training in this context (Jenkins, 2014). Trying to be professional as a female soccer player can quickly create an overload (e.g., injuries, burnout, loss of motivation) and reduce the players' ability to develop their expertise and utilize their talent and ability in the long-term (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015). A comment made by all coaches is that more money needs to be invested into female soccer if the aim is to develop the sport further. Furthermore, it is therefore neither fair nor reasonable to place such significant 'professional' demands and expectations on elite female players without such 'professional' investment and reward.

Another consequence of this poor economic condition is that players are forced to terminate their career earlier than their male counterparts in order to pursue other more financially sustainable careers (Kristiansen et al., 2014). Taken together, the poor economic conditions create a vicious cycle and have a negative ripple effect on the players, that several studies have identified (de Haan & Norman, 2020; Kristiansen et al., 2014). This then impacts clearly on their coaches as the following quote identifies:

> Female players must get up early in the morning: they have to study, they have to work, they have to do a lot in a day. As a coach, I have to take this into account when I plan the training.
> (Participant 1)

The quote above highlights a significant consideration for the coaches. They need to balance the players' motivation, ambitions, and goals with external forces or the demands to be 'professional' with the reality of sub-professional financial rewards. This makes it difficult or almost impossible to facilitate optimal development and performance, even though most people (e.g., management, football association, media, society) expect and demand it. Since coaches have less time with the players and the team, they are unable to follow up with the players as often. This can be illustrated with the following quote: "I think that too little time together with the players is a challenge. I should have had a lot more time with them. I have time, but they don't." (Participant 10). In addition to providing observations and guidance during training sessions and matches, coaches, players, and researchers alike highly recommend regular individual coaching conversations (Jowett, 2007). Even if many coaches for team sports find that individual follow-up is time-consuming due to the relatively high number of athletes in the team, they often try to prioritize it. However, the coaches are dependent on the availability of the players when conducting follow-up in addition to team sessions. In this study, the coaches state that even if players are motivated, need a follow-up, and understand its usefulness for their performance, they often do not have time for them.

Taken together, the core point from the coaches is that they believe the limited or weak economic conditions are a significant cause of many specific considerations, not only for the players but also for the coaches themselves when trying to optimize their coaching practice. Therefore, the recommendation from the coaches is that greater financial investment is required in elite female soccer and player salaries to enable players to be financially able to meet the expectations and demands of elite level professional sport.

Early career termination – gender stereotypes and pregnancy

Several studies have identified the phenomenon of early-career termination in female elite soccer players (Barreira, 2016; Martìnez-Lagunas et al., 2014). According to Koukiadaki and Pearson (2017), female players leave soccer in their early twenties to pursue a more sustainable career or start a family. Early-career termination is perceived as a specific consideration because it reduces the coach's time and ability to do an optimal job developing the players and the team over extended periods of time and through successive seasons. As one of the coaches mentioned: "Family life is difficult to combine with a female soccer career. As a result, most female soccer players quit early and often before establishing their own family." (Participant 2). Early-career termination may be a

consequence of social gender roles as one female gender stereotype is that women should be more responsible for setting up a family life and establishing a home than men (Meeussen et al., 2016). Therefore, it is very difficult for women to fully invest in their soccer career and comply with this expectation, forcing players to terminate their careers. This relatively incompatible female gender expectation and elite soccer demands are naturally challenging for the players, but also for the coaches. It limits the coaches' opportunities to create and develop the players and the team. When coaching female soccer players, organizing training, and assigning obligations, coaches must understand the pressure players face and thus must recognize that the training sessions may not be as optimal as they wish. This may be frustrating for the coaches to acknowledge. However, if they do not recognize the power dynamics in the expectations placed on players, or misinterpret players' choices, attitudes, and behaviors as unprofessional, and do not adapt their plans (e.g., attendance, training load, meetings), they may accelerate the early-career termination process. Furthermore, many of these players are at an age where having children is becoming increasingly expected, which also is a significant factor for early-career termination. Simply described by participant 1: "Women give birth to children, and this can be limiting for the length of a soccer career." The quotes may reflect stereotyped views on pregnancy and maternity that mainly limit women's athletic achievements and/or motivation (Fullagar & Toohey, 2009); however, they also show that coaches recognize that many female players leave the sport when they become or want to become pregnant. From a performance and career perspective, however, most athletes in Sundgot-Borgen and colleagues' (2019) study claim that their performance level was the same or better after becoming mothers. This is also consistent with other studies that have shown that athletes' performances improve after they give birth (Martìnez-Lagunas et al., 2014). Therefore, even if becoming a mother can significantly change a person's life, players can combine having children and playing soccer at the elite level. However, this requires the team and club to make appropriate arrangements, such as providing financial support that allows the athlete to be a mother while continuing their career. If players can return to their soccer career after pregnancy, female soccer organizations could ensure that they do not prematurely lose experienced and skilled players. This also ensures that the coaches have more time and better opportunities to develop female players' skills over the longer term, thus increasing the quality of female soccer. As participant 5 said, "When a club has money and continuity in a squad, then it will be good. Only money and no continuity in a squad, it will be ok, but no top position."

Mental characteristics – self-confidence and caring

All participants were aware of the importance of mental characteristics and especially self-confidence. Research has shown that a low level of self-confidence is related to a fear of failure (Frey & Ruble, 1990), self-handicapping (Hays et al., 2009), and a more conservative playing style (Cresswell & Hodge, 2004). Moreover, low levels of self-confidence may also negatively contribute to team factors such as collective efficacy, team resilience, and team performance (Fransen et al., 2015). The participants perceived that female players have low self-confidence compared to male players and that their self-confidence is relatively unstable and situationally dependent. As one of the coaches mentioned: "Female soccer players are a bit more naturally humble; they have

less confidence compared to male players." (Participant 4). Jones and colleagues (1991) put forth a possible explanation for the low level of self-confidence when they reported that female athletes worry more about achieving their competitive goals and being adequately prepared compared to male athletes. In general, the statements from the coaches seem to parallel this with female players' self-confidence related directly to male players, and female players' self-esteem identified as lower than that of male players (Sheard, 2013). Gallucci (2014) has also reported that sport-specific self-confidence may be less stable for women than for men. The gender comparison seems to be relatively common both in the research and among coaches and furthermore, it is not restricted to mental constructs but also applies to the sport in general and athletes' attitudes, skills, and performances (Skogvang & Fasting, 2013). However, the gender comparison is not always practical, nor may it provide a nuanced and accurate picture of the actual conditions. For example, Ridgers and colleagues (2007) highlighted that women are more honest in their assessment of themselves, while men tend to overestimate their competence. While it is important to consider this, it does not mean that low self-confidence is not a common feature among female athletes nor that coaches' perceptions of the players' self-confidence do not reflect reality. While it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss the gender differences per se and gender comparisons, this is a highly important issue. From a performance perspective, it is therefore not surprising that the coaches perceive low self-confidence as a specific consideration and as impacting their coaching practice in several ways. One coach sated it in the following way:

> *Female teams can win match after match, and then as a coach, I now think my players believe in themselves. So, I think I can push a little extra, but my players are still uncertain. As a coach, you must be very vigilant about players' self-confidence. Preparation is what creates self-confidence. It's about going out and doing those repetitions, so the players are confident in the execution.*
> (Participant 5)

The quote indicates firstly the need to continuously nurture the players' self-confidence and not take for granted that a positive experience such as winning per se contributes to increased self-confidence. Secondly, and in accordance with Giske et al. (1999), coaches should continuously use exercise sessions (e.g., drills, strategies, preparation to competition, and post-competition evaluation) that hone a player's experience, characteristics, and needs. This will enable players to gradually experience mastery, which in turn can increase their self-confidence. Even if all coaches highlighted that female players need relatively high levels of recognition, caring, and feedback, only the male coaches perceived this as a specific consideration: "Female soccer players need more confirmation that I, as a coach, care about them. They need a coach who is there for them; they need feedback and confirmation that they have been seen. (Participant 1), and "The need for feedback, for example, is a topic that is difficult to satisfy." (Participant 8). The coaches' perceptions of the female players are in parallel with Norman's (2015) study on high-performance female athletes. She identified critical coaching needs for female athletes as support, positive communication, and recognition from the coach. It is interesting that only the male coaches identified these specific needs as

considerations. This could be a product of the male soccer culture, where such needs and behavior could be more suppressed or not recognized. Another possible reason is that the focus in male elite soccer and soccer education is highly sport-specific (e.g., skills, tactics, performance, and "winning") (Filetti et al., 2017). Thus, this could mean that a holistic management approach is not considered (e.g., one that considers communication, caring, and confirmation) (Hardman et al., 2010). Finally, female coaches may better understand and empathize with these needs and behaviors and, therefore, can more easily address and naturally develop a holistic leadership approach that includes caring and feedback, without perceiving these approaches as either specific or challenging. Fasting and Pfister (2000) and Lindgren and Barker-Ruchti (2017) support this latter claim, finding that female coaches adopt a caring, holistic, and athlete-centered coaching approach while working at the highest level of competitive sports and achieving competitive success. In line with this, Dohsten and colleagues' (2020) findings indicate that a caring coaching approach is important for all genders to create a sustainable elite sports practice. Therefore, the adoption of more holistic communication competence and skills should be highlighted as critical features of coaches' professional competence (Haselwood et al., 2005), when coaching individuals, and teams of female athletes.

Intrateam communication – gossip and backtalk

All coaches were aware that communication within the team is important for team functioning and a prerequisite for good performance; this is also underlined in the sports literature (Sullivan & Short, 2011). The coaches perceived 'gossip' and 'back talk' to be the most challenging aspects of intrateam communication in female teams: "It's a lot of gossip and back talk in the groups. I know that many female soccer teams have been bothered by it" (Participant 6) and, "In female soccer, players can be quite ugly when talking about each other, coaches, and other things around. There may be several such small comments to each other, which players can bring into training sessions, matches, and national team gatherings". (Participant 1). Gossip can be described as informal talk about players on the team (Ellwardt et al., 2012). According to Dunbar (2004), gossip is a ubiquitous phenomenon that accounts for approximately 65% of human speaking. There is also evidence that women spend more time gossiping overall than men, and they are more likely to gossip about close friends and relatives (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Thus, it is natural that gossip will exist in female soccer teams. In the literature, studies have claimed that gossip serves several different group functions, but it is still unclear whether or when the effect of gossip on a team is primarily positive or negative (Beersma et al., 2019; Ellwardt et al., 2012). As gossip can have positive consequences for sharing information, evaluating others, emotional venting, and self-protection (Bergmann, 1993; Robinson, 2016), it can contribute to maintaining team norms and increase bonding and relationships between team players (Dunbar, 2004). However, gossip can also have negative consequences and has been associated with malice, jealousy (Einat & Chen, 2012), lies (Melwani, 2012), judgmental and trivial assumptions (Michelson et al., 2010), and back talk (Bergmann, 1993). Given that the coaches experience gossip and back talk as a challenge, it can be presumed that they primarily focus on the negative consequences and perceive it as being destructive for team functioning. There is also evidence that the gossip between women is more likely to be aggressive and competitive than

that between men (McAndrews, 2014). When gossip is used to attack others, which may occur during back talk, it could divide the team, disrupt team harmony, and destroy loyalty (Ribeiro & Blakely, 1995). However, there is a possibility that coaches overlook or ignore the positive effects of gossip in female teams. Thus, the nature of the gossip should be further investigated and perhaps explored in a more nuanced manner. However, based on their perception of gossip and back talk, the coaches clearly have strategies and actions to prevent, eliminate, or reduce gossip; this is also in line with theoretical recommendations for developing effective intrateam communication (Marani et al., 2020).

> *Clear guidelines on the team; for example, in this team, we're talking to each other and not about each other. If you are going to say something about someone else on the team and you do not dare to say it directly, then you should be quiet. Then there is no issue.*
> (Participant 6)

Romantic relationships – subgroups and conflict

In female sports and especially in soccer, being lesbian is common and accepted, and the sport appears to be inclusive (Skogvang & Fasting, 2013). The coaches did not find sexual orientation to be an issue per se, and they understood that romantic relationships could develop within a team where the players spend a lot of time together. Despite this, the coaches perceived the romantic relationships in the team as challenging because they could easily contribute to the formation of a subgroup and be counterproductive for team functioning and performance (Martin et al., 2015). A more prominent consideration identified was the end of romantic relationships, that could negatively influence the team dynamics and be a source of increased conflict in the team. The coaches saw this experience as unique to coaching females:

> *There are several [players] who are lesbians. The challenge is if they become lovers, and especially if it ends. Then it will be a nightmare… We can't control the love life, but I think the players understand that we do not want any national team players to be lovers. Because it is not beneficial, it can lead to chatter and whispering. As well as the formation of subgroups in the team.*
> (Participant 9)

Both subgroups and team conflict negatively impact team functioning and performance, and it is not surprising that coaches strive to develop cohesive teams with a collective identity and sense of 'we' (Carron & Eys, 2012). The uniqueness in these coaches' experiences lies not in the fact that subgroups and conflicts exist, but from where this conflict emanates. However, coaches cannot stop romantic feelings from developing, and it is perhaps not appropriate nor possible to regulate them, although many business companies and organisations now mandate exactly this. Thus, they should focus more on possible benefits of close romantic relationships and subgroups (e.g., effort, motivation, well-being, acceptance, communication, decision-making) for the players and the team (Martin et al., 2015). As a significant part of the team development process, coaches should explicitly focus on intrateam communication, subgroups, and conflict management. In addition, building team resilience independent of romantic relationships in the team may be an effective preventive strategy. This would curtail further

negative consequences not only concerning romantic relationships but also other challenges that a team may face (Morgan et al., 2019).

Access to the locker rooms – relationship and culture

Goffman's (1959) terms 'frontstage' and 'backstage' can be used to describe locker room regions that are relevant to performance. The concepts of frontstage and backstage can be relative; however, the frontstage is the region in which a performance takes place, and the backstage is the region where interactions that relate to the frontstage take place. Using this terminology, the locker room may serve many functions and can be a significant arena for coaches to develop and/or understand their players, the team, and the team culture.

> There is a big difference between coaching women and men because, as a male coach of women, I have no locker room. I can't go to the players when I want to. I would have liked to have been much more with them in the locker room because I think the locker room is an important place to be. (Participant 7)

The importance of the locker room can be illustrated using a common coach metaphor: 'missing the locker room' although this saying was originally used to suggest that coaches that had lost their leadership power and influence on their team. Furthermore, research has shown that locker rooms are used formally (e.g., pregame speech, team meetings) and informally (e.g., socializing, relaxing, eating, dressing) (Breakey et al., 2009; Wilson, 2018). Therefore, the locker room is a significant space where team communication and interaction unfold among team members (Wilson, 2018). Coaches should have access to locker rooms not only to interact with the players but also to gain knowledge about the team. Therefore, and perhaps not surprisingly, reduced access to the locker rooms was a challenge that all male coaches discussed. For the male coaches, 'missing the locker room' is not about losing authority but about being denied from an area that they perceive as valuable for understanding or influencing the players and the team. Thus, it is understandable that the male coaches negatively view their inability to fully access the locker room; this is a well-suited space for close and personal communication that would enable them to establish close and trusted coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2017). Moreover, several studies have highlighted that female athletes prefer coaches that show interest in them beyond their athletic performance (Norman, 2015). It may be easier to show this focus and interest and communicate with players when in the locker room. The locker room provides good opportunities for what Høigaard and Mathisen (2008) define as informal situated counseling, which is often short conversations that are non-institutionalized, informal, and fleeting. They further state that these coaching conversations can be more like counseling than the institutionalized, 'correct' wide-ranging conversations, and they can significantly impact the athletes. From a broader perspective, the locker room space and interactions are one of many components used in creating a distinctive team identity and are thus highly important for coaches (Gallan, 2019). Considering the gender differences between the coach and players, it is paramount for male coaches to have what Danielsen and colleagues (2019) define as cultural architects 'working for them' in the locker room. One of the coaches stated this in the following way: "She was a player I leaned on. And she had the locker room, and I knew that if we won or lost, she

was the right person to lead the locker room". (Participant 9).

Team selection – consequences of choosing playing time

Coaching an elite team sport involves having to continuously make decisions, and the quality of these decisions has a direct impact on the performance, motivation, satisfaction, coach-athlete relationship, and the team (Cox et al., 2018). One continuous and inevitable decision coaches need to make is team selection. This selection also includes deciding players playing time, which is usually a factor that players value highly (Carron & Eys, 2012). Elite-level teams have more players available than the operational team directly involved in the match. Therefore, striving for playing time may cause intrateam rivalry. This 'fighting for playing time' is an ongoing, omnipresent process. If the players perceive the distribution of playing time as unfair, it may initiate destructive internal conflicts that can interfere with optimal team functioning and competitive success (Carron & Eys, 2012). Consequently, most coaches take team selection and allocation of playing time quite seriously. Nevertheless, only the female coaches in this study's sample perceive this as challenging.

> I chose one player in midback because it was best for the chemistry overall, while the other player probably is a better player in isolation. But it was bad chemistry and cold climate, and then we had to make a choice. It costs a bit, and it really did not go well for the one who was put out. She did not handle it very well, so it became very difficult. (Participant 2)

As the quotes illustrate, the coaches' perceptions of the players' reactions to team selection and lack of playing time include negative feelings and dissatisfaction. Former research has reported similar cognitive and emotional reactions related to team selection and playing time (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Even if all coaches are aware of the players' reactions, it may be that the female coaches are more sensitive to these reactions and how it may affect the players. Female coaches have been described as empathetic and caring (Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017); therefore, they may be more attuned to the implications of team selection and playing time. They are potentially more aware that, besides the player's acute reaction, it may have implications for the coach-athlete relationship and may have career implications for the player (McEwen et al., 2018).

Concluding remarks

This article has explored the considerations that male and female coaches perceive in elite female soccer coaching practice. From a practical point of view, the findings of this study have implications for coaches, players, sports psychologists, and teams. These can be summarized in four main points. First, the findings show that players on female elite teams primarily have semi-professional rather than fully-professional lives. This makes it challenging for the coaches to have influence and for the players to manage their commitments, affecting their ability to develop their full potential as soccer players. A consequence of these commitments may be that female players are more prone to injuries, burnout, and early-career termination. Coaches need to consider this when planning players' training sessions and weeks. Second, the

coaches perceive that female players have low self-esteem; thus, it is essential for coaches to employ a personal and supportive management style. Third, the end of romantic relationships between players in the team has the potential to disrupt the whole team and cause intrateam conflicts. Thus, coaches should identify and communicate a conscious strategy for how coaches and the players should handle any romantic relationships in the team. Fourth, the analysis shows that coaches may experience different challenges depending on their own gender. Male coaches discussed the detrimental impact of reduced access to the locker room, while female coaches found team selection challenging.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study is that coaching female elite players comes with coaching considerations identified as being specific to this context. Being aware of them can lead to a better coach-athlete relationship, improved learning environment, and enhanced performance culture in the team. This knowledge can also be helpful for coaches in strengthening their leadership position. Finally, it is recommended that studies with a longitudinal design examine how the challenges might be perceived to change over time and how effective the actions coaches take to minimize these challenges are.

References

Abdul, G. (2018, April, 5.). Women soccer players demand equity. Women´s media center. https://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/women-soccer-players-demand-equity

Barreira, J. (2016). Age of peak performance of elite women`s soccer players. International Journal of Sports Science, 6(3), 121-124. https://doi.org/10.5923/j.sports.20160603.09

Beersma B., van Kleef G. A., & Dijkstra M. T. (2019). Antecedents and consequences of gossip in work groups. In F. Giardini & R. Wittek (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation (pp. 417-434). Oxford University Press.

Bergmann, J. R. (1993). Discreet indiscretions: The social organisation of gossip. Aldine de Gruyter.

Breakey, C., Jones, M., Cunningham, C. T., & Holt, N. (2009). Female athletes' perceptions of a coach's speeches. International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 4(4), 489-504. https://doi.org/10.1260/174795409790291376

Carron, A.V., & Eys, M. A. (2012). Group dynamics in sport (4th ed.). Fitness Information Technology.

Côtè, J., Salmela, J. H., Baria, A., & Russell, S. J. (1993). Organizing and interpreting unstructured qualitative data. The Sport Psychologist, 7(2), 127-137. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.7.2.127

Cox, E., Bachkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (Eds.). (2018). The complete handbook of coaching (3rd ed.). Sage.

Cresswell, S., & Hodge, K. (2004). Coping skills: Role of trait sport confidence and trait anxiety. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 98(2), 433-438. https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.98.2.433-438

Creswell, J. W. (2008). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. Pearson.

Cushion, C., & Jones, R. L. (2006). Power, discourse, and symbolic violence in professional youth soccer: The vase of Albion Football Club. Sociology of Sport Journal, 23(2), 142-161. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.23.2.142

Danielsen, L. D., Giske, R., Peters, D. M., & Høigaard, R. (2019). Athletes as "cultural architects": A qualitative analysis of elite coaches' perceptions of highly influential soccer players. Sport Psychologist, 33(4), 313-322. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2018-0166

de Haan, D., & Norman, L. (2020). Mind the gap: The presence of capital and power in the female athlete-male-coach relationship within elite rowing. Sports Coaching Review, 9(1), 95-118. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2019.1567160

Dohsten, J., Barker-Ruchti, N., & Lindgren, E. C. (2020). Caring as sustainable coaching in elite athletics: benefits and challenges. Sports Coaching Review, 9(1), 48-70. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2018.1558896

Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004). Gossip in evolutionary perspective. Review of General Psychology 8(2), 100-110. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.8.2.100

Einat, T., & Chen, G. (2012). Gossip in a maximum security female prison: An exploratory study. Women & Criminal Justice, 22(2), 108-134. https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2012.662122

Ellwardt, L., Labianca, G. J., & Wittek, R. (2012). Who are the objects of positive and negative gossip at work? A social network perspective on workplace gossip. Social Networks, 34(2), 193-205. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2011.11.003

Fasting, K., & Pfister, G. (2000). Female and male coaches in the eyes of female elite soccer players. European Physical Education Review, 6(1), 91-110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X000061001

Felton, L., & Jowett, S. (2013). 'What do coaches do' and 'how do they relate': Their effects on athletes' psychological needs and functioning. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 23(2), e130-e139. https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12029

FIFA. (2019). Women`s football: Member associations survey report 2019. https://img.fifa.com/image/upload/nq3ensohyxpuxovcovj0.pdf

Filetti, C., Ruscello, B., Dottavio S., & Fanelli, V. (2017). A study of relationships among technical, tactical, physical parameters and final outcomes in elite soccer matches as analyzed by a semiautomatic video tracking system. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 124(3), 601-620. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031512517692904

Fletcher, D., & Arnold, R. (2011). A qualitative study of performance leadership and management in elite sport. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 23(2), 223-242. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2011.559184

Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., de Cuyper, B., vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015). Perceived sources of team confidence in soccer and basketball. Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 47(7), 1470-1484. https://doi.org/10.1249/MSS.0000000000000561

Frey, K. S., & Ruble, D. N. (1990). Strategies for comparative evaluation: Maintaining a sense of competence across the life span. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Kolligian, Jr. (Eds.), Competence considered (pp. 167-189). Yale University Press.

Fullagar, S., & Toohey, K. (2009). Introduction to gender and sport management special issue: Challenges and changes. Sport Management Review, 12(4), 199-201. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.09.001

Gallucci, N. T. (2014). Sport psychology: Performance enhancement, performance inhibition, individuals, and teams (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.

Gibbs, G. R. (2007). Analyzing qualitative data. Sage.

Giske, R., Hollingen, E., & Pensgård, A. M. (1999). Innføring i idrettspsykologi [Introduction to sports psychology]. Universitetsforlaget.

Gledhill, A., & Harwood, C. (2015). A holistic perspective on career development in UK female soccer players: A negative case analysis. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 21, 65-77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.003

Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. Anchor Books.

Gómez, M. A., Lago-Peñas, C., Gómez, M. T., Jimenez, S., & Leicht, A. S. (2021). Impact of elite soccer coaching change on team performance according to coach- and club-related variables. Biology of Sport, 38(4), 603-608. https://doi.org/10.5114/biolsport.2021.101600

Hardman, A., Jones, C., & Jones, R. (2010). Sports coaching, virtue ethics and emulation. Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy, 15(4), 345-359. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408980903535784

Haselwood, D. M., Joyner, B. A., Burke, K. L., Geyerman, C. B., Czech, D. R., Mukansky, B. A., & Zwald, A. D. (2005). Female athletes' perceptions of head coaches' communication competence. Journal of Sport Behavior, 28(3), 216-230.

Hays, K., Thomas, O., Maynard, I., & Bawden, M. (2009). The role of confidence in world-class port performance. Journal of Sports Sciences, 27(11), 1185-1199. https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410903089798

Høigaard, R., & Mathisen, P. (2008). Informal situated counselling in a school context. Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 21(3), 293-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070802478976

Jenkins, S. (2014). Professionalism, golf coaching and a Master of Science degree. International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 9(4), 693-715. https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.9.4.693

Jones, G., Swain, A. B. J., & Cale, A. (1991). Gender differences in precompetition temporal patterning and antecedents of anxiety and self-confidence. Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 13(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.13.1.1

Jowett, S. (2007). Interdependence analysis and 3+1 Cs in the coach-athlete relationship. In S. Jowett & D. Lavallee (Eds.), Social Psychology in Sport (pp. 15-28). Human Kinetics.

Jowett, S. (2017). Coaching effectiveness: The coach-athlete relationship at its heart. Current Opinion in Psychology, 16, 154-158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.006

Jowett, S., & Nezlek, J. (2012). Relationship interdependence and satisfaction with important outcomes in coach-athlete dyads. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29(3), 287-301. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511420980

Jowett, S., O`Broin, A., & Palmer, S. (2010). On understanding the role and significance of a key two-person relationship in sport and executive coaching. Sport & Exercise Psychology Review, 6(2), 19-30.

Koukiadaki, A., & Pearson, G. (2017). 2017 FIFPro global employment report: Working conditions in professional women's football. Academia. https://www.academia.edu/36496145/Working_Conditions_in_Professional_Womens_Football

Kristiansen, E., Broch, T. B., & Pedersen, P. M. (2014). Negotiating gender in professional soccer: An analysis of female footballers in the United States. Choregia, 10(1), 5-27.

Levin, J., & Arluke, A. (1987). Gossip: The inside scoop. Plenum Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Sage.

Lindgren, E. C., & Barker-Ruchti, N. (2017). Balancing performance-based expectations with a holistic perspective on coaching: A qualitative study of Swedish women's national football team coaches' practice experiences. International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 12(2), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2017.1358580

Longshore, K., & Sachs, M. (2015). Mindfulness training for coaches: A mixed method exploratory study. Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, 9(2), 116-137. https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2014-0038

Lyle, J. (2002). Sports coaching concepts: A framework for coaches' behavior. Routledge.

MacKinnon, V. (2011). Techniques for instructing female athletes in traditionally male sports: A case study of LPGA teaching professionals. The International Journal of Sport and Society, 2(1), 75-88. https://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v02i01/54060

Marani, I. N., Barata, I., & Gunawan, R. (2020). The influence of intra-team communication on the attacking success in rugby. Advances in Health Sciences Research, 21, 130-132. https://doi.org/10.2991/ahsr.k.200214.036

Martin, L. J., Wilson, J., Evans, M. B., & Spink, K. S. (2015). Cliques in sport: Perceptions of intercollegiate athlete. The Sport Psychologist, 29(1), 82-95. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2014-0003

Martìnez-Lagunas, V., Niessen, M., & Hartmann, U. (2014). Women`s football: Player characteristics and demands of the game. Journal of Sport and Health Science, 3(4), 258-272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2014.10.001

McAndrew, F. T. (2014). The "sword of a woman": Gossip and female aggression. Aggression and Violent Behavior, 19(3), 196-199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.04.006

McEwen, C. E., Clarke, C. H., Bennett, E. V., Dawson, K. A., & Crocker, P. R. E. (2018). "It's this thing of being an Olympian that you don't get from anything else": Changing experiences of Canadian individual-sport athletes with Olympic team selection. The Sport Psychologist, 32(2), 81-92. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2016-0152

Meeussen, L., Veldman, J., & van Laar, C. (2016). Combining gender, work, and family identities: The cross-over and spill-over of gender norms into young adults' work and family aspirations. Frontiers in Psychology, 7(1781), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01781

Melwani, S. (2012). A little bird told me so…: The emotional, attributional, relational and team-level outcomes of engaging in gossip. [Doctoral thesis, University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest. https://search.proquest.com/docview/101928167 2?accountid=12994

Michelson, G., van Iterson, A., & Waddington, K. (2010). Gossip in organizations: Contexts, consequences, and controversies. Group & Organization Management, 35(4), 371-390. https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601109360389

Moen, F., Hrozanova, M., & Stenseng, F. (2019). Validating the working alliance inventory as a tool for measuring the effectiveness of coach-athlete relationships in sport. Cogent Psychology, 6(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.169541 4

Morgan, P. B. C., Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2019). Developing team resilience: A season long study of psychological enablers and strategies in high-level sport team. Psychology of Sport & Exercise, 45, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.169541 4

Nilssen, V. (2012). Analyse i kvalitative studier: Den skrivende forskeren [Analysis in qualitative studies: The writing researcher]. Universitetsforlaget.

Norman, L. (2015). The coaching needs of high performance female athletes within the coach-athlete dyad. International Sport Coaching Journal, 2(1), 15-28. https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2013-0037

Norman, L., & French, J. (2013). Understanding how high performance women athletes experience the coach-athlete relationship. International Journal of Coaching Science, 7(1), 3-24.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice (4th ed.). Sage.

Ribeiro, V., & Blakeley, J. (1995). The proactive management of rumor and gossip. The Journal of Nursing Administration, 25(6), 43-50. https://doi.org/10.1097/00005110-199506000-00010

Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A practical guide to collaborative qualitative data analysis. Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 37(2), 225-231. https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084

Ridgers, N. D., Fazey, D. M. A., & Fairclough, S. J. (2007). Perceptions of athletic competence and fear of negative evaluation during physical education. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 77(2), 339-349. https://doi.org/10.1348/026151006X128909

Robinson, B. (2016). Character, caricature, and gossip. The Monist, 99(2), 198-211. https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onv036

Sheard, M. (2013). Mental toughness: The mindset behind sporting achievement (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Skogvang, B. O., & Fasting, K. (2013). Football and sexualities in Norway. Soccer & Society, 14(6), 872-886. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2013.843924

Sullivan, P. J., & Short, S. (2011). Further operationalization of intra-team communication in sports: An updated version of the Scale of Effective Communication in Team Sports (SECTS-2). Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 41(2), 471-487. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00722.x

Sundgot-Borgen, J., Sundgot-Borgen, C., Myklebust, G., Sølvberg, N., & Torstveit, M. K. (2019). Elite athletes get pregnant, have healthy babies and return to sport early postpartum. BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine, 5(e000652), 1-9. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2019-000652

Wilson, N. (2018). The portable locker room: Language, space, and place in rugby pre match interaction. Sage Journals, 6(5), 547-569. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517734849