

Desirable Characteristics of Coaches and a Perception on Their
Coaching Abilities Based on the Effect of Gender

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to look at characteristics of coaches deemed desirable by athletes and to compare how coaches are perceived by athletes based upon these characteristics and the coach's gender. The sample group for this study was taken from Chowan University student athletes of the men and women's basketball, cross country, golf, soccer, tennis, softball, and baseball teams. The participants were asked a series of questions through surveys and gave their opinions on certain coaches based on a control and an independent biography about these coaches. Through a series of analyses, it was found that there was a slight significant preference for male coaches over female coaches. The coaches' gender and characteristic also contributed to how a coach was perceived, although there was no relationship between the two variables.

Keywords: characteristics, desirable, coach, athletes, gender

Many women in athletics—specifically coaches at the high school or collegiate level—face challenging situations and find that they cannot surpass certain levels in their careers. Often termed a “glass ceiling,” this phenomenon is prominent when examining the effect of gender biases on coaches or potential coaches. For instance in the 1990s, at the height of Title IX enforcement, male counterparts who were opposed to Title IX argued that men are more interested in sports and thus should receive more funding and opportunities (Brake & Caitlin, 1996). When this viewpoint was brought to court, it was denied. When exploring reasons for discrimination and bias towards women and their equal rights in athletics, it serves to inquire if there is a similar attitude towards women in coaching.

Female coaches have often received negative attitudes from athletes (Habif, Van Raalte, & Cornelius, 2001). In their study, Habif et al. aimed to determine if athletes continue to have negative attitudes towards women coaches and whether an athlete’s preference for a coach of a certain gender has changed. Habif and colleagues did a two-part study. First, they recruited 139 participants who competed in the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) in division three basketball teams. Of those teams, 34% of the head coaches were female and 66% were male. They concluded that there was no significant gender difference in athletes’ attitudes towards female coaches, but that there was a significant difference in the preference for a male coach as opposed to a female coach. In the second part of the study, 129 athletes from NCAA division three volleyball teams participated. Similar to the first study, there was no significant difference found in the attitudes of the athletes towards female coaches; however, in contrast to the first study, it was found that there was also no significant difference in the preference for a head coach of a specific gender. Habif and colleagues’ reasoning for these findings is that basketball is a masculine sport. It is predominately male athletes and coaches. Because of this, it may be normative to have or want to have a male head coach for basketball. On the other hand, volleyball tends to be a more gender-diverse sport, with increased opportunities to work with coaches of the opposite gender. Habif et al. concluded athletes that have a greater opportunity to be coached by or work with the opposite gender may have less of a gender preference for head coach.

Barber (1998) found partial support for significant differences between the perceived competence of male

and female coaches. Barber hypothesized that women emphasized self-referenced factors in coaching (i.e., athlete improvement and coaching skill improvement), whereas men emphasized external sources (i.e., administrative and peer approval, physical outcomes of competitions). Importantly, it was found that men did not place a significant amount of importance on the external sources, such as administrative support. Barber observed that the difference was that male coaches ranked higher in teaching sports skills. These findings may exist because a particular sport is a male-dominant; therefore, androcentric ideals and beliefs may be rooted in the culture of the sport (Fasting & Pfister, 2000). In relation to how a coach is perceived before hiring, Myers, Beauchamp, and Chase (2010) found that an athlete’s satisfaction level with their head coach has a strong correlation with how they perceive their coach’s abilities. These abilities include being able to alter an athlete’s mood and skills with instruction and interaction during practice. These results correlate to a similar study conducted by Manley, Greenlees, Thelwell, and Smith (2010).

Manley et al. (2010) found that the reputation of a coach plays a key factor in athletes’ perceptions of potential coaches. For instance, coaches with successful reputations were found to have a significantly higher level of perceived competence than those of unsuccessful reputations. Manley et al. also examined whether the gender of a coach coupled with their reputation influenced athletes on their initial assessments of a potential coach. They hypothesized that female coaches would be perceived as significantly less competent in initial expectations. This hypothesis was partially supported. Men scored significantly higher in their abilities for game strategy and technique, whereas women scored higher in their abilities to motivate athletes and build upon their character.

In conjunction with the Barber (1998) and Manley et al. (2010) studies, it has been found that coaches are able to influence the amount of task cohesion on a team through augmenting training and instruction, social support, and democratic behaviour when approaching the team (Gardner, Shields, Bredemeier, & Bostrom, 1996). Gardner et al. (1996) conducted a study on a group of softball and baseball players and concluded that coaches were able to remind the team and coaching staff of shared goals, therefore encouraging cohesion. They also found that there was a significant gender difference in the way softball and baseball players perceived the leadership of their coaches. Males tended to identify with

autocratic behaviour, whereas females identified more with instruction and training, democratic behaviour, and positive feedback. Gardner et al. suggested the differences may be from previous personal histories of perceived leadership. Interestingly, a significant difference in task cohesion was found between the genders. In addition, they found that softball players had greater task cohesion than baseball players, possibly because females tend to emphasize social interactions and relationships, as well as interdependence (Gardner et al., 1996; Gilligan 1982).

Regarding team cohesion, female athletes tend to prefer more social support from male coaches than female coaches (Riemer & Toon, 2001). Reimer and Toon explained that female coaches who coach female athletes have similar ways of communicating and offering support. In contrast, male coaches do not tend to show as much social support; thus, female athletes search for social support in a male coach as it is not readily offered compared with a female coach.

Fasting and Pfister (2000) also discussed preferences towards having a male or female coach, particularly in women's soccer. Overall, they found that there was an increase in woman coaches, but that men were still preferred over women. Fasting and Pfister proposed that the reason why men tend to be preferred as coaches is because soccer is perceived as a male-dominant sport, thus making it difficult for women to gain a credible foothold.

Also studying soccer, Millard (1996) discussed how coaches have the ability to influence their athletes' performance as well as their psychological well-being. Millard examined the frequency of coaches' engagement with their athletes and the variety of behaviours based on gender. The study showed that men tended to be older and have more years of coaching experience, while women had more athletic experience. Furthermore, men were more likely than women to give out technical advice and less likely to offer encouragement.

The purpose of this study is to extend previous research in order to determine what characteristics are considered desirable in a coach and if gender affects perceived coaching ability, regardless the presence or absence of the desirable characteristics. Essentially, this study seeks to determine whether coaches with identical coaching characteristics are perceived differently based on gender. Hypothesis 1) The characteristics deemed most desirable will be reinforcement of good play and effort, organization, instruction, and the coach's ability-

to control their emotions. Hypothesis 2) There will be a significant difference in athletes' preference for male coaches over female coaches, regardless of the desirable/undesirable characteristics. Hypothesis 3) There will be an interaction between the gender of the coaches and desirable/undesirable characteristics in athletes' perceptions of coaching ability.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of male and female athletes at a small private National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division Two school in the northern region of North Carolina. The total sample size was 106 student athletes from the men's ($n = 67$) and women's ($n = 39$): basket ball ($n = 18$), golf ($n = 12$), tennis ($n = 15$), softball ($n = 16$), baseball ($n = 25$), and men's soccer ($n = 20$) teams. One hundred and ten subjects were initially used in the study, but four of the survey packets used had to be dismissed from the research on account of incorrect completion. Of the participants, 56.2% were Caucasian, 22.9% African American, 9.5% Latin American, 3.8% Asian American, 1% Native American, and 6.7% other. Additionally, 32.4% were freshmen, 25.7% sophomores, 28.6% juniors, and 12.4% seniors. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-23 years old (mean=19.72; $s=1.337$). There was no incentive given to the participants, and the study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited via email with permission from the coaches. The day of the survey, participants were given the option to abstain from the study.

Measures

Desirable/Non-desirable characteristics. To determine which characteristics were found to be more desirable among the participants, the Desirable Characteristics survey (DCS) (see Appendix) was administered, using definitions of researchers Reddy et al. (2013). This survey had 12 behavioural category questions, which included: "A coach giving positive feedback, verbal or nonverbal, is important?" and "A coach failing to respond to good performances is?" The participants then rated the following questions on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 indicating that a characteristic was not important and 5

indicating it was very important. A higher score indicated a higher level of importance as given by the respondent.

Perceived Competency. To measure the competency between the genders, four mini-biographies (based off the Manley et al. (2010) study on athletes forming initial thoughts on coaches) of a coach were given to the participants. Each packet consisted of two coaches (one male, one female) with the hypothesized desirable characteristics and two coaches (one male, one female) with less desirable characteristics. All of the contents within the survey packets were randomized in the sequence of demographic page, male-to-female coaches, and desirable to non-desirable characteristics in order to account for possible priming and order effects. After reading the biography, participants rated the coach on the competency level survey (CLS) (see Appendix). The CLS was a 5-point Likert scale (1 being low competency and 5 being high competency). Higher scores indicated higher competency levels.

Procedure

The surveys were given to the men's soccer team and the men's and women's basketball, golf, tennis, softball, and baseball teams. These surveys were coordinated between the survey administrator and coaches during times that were available for both parties. The participants were asked to complete the paper survey packet for a study being conducted on campus. Consent was given prior to the surveys being taken. Athletes were encouraged but not required to take the survey. If the survey questions were unclear, the participants asked the survey administrator to clarify. All parts of the surveys were anonymous, and there was no required time limit. Depending on the survey packet the participant received, they began by answering the demographic section of the survey, which included questions about race, gender, age, sport, etc. Once the demographic section was completed, they were instructed to read a mini biography of a coach and complete the CLS. The participants repeated this step three times for the other three coaches. Following the biographies, the participant completed the DCS section. As previously stated, packet order (demographic section, biographies, and DCS) was randomized to account for order priming. When all the surveys were completed, the athletes stayed for a short debriefing and then were excused from the study.

Results

To test the first hypothesis, a repeated measures ANOVA was used to determine which of the 12 characteristics athletes found to be most desirable. The results supported the hypothesis that the most desirable characteristics were reinforcement ($M = 4.43$), organization ($M = 4.79$), coaches' controlling their emotions ($M = 4.54$), instruction after a mistake ($M = 4.79$), and instruction in technique ($M = 4.27$), $F=55.82$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.358$ (see Figure 1). The results also concluded that coaches showing hostility towards an athlete ($M = 2.76$) and giving a negative response after a mistake ($M = 3.18$) were found to be the least desirable characteristics a coach could possess. Based on the means, for the next analysis, instruction after a mistake, organization, controlling emotions, reinforcement, instruction in technique, encouragement, and encouragement after a mistake were combined as desirable characteristics; where as hostility, negative response to a mistake, no response to a mistake, no response to a good play, and interactions unrelated to the sport were combined as undesirable characteristics.

By using a 2 x 2 split plot ANOVA, the study showed two significant main effects (gender and characteristics). For the gender main effect ($F= 6.99$, $p=0.009$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.062$), the male coaches ($M = 3.54$) were found to be rated significantly higher than the female coaches ($M = 3.37$). Although there was a significant difference between the genders, their effect size was relatively small ($\eta^2 = 0.062$) and had a mean difference of 0.170. There was also a main effect of characteristics, ($F = 313.88$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.749$), such that desirable characteristics ($M = 4.54$) were rated higher than undesirable ($M = 2.37$) characteristics (see Figure 2). This significant difference had a much larger effect size with a mean difference of 2.170.

There was no significant interaction ($F = 0.86$, $p= 0.356$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.008$) between gender and desirable/undesirable characteristics in coach ratings. Consequently, the gender differences in scores were similar for the two coaching styles.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend previous research by examining which characteristics athletes find desirable in coaches and to see if gender played a role

in the perceived competency of a coach, regardless of the presence or absence of desirable characteristics. The first hypothesis stated that the characteristics deemed most desirable would be reinforcement of good play and effort, organization, instruction, and the coach's controlling their emotions. The results supported this hypothesis. When comparing the hypothesized characteristics to all the characteristics, it was found that instruction, whether after a mistake or in game strategy or technique, was the most preferred characteristic. These results are similar to the findings of Reddy et al. (2013). They found that having an open dialogue between a coach/athlete pairing is imperative to the athlete's performance and satisfaction. The open dialogue included coaches addressing an athlete's good game of play and providing insight on their performance. Reddy et al. (2013) also state that when a poor athletic performance has happened, it should not be criticized; rather, coaches should find positive aspects and praise what was done correctly while giving constructive criticism, thus allowing the athlete to learn from their mistake. Providing this recognition and feedback supports the findings in this study.

The second hypothesis stated that there would be a significant difference in the preference for a male coach over a female coach. The results showed support for that statement, concluding that the participants ranked the perceived competency levels of the coaches higher for males than females. The males seemed to be rated as more effective coaches, but the effect size of the significant difference was inherently small. Also, the average means of the male and female coaches were quite similar, thus supporting the small effect size as well. These results remain consistent with previous studies (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Habif et al., 2001). Part one of Habif et al. found that there is a preference for male coaches as opposed to female coaches, especially in male-dominated sports. Additionally, Fasting and Pfister found similar results while researching women in soccer. As previously stated, Fasting and Pfister suggested that soccer has deeply-rooted patriarchal ideals and beliefs and is still male-dominant, resulting in a higher competency rating for male coaches. This remains consistent with this study's findings. One theme that Fasting and Pfister found in their literary review is that women athletes tend to prefer women coaches as they have similar communications styles. This contrasts the findings in this study, perhaps due to the difference in male and female participants (men $n = 67$ and women $n = 39$).

Finally, the third hypothesis stated that there would be an interaction between the gender of the coaches and their coaching characteristics or style. This was not supported in the results. Despite significant differences in both main effects and the perceptions of a coach's competency, as well as the characteristics/style of the coaches, there was no interaction. The difference in competency scores between the male and female coaches was similar for each of the two types of coaching styles. These results are partially supported by previous research (Manley et al., 2010). Manley et al. found that there was no significant difference in the increased competency ratings for male coaches over female coaches in terms of motivation and character building in their athletes. Interestingly, the researchers did find a significant difference in the preference for male coaches regarding game-strategy and technique, which they attribute to how masculine or male-orientated in the sport seems.

Implications of this study contribute directly to the perceived competency levels of coaches and gender differences among coaches in athletics. This study seems to be one of few that are looking to analyze only the perceived competency of a coach through the aspects of their gender and coaching characteristics. The findings from this study have significant implications for coaches or potential coaches because it discusses the effectiveness of certain coaching behaviours/characteristics. By looking at effective coaching characteristics, it gives coaches the ability and opportunity to re-evaluate their own styles and to adjust their own behaviours. In addition, it also allows coaches to estimate how they may be perceived by their own athletes through characteristics they possess. Knowledge of their perceived competencies can be utilized to improve their abilities further, which would, theoretically, improve overall team performance.

Future research should continue to investigate gender differences in athletes' perceptions of coaches. It is imperative to continue to delve into such research in efforts to gain gender equality in a relatively male-dominated field (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Manley et al. 2010). Future research should focus on factors such as coaching experience, total years of coaching, experience playing the sport they coach, gender bias, and its effect on the perceived competency of a coach.

Limitations of this study were the sample sizes, balance of male and female athletes, and time. Attending

a small, private university while being a full-time student-athlete made it difficult to acquire an adequate sample size. Of the small sample size, there was a greater number of male athletes as opposed to female athletes, which could have had an effect on the results. Having a sample size with a closer ratio of male to female athletes could have given more accurate results. In addition, the data collection period should have been increased not only to gain more participants, but also to achieve more accurate results. Future studies should gather more participants of same-sex sports with a longer overall time period.

This study's aim was to look at gender biases among coaches through the perception of their athletes, to determine which characteristics are most desirable in coaches, and to examine coaches' perceived competency based on those characteristics. Even though there was a gender difference in the preference for a male coach over a female coach, this difference was quite small. This can be promising for women in coaching and athletics. With the effect size being relatively small, hopefully this significant difference can be reduced to no significant difference between the genders. Athletics should strive for gender equality to achieve optimal performances not only from the coaches, but from the athletes and organizations as well.

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Appendix

Desirable Characteristics Survey (DSC)

Please DO NOT write your name on the survey.

For the following: check the square box under the column to which you believe answers the following questions. Answer the following questions on how important YOU believe each characteristic should be for a coach.

	Very Important Characteristic (5)	Important Characteristic	Neutral Characteristic (3)	Not as Important Characteristic	Not Important at all Charac- teristic (1)
Is it important when a coach rewards a good play or effort in a positive verbal or nonverbal manner?					
Is it important when coaches fail to respond to good performances?					
Is it important when a coach gives encouragement to an athlete after a mistake?					
Is it important when a coach gives instruction to an athlete on how to correct a mistake?					
Is it important when a coach gives a negative reaction, verbal or nonverbal when an athlete makes a mistake?					
Is it important when a coach gives instruction to an athlete after a mistake in a hostile or retaliated way?					

	Very Important Characteristic (5)	Important Characteristic	Neutral Characteristic (3)	Not as Important Characteristic	Not Important at all Charac- teristic (1)
Is it important when a coach fails to respond to a mistake an athlete has made?					
Is it important when a coach is able to control their emotions and maintain order with the team?					
Is it important when a coach gives instruction in techniques and strategies not following a mistake?					
Is it important when a coach gives encouragement not following a mistake?					
Is it important when a coach is organized?					
Is it important when a coach interacts with his/her athletes that are unrelated to the sport?					

Biographies and Competency Level Survey (CLS)

John Smith, age 42, has been coaching for seventeen years. He believes that keeping a team organized with good communication, instruction, and reinforcement, on and off the field, will create a strong and well-functioning team that will achieve maximum performance.

Jane Smith, age 42, has been coaching for seventeen years. She believes that keeping a team organized with good communication, instruction, and reinforcement, on and off the field, will create a strong and well-functioning team that will achieve maximum performance.

John Smith, age 42, has been coaching for seventeen years. He believes in his coaching approach that failure to responding to mistakes, no responses to good performance, and punishment will foster a sense of inner ambition or complexes to achieve maximum performance out of his athletes, and to create a strong well-functioning team.

Jane Smith, age 42, has been coaching for seventeen years. She believes in her coaching approach that failure to responding to mistakes, no responses to good performance, and punishment will foster a sense of inner ambition or complexes to achieve maximum performance out of her athletes, and to create a strong well-functioning team.

Please DO NOT write your name on the survey

Please rate the coach that you have read as being highly competent (5), average competency (3), or low competency (1).

High Competency (5)	Slightly Above Average Competency (4)	Average Competency (3)	Slightly Below Average Competency (2)	Low Competency (1)

Figure 1

Characteristic Means

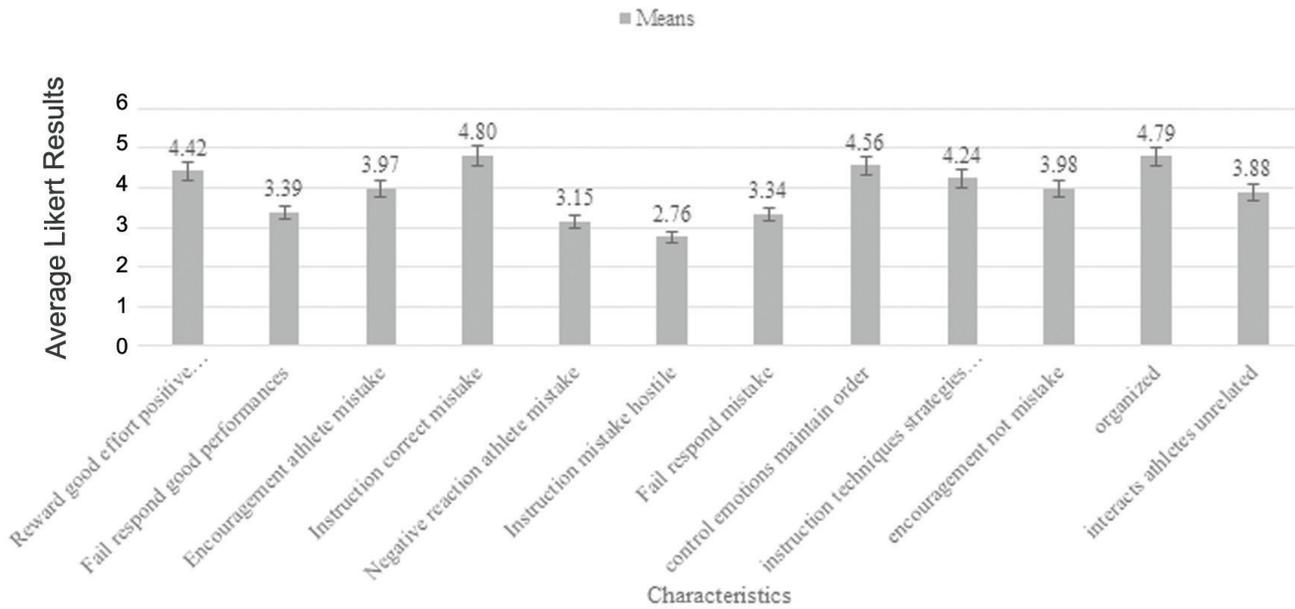


Figure 2

Main Effect of Gender and Characteristics

