

## **Analyzing the Expectations of High School Athletic Directors on the Role of Head Coaches Within a Performance Appraisal**

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With the lasting positive benefits afforded student-athletes through their participation, including positive academic outcomes, life skill development, and meaningful long-term outcomes, as well as the high participation rates, high school athletics have been considered the most significant body within the sport industry (Fraina et al., 2022). Given the impact that coaches have on student-athletes (Gould & Carson, 2010), increased importance is placed on the ability of athletic directors to effectively evaluate the performance of those tasked with leading individual programs in the athletic department, which is maximized when head coaches are positioned as involved participants within this process. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the expectations of high school athletic directors on the role coaches should play in their evaluation. Participants (n=25) represented high school athletic directors across school classification (i.e., 1A, 2A, 3A, and 4A) and school type (i.e., public and private), and saturation was determined to have been met at this sample size. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection, with a thematic analysis relied upon that yielded four main themes (i.e., self-evaluation, perceptions of coaches' responses to the evaluation process, impact of athletic director-coach relationships, and goal development). Practitioners can consider the findings from this study to ensure their department positions coaching evaluations in a way that provides coaches a meaningful opportunity to play a key role in this process.

**A**cross the United States, high school sports play an important role within communities as people dedicate time and resources to support their local teams. Currently, almost eight million high school students participate in at least one sport (Grant, 2021), with high school athletics representing a meaningful element within the overall educational experience (Miracle & Rees, 2010). Through not just these high participation rates, but also the wide-reaching benefits associated with being a student-athlete, such as higher academic performance, the development of life skills across key domains, and positive long-term outcomes, this segment has been identified as the most significant body throughout the sport industry (Fraina et al., 2022).

With athletics positioned in an academic setting, high school athletic departments prioritize ensuring education-based outcomes at the core of athletic programs that facilitate growth within and outside of sport. Therefore, the manner in which programs are established, managed, and executed shapes the experiences of student-athletes and contributes to their personal development (Forsyth et al., 2022). Expectations for effective sport offerings stretch beyond success on the field; student-athletes within high school athletics are positioned to embrace benefits that transcend sport and contribute to their overall development. To achieve these aims, high school athletic departments are reliant upon the involvement of key stakeholders to develop athletic offerings that ensure meaningful programs into the future.

Given this expectation for what constitutes success, enhanced importance is placed on reviewing those at the helm of each individual athletic program (i.e., head coaches) regarding their effectiveness in meeting outcomes from both a sport and non-sport perspective. This review culminates in a performance appraisal where athletic directors work to ensure a full picture of a coach's performance is developed and appropriate decisions can be made. To contribute to this effort, onus is also put onto head coaches to be engaged in their evaluation. O'Boyle (2014) detailed how coaches represent the core of a high school team, as they make key decisions in how to best lead their program (Forsyth et al., 2022). As such, meeting the expectations established by the athletic department and creating a positive experience that contributes to the development of student-athletes reflect two key elements within the role of the head coach.

### **Performance Appraisal Process**

One of the most important practices within the management of an organization is the performance appraisal (PA) process that allows leadership to review employee efforts, identify strengths and weaknesses, and develop objectives that guide future actions (Barbieri et al., 2021). Within this interaction, how employees respond and engage with the appraisal process can shape the outcomes that are elicited, which can be positively impacted by affording individuals the opportunity to have a voice in their own evaluation (Pichler, 2019). By facilitating an acceptance of PAs by employees, organizations can elicit more accurate

depictions of an individual's performance and make necessary decisions to position them for success moving forward. Furthermore, employees that are satisfied with the outcomes of their appraisal experience greater dedication to the organization, higher levels of job satisfaction, and a boost in affective, normative, and continuance commitment (Alhakeem & Qazi, 2022).

The dynamic between raters and ratees is important when considering the outcomes of the PA process. Prowse and Prowse (2009) found that appraisals are dependent on whether the employee has established a good relationship with their manager, while Iqbal et al. (2015) argued that relationships play an important role in the effectiveness of measurement criteria and outcomes during these interactions. When considering the responses of employees, reactions toward the overall process tend to be more favorable when there is a positive preexisting bond between the rater and ratee. As a result, employees with a meaningful relationship with their supervisor are more willing to participate and engage in the appraisal, receive rating favorability, and have a positive reaction toward the process (Pichler, 2012).

Sport organizations are reliant upon employee evaluations to ensure the organization is operating effectively and established goals are being met. As goals provide the foundation for which performance is measured during an evaluation, joint collaboration between leadership and employees when developing these outcomes can ensure a shared understanding of the objectives that will be used to guide the appraisal. Known as

management by objectives (MBO), this effort creates a clear set of expectations for employee performance and has been found to elicit increased productivity for those working within sport (Rodgers & Hunter, 1991; Williams, 2013).

### **Goal Setting Theory**

First developed by Locke (1968), goal setting theory has evolved to demonstrate that through developed expectations, people's actions are then guided by an intended purpose, with more difficult and challenging goals eliciting heightened persistence as individuals strive to be successful (Latham, 2016). A goal-oriented perspective has consistently been relied upon to help evaluate effectiveness in accomplishing objectives and maximize appraisals (Locke & Latham, 1990; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). When faced with an expectation for performance, employees commit themselves to achieving these goals when the desired outcomes are specific and difficult, and they are given the opportunity to be actively involved in the goal setting process. By developing the goals for which they will ultimately be measured on during the performance appraisal, individuals feel more connected to the established objectives and demonstrate greater effort and strategies to help them be successful (Locke & Latham, 2019).

Sport organizations rely on goal setting to guide and motivate employee performance, as goal achievement has been found to increase an individual's commitment and loyalty to the team (Williams, 2013) and facilitate strengthened investment and relationships into the future

(Kingston & Wilson, 2008). This connection to the organization is enhanced when employees are given a voice in developing goals that challenge them and relate to their specific abilities, as they then feel that their specific needs and skills are being considered (Swann et al., 2021). By incorporating multiple individuals into the goal setting process, employees then have a clear understanding of what represents successful efforts, and leadership has a set of expectations for which to evaluate performance during an appraisal.

### **High School Coaches**

At the center of a high school athletic program, head coaches determine the overall operations of the team and influence the experiences of student-athletes. With the opportunity to have a lasting impact on students, effective coaches can facilitate both short-term and long-term benefits through one's athletic participation. As high school athletics have developed into an important element of the educational experience for student-athletes, the responsibilities and expectations of head coaches have simultaneously grown. Lu et al. (2022) recommended the implementation of an autonomy-supportive working environment, as coaches that perceive more job control experience enhanced benefits within their work. This can empower coaches to become more involved in the development of goals, which facilitates goal achievement and produces better individual and team performance.

### **High School Athletic Directors**

Athletic directors represent the leader of the athletic department and make

decisions that impact key stakeholders, including student-athletes and coaches (Forsyth, 2021). By providing direction, setting goals, considering the perspectives and needs of others, and evaluating the successes of individuals and programs, these leaders set the standard for how the department will operate and work to ensure the right head coach is leading each athletic program. However, given the vast responsibilities facing the athletic director position, conflicts can arise that facilitate stress and burnout (Forsyth, 2021) and force sacrifices to be made. One managerial responsibility that is often jeopardized is the coaching evaluation, as athletic directors are unable to dedicate the necessary time and resources to maximize this interaction (Brown et al., 2010; Shank & Brown, 2020).

Given the constant interactions that take place between athletic directors and coaches, there are substantial opportunities to develop a relationship that can strengthen outcomes related to performance (Pichler, 2012). In fact, athletic directors who are able to socially engage and establish relationships with head coaches elicit favorable outcomes that increase commitment to the athletic department and enhance overall job satisfaction (Robinson et al., 2019). Leadership within sport has continued to evolve to further account for the social aspect that permeates interactions among those within a sport organization. Those who value social and relational collaborations ultimately strengthen bonds with subordinates (Billsberry et al., 2018). Additionally, when managing relationships with others, athletic directors have implemented strat-

egies of cooperation, communication, and transparency to enhance interactions and capitalize on the efforts of stakeholders by engaging them in the decision-making process (Zdroik & Veliz, 2020).

The manner in which one leads their athletic department, and more specifically, individual coaches, shapes the achievement of team success in meeting established expectations. Effective managerial leadership of others has been referenced for maximizing connections between leaders and employees by pursuing a balance between organizational needs and individual employee needs (Soucie, 1994). Sulz et al. (2021) detailed the shared views between athletic directors and coaches on the shifting landscape creating new challenges in high school sports, including the evolving culture surrounding sport, having the facilities and resources to sustain programs, and competing external forces. For athletic directors to effectively lead and evaluate head coaches, they must recognize the specific perspectives and needs of each individual.

### **Coaching Evaluations**

Early research aimed to provide considerations and recommendations to high school sport leaders when evaluating head coaches, including giving coaches the opportunity to have a voice in their appraisal (Bennett & Rhea, 1979) and ensuring effective communication between athletic directors and coaches (Leland, 1988). Specific criteria used to measure coaching efforts have also received attention in providing direction to head coaches and offering consistent objectives for leader-

ship to consider. These performance dimensions offer an opportunity for leaders and coaches to jointly establish goals that embody what constitutes an effective head coach, such as academic outcomes, athlete development, behavior and skill development, and leadership (De Klerk & Surujlal, 2013; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995). By including head coaches in goal development, athletic directors can then ensure a coaching evaluation process that is consistent, accurate, and informed.

The use of coaching evaluations has been demonstrated throughout sport to ensure effective efforts from those leading teams. Research has found similarities between administrators and coaches with respect to their perspectives toward the process and the individual criteria deemed to be important (Gillham et al., 2015; MacLean & Zakrajsek, 1996). Across levels of competition, the views for coaching behaviors have remained consistent, as specific performance indicators and expectations of coaches (e.g., attendance, punctuality, implementing strategies) reflect the high standards for leading and developing players (Antunes et al., 2020).

In the high school sport context, quantitative research has examined the coaching evaluation process. To compare the perspectives of coaches and athletic directors toward this process, Hoch (1989) sent questionnaires that examined views on key elements and attitudes in an effective evaluation and found the two groups tended to be similar in their overall perspectives of an effective coaching evaluation. More recently, as an updated look at the presence of coaching evalu-



ations, Thielges (2015) surveyed athletic directors and found that 77% of participants reported evaluating coaches to examine performance. Finally, looking at the specific criteria considered by athletic directors to be the best representation of effective coaching, Hill and Pluschke (2005) identified 17 factors (e.g., exemplifies moral and ethical qualities, supervises facilities, communicates with others, utilizes effective motivational strategies for players) that were rated as somewhat or very important by more than 88% of participants.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the expectations that high school athletic directors have regarding the role head coaches should play within their evaluation. A gap in the literature exists related to the perspectives of leadership toward the ways in which coaches can contribute to the appraisal process to help form the full picture of their efforts. This research represented the first known qualitative study to examine coaching evaluations through this lens within the high school sport context, and in doing so, results aimed to detail the justifications and beliefs of athletic directors more thoroughly in including this key stakeholder (i.e., head coaches) within the structure of the performance appraisal. Inconsistent procedures have been found to limit the maximization of performance appraisals within organizations (Bayon, 2013; Prowse & Prowse, 2009), so this study worked to highlight a clear and consistent set of expectations shared by participants regarding coach-

ing involvement in the process. Through a foundation with the PA process and goal setting theory, the following research questions guided this effort:

RQ1: What expectations do athletic directors have for head coaches regarding their involvement during a performance appraisal?

RQ2: What role do head coaches play in developing goals that are used to review their performance in a coaching evaluation?

### **Methods**

Given the current gap in the literature, this research utilized an exploratory qualitative approach to provide a deeper understanding of the expectations shared by athletic directors toward the role of head coaches within their evaluation. To consider the perspectives and experiences of athletic directors in the high school sport context, data collection efforts ensured participant representation across two key categories (i.e., school classification and school type) that have been the focal point of previous high school sport research to examine how they impact the experiences of key stakeholders (e.g., Epstein, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). Therefore, specific consideration was given to ensure that representation was met across school classification (i.e., 1A, 2A, 3A, and 4A) and school type (i.e., public and private schools).

The sample for this study was secured utilizing a nonprobability sampling technique, which has been identified as the

most common sampling method within qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). More specifically, a purposeful nonprobability sample was developed, as this approach allows for new insight on the phenomena of interest (Robinson, 2014) and elicits information-rich cases to provide in-depth understandings on the central areas of focus (Patton, 2015). Participants represented a heterogeneous sample of athletic directors across the two key categories (i.e., school classification and school type) considered. These athletic directors were secured from a Midwestern state that ranks in the top 20 in the United States in terms of sport participation numbers according to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and whose state athletic association administers at least 10 boys' sports and 10 girls' sports (NFHS, 2022).

Contact information was compiled for each athletic director whose school belonged to the specific state's athletic association to create a full list of potential participants for this study. Email communications were then sent to each individual requesting their participation, which included an overview of the study's purpose and goals and a study information sheet. In total, 25 athletic directors agreed to participate and made up the sample for this research. For a full breakdown of the participants included in this study, please see Table 1. Once the sample was secured, semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted using an interview protocol, which was refined and approved by an expert panel, that helped guide the conversation and ensure consistency during data collection (Creswell &

Guetterman, 2019). Within the 25 interviews, the average interview length was 63 minutes and 20 seconds (63:20), with the longest interview being 87 minutes and 33 seconds (87:33) and the shortest interview lasting 42 minutes and 48 seconds (42:48).

**Table 1**  
*Athletic Director Participants*

Athletic Director	School Classification	School Type
Athletic Director 1	1A	Public
Athletic Director 2	1A	Public
Athletic Director 3	1A	Public
Athletic Director 4	1A	Private
Athletic Director 5	1A	Private
Athletic Director 6	2A	Public
Athletic Director 7	2A	Private
Athletic Director 8	2A	Public
Athletic Director 9	2A	Public
Athletic Director 10	3A	Private
Athletic Director 11	3A	Public
Athletic Director 12	3A	Public
Athletic Director 13	3A	Public
Athletic Director 14	3A	Public
Athletic Director 15	3A	Private
Athletic Director 16	3A	Private
Athletic Director 17	4A	Public
Athletic Director 18	4A	Public
Athletic Director 19	4A	Public
Athletic Director 20	4A	Public
Athletic Director 21	4A	Public
Athletic Director 22	4A	Public
Athletic Director 23	4A	Public
Athletic Director 24	4A	Public
Athletic Director 25	4A	Private

## **Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis was implemented to analyze the compiled data using the six phases (i.e., familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report) outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to develop overarching themes. As this research worked to provide insight into the specific considerations and expectations of athletic directors regarding the role of head coaches during their evaluation, theme development took place using a deductive approach that allowed results to be framed within the established research questions. Through this effort, it was determined that the saturation point had been met and additional participants were not needed, as the research questions were fully answered by the available data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To ensure that data analysis and the developed themes reflected the compiled data, several validity measures were implemented. Upon completion of interview transcription, member checking was conducted, as each participant received their transcript and was given the opportunity to identify any needed changes or edits. In addition to interviews, athletic directors were also asked to share their coaching evaluation forms, which was completed by 24 of the 25 (96%) participants. These documents allowed for data triangulation, as internal validity was secured using the multiple points of measurement. An external coder, who possessed experience in high school sport research and coding qualitative data, was also recruited to review coding efforts. This individual coded

21.5% of the total data, and there was an initial agreement of 83.6%. The researcher and external coder then met to discuss differences until a 100% agreement was reached on the coded data.

## **Results**

The thematic analysis conducted for the data compiled from the 25 semi-structured, in-person interviews led to the development of four main themes (i.e., self-evaluation, perceptions of coaches' responses to the evaluation process, impact of athletic director-coach relationships, and goal development). Additionally, subthemes are present within each major theme to provide deeper context within the main findings.

### **Self-Evaluation**

Although athletic directors are engaged in a constant information-gathering process, the reality is that they cannot be everywhere all of the time. Therefore, it becomes necessary for them to rely on head coaches to help provide additional information by engaging in a self-evaluation exercise. Not only does this generate additional context into the efforts of head coaches, but it also allows coaches to feel as though they are an active participant who has a voice during the coaching evaluation process. By being intentional about this opportunity for self-evaluation, coaches become more engaged, reflective, and responsible for the outcomes and directions pursued during their evaluation. In the theme of self-evaluation, two subthemes were identified: opportunities to self-evaluate and value of self-evaluation.



### ***Opportunities to Self-Evaluate***

When developing their evaluation structure, athletic directors outlined how they intentionally work to provide opportunities for self-evaluation to coaches as a key piece in the interaction. Oftentimes, athletic directors will ask coaches to complete a self-evaluation prior to the meeting so that there will be specific talking points that help guide the conversation and get coaches thinking about the year. Athletic Director 24 described how the use this approach by telling their head coaches “to bring in how you felt you did this year, and let’s work from there.” Coaches will then already be thinking about specific points and be able to provide evidence for why they view themselves in certain ways. One athletic director (16) recognized the length to which they ask their head coaches to go with a self-evaluation exercise ahead of the evaluation meeting but felt it is an all-encompassing, essential piece to maximizing the subsequent interaction. They detailed:

At the end of each season, I send our coach a pretty extensive, it’s six or seven pages of a self-evaluation, so they’re evaluating themselves on those four areas. They’re reflecting on the mission of the school, and then, we have everything broken down by category relative to their pedagogy, their communication, how well they’re delivering information, their commitment to the mission here.

Providing coaches with the opportunity to engage with the same evaluation tool that will ultimately be completed by the

athletic director helps to facilitate the performance appraisal. This was confirmed by Athletic Director 15, who added, “The strength is letting them see the evaluation and letting them evaluate themselves. I think that’s the biggest part of it. It makes the sit-down conversation easy for the most part.” Athletic Directors 9, 14, and 18 also indicated an expectation that their head coaches fill out a self-evaluation as an opportunity to share their insight into how the season went and the opportunities that are present moving forward.

Athletic directors also stressed the importance of giving head coaches the opportunity to share their reflection and responses to specific points during the evaluation. Athletic Director 2 noted that they prioritize wanting to “let the coaches have a lot of say in reflecting.” Athletic Director 13 also emphasized this as an essential element to an effective evaluation. “I think allowing the coach to speak,” they outlined. “It’s easier said than done, and I’ve been in rooms where the leader doesn’t allow the coach really to have a chance to speak...so giving that coach a chance to evaluate themselves is important.”

### ***Value of Self-Evaluation***

One element remained consistent within the perspectives of athletic directors toward coaches’ self-evaluations, which is that this is a valuable piece to the overall performance appraisal. By receiving this insight, participants indicated how they are able to secure a more representative and accurate review of the coach’s efforts from the previous year. Sometimes,

this open exchange can even uncover information that might have been unknown to the athletic director, which has been the experience of Athletic Directors 5, 11, 14, and 19. For example, when approaching the conversation in this way, Athletic Director 11 found, “They’ve (coaches) got a reason why something’s maybe gone haywire in my sense, but there’s underlying circumstances that have caused it.”

Though this added context to specific situations is important, athletic directors emphasized that some of the biggest value achieved through personal reflection is that head coaches are able to self-identify areas where improvement might be needed, which elicits more meaningful outcomes for people when they recognize that on their own. This was indicated by Athletic Director 18. “There’s a lot of merit, I think, in letting a coach kind of go through and give you what they feel like strengths and their areas of improvements need to be,” they said. They also added that doing this effectively “gives you a good starting point for your conversation when you go through the official evaluation.” The pursuit of self-reflection was described as especially important by Athletic Director 16, who detailed why they prioritize this part of the evaluation process when sharing:

The reflective piece of that is huge. In order to grow, you have to know yourself, right? I obviously have an opinion, right, an observation, specific observed behavior, but their opinion of themselves is key. First step in solving a problem is identi-

fying that there is one, and it starts with you.

Overall, athletic directors recognized the value in providing opportunities to head coaches for personal reflection, which can provide key insight that strengthens the coaching evaluation. As Athletic Director 13 summarized, “They (coaches) want to push themselves to be better, and if you are giving them that voice, then that gives them some sense of involvement instead of just telling them, hey, here’s how it needs to be.”

### **Perceptions of Coaches’ Responses to the Evaluation Process**

To ensure an effective coaching appraisal is in place, athletic directors must be able to recognize the perceptions that coaches possess toward the evaluation process. During interactions in which coaches approach an evaluation with hesitancy and doubt, athletic directors have to shift their focus and attention on breaking down walls that limit the exchange of information. However, when there is a foundation of trust and understanding in place, head coaches are more likely to perceive the appraisal as an important opportunity to engage in an honest reflection of their efforts. Within the responses of athletic directors in this research, the latter emerged as the shared experiences of participants when describing how they feel coaches perceive this process. Two main subthemes (i.e., positive interaction and beneficial experience) provide further insight and are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Positive Interaction***

In instances where a person's efforts are being reviewed and even criticized, it is not uncommon for this setting to become uncomfortable and based in negativity. However, when discussing how they believe coaches view the evaluation process, athletic directors perceived the overall response of coaches toward this interaction as positive. Athletic Director 24, when fully appreciating this reality, noted, "I've been blessed, man. So far, I've not had a negative reaction." This athletic director added that even though people can have differences of opinions within an evaluation, which they described "like Republican and Democrats" where you have "one party believes in this, one party believing that," they believe the common thread is an understanding with head coaches that "we all should be pushing to get the same results." Another athletic director (4) said that coaches respond well to an approach in which "I tell them this is what I'm doing. All cards are on the table." This allows them to establish a culture of openness and honesty that resonates well with their head coaches.

For many, securing positive interactions with coaches during this process has come via an effort to position this conversation as positive. Athletic Director 22 indicated that the end result of each appraisal is "usually pretty good" because they emphasize a setting where "we usually walk away with a good understanding of where we're at, what we need to move forward with." Additional athletic directors (i.e., 7, 20, and 25) pointed to specific evidence they have received that confirms

coaching perspectives toward the process are overwhelmingly supportive. For example, Athletic Director 25 shared that the feedback they receive from their boss, the principal, includes completed surveys from head coaches regarding the athletic director's performance. The results "come back relatively positive from our coaches" and demonstrate a favorable perception from coaches on how they are evaluated.

### ***Beneficial Experience***

Beyond ensuring that the interaction is seen as positive by head coaches, athletic directors also emphasized how they believe it is viewed as a beneficial experience that fully maximizes what this process is supposed to be about, which is coaching improvement. This was noted by Athletic Director 19, who felt that their head coaches use the appraisal as an opportunity to "find out how can they go to the next level" to enhance "that experience for those kids." Athletic Director 3 summarized this view of coaches by describing a conversation they had with their volleyball coach. Through an open conversation, this athletic director recalled how "it started with just a simple question, and it evolved into them (the coach) reflecting on quite a bit of his season and what they plan to do moving forward." Not only did this lead to a productive evaluation, but it also allowed the coach to feel good about what is now ahead. "So for them, they were like, man, this was good," the athletic director concluded. "It wasn't something that they'd even really thought about yet."

Athletic directors also detailed how coaches are able to help shape the evalu-

ation moving forward. For example, one athletic director (2) noted that they will ask questions about what coaches like and what they want to see changed as a way of making coaches feel included as a key piece of the overall puzzle. “It’s giving them the opportunity to look at it from overall and letting them lead that because then they’re taking ownership,” they explained. In doing so, athletic directors feel that coaches perceive their role as an active participant in not only identifying what areas they can work on, but also as a necessary voice in shaping the future of their program and the athletic department as a whole.

### **Impact of Athletic Director-Coach Relationships**

Through consistent communications between athletic directors and head coaches within the athletic department, relationships are developed that can strengthen subsequent interactions. Performance appraisals are not immune to the personalities of each individual, as well as the context and background that exist between those participating in the process. By establishing meaningful connections with their head coaches, athletic directors recognized the positive impacts afforded them within the performance appraisal, especially when discussing negative situations or areas of improvement that need to be addressed. The benefits that can emerge from these relationships are represented by two key subthemes (i.e., open line of communication and foundation of trust) discussed below.

### ***Open Line of Communication***

With frequent interactions over the course of a year, people develop a comfort with each other that facilitates a willingness to share information even during difficult times. As this communication line is established, athletic directors identified how it is then transferred into the postseason evaluation and ensures an exchange of honest feedback and productive ideas. Athletic Director 13 summarized this belief when sharing, “That open line of communication then allows me to sit across from a coach and say here’s what I really feel, and that coach is saying, yeah, I agree with that, or no, it kind of went this way.” Not only does this provide a more productive coaching evaluation, but the athletic director also pointed out how “when you’re open, and you’re honest and things like that, you end up having a better relationship with a person.” Another athletic director (21) echoed how relationships and open communication go hand in hand within the appraisal. “If you develop that personal relationship, and you grow that, then the communication is going to be strong, and you can have those honest conversations,” they outlined.

Perhaps one of the most beneficial outcomes of these established relationships on the evaluation process are the communications that can take place ahead of time rather than during the appraisal. Constant and sustained communication has been identified by athletic directors as a key driver in ensuring both sides are on the same page. Athletic Director 20 noted that they “have those conversations regularly” with coaches, while another



(10) aligned with this approach by sharing that a head coach “shouldn’t be hearing from me about something the first time in a performance evaluation. We should have enough contact points throughout the year.” As Athletic Director 18 further argued, the foundation of an evaluation should be built on “communication, and it goes both ways.” Doing so ultimately strengthens coaching appraisals and ensures meaningful outcomes can be elicited.

### ***Foundation of Trust***

Strong relationships are built on the presence of trust that each person will work to do what is in the best interest of the other. The relationships that athletic directors have tried to establish with their head coaches are built on this idea of trust to allow coaches to share their true perspectives while knowing that they will not be used against them within subsequent decisions from an evaluation. Athletic Director 3 felt strongly about the need for trust, calling it “probably the biggest part of any evaluation.” This athletic director has worked to develop relationships so that coaches feel they have “somebody that’s in their corner. By doing that, you instill trust between the two of you.”

Athletic directors outlined how they have worked to create an environment in which head coaches trust them. Within the experiences of Athletic Director 5, they have worked to establish trust by allowing the head coaches to “have the final say so” on many decisions that come from an evaluation because “they know their team better than I do.” This

demonstrates to coaches that they are trusted as the leaders of their program to decide how best to guide it, which in turn encourages them to reciprocate trust to the athletic director. Athletic Director 20 perceived their biggest strength in the evaluation process to be an ability to help coaches recognize the support and trust given to them to lead their program. They added, “We both know that I know that they want the best for us, and they know that I want the best for them.” At the core of meaningful athletic director-coach relationships is a shared understanding that each person is working toward what is in the best interest of each other, the athletic program, and student-athletes.

### **Goal Development**

As athletic directors strive to include head coaches as active participants within a coaching performance appraisal, one area in which they aim to create substantial coaching involvement is in the goal development process. By giving them opportunities to dictate the direction of the program and the expectations that will guide their efforts, athletic directors believe that coaches will feel a stronger sense of control within their role. One athletic director (20) admitted that head coaches play “not enough of a role to be honest with you” when reflecting on the involvement afforded them in goal development efforts and identified this as “a good point, and maybe something that we need to look at” as they consider improvements to their coaching evaluation process moving forward. Overall, though, athletic directors detailed how they work with their coach-



es to develop goals that will reflect the program's pursuits moving forward, and two subthemes (i.e., setting the standard and fitting with the athletic department) are highlighted to provide further context into this goal development process.

### ***Setting the Standard***

A point of emphasis for athletic directors when discussing their coaching evaluation process is not micromanaging how head coaches lead their specific programs. One area where this is especially relevant is within the goals that are developed that will become the expectations for the team. "They pretty much set it," said Athletic Director 23. "I ask them what are they going to be intentional about this season because every season is different." This athletic director felt that when they "allow them (coaches) to set those expectations of themselves and their team and where they are at," then success means a little bit more to the head coaches, as it "is all based on what they said, not me." Another athletic director (4) shared that "one thing I don't do is tell the coaches what are your goals for the year." As an athletic director, giving the coaches the freedom to lead goal development reflects a belief that they are the ones who know what their program needs most.

Setting the standard is reflected not only in what the current needs of the program are, but also where the head coach plans to lead it into the future. This was identified by Athletic Directors 18 and 25, who shared that not only will the evaluation include positive feedback from the previous season, but also a space to ask

coaches questions about how they will achieve improvement and where they see the program going. Another athletic director (17) continued this thought process by outlining the "huge role" they believe coaches play in "setting the standard," as "they (coaches) should be setting the goals of where it is that they want to go and what they want to achieve, and it's their job to find the path, so to speak, to reach their goal."

### ***Fitting With the Athletic Department***

Although head coaches are given the ability to set the standard for how their program will be led, there is still an expectation from athletic directors that these efforts fit within the larger picture of the athletic department and the culture that has been established. Athletic Director 1 explained this as coaches "understanding the work that needs to go into it" and working to "know the culture of the school." Another athletic director (16) believes the joint cooperation of goals to be so important that in their coaching evaluations, "we make sure that there's alignment by the end of that meeting." At the end of the goal development process, athletic directors want to see a set of objectives that aim to improve and set the standard for the program, while also contributing to the effectiveness of the athletic department.

To achieve the departmental goals and priorities in place, athletic directors detailed the shared perspectives that are necessary with head coaches regarding what constitutes a successful program. Given the presence of high school athletics with-

in an educational environment, Athletic Director 18 noted, “I think we as educators are on the same page as far as caring for kids, academic success, definition in general of success.” This athletic director continued that “I don’t think you can be out of alignment with a head coach and think that that’s going to be a good situation.” Athletic Directors 7 and 17 each stressed that they do not want the focus of athletic programs to be “about wins and losses.” This is something Athletic Director 17 felt “aligns pretty well because I think my philosophy is fairly similar to most head coaches’ philosophy.” As Athletic Director #19 summarized, “Coaches want the kids to advance. We do, too. We want the coaches to succeed.” Thus, goal development necessitates coaches that set the right standard and strive to align with the larger athletic department to help ensure meaningful and effective programs.

### **Discussion**

With strong participation rates and short-term and long-term benefits provided to student-athletes, high school athletics have been identified as the most important segment within the sport industry (Fraina et al., 2022). Given the impact, both positively and negatively, that head coaches can have on these benefits, high school athletic directors must be able to evaluate coaches to ensure they are meeting performance expectations. However, due to the demands facing athletic directors in their role, they must also be able to rely on head coaches to actively engage in this evaluation process.

Therefore, the purpose of this study

was to examine the expectations and perspectives that athletic directors have toward creating a structure for coaches to be involved in the review of their performance leading an athletic program. Participants were represented by 25 athletic directors across school classification (i.e., 1A, 2A, 3A, and 4A) and school type (i.e., public and private). Using a thematic analysis, four main themes (i.e., self-evaluation, perceptions of coaches’ responses to the evaluation process, impact of athletic director-coach relationships, and goal development) highlight how athletic directors work to ensure head coaches are provided a role in the evaluation process and describe their perceptions of how coaches view this interaction.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Findings identified in this study reflect how athletic directors expect and position head coaches to be actively involved in their evaluation process, the influence of relationships with athletic directors, and expectations of them in goal development. Previous literature within the performance appraisal process has examined the impact of employee reactions within an appraisal (Alhakeem & Qazi, 2022; Brown et al., 2010) and how positive relationships shape interactions and subsequent decisions (Iqbal et al., 2015; Prowse & Prowse, 2009). Participants in this study emphasized how they expect head coaches to engage in self-reflection exercises that provide a space for their voice to be heard, while also demonstrating their perceptions of head coaches as viewing this process as a positive and beneficial

experience. These interactions are further strengthened when a strong relationship has been established between athletic directors and head coaches.

In the framework of goal setting theory, research has highlighted the need to include key stakeholders, such as coaches, to create the most effective objectives (Locke & Latham, 2019). Thus, goal setting should not be conducted by a single person but should instead feature joint collaboration between managers and employees. Findings from this study support how head coaches should be actively involved in goal development efforts and the impact that can be had when both athletic directors and head coaches possess aligned views for what represents success.

### **Practical Implications**

For those working within high school athletics, results from this research provide insight into how head coaches should be positioned to be engaged participants within the evaluation process. Athletic directors shared how they are reliant on head coaches to share perspectives and contribute to the development of goals to help create an appraisal that accurately reflects their coaching efforts. By including coaches in this process, these individuals then feel more connected to the organization and experience more favorable reactions to their evaluation. The active participation and investment of head coaches in creating a positive interaction was deemed to be essential by athletic directors for establishing an open exchange of information that can help identify the needs of the athletic programs. Current

high school athletic directors should prioritize developing a setting that facilitates involvement by head coaches as a key piece to the evaluation, including self-evaluation and goal development efforts. When appropriately incorporated, coaches reflect a key stakeholder beyond high school athletic directors who directly impact the coaching evaluation and thus should be included by those preparing to lead a performance appraisal.

### **Limitations**

Two biases reflect limitations that emerged during this study. Non-response bias is one form of bias that was present, as the majority of high school athletic directors contacted decided not to participate and thus highlight potential data that were not able to be included within the main findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). During the recruitment phase of data collection, email communications were sent to each athletic director whose school is a member of the state association relied upon for this research. With a final sample of 25 athletic directors, this signifies that most of the athletic directors did not respond and agree to participate. While the reasons for the decision not to participate were not offered, potential explanations include a lack of time and interest or an unwillingness to provide insight into approaches used to evaluate coaches which could be considered ineffective. Regardless of the motivations behind these decisions, non-participation in this study from potential participants embodies a limitation in the overall representation of final data and findings that

aimed to provide insight from athletic directors into how they try to incorporate head coaches into the evaluation process.

When conducting interviews, the potential for social desirability bias impacts how participants respond to questions, as they attempt to provide answers based on how they think they should respond given what they believe to be socially acceptable. Through the presence of social desirability bias, a disconnect can exist between how the individual genuinely feels and acts and how they present information, which negatively impacts the legitimacy of the findings developed when working to understand key concepts (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). As athletic directors shared their evaluation processes, social desirability bias could have led to participants overinflating their true efforts in incorporating head coaches within the performance appraisal process. Therefore, this bias would lead to a reflection of how athletic directors believe coaches should be included in their evaluations instead of how they actually are and thus not provide a true representation of how athletic directors operate.

### **Future Research**

Attention has been placed on the views and experiences of athletic directors regarding their perceptions toward the role coaches should play in an evaluation. Through the results of this study, additional research could be pursued in which the perspectives and experiences of head coaches are more thoroughly examined to further analyze how these individuals perceive their role in an evaluation and the

impact that they can have in influencing outcomes. Previous research has pointed to the role of rates within the evaluation process, yet no work has looked at this specifically through the views of coaches in the high school sport space. Given this reality, this future work can secure the alternative perspective to that of the athletic director and highlight whether the beliefs of athletic directors regarding how head coaches should engage in this interaction align with how head coaches believe they should be involved. This insight could also capture the needs and opinions of coaches toward strengthening the process, as it is their performance being reviewed and their future outcomes being decided during an appraisal. By pursuing a similar study to the current one but through the perspectives of head coaches, a clearer picture of the strengths and opportunities for improvement within the coaching appraisal process can be identified.

### **Conclusion**

With nearly eight million participants competing in high school athletics (Grant, 2021), this segment provides student-athletes with lasting and wide-reaching benefits. Knowing the influence of head coaches on the achievement of these positive outcomes, athletic directors must be able to evaluate coaching efforts through an effective performance appraisal. To maximize this interaction, head coaches need to be afforded the opportunity to share information and feedback, as well as play an active and important role in this process. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of high



school athletic directors regarding how head coaches are positioned to participate within their evaluation process. As the first known study to consider high school head coaches within this context, this research aimed to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing how athletic directors work to involve head coaches in this process, their perceptions of coaches' views and responses toward the evaluation structure, and the opportunities afforded coaches to contribute to their appraisal.

A qualitative approach was implemented to highlight the shared perspectives and experiences of athletic directors (n=25), with four main themes (i.e., self-evaluation, perceptions of coaches' responses to the evaluation process, impact of athletic director-coach relationships, and goal development) emerging that reflect the expectations of athletic directors for coaches within the performance appraisal process. From both a theoretical and practical perspective, these findings advance the understanding of how the coaching evaluation process can be strengthened by positioning head coaches to be active participants in developing the full picture of their overall performance.

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