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"I recruit parents just as much as I do kids": The evolving relationship between intercollegiate coaches and parents

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Parents play a large role in their child's development, and this influence continues into their child's early adulthood (i.e., emerging adulthood; Darlow et al., 2017; Dotterer, 2022). This continued involvement holds true for many intercollegiate athletes (Dorsch et al., 2016; Parietti et al., 2017). An area that research has not examined is how parental involvement impact intercollegiate coaches and how they respond. The purpose of this study was to examine how coaches view parental involvement in athletics, specifically what is the current coach-parent dynamic in intercollegiate sport. Fourteen head coaches participated in this qualitative interview study. Thematic analyses were conducted and the following themes emerged: parent-coach interaction, everybody knows what the line is, and mother/father differences. Overall, coaches are interacting with parents in various ways, and this study helps to start the discussion regarding the intercollegiate coach-parent dynamic.

Parents play a large role in shaping their child's expectations, values, and behaviors in regards to sport often through their own interest and/or participation in sport (Bhalla & Weiss, 2010; Strandbu et al., 2020). Along with this influence, it has also been discovered that parents are becoming increasingly involved in youth sports (Strandbu et al., 2020) and in the lives of intercollegiate athletes (Dorsch et al., 2016; Parietti et al., 2017). These intercollegiate athletes are typically in the stage of life referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2004). This is the stage of life when individuals explore who they are and renegotiate their relationship with their own parents (Arnett, 2004). Sport researchers have focused on this time frame because of how unique this developmental period is (Dorsch et al., 2016; Kaye, 2019; Parietti et al., 2017). As Dorsch et al. (2016) highlighted, parents remain a key socializing agent during emerging adulthood. This continued influence makes it imperative to continue to study the intersection of college students, parents and college coaches.

In terms of coaches, Williams et al. (2010) and Schroeder (2000) found that coaches of intercollegiate athletes tend to serve as major influences in their careers. In the case of Schroeder's (2000) qualitative study, the sample of basketball athletes constantly searched out their head coach for advice and mentorship regarding athletic, academic, and social matters. Williams et al. (2010) similarly stated from their study that "…athletes seek support and guidance from coaches, teammates, family and peers in athletic, academic and personal situations" (p. 228). Thus, the dichotomous relationship between an athlete and his or her coach and parent(s) as socializing agents results in the experience an athlete could have in college. It is still uncertain what impact the increase in parental involvement means for intercollegiate athletic departments, specifically the coaches that work closely with the athletes. Also, researchers have not yet examined the possible variances between mothers and fathers in their interactions with coaches. The purpose of this study was to examine how coaches view parental involvement in athletics, specifically what is the current coach-parent dynamic in intercollegiate sport.

Literature Review

There has been a growing body of research regarding the involvement of parents in the lives of college aged individuals (i.e. emerging adults; Darlow et al., 2017; Dotterer, 2022). Research has shown that parental involvement often decreases as a student gets older, making it higher when the child is in middle school and lessening over high school and college (Dotterer, 2022). This decrease can be exemplified by parents' choosing more indirect ways of interacting with their child's academics, such as asking their child about how school is going versus contacting a college professor directly (Dotterer, 2022).

While parental involvement decreases over a child's life, parents are still often involved in the lives of college students (Dotterer, 2022; Ma, 2009; Parietti et al., 2017). It has been found that parents commonly assist their child with their choice of college (Ma, 2009), choice of major (Ma, 2009; Parietti et al., 2017), and other academic decisions (Dotterer, 2022; Parietti et al., 2017). Parents also often continue to provide both financial and emotional support (Dotterer, 2022). In

addition, the growth of technology has provided multiple means for parents to stay in contact with their child, even when that child has moved away to go to college (Dotterer, 2022; Parietti et al., 2017). In fact, researchers have found many colleges are seeing an increase in parental involvement (Cullaty, 2011; Darlow et al., 2017). There are several potential positive outcomes related to parental involvement in their child's life as that individual enters college. Mailhot et al. (2017) found parents can impact their child's academic self-concept, and this in turn may impact the college student's academic achievement. Specifically, they found parents that believed their children would be successful academically had children with higher GPAs. Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan (2014) similarly discovered parental involvement was positively related to the social self-efficacy of their college-aged child, also predicting the student's graduate school intentions.

Parental involvement in college may also have some negative outcomes. Milhot et al. (2017) found that students had lower GPAs when students thought that grades mattered to their mothers than those who perceived their mother to care less about grades. The researchers suggested this may be caused by these college students seeing their mothers as overbearing or as "helicopter" parents. The term "helicopter" parent has been made popular though the media and refers to some parents' tendencies to hover over their offspring, which is also termed as over-parenting (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). This over-parenting has been found to be negatively related to a college student's self-efficacy (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Darlow et al., 2017). The lower levels of self-efficacy in turn lead to suboptimal academic results and social adjustment (Darlow et al., 2017). Over-parenting has also been tied to higher levels of depression in college students (Darlow et al., 2017; Schiffrin et al., 2014) and lower levels of life satisfaction (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

Parental Involvement in Intercollegiate Athletics

While research examining parental involvement in the lives of college-aged individuals has been growing, research investigating parental involvement in intercollegiate sport is still limited (Lowe et al., 2018; Parietti et al., 2017). The earliest research of note in this area was conducted by Dorsch et al. (2016), who studied how parents are involved in the lives of intercollegiate athletes. They found that parental engagement with academics and athletics was positively related to student-athlete academic self-efficacy, athletic satisfaction, and a lower level of depressive systems. Parental engagement was also tied to lower levels of emotional and functional independence, as well as lower levels of attainment of adult criteria (i.e., "responsibility for themselves, independence in decision-making, and financial independence"; Dorsch et al., 2016, p. 2). In other words, intercollegiate athletes were happier when their parents were engaged, but those same athletes were also further from being independent adults. These results were replicated across the three NCAA divisions through research conducted by Lowe et al. (2018) who surveyed 455 student-athletes across the three divisions and found no divisional differences.

Intercollegiate athletes have indicated that their parents were engaged in both their athletic and their academic lives (Lowe et al., 2018; Parietti et al., 2017). This contact is commonly through text messaging, which often takes place on a daily basis (Lowe et al., 2018). Lowe et al. (2018) found no differences in parental involvement across the three NCAA divisions, and noted that contact with parents was most commonly in the form of text messaging. Additionally, academic advisors who work with athletes have shared that this engagement has become more prominent over their career span (Parietti et al., 2017). Specific to athletics, Kaye et al. (2019) examined 50 student-athletes and a corresponding parent, and found when parents expressed their beliefs in their athlete child's competence, the athlete perceived one's own athletic success more positively.

Parent-Coach Relationship

Both parents and coaches have a large impact on the sport experience of athletes (Blom, 2013; Villafaina et al., 2021). Researchers have examined the athletic triangle, which is the "interpersonal relationships among the parent, coach, and athlete" (Blom et al., 2013, p. 86). At the youth level, research shows that both the coach and parent have a large impact on athletes, and therefore, should work together (Blom et al., 2013; Preston et al., 2020). Beyond this, Villafaina et al. (2021) found through a study of 159 youth coaches, that parents have the ability to influence the behavior of coaches at the youth level, which further emphasizes the need to understand the parent-coach dynamic.

Multiple researchers have stressed the need for positive communication and understanding between coaches and parents at the youth level (Gould et al., 2016; Preston et al., 2020). This could help with what many youth coach parents have indicated, which is the fact that parents are one of the biggest challenges of coaching (Gould et al., 2016). Participants in a study by Gould et al. (2016) of 14 experienced U.S. youth tennis coaches explained having a positive attitude as a coach and seeing parents as an asset helped the parent-coach relationship. Further, the coaches "suggested that parents need to find the *appropriate level of involvement*" (p. 100). It can be inferred that the appropriate level of involvement would change as the athletes aged. Minimal research has discussed the parent-coach relationship at the collegiate level, and typically only in relationship to a different research topic. For example, Parietti et al. (2017) interviewed eight collegiate athletes from a large Midwestern university about parental involvement, and one of the participants described how his mother "talked to a coach about how his coaching style was not conducive to [her son's] success" (p. 125). While many researchers have found that a positive view on the parent-coach dynamic is useful, it is yet to be seen what impact this may have at the collegiate level.

Theory of Emerging Adulthood

Researchers in developmental psychology have identified the ages of 18 to 29 as a new life stage called emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014). Individuals in this life stage have reached physical maturity but have not yet established stable

adult structures (long-term commitments in love and/or work; Arnett et al., 2014). According to Arnett et al. (2014) this life stage is typified by five features: "identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities or optimism" (p. 570). Identity explorations are an individual's effort to try out different possibilities for what they want themselves and their lives to look like long-term (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014; Kohútová et al., 2021). Arnett et al. (2014) argued that this time period "is arguably the most unstable period of the lifespan" (p. 571) in that both love relationships and work experiences are often in flux. Arnett (2000) added that this time also includes instability in regards to living arrangements. Emerging adulthood provides individuals with the ability to focus on themselves more than any other life stage as people in this age range often have the fewest obligations to others, such as parents or children (Arnett et al., 2014). Emerging adults may feel like they are somewhere in-between being a child and an adult as they may be separated from their parents (e.g. living on their own, making their own decisions), but are still financially dependent on their parents (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014; Kohútová et al., 2021; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Even with the challenges emerging adults face in trying to determine who they are and who they will be, most are optimistic about their future (Arnett et al., 2014).

Emerging adulthood is also a time when the nature of the parent-child relationship undergoes dramatic changes (Jiang et al., 2017; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). This is a time-period when individuals usually individuate (separate) from their parents (Jiang et al., 2017; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). In other words, they are working to become more self-reliant and to separate themselves from their parents (Arnett, 2004). Jiang et al. (2017) discussed how this life stage can be challenging for both parents and their child to navigate as parents may see themselves as giving help and advice out of caring, while their child may interpret their parents' actions as a violation of their independence.

Purpose

The changing dynamic of the parent-child relationship may have implications for the parent-coach relationship. This is an important time-frame to examine when it comes to coaching as research has shown parents are becoming increasingly involved in the lives of their emerging adult children. However, no research to date has been found to examine the relationship between intercollegiate coaches and parents. The purpose of this study was to begin to fill this research gap. The research question that guided this study: As athletes move into emerging adulthood, how do coaches perceive the dynamics between coaches and the parents of athletes?

Methods

Based on the lack of existing research regarding intercollegiate coaches and parents, it was determined that a qualitative study was the best method. Qualitative inquiry has the goal of "understanding the meaning of human action" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 248). Qualitative researchers attempt to study phenomena through the meanings that people ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study used an exploratory design in which the

goal was to learn more about the topic in hopes of spurring future research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

The researchers utilized an interpretivist paradigm for this study. The ontology of interpretivism is that reality is constructed by human's interaction and each person has their own version of reality (Sipe & Constable, 1996). In other words, reality is socially constructed, and there are multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interpretivist epistemology is that everyone has a different view of reality, and it is only through talking to them and observing them that we can understand what this view is (Sipe & Constable, 1996). In the case of this study, we had the goal of understanding what the parent-coach dynamic was through the views of the coaches. In alignment with common practice in qualitative research, both authors have practiced self-reflexivity regarding their personal relationship to the research (Duran et al., 2025). Both authors are parents and have coaching experience with author one having coached youth athletes and author two coaching at the high school and intercollegiate levels. The first author has focused their research on parental involvement, while the second author has focused on elements of coaching in their research. Our experiences as parents and coaches shaped our interest in this research and helped us to relate to the participants through shared experiences.

Participants

As all interviews were conducted in person and this was an exploratory study, the researchers utilized a purposeful, typical case sampling technique, where any collegiate coach within the NCAA could be considered (Glesne, 2011). The authors started with coaches that they had access to, and fourteen head coaches agreed to participate in this research (Table 1). All coaches were from universities in the Midwest and they represented NCAA Division I (n=2), Division II (n=8), and Division III (n=3) institutions. At this point the study had reached data saturation, which is commonly defined as the point in a study where no new relevant data is being added (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In the case of this study, we found no new topics in our final two interviews, and therefore found we had reached data saturation. In a systematic review of qualitative studies, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found data saturation was typically found with 9 to 17 interviewees in a study where the population was relatively homogenous as is the case with the current study. This puts the current study's sample size of 14 well within the typical bounds. Pseudonyms and limited demographic information have been utilized to protect the identity of the participants.

Instrument and Procedure

As is in alignment with qualitative research, multiple sources of data were collected for this research (Creswell, 2016; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Each coach was asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews. Once coaches agreed to participate in the study, the coaches were sent an email with an informed consent document and a demographic survey. These were both completed and returned to the interviewer during the first interview. The first semi-structured interview was arranged at the coach's convenience. All coaches chose to have the interviews occur in

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Coach Gender	NCAA Division	Sport Gender	Team/Individual Sport
John*	M	I	F	Individual
Charles*	M	I	M	Team
Frank	M	II	M	Team
Alan	M	II	M	Team
Jordan	M	II	M/F	Individual
Sam	M	II	M	Individual
Dean	M	II	M	Team
Loreta	F	II	F	Team
Anne	F	II	F	Team
Lacy	F	II	F	Team
Tracy	F	II	F	Team
Zach	M	III	M	Team
Logan	M	III	M	Individual
Elaine*	F	III	F	Individual

*Did not participate in second interview

their respective offices. The first interview focused on how parents were involved in their child's athletics experience and the impact that had on the coach's role. The first interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes, and ranged from 27 to 71 minutes.

The second interview consisted of follow-up questions and topics that were spurred by the first interview. This included asking for more detail regarding factors that might impact parental involvement, what they saw as the ideal parent-coach relationship, and further information regarding their personal experiences with parents. The second interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes and ranged from 17 to 64 minutes. Three coaches chose to opt out after the first interview and did not complete the second interview. The information from their first interview was still included in the research.

Analysis

Thematic analyses were conducted on the interview transcripts. As follows the traditional methods for thematic analysis, the transcripts were first read for familiarization with the data (Clark & Braun, 2014). Then the first author reduced the data by marking sections of interest based on commonly shared information, information related to the research topic, or unique information (Clark & Braun, 2014; Creswell, 2011; Seidman, 1998). The first author continued to code these sections (Creswell, 2011; Glesne, 2011), and then combined the codes into themes (Glesne, 2011; Seidman, 1998). The second author reviewed the transcripts, codes, and themes. The two authors then discussed any differences they had in their views of the codes and themes, and resolved any variances. Once agreement was reached, the following themes emerged: par-

ent-coach interaction, everybody knows what the line is, and mother/father differences.

Credibility

This study utilized several techniques to establish credibility. Member checks completed during the second interview allowed the participants to give their feedback on initial themes and interpretations (Glesne, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). Thick description has been used in the form of sharing participant quotes as well as explaining the methods used (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Finally, negative case analysis was used on any information participants shared that did not align with the themes or was contrary to what the other participants said in order to give a complete picture of what all participants shared (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007)

Findings

Parent-Coach Interaction

The participants in this study discussed several aspects that have an impact on the relationship between parents and coaches. They also emphasized how parent-coach interactions started during the recruiting process and continued through the collegiate career of athletes. This theme of parent-coach interaction includes the subthemes of recruiting parents, change over time, amount of communication, value of supportive parents, and proper communication.

Recruiting Parents

The coaches shared that their first interactions with parents were usually during the recruiting process, by which the participants were split on who was the focus of recruiting efforts. Some coaches focused on including the parents when they recruited. "I recruit parents just as much as I recruit the kids," described Elaine. Anne described that she wanted to make "sure [parents] know a little bit about me, especially in the recruiting process." Other coaches focused on the athlete. Alan stated, "For the most part I recruit the kid. I don't recruit the parents. You always get into trouble when you're talking to parents too much." Jordan agreed, "During the recruiting process we sort of bring the parents in as part of the process, but try to stay pretty focused on the student athlete." Loreta discussed that she "makes it clear that through the recruiting process that I would prefer to have the student athlete always communicate with me." One outcome of this for Loreta was that parents "write the email as if they were the player."

The participants also explained how parents impacted their view of potential recruits. According to Elaine, "If the parents are pushy or start bragging about their kids right away, I more than likely won't reach out to you [athlete] again." Loreta added,

> You'll hear coaches at all levels say this, that we'll watch parents and how they react at games because if they're not great at controlling their emotions at a high school game or a club game, that's gonna happen at the college level too.

Anne agreed that she watches parents when she goes on recruiting trips. She looked at "how they are acting when they are watching their kid play…if they're cheering on anybody, if they're only cheering on their kid. Also, how they commu-

nicate with me as well." Lacy summed it up as, "I'm analyzing them [parents] just as much as I'm analyzing their kids." She later mentioned, "I'll pay attention to how they are talking about the coach that their daughter is now playing for?...because if they're talking negatively about a coach, imagine in a year, that's how they're going to be talking about you." Overall, the coaches found parents an important aspect in choosing the correct recruits for their team.

Change over Time

Once athletes are on campus, the coach-athlete-parent relationship often changes. Elaine shared, "There are some parents that get overly involved, but they learn after a year or two that they need to back away." Dean discussed that for many parents, their involvement "tends to taper off as they [athlete] get through college." He also pointed out these changes depend on the family:

> I've had freshmen whose parents were very hands off you know, they keep their distance, they're just there to support their child. And I've had seniors whose parents are the opposite, you know, very hands on, still want to have influence.

Frank added, "I think there's more interaction when their sons are freshmen and then, as they grow up and go through the program, I think you have less interaction with parents." Logan seconded that view, adding, "I can see the transition into where they're just dropping of their little kid [freshmen], and it's hard, and then by their senior year, I think they see them much more as young adults." Lacy shared when she started as a head coach, the seniors she had "never once mentioned my parents want to meet you. Now the freshmen, on the other hand, that was a big concern for them for their parents to know that their daughter is not being coached by some crazy lady."

Most of the coaches also noted that they had seen a change in parental involvement over their career. For example, Charles said,

> I think there's so much more involvement now. When I first started coaching a lot of them just "here ya go…take care of them, just make sure he develops and gets better, and grows to be the man that we want him to be."… [now] with social media there's more opportunities to watch us play, so there's a greater imprint…so they're much more involved.

Anne added parents are "a little bit more involved with everything." Lacy described, "Parents are more helicopter-ish now…their moms would be over at the apartments helping them clean, and cook food, and stuff like that." Dean stated, "…we used to make fun of the kid whose mom brought him Gatorade for the game…nowadays, that's kind of the normal thing…There's a lot of hovering." Loreta added, "They're more involved for sure." Sam gave his perspective: "I think it's increased, and I think it's gonna continue to increase." He later mentioned parents were becoming more emotionally involved at the youth level in his sport, and he expects that behavior to carry over into the college level sport. Tracy shared the increased involvement of parents over her career has made it

> hard for me at times because I want to get to know them, and I want to have some sort of relationship, but

> I think it so quickly crosses a line for them in terms of, "well now we can just talk about whatever."

She further stated that this meant parents were trying to become more involved in discussing coaching decisions.

Amount of Communication

Another aspect of the parent-coach relationship the participants discussed was the amount of communication between the two parties. The coaches had different views when it came to determining how much communication defined a good parent-coach relationship. Some preferred no interactions with parents. For example, Alan shared, "Normally I would have no interaction with parents [unless] it was like this is a serious situation." This was a similar experience to John, who expounded, "One girl's parents I have yet to speak with them in any way: email, text, phone call, in person, nothing at all. Consequently it's like my easiest kid."

However, most of the coaches talked about how they valued good communication with parents. As Charles mentioned, "I think there is great value in the communication with them so that they know that 'my son is safe, he's with the right person'". Anne described it as such:

> The parents aren't here every day at practice so they don't always hear the whole story. If they know my philosophy, my reasoning, how I structure things, it is good because… that could help them better understand what they're [the athlete] going through every day.

Logan said, "I think it makes it easier for us, honestly, to have a good relationship with the parents." He later added:

> I think there's just more of an understanding if they [parents] know me well. I think there's a lot more support for what they're [their athlete child] is trying to accomplish in athletics…For me too, it's nice to get to know the families just because you spend so much time with the athletes, it's good to kind of know where they came from.

Sam shared he thought it was important to have a relationship with parents because "it also teaches me about…how they grew up, and maybe a support system back home or lack thereof." He mentioned that knowing this helped him to better coach the athletes.

Value of Supportive Parents

Along with a proper amount of communication, many of the coaches explained they valued parents who supported their coaching. For example, Anne said she wanted parents to "fully support me knowing that I want the best for their kid." Loreta described the ideal parent-coach relationships as "having parents that are supportive and respect your program and that have an understanding of what your vision is and where you want the program to go." Frank added, "if the parents buy in to how we do things, that's gonna help their sons get through tougher times." Lacy agreed saying, "The ideal parent coach relationship would be supportive." She also added to get the support from parents coaches need "to show we truly care about their child…then I think it is easier for that parent to kind of let go in that regard."

Several coaches mentioned they wanted parents to be engaged both with their

program as well as with their child. As Alan shared, "Come to the games and be a good fan." Loreta discussed she knew parents supported their children "if they come to games." Sam put it as,

> it's really, really, really important for their parents to support them… when there's a phone call home or when they go home, there has to be some support, like, 'hey how's [sport] doing?' you know, like they have to care about them and that domain in their life.

Overall, many of the coaches saw value in parents interacting with the team by attending games as well as being there for their child.

Proper Communication

While supportive parents were important the coaches also highlighted that they wanted parents to know what lines to not cross when it came to communication. Anne stated that she wanted parents to be comfortable talking to her "yet not super comfortable that they are willing to just walk into your office and ask why I'm making decisions, questioning my coaching." Tracy agreed, stating, "I think the ideal would be that there's good open dialogue, but that there's an understanding of what's appropriate to talk about and what's not." Dean added, "I think the best ones are hands off." Sam shared about one parent, who had extensive experience in the sport, that knew the boundaries, "he was just outstanding. Like, one of the first things he's ever said to me was, 'I'm gonna let you coach, and I'm just gonna be his father, so I ain't gonna tell him how to [do sport].'" The participants shared proper communication with parents meant parents focused on being parents and allowed the coach to do their job.

Everybody Knows What the Line is

All but one of the coaches mentioned that there is a strict line when it comes to talking to parents, and that line is discussing coaching decisions. The one coach, Charles, shared that he does talk to parents about coaching decisions. He expounded that he would tell parents the truth about their child "and sometimes I'll even invite parents to come in, if you want to watch film, let's watch film." He further explained, "I want an open dialogue with the parents so that they understand exactly what my expectations are."

Conversely, Elaine shared, "I think everybody knows what the line is." For example, Anne said, "I want to be able to talk to them [parents] and have a conversation with them, as long as it's nothing to do with their kid's playing time." Dean elaborated, "I don't really want to talk about [sport] with the parents…It's kind of an unwritten rule." Tracy summed it up that by asking coaches about playing time is "not really a role in the college game for parents." Despite the line coaches drew, some parents still tried to discuss playing time. Tracy described a time when a parent stepped over the line:

> There was an email sent that involved playing time. It was sent to [AD] and [athletic trainer]. It was sent to like everyone in the building basically that had any involvement with the program…then the father approached my assistants when they were out in [town] at a restaurant…the player's not on the team anymore.

On the other hand, Jordan and Sam both pointed out that they rarely have parents

approach them regarding the athletic side because their particular sports are clearer when it comes to why an athlete is participating in the way they participate. Jordan described, "There's not very often I'm making a decision that people will think is controversial." Sam added, "Parents really steer clear because it's really black and white, especially for playing time."

Some coaches said they did not talk to parents about playing time because the parents did not have all the information needed to make sport decisions. For example, Dean shared, "I don't ever talk about playing time with parents though. It's just not even an option…They don't know the whole story. They can't see the big whole picture." Lacy agreed, stating,

> Parents see less than 5% of the work that's done. You see the game time. You miss the practices. You miss the weights. You miss all the opportunities that your kid has an opportunity to show us…You got that 5%, but what you're missing is that 95% picture, and are they doing the work that it entails to get there?

John summed it up as "I'm not going to talk to you [parent] about anything that happens within [sport] cause, look, I spend more time with your daughter than you do."

The coaches stated that they preferred the athletes to discuss playing issues with them. Jordan was quoted, "We've really tried to build a pretty autonomous structure where I feel like the decision-making process in terms of what's going on is really centered around the relationship between me and the student athlete." If a parent asked Alan about playing time, he "would just say, well, 'Johnny should come ask me.'" Anne called it a "red flag" when parents are "asking questions that were answered to their children or things that their kids should be asking me." She illustrated that she would try to "politely avoid" parents that did this. Loreta shared about an experience she had:

> Two years ago, I did have a father email me about playing time, and I did not respond to his email. My response was, I pulled his daughter into the office, and I actually had his daughter read the email, so she knew exactly. Then me and her talked through the email. She then went home because three hours later I got an apology email saying, "I apologize I wrote this. I should've had her come directly to you."

Frank shared similar experiences: "I've had parents email me during the season, and I just don't respond. And then when the season's over I meet with Jimmy or Joey, and I say… 'just tell your parents I don't discuss playing time ever.'" Sam added a story regarding a father, specifying "I remember saying, 'I'll just have this conversation with your son, he'll figure it out, he's an adult.'" Overall, the coaches showed a preference for all sport-related discussions to be between the coach and athlete, while parents stayed out of the conversation.

Mother/Father Differences

On further discussing parental interactions, several of the participants discussed differences they saw between parents. The differences they highlighted often were between mothers and fathers. In the case of this study, these differences can

be broken down into the sub-themes of "coach type fathers, holistic mothers, and difficult mothers.

"Coach Type" Fathers

The coaches agreed that fathers were more focused on the athletics side of their child's athletic career. As Sam put it, "Dads may be more of 'the coach type.'" For John, one of the players had a father that was currently a coach for that sport. Frank shared that fathers were more understanding of what happened in the sport and "are probably a little bit more critical [of their child's performance]." Alan added, "Dads are, I guess, pushing them a little bit more." Jordan described this coaching side as "they [dads] tend to be more performance oriented in terms of what the nature of their conversations are. A little bit more competitive and a little bit more interested or wanting to engage on that side of things." Loreta put it as "dads are very tied to games and probably show the most emotions at games, especially if they're unhappy with something…[like] a bad call." Logan discussed, "Sometimes dads get a little bit more involved in the sport aspect of it." Lacy added "some dads can be really protective." The participants often saw fathers being more focused on the athletic aspects of their child's sport experience.

Holistic Mothers

On the other hand, all of the coaches indicated that mothers were the holistic parent that supported their child no matter what and cared about how their child was doing as a whole. Logan said, "A lot more times conversations with moms tends to be more kind of about the emotional aspects of their kids, like how are they doing? How is school going?" Jordan talked about how conversations with mothers were "more 'how are they doing?'" He further shared that they were more "holistic" in their conversations about their child. Alan clarified that he did not want to stereotype, but "moms are usually just supportive." Other coaches put it as "their [moms are] more the cheerleader" (Sam) and "moms are a bit more of the loving portion of a bad game" (Loreta). Frank shared, "A higher percentage of mothers feel like their sons can't do as much wrong." He later added, "I don't think mothers maybe analyze it [the sport aspect] as much, they're just from the supportive side." Anne shared "I definitely interact with more moms than I do dads." Several coaches also indicated that mothers were more emotional. For example, Anne shared "I see more emotional mothers. I know that sounds bad." This showed the participants saw mothers as less focused on athletic achievement and more attentive to their child's overall well-being.

Difficult Mothers

With mothers being more holistically focused, some of the coaches discussed they were more difficult to work with. One example was shared by Sam:

> You'll get a mom that will want things done a certain way…I had a mom tell me, "oh, the old coach used to do this" or "his high school coach did this to him and that worked," like try to tell me how to do things you know.

Dean agreed saying, "Moms get a little more upset with anything they deem unfair…I think the bigger issues have always been moms." He then told a story about

a mother who was upset because she felt her son was being mistreated, but Dean argued she "didn't really have a handle on the game of [sport] and statistics." John shared that he had a player that was starting the next season and he had "spoken with mom more than I have with the daughter." He later explained the mom was sending emails to the coach from her daughter's email account. Only one coach, Lacy, shared that she had dealt with a difficult father. Overall, the participants shared great insights into the coach-parent dynamic.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between intercollegiate coaches and parents, specifically examining this relationship in light of the life stage of the intercollegiate athlete, emerging adulthood. Several overarching themes emerged from the data shared by coaches. These included: parent-coach interaction, everybody knows what the line is, and mother/father differences.

Parent-Coach Interaction

Researchers have found that parents commonly assist their child with their choice of college (Ma, 2009). It would therefore logically follow that parents would also be involved in the recruiting process, which is what all of the coaches in this study experienced. Many of the coaches indicated the involvement of parents does not end when their child starts college. According to Dotterer (2022), parental involvement changes over a child's lifetime, but parents often still interact with their child's academics. Several of the coaches explained how they often see changes in parental involvement from the time an athlete is a freshman until they are a senior with parents being more involved at the beginning of their child's collegiate career and lessening their involvement as their child moves through college.

Previous researchers have found parents are becoming increasingly involved in their child's collegiate academic career (Cullaty, 2011; Darlow et al., 2017). This increase in involvement appears to also be seen within intercollegiate athletics. Similar to the findings of Dorsch et al. (2016) and Parietti et al. (2017), several of the coaches explained how they had witnessed parents becoming more involved in the lives of intercollegiate athletes. The coaches acknowledged that there were benefits in regards to parents being involved in the lives of their intercollegiate athlete child; specifically, they preferred when parents were supportive of their child's athletics, as well as their coaching.

Multiple researchers have stressed the importance of good communication between youth coaches and parents (Gould et al, 2016; Preston et al., 2020). The coaches in this study shared that the importance of good communication continues into intercollegiate athletics. While the participants in this study did not imply parents are one of the biggest coaching challenges as was seen in youth sport (Gould et al., 2016), the coaches in this study acknowledged parents still have an impact on their child. The participants explained that good communication can help parents feel more comfortable regarding their child's sport as well as help the parent to be more supportive of the coach. However, the coaches stressed that it was important for the communication between the coach and the parent to remain professional, they were not friends.

Everybody Knows What the Line is

While the coaches appreciated good communication with parents, all but one of them emphasized the unwritten rule, coaches do not talk to parents about playing time. While this seems to be a well-known view among coaches, previous research has not examined this aspect of the parent-coach dynamic. At the youth level it may be more difficult to maintain this strict line as parents are more heavily involved in the lives of young children (Dotterer, 2022). The fact that these coaches worked with emerging adults may have helped them to maintain their strict line with parents regarding the discussing of their sport. It is also possible that the growing involvement of parents in the lives of emerging adults has enabled more parents to attempt to cross the line regarding talking to coaches about coaching decisions. This change may make coaching more challenging in the future.

Mother/Father Differences

The differences that the coaches mentioned regarding mothers and fathers fell into the following subthemes of "The 'Coach Type' Father" and the "Holistic Mother," suggest the coaches ascribed to the gender roles expected of men and women. It does have to be highlighted that these answers were from the coach's perspective, it is unknown if the majority of parents they interacted with actually fulfilled these gender typical roles or if the coach only perceived that to be true. In alignment with what the participants answered, many researchers have found that men are expected to be better at sport, and with that know more about sport (Boiché et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2025; Mateo-Orcajada et al., 2021). When looking at athlete support of corporate social advocacy initiatives, Brown et al. (2025) found male athletes were seen as more credible than female athletes by both male and female participants. Sports and coaching also closely align with the agentic roles that are typically seen as masculine (Andrew & Hums, 2007; Eagly, 1997; Grappendorf et al., 2023; Hentschel et al., 2019; Weight et al., 2021). The view of the "holistic mother" also aligns with the research that has found women are expected to have more communal behaviors (Andrew & Hums, 2007; Eagly, 1997; Grappendorf et al., 2023; Hentschel et al., 2019; Weight, 2021). With this, mothers are perceived as more caring, supportive, and nurturing. As these answers were from the coach's perspective, it is unknown if the majority of parents they interacted with actually fulfilled these gender typical roles or if the coach only perceived that to be true. As Eagly and Wood (2012) shared, an individual's internalization of gender roles impacts how they expect others to behave.

The subtheme of the "difficult mother" is interesting in the fact that behaviors within the expected gender role of female were seen as making mothers more difficult to deal with for coaches. Typically, the feeling is that mothers as caretakers would want what is best for their child (Eagly & Wood, 2012). When they are outspoken for what they believe is their child's best interest, the coaches found them difficult. The same was not said about fathers by the participants. The coaches often tied the mother's interactions as stemming from not understanding the sport, and therefore mistaking good decisions as unfair. This aligns with previous research that suggests women are seen as less

knowledgeable regarding sport (Brown et al., 2025; Mateo-Orcajada et al., 2021). It is possible the coaches' views on this topic are filtered through their expectations for gender roles.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provided an early step into understanding the intercollegiate coach-parent dynamic, but further research is needed to delve further into this complicated relationship. The small, regional sample precludes generalizing from this study, and further research should be conducted to gain a more complete picture of the parents of intercollegiate athletes and their interactions with coaches. Although the sample consisted of NCAA Division I, II, and III coaches' perceptions, the sample is skewed toward Division II, and further studies should consider a quantitative method which could better compare the different divisions. Finally, the perspectives of athletes' parents and the athletes themselves would be valuable.

Practical Implications

This study has multiple implications for those who work with college athletes. With many of the coaches sharing how they have seen parental involvement increase over their careers, it is important for athletic departments to consider what this means for their coaches, athletes, and overall programs. Departments should consider having resources for parents that help to explain the coach-parent dynamic, such as setting the expectation that coaches will not discuss playing time or other sport-specific issues. It also may be beneficial for athletic departments to consider a uniform policy for coach-parent interactions. This can help bring clarity for coaches regarding expectations for working with parents. Finally, based on the coaches' preference for parents that support both the coach and the sport, athletic departments may want to consider adding more parent-related activities that help build healthy relationships between the parents, coaches, and athletic department.

Conclusion

Where previous research has focused on parental involvement in youth sport, this study provides a starting point for better understanding the parent-coach relationship at the intercollegiate level. This study suggests that there is a growing need to understand parental involvement in sport at the intercollegiate area as many of the participants saw parents becoming more involved over their careers. It was also shown that coaches value good communication with parents, though what good communication means differs some from coach to coach. The one clear communication line regarded the discussion of sport-specific decisions, such as playing time, which the coaches did not discuss.

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