

SPORT

“Wins and Losses Are Secondary”: Goals Developed by High School Athletic Directors to Evaluate Coaching Success

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Abstract

High school head coaches play an important role in the achievement of wide-reaching benefits afforded to student-athletes through their athletic participation. Given this impact, athletic directors must establish expectations that reflect successful coaching efforts by those tasked with leading athletic programs. Limited research has considered the use of performance appraisals within high school athletics as a way of evaluating head coaches, and a gap exists related to an in-depth examination of the criteria utilized to guide this process and detail how athletic directors perceive coaching success in this role. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the goals relied upon by athletic directors to evaluate head coaches during the performance appraisal process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants representing athletic directors across school classification (i.e., 1A, 2A, 3A, and 4A) and school type (i.e., public and private), with a thematic analysis yielding six main themes (i.e., coaching leadership behaviors, in-sport priorities, student-athlete life skill development, school day behaviors of student-athletes, promoting the athletic department, and investing in the feeder system) that detail the diverse

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areas considered by athletic directors during coaching evaluations. From a theoretical perspective, this work advances understanding of the performance appraisal process and goal-setting theory within high school athletics, while practitioners can utilize findings to reflect on their personal expectations of coaching success through the specific goals implemented for evaluating performance.

Introduction

With nearly eight million students participating in at least one sport (Grant, 2021), high school athletics play a key role in the overall academic experience in the United States. Given the high participation rates and wide-reaching benefits from being a student-athlete (e.g., academic success, life skills, lasting positive outcomes), this segment has been identified as the most significant body in the sport industry (Fraina et al., 2022). As athletics have been incorporated into the educational mission of schools, athletic departments thus prioritize programs that contribute to the development of student-athletes. This creates a need to ensure that those leading each athletic program (i.e., head coaches) are successful in meeting established outcomes through a sport and non-sport perspective. As the person responsible for making decisions that shape how the program operates, the onus is placed on head coaches to facilitate positive experiences for student-athletes through their participation (Forsyth et al., 2022).

To review coaching efforts, athletic directors engage in a performance appraisal process that evaluates coaching performance and determines the success of head coaches in meeting the goals they have developed (Ratts & Pedersen, 2023). In leading the athletic department, these leaders establish what is most important for student-athletes through their participation as well as expectations for a successful program (Forsyth, 2021). As such, the goals established to guide a coaching evaluation represent overarching organizational objectives, emphasize the priorities of athletic directors when considering successful head coaches, and demonstrate what constitutes a meaningful experience for those involved in the athletic program.

Performance Appraisal Process

Organizations aim to guide and enhance employee efforts by consistently reviewing performance and ensuring established goals are met. This review is conducted through the performance appraisal process, in which management and subordinates collectively reflect on the past and determine necessary future directions. Barbieri et al. (2023) identified these appraisals as one of the most powerful management tools by affording leaders the opportunity to assess employee work, identify goal achievement, and foster effective performance moving forward. Implementing specific goals to review performance provides a clear measurement for evaluating an employee's efforts and ensures consistency in determining success (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006; Iqbal et al., 2015). Through an appraisal process that promotes goals, specific criteria can be established for individuals, and desired outcomes can fit within the broader context of the organization. Known as management by objectives, this approach clearly communicates the expectations of the employee and has been found to increase productivity within sports (Williams, 2013).

Goal-Setting Theory

To maximize an evaluation of employee performance, DeNisi and Pritchard (2006) emphasized the use of a goal-oriented perspective. First developed by Locke (1968), goal setting describes how hard and specific goals elicit a higher level of success, as defined intentions motivate actions. Over time, Locke and Latham (1990) established a theoretical framework centered on goal setting, which posits that implementing specific and challenging goals represents the most effective approach for enhancing an individual's performance. Thus, goal-setting theory serves as a meaningful way for achieving desired objectives (Locke & Latham, 1990). Every organization relies on goals to detail what it aims to accomplish through performance expectations, which places an emphasis on the process of goal setting to be successful (Locke & Latham, 2019). Sport has been identified as an ideal setting to help improve employee performance through goals that touch all areas of the organization, stretch across different skills and traits, and facilitate long-term success (Locke & Latham, 1985). When done effectively, sport leaders provide a lens through

which evaluations can be positioned, while employees are provided with direction to guide their efforts. By achieving goals, employees experience success in their role and strengthen the organization (Locke & Latham, 2019).

Coaching Evaluations

Leaders within sport have used appraisals as a guide in determining an individual's success. Within coaching appraisal literature, performance dimensions embody the goals developed to inform coaches on how success will be determined, reflect desired outcomes at the individual and organizational level, and examine areas such as academic outcomes, skill development, and leadership (MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995). These dimensions have been featured within scales established to measure coaching expectations in appraisal processes (Gillham et al., 2013; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995), as well as additional coaching evaluation tools utilized to offer guidance on coaching success. Mallett and Côté (2006) established a model for evaluating head coaches that went beyond wins and losses and encouraged perspectives from key stakeholders, while Gillham et al. (2013) relied on a questionnaire that assessed coaching ability based on individual athlete outcomes (e.g., self-confidence, motivation, enjoyment).

Coaching Evaluations in High School Sports

In high school sports specifically, limited research has considered the use of performance appraisals to review coaching efforts. Hoch (1989) compared the perspectives of coaches and athletic directors on this process and found similar views on the elements of an effective process, while a more recent survey of 171 high school athletic directors included 77% of participants sharing that they evaluate coaches and 70% indicating that the evaluation took place at the end of the sport season (Thielges, 2015). As such, athletic directors have implemented coaching evaluations to analyze coaching success. Through questionnaires with athletic directors on what should be included on an evaluation form, 17 factors (e.g., exemplifies moral and ethical qualities, supervises facilities, communicates with others) were noted as being somewhat important or very important by more than 88% of respondents (Hill & Pluschke, 2005).

More recently, Ratts and Pedersen (2023) conducted a qualitative analysis of performance appraisals to understand how athletic directors evaluate the efforts of head coaches. Findings detailed an evaluation process that aims to analyze coaching success through elements such as year-round information gathering, a positive and open evaluation environment, and a coaching evaluation form that ensures clear and consistent interactions with head coaches. Despite efforts to maximize this process, a lack of time and resources and differences in opinions during the evaluation reflect challenges facing athletic directors (Ratts & Pedersen, 2023). To help ensure a comprehensive understanding of head coaching efforts is secured when determining success, it is necessary to incorporate perspectives from key stakeholders (e.g., administration, student-athletes, assistant coaches) on their experiences with the head coach (Ratts, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the goals developed by high school athletic directors to evaluate coaching performance in determining successful efforts. A gap in the literature exists regarding an in-depth analysis of leadership perspectives on what they prioritize when ensuring coaching effectiveness. This research represented the first known study to thoroughly examine the specific criteria used to guide performance appraisals in high school sports. Therefore, results aimed to provide context for the goals that athletic directors utilize when engaging in a coaching evaluation. In doing so, a deeper understanding was pursued on the perspectives of athletic directors regarding the outcomes they have identified as key focal points in their appraisals. Through a foundation within the performance appraisal process and goal-setting theory, the following research question guided this study:

RQ1: What goals are utilized by high school athletic directors when conducting a performance appraisal to determine successful head coaching?

Methods

This study utilized an exploratory qualitative approach to secure a deeper understanding of the goals emphasized by athletic directors

to determine coaching success during an evaluation. Data collection efforts ensured the representation of athletic directors across two key categories (i.e., school classification and school type) that have been examined in high school sport research to secure diverse perspectives and experiences (e.g., Epstein, 2008; Johnson et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described a nonprobability sampling technique as the most common sampling method for qualitative research. Specifically, a purposeful non-probability sample was developed, as participants represented a heterogeneous group of high school athletic directors from a Midwestern state ranked in the top 20 in the United States based on the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) sport participation numbers (NFHS, 2023). Intentional consideration was given to achieve representation within school classification (i.e., 1A, 2A, 3A, and 4A) and school type (i.e., public and private schools).

Every athletic director whose school was a member of the specific state's athletic association was contacted via email to request their involvement in the study. A total of 25 athletic directors agreed to participate, thus representing the study's sample. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants in this research. Once the sample had been developed, semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted using an interview protocol approved by an expert panel of five individuals to guide the interview conversations and ensure consistency during data collection. Across the 25 interviews, the average interview duration was 63 minutes and 20 seconds (63:20), with the longest interview lasting 87 minutes and 33 seconds (87:33), and the shortest one lasting 42 minutes and 48 seconds (42:48).

Data Analysis

Guided by 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) detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis was utilized to capture the shared goals implemented by high school athletic directors to evaluate head coaching performance. Theme development was conducted through a deductive approach, positioning results within the context of the established research question. Saturation was deemed to have been met through the analysis, as the research question was fully answered, and no new themes emerged (Merriam & Tisdell,

Table 1
Athletic Director Information

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

2016). Several validity measures, including member checking, data triangulation, and reliance on an external coder, were employed to ensure that the thematic analysis and established themes accurately represented the data.

Results

The thematic analysis implemented for the data from the 25 semi-structured, in-person interviews generated six main themes (i.e., coaching leadership behaviors, in-sport priorities, student-athlete life skill development, school day behaviors of student-athletes, promoting the athletic department, and investing in the feeder system) that detail the key goal areas considered by athletic directors when evaluating coaching success.

Coaching Leadership Behaviors

As the leader of the athletic program, head coaches are expected to set the example for how operations will be conducted. Through specific coaching leadership behaviors, athletic directors discussed how they can be confident that the right person is leading the program. While the ways in which coaches can exhibit these behaviors are vast, two subthemes (i.e., creating a culture and interactions with others) encapsulate the shared areas where athletic directors view successful leadership from coaches and are more thoroughly detailed below.

Creating a Culture

For athletic directors participating in this research, a priority was to identify coaches who have established a culture in which people want to be involved. Athletic Director 1 called this “creating a culture that makes kids want to come play,” while Athletic Director 4 added, “I was told this a long time ago...your best coaches are the ones that the kids want to play for the coach.” Another athletic director (12) described a successful coach through how they have positioned culture as an important piece to their leadership. “The big thing for me is culture,” they noted. “What is the culture of your program? Are all your kids totally invested?” For one athletic director (23), they discussed the idea of what they called “to create and maintain an athletic program that people want to be part of. That’s our main goal.” They explained how for “94% of high school athletes, this is it. When they leave us, 94% of them have played their last athletic competition,” so it is important “to ensure that from the starter all the way to the last kid on the bench that they have the best experience.”

A crucial component in creating a culture is having a clear plan for how to best structure operations. Athletic Director 19 summa-

rized how the coach's ability to be organized reflects the "nuts and bolts of the beginning of the evaluation because you got to have those in place to be able to perform." For one athletic director (18), maximizing the ultimate goal of "care of kids" cannot be achieved unless the head coach has clearly outlined how they plan to ensure a program is structured in a meaningful way. At the same time, another (10) has found that this area of a coach's role is underappreciated for "how it impacts the culture of the team."

Interactions With Others

Another important element of successful leadership is the ability to develop meaningful relationships with others to elicit positive outcomes. Athletic Director 3 emphasized that building relationships must be at the core of everything their coaches do to have a positive impact on student-athletes. "The very first thing I'm looking for in a coach is that they are personable and that they're ready to build relationships with their players because again, you can't get by in any system without relationships first," they emphasized. Connecting with student-athletes was echoed by another athletic director (20) when saying, "I think first and foremost, it's the relationship building." They continued that "when they (student-athletes) know and they trust you... they'll do anything for you, so I think that relationship thing is most important." When talking with head coaches about the potential impact that they can have, Athletic Director 2 will "try to instill that in my coaches, get to know the kids on a different level."

In leading an athletic program, the ability to communicate effectively is identified as necessary for success. One athletic director (17) posited that "if you're going to be somebody that's highly effective here, you are going to be a great communicator with the kids." Effective communication was listed by another (11) as "the most important thing" for head coaches in their role. Athletic Director 10 used an example of one coach "that I would have a tremendous amount of respect for and really feel good about the job they're doing" because of how they show their student-athletes respect. "They treat their student-athletes with respect, and by that what I mean is their coaching voice, their coaching tone, the information they give is always given in a positive, supportive manner," they explained. Athletic Director 7 added that "when I look at success, I look at their ability to communicate."

In-Sport Priorities

The pursuit of winning represents a key element that leads many to engage in sports. As high school athletics are founded within an educational setting, however, participants emphasized that their in-sport priorities are not reliant upon wins and losses. Instead, the focus is on how head coaches conduct themselves when leading the team during a game, as well as how student-athletes develop throughout the season and represent the program. As such, three subthemes (i.e., wins and losses not important, performance expectations, and a positive coach demeanor) reflect the lens through which athletic directors consider whether a head coach is meeting expectations for success.

Wins and Losses Not Important

While those involved in any athletic program want to win, athletic directors explained how this is not what is most important when considering whether a coach is successful. Given the presence of athletics within a school setting, the desired outcomes align more closely with the experiences of student-athletes. One athletic director (23) described this perspective when indicating, “We never talk about wins or losses. We just focus on what kind of experience they’re going to provide for the student-athlete.” Athletic Director 12 further highlighted this view. “Wins and losses are secondary,” they noted. “We are still in the business of interscholastic education. Is her or she good to the kids? Are they a good leader? Are they a good role model?” The athletic director added that “if the answer to that is yes, I’m very reluctant to make any kind of changes based on wins and losses.” Another athletic director (16) knows that “it sounds so cliché and something you would say,” but “we don’t evaluate coaches off of a scoreboard or wins and losses.” They bluntly concluded, “I legitimately don’t care.”

Performance Expectations

By prioritizing other areas over winning and losing, athletic directors believed that their head coaches could enhance the overall experience for student-athletes by investing in their development. Athletic Director 2 emphasized “that if we improve every year, that’s the biggest thing,” which then allows student-athletes to develop and enjoy being a part of the athletic program. Through the promotion

of skill development within the sport, Athletic Director 12 felt that student-athletes could “continue to love the sport.” They added, “We want to see skill progression and knowledge and gameplay progression on the mental aspect... You want to see them progress as athletes while continuing to enjoy doing it.”

Participants also emphasized the importance of seeing individuals who represent the school in the right way, demonstrating good sportsmanship and effort while competing. Athletic Director 17 believes this is something “that the coach sets that example.” At the same time, Athletic Director 22 noted how they tell coaches that “we want you to win,” but what is more important is that “we want you to do it the right way,” which is reflected by having “great sportsmanship.” This comes with a respect for the game, which involves giving maximum effort. “My expectation is that our kids play hard,” Athletic Director 6 explained. “I don’t want them giving up at the end...the expectation is that they’re playing hard.” When leaders are unwilling to commit to promoting hard work within their program, it has led to decisions to move on from a head coach. Athletic Director 21 offered an example of this when recalling, “I have only in my 12 years removed two coaches, and both of them is because they lost their team. The kids weren’t playing hard.”

Positive Coach Demeanor

Athletic directors also pointed to what they want to see from head coaches in their demeanor when leading the team during an event. A coach’s response to a situation can set the tone for how student-athletes react to certain calls during an event, as further explained by Athletic Director 5. They described wanting a head coach on the sideline who is “calm, cool, and collected” when interacting with others because they know that the coach’s “actions on the court on bad calls is a direct relation to how the kids are going to react as well.” Exchanges with student-athletes during a game also reflect the conduct of head coaches, as Athletic Director 10 discussed how they consider, “How do they (head coaches) interact with their students? How do they interact with their students when they make a substitution?” For Athletic Director 16, any interaction between coach and student-athlete should aim to get the best out of every player so “that it’s apparent to me that there is a love for one another on that team.” They continued, “It needs to be obvious to me that there’s love com-

ing from the sideline, there's love coming to the sideline, and there's love while it's going on."

Student-Athlete Life Skill Development

Beyond growth within the sport, a priority was also placed on student-athletes becoming better human beings through their participation, which the head coach cultivates. Athletic Director 9 described this mindset further, "I want to make sure that our coaches are not just developing student-athletes on the field, but off, and having those life talks, those expectation talks." Another athletic director (21) said that "our concern is what are they (head coaches) doing with our student-athletes," and "how are they getting those kids prepared for life." For Athletic Director 5, success on the court is nice, "but if we're teaching the kids something that's going to help them in life, that's the biggest thing," while another athletic director (22) posited, "Education-based athletics is about helping students and athletes be ready for their next step."

The prioritization of life skill development through high school sport participation focuses not only on its short-term impact on student-athletes, but also on its long-term benefits for them. Athletic Director 23 highlighted wanting coaches who are in this role because they want "to put out really good adults later on in life, and so that's where we spend a lot of our time. How can we develop these kids into good, outstanding adults in our community?" Athletic Director 15 has an expectation "to get our kids prepared for either playing the sport in college or the realities of life once they get out of high school. We want to hold a high standard." This idea was echoed by Athletic Director 2, who said, "My biggest thing is if we can look at it and say are we building kids to be successful outside of high school?"

School Day Behaviors of Student-Athletes

The presence of sports within an educational setting creates a relationship between athletics and academics in which these extracurricular activities are positioned to promote the performance of student-athletes during the school day. Within the school day behaviors of student-athletes, two subthemes (i.e., promoting academic success and addressing discipline issues) represent how head coaches should contribute to student-athletes being high achievers and positive examples in the classroom.

Promoting Academic Success

High school athletics represent an environment in which sports can champion academic success as head coaches establish educational expectations for student-athletes to participate. “Number one, they’re student-athletes first, and we always emphasize the student being first,” explained Athletic Director 17. “The idea of emphasizing the student part of student-athlete first is something that I have always done and continue to do.” Athletic Director 3 shared how one of the first questions they pose in an evaluation relates to a coach’s view toward athletics promoting academics. “I’m looking for student-athlete,” they offered. One athletic director (24) added how they seek coaches who can recognize these academic issues and work to help student-athletes overcome them. They noted how they want coaches to say, “You’re struggling in class. What can I do to help you because I can’t let you participate if you’re not doing what you need to do in the classroom. I think it all goes hand in hand.” As Athletic Director 25 summarized, “Academics is the number one thing, and our kids know that, and our coaches know that.”

Addressing Discipline Issues

Although athletic directors recognize that head coaches cannot prevent every discipline issue that might arise, what is most important is how leaders respond in these situations. Athletic Director 20 shared that “what may be reflected on the evaluation is if the coach also doesn’t address it and try to use it as a teachable moment.” Another athletic director (23) stated they want to see head coaches “holding a kid accountable” when they hear about bad behavior. “We’ve had coaches in the past who no longer work here that when a kid would get in trouble, they would ask how they could get them out of trouble,” they reflected. The athletic director indicated that “now, we have a lot of coaches who when a kid gets in trouble, the coach is actually asking me to do more than what we have to do.” Athletic Director 19 recognized that coaches “get pretty disappointed when their kids are a bad example at school” because they “take a lot of ownership in the representation of the program.” When issues arise, head coaches consider, “How are we going to work through this?” and “How are we going to build from it?”

Promoting the Athletic Department

Beyond the individual program coached, participants also emphasized the need for head coaches to be invested in the overall athletic department. Athletic Director 18 explained, “I don’t think you can, as an athletic director, let your coaches be so siloed that they only care about their program.” Two subthemes (i.e., show up to support others and encourage multi-sport athletes) highlight how head coaches are expected to successfully promote the athletic department.

Show Up to Support Others

One way participants want to see their head coaches promote the athletic department is by attending and supporting other teams’ events. As Athletic Director 15 outlined, “We’re in a very good situation right now with our coaches...they’re going to support each other, and that was something that I was really big on when I got here.” Another athletic director (19) appreciates being at a school where they truly feel that head coaches support each other. “I see a lot of them come to other events, and that’s what we want,” they shared. “It makes it more of a community of everyone, and that’s unique.” The presence at other events was identified by Athletic Director 9 as “part of our evaluation” because it is “a good showing to the community that we’re all in this together,” especially by “showing your student-athletes that you’re supporting them outside of your sport.” These efforts should also include head coaches encouraging their student-athletes to support each other, as Athletic Director 13 referenced their motto of “we over me,” and proposed, “I think if it’s a healthy culture, then coaches automatically think that’s what we need to be doing.”

Encourage Multi-Sport Athletes

There was also an expectation that head coaches would promote multi-sport participation to support the interests of student-athletes, which is often necessary to field full rosters within certain sports. As Athletic Director 20 detailed, “I tell our coaches all the time that we can’t survive without multi-sport athletes. We’re just not that school.” Knowing this, they have to find coaches who “are supportive” of multi-sport athletes, “and if they’re not, then we’re going to have to have a discussion about that.” Another athletic director (22) believes

“we have to share athletes, so we have to help each other in their own success in a certain way.” Athletic Director 17, who also stressed being “a huge believer in promoting a multi-sport athlete,” outlined how they “in no way, shape, or form am supportive of any coach who says, hey, don’t play this sport” and will not hesitate to “confront those coaches” who discourage multi-sport participation.

Investing in the Feeder System

Being an effective high school head coach involves looking ahead to invest in the future student-athletes of the high school. “I’ve had coaches in the past that didn’t last very long that just thought, no, my team is the ninth through twelfth,” detailed Athletic Director 21. “No, that’s not your team. That’s your team that you’re coaching, but you have to talk with these other coaches because that’s your feeder system.” In understanding how head coaches should be present in the feeder system, two subthemes (i.e., working with middle school teams and involvement with youth programs) embody the needed engagement with future student-athletes.

Working With Middle School Teams

To ensure the foundation is being developed at the middle school level, participants want head coaches who are actively involved in operations. For a coaching evaluation, Athletic Director 17 noted how “that plays really well into the evaluation process... because you’re not just taking the best interests of the varsity kids that you’re in charge of, but you’re taking a vested interest in the kids in the community.” Another (21) also highlighted how involvement with the middle school programs is a key “part of our evaluation” because “if you’re not someone who was developing a middle school program, and then you want to complain that we don’t have talent, well, that’s part of your responsibility, and you should have been doing that.” This includes attending middle school events, as Athletic Director 22 expressed, “We believe they should attend that middle school basketball game, that middle school football game. Go to the middle school baseball game when time allows. Be present. Be visible.”

Involvement With Youth Programs

Youth programs represent the first opportunity for head coaches to interact with student-athletes and build relationships that will de-

velop over time. One athletic director (2) viewed this involvement as “a huge thing because in my opinion, successful programs start at the youth level.” Athletic Director 20 further emphasized, “Your face, you got to be seen, and again, it goes back to those relationships.” At the same time, another athletic director (14) added how they “always have youth nights at our events” because kids start to think “I can’t wait to play here.” Furthermore, by hosting youth camps, interactions can begin to take place between high school programs and children. “I think that’s a really important thing for our schools, especially these camps, trying to get kids here on campus and getting to meet our coaching staff and our kids and see what we’re all about,” shared Athletic Director 7. In summarizing the value of a feeder system, Athletic Director 13 stated, “If I’m being serious with them (head coaches) when I’m talking to them, I tell them you’re only going to be as good as your feeder systems.”

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to detail the goals implemented by high school athletic directors to evaluate the success of head coaches during a performance appraisal. The six main themes in this research represent the points of emphasis for athletic directors when engaging in a coaching evaluation. While winning is often considered the primary focus of athletic participation, the presence of high school sports in an academic setting also facilitates expectations from head coaches that extend beyond winning. Thus, education-based athletics should emphasize the development of student-athletes both on and off the field to ensure positive and lasting benefits (Forsyth et al., 2022). The key areas outlined by participants reflect the goals viewed as most important for successful coaching and align with previous work on performance expectations across levels of sport (Gillham et al., 2013; Hill & Pluschke, 2005; Mallett & Côté, 2006).

As coaches are responsible for decisions related to all areas of the athletic program, wide-ranging expectations for success underscore the need for coaches to prioritize outcomes beyond the final score to facilitate meaningful experiences for student-athletes. The coaching evaluation represents the interaction in which performance is reviewed, as athletic directors examine the efforts of head coaches and consider their overall success in meeting desired goals. Through

both theoretical and practical lenses, the findings add context to the role of performance appraisals and goal setting within high school athletics, emphasizing how these frameworks are reflected in the coaching evaluation and offering guidance to practitioners to ensure they are appropriately capturing successful coaching performance in their appraisal processes.

Theoretical Implications

The performance appraisal process offers an opportunity for leadership to evaluate employee efforts against established goals that reflect effectiveness (Locke & Latham, 2019). Barbieri et al. (2023) emphasized the role of appraisals in analyzing goal achievement and ensuring desired outcomes are met. In the context of high school sports, the coaching evaluation serves as one example of this appraisal process, utilizing specific goals that have been established to achieve success. Participants emphasized how these key goal areas are captured by outlining expectations within each aim. Not only do these goals ensure a clear and consistent set of measures for determining success, but they also help leaders guide head coaching efforts. High school athletic directors in this study detailed the need for a coaching evaluation process that is founded in goals, as this approach facilitates the appraisal and ensures coaches are reviewed based on what constitutes a successful head coach.

Within the goal-setting theoretical framework, specific and difficult goals increase an individual's performance (Locke, 1968; Locke & Latham, 1990). Given the emphasis on achieving end results, sport has been found to represent an ideal setting for developing goals related to one's efforts within an organization and providing a lens through which performance can be evaluated (Locke & Latham, 2019). Participants demonstrated an intentionality in the goals they have established as the benchmarks for a successful head coach. This goal-setting effort represents an important task to establish measures for reviewing performance. As these goals are positioned within the larger context of the organization and span all areas of coaching efforts, the six key goal categories detailed by participants reflect the criteria viewed as most important by athletic directors. When met, head coaches are viewed as successful and help strengthen the experiences of student-athletes in their participation.

Practical Implications

Findings from this research provide important context for leaders in high school athletics, as detailed goals have been outlined to guide expectations for successful coaching efforts. Within sports, winning is traditionally considered the deciding factor in success. However, participants in this study emphasized that while winning is celebrated, it is secondary compared to the key focal points (e.g., coaching leadership behaviors, student-athlete life skill development, investing in the feeder system) considered when determining if a head coach is effectively leading an athletic program. Those looking to establish a coaching evaluation within their own athletic department can consider how these goal areas fit within their definition of a successful head coach and use the perspectives shared as a guide for implementing them.

Participation in high school athletics offers student-athletes lasting benefits that extend beyond sports. Thus, athletic directors seek head coaches who contribute to this overall development, rather than those who sacrifice all other areas for the sake of winning. For high school athletic administrators, self-reflection can be employed by utilizing these results to ensure that the goals they have set for the coaching evaluation process accurately reflect what should be considered successful coaching. In doing so, athletic programs can be better positioned to provide student-athletes with meaningful experiences both within and outside of sports through head coaches who meet these prioritized criteria.

Limitations

Through this research, two biases represent limitations impacting the study's results. Non-response bias was reflected in the high school athletic directors who decided not to participate in this study, which potentially excluded data that could not be included in the main findings. While 25 athletic directors from the specific state agreed to participate, every athletic director whose school belonged to the state's athletic association was asked to participate, with many opting not to be involved. Thus, the data that could not be secured from these potential participants constitutes a limitation within overarching findings on the key goal areas implemented by athletic directors to evaluate head coaches.

Additionally, when asking participants to share personal experiences and perspectives, social desirability bias can affect the answers provided and negatively influence the impact of findings. Specifically, in the context of this study, athletic directors were asked to discuss the goals they had developed to evaluate coaching performance. As high school sports are viewed as a segment that prioritizes student-athlete development, participants may have minimized the importance they truly place on winning to overinflate other areas considered (e.g., student-athlete life skill development, feeder system involvement, school day behaviors). This bias would elicit a description of goals that participants believe they should be emphasizing rather than the ones they use during a coaching evaluation.

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