

## **The role of high school coaches in helping prevent adolescent sexual aggression: Part of the solution or part of the problem?**

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### **Abstract:**

In this qualitative study, we examine whether male high school coaches could effectively serve as advocates or educators for male-focused programs to prevent sexual aggression. We conduct open-ended key informant individual and focus group interviews with high school coaches and administrators. The five themes the authors identified suggest that coaches (a) believe they have influences over athletes, (b) lack education about sexual aggression, (c) endorse rape myths, (d) minimize the problem of sexual aggression, and (e) are resistant to being engaged in sexual aggression prevention. Our results reveal that coaches may need in-depth training on sexual aggression even if they do not want to engage in prevention efforts because they may be transmitting values and beliefs that support and condone sexual aggression of their athletes.

**Keywords:** women | coaches | sexual assault | sexual aggression

### **Article:**

Perpetration of sexual aggression often has its start in adolescence. White and Smith (2004) found that 22% of the men who committed some form of sexual aggression while in college had first perpetrated while in high school. Adolescent perpetration increases the risk of perpetration in adulthood for men (White & Smith, 2004), and women who experience sexual aggression in adolescence are at a higher risk of future victimization in adulthood (Gidycz, Hanson, & Layman, 1995; Humphrey & White, 2000; Young & Furman, 2008). By the end of high school, 49% of girls have experienced some form of sexual aggression (Smith, White, & Humphrey, 1999). There have been recent calls for prevention programs that reduce the forces in adolescents' environments that give rise to adolescent aggression. Smith, White, and Moracco (2009) call for prevention strategies that redefine what legitimizes authority by moving away from authority seen as synonymous with having power over others to authority that stems from having respect and compassion for others and that teach adolescents to respect others and self, teamwork, responsibility, and leadership. Coaches have the potential to be an important ally in this effort, as they have the opportunities—perhaps even a directive—to teach teamwork, leadership, and responsibility, which may then continue “off the field” into the interpersonal

arena. Many coaches believe that personal development of athletes is a priority that is connected to performance enhancement (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007).

A large number of high school students participate in some form of sport (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2005). A commonly held belief is that participation in sport develops life skills such as cooperation, teamwork, and respect for others. High school coaches believe that part of their role includes character development and helping athletes develop psychologically and socially (Gould, Chung, Smith, & White, 2006), although coaches may not be able to specify the process by which this happens (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Researchers have found that development of these life skills is often a byproduct of sports participation at all ages (Danish, Pettpas, & Hale, 1993). In addition, these skills are potentially transferable to other settings such as school and community spaces (Hellison, 1995; Hellison, Martinek, & Cutforth, 1996). Although possible, the transferability of these skills is not guaranteed (Martinek, McLaughlin, & Schilling, 1999).

Many of the sexual aggression prevention programs are critiqued for being “one-shot” interventions (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Townsend & Campbell, 2008); in contrast, high school athletic coaches are already embedded in the lives of many male adolescents and have long-term multiple-contact interactions with their athletes. Thus, the coach–athlete relationship may have a more significant effect on athletes’ attitudes and behavior than a short-term, single-event, external prevention program (Poczwadowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002). It is important, however, to examine coaches’ attitudes and behaviors about sexual coercion and assault prior to engaging them in male-focused sexual assault prevention efforts.

Currently, there are no data on coaches’ attitudes regarding these issues. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to assess whether male high school coaches would be a viable means for male-focused sexual assault prevention in adolescence. In this process, we qualitatively explore coaches’ attitudes about sexual aggression and their suggestions for prevention. Specifically, we examine how coaches view their role in the area of character development, whether they believe this could include sexual assault prevention, what coaches believe about sexual assault, and whether they would be open to being directly involved in sexual assault prevention efforts.

### **Are Athletes a Good Target Population for Sexual Assault Prevention?**

A number of factors associated with sports participation predict sexual aggression: alcohol use (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Koss & Gaines, 1993), being competitive and win oriented (Caron, Halteman, & Stacy, 1997; Smith & Stewart, 2003), adhering to certain masculine gender ideals (Locke & Mahalik, 2005), and having a high number of sexual partners (Faurie, Pontier, & Raymond, 2004; Lalumiere, Chalmers, Quisley, & Seto, 1996). Some studies have found that male athletes are at higher risk for engaging in sexually coercive behavior than nonathletes (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006; Frintner & Rubinson, 1993; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Koss & Gaines, 1993), whereas others have not (Caron et al., 1997; Lackie & de Man, 1997; Locke & Mahalik, 2003; Smith & Stewart, 2003).

Athletes may still be a good population for prevention because certain stereotypical rape-supportive attitudes, called rape myths (Burt, 1980), are associated with participation in some

types of high school and collegiate sports (Boeringer, 1999; Forbes et al., 2006; Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002). McMahon (2007) conducted interviews and focus groups with athletes who endorsed a variety of rape myths, such as the myth that many girls falsely claim rape out of revenge or regret over consensual sex. Male athletes also talked about “accidental rape,” and both male and female athletes commented that some girls “ask for it” when they dress and act in an overly flirtatious or sexual manner. These attitudes reduce the level of support for victims (Koppelaar, Lange, & van de Velde, 1997) and are often targeted by prevention programs (e.g., Townsend & Campbell, 2008). One program in particular is the Mentors in Violence Project (MVP) started by the Center for the Study of Sport in Society (Katz, 1995). The program is unique in that its goal is to educate athletes to intervene as empowered bystanders. The MVP program uses former athletes as mentors and role models to provide concrete strategies for intervening in an abusive situation and to make people aware of, think in new ways about, and be open to discussing men’s violence toward women. Can current high school coaches serve a similar role in violence prevention?

## **Coach–Athlete Relationships**

Coaches are often already role models for adolescents (Drewe, 2000; Martin, Richardson, Weiller, & Jackson, 2004; Molstad, 1993) and can exert a tremendous amount of influence on the team, perhaps more so than the athletes can among each other (Carron, 1980). The coach–athlete relationship involves both instruction about sport-specific techniques and the social relationships that develop during the process (Poczwarcowski et al., 2002). During the sport season, coaches have day-to-day access to and influence over groups of young men. The relationship between coaches and athletes may be close, and the coach may be a trusted authority figure and someone to whom the athlete may turn to as a resource for personal issues as well as athletic performance (Côté & Salmela, 1996). These relationships may be long-lasting, throughout multiple years of a sport and even beyond. Researchers have investigated the commonly held belief that participation in sports influences personal and social development, including responsibility, life skills, and desirable character traits (Coakley, 1993, 1994).

If such positive traits are developed, they may transfer from the game to athletes’ romantic relationships. Theoretically, if the social context around a sport promotes a mindset and culture emphasizing nonviolence, self-control, respect for self and others, physical fitness, patience, and responsibility, then athletes may learn to control gender-based aggressive behavior (Coakley, 1998). However, the same potential for traits to transfer “off the field” exists for negative traits as well. Although coaches may be a solution to the problem of male adolescent’s sexually aggressive behavior, they may also be part of the problem. Shields (1999) found that more than half of high school athletic administrators reported that coaches encourage and even explicitly teach athletes to be verbally abusive and to use physical intimidation to win games. In fact, coaching in this manner was the best predictor of verbal and physical intimidation and physical violence on the field. These same coercive and aggressive traits may transfer from sport-specific contexts to the context of romantic relationships with young women. Athletes observe and evaluate the coach’s behaviors and attitudes and then make a personal decision about whether or not the coach’s behaviors or attitudes are justifiable and acceptable for personal use (Carron & Bennett, 1977; Poczwarcowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006). Important role models, such as coaches,

may be one method by which young men internalize norms of coercion, dominance, and control that are found in many dating relationships (Douglas, Bathrick, & Perry, 2008).

We wanted to explore coaches' attitudes and beliefs from the perspectives of both individual coaches and coaching administrators who would be in a position to support state-wide sexual violence prevention efforts or training for coaches. We took a qualitative approach because it is recognized as a useful strategy for collecting in-depth knowledge on complicated issues about which little is known (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, we took the pragmatic qualitative approach, where the question drives the methodology rather than a particular epistemology (Creswell, 2003).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

We first used a purposive sampling strategy to conduct three individual key informant interviews with officials of three state-wide high school athletic/coaches associations. They recommended individual coaches to participate in subsequent interviews. We limited our sample to football, basketball, and soccer coaches, as these are the most popular team sports. We then conducted individual key informant interviews with five high school coaches and one focus group with high school coaches ( $n = 6$ ), resulting in a total of 11 informants. All of the coaches interviewed individually and as a part of the focus group were men; two of the three coaching administrators were women. Two of the three coaching administrators had also coached in high school. Most of our coaches were white, married, had children, were between the ages of 35 and 50 (although most were in their late 40s and early 50s) and had coached for a minimum of 10 years and a maximum of 30 years.

### **Interview**

Each individual interview lasted about 1 hour; the focus group lasted 2 hours. An interview guide was used for the semistructured interviews, with the interviewer asking follow-up questions for clarification. Participants were asked specific questions regarding their experiences with and perceptions of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the individuals in these situations. The questions used for both the interviews and the focus group addressed the coaches' perception of the potential relationship between sports and violence and then more specifically about any link between sports and sexual aggression. Coaches were also asked questions about their role as coaches, particularly in the areas of character development and how much this was a part of their jobs as coaches, whether they believed sexual assault prevention was or could be considered within the boundaries of their roles as coaches, their beliefs about sexual assaults and those individuals involved in them, and their suggestions for interventions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Plan**

A trained male graduate student experienced with conducting qualitative interviews and with coaching conducted the individual interviews with coaches and the focus group. Authors Smith and White conducted the interviews with the coaching administrators. The audiotaped interviews

were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were uploaded into *Ethnograph* (Qualis Research Associates, 1985), which was used as an organizational tool to aid coding and analysis.

Because this study was exploratory we relied on emergent coding techniques. Independent coders did an initial read through of the transcripts and developed a basic codebook. This codebook then guided the coding of the key informant interviews and the focus group. In order to identify general themes, coders independently read the coded excerpts of the transcripts to identify common patterns in the coaches' words. The thematic analysis began by reading the grouping of coded segments to look for commonalities among informants. The search for these commonalities, or meaningful units of information known as themes, was repeated multiple times. The next step in the process was to look for any pattern to the themes. Finally, the meaning behind the themes was interpreted and synthesized into a consistent and contextualized pattern (Giorgi, 1979; Moustakas, 1994). The final thematic interpretation emerged from a group consensus.

## Results

Our analysis resulted in five themes indicating which type of role, positive or negative, that high school coaches could play to help prevent gender-based sexual aggression: (1) Coaches believe they have influence over athletes' character and life on and off the "field," (2) coaches lack education in gender-based sexual aggression, (3) coaches endorse rape myths, (4) coaches minimize the problem of male sexual aggression, and (5) coaches are resistant to being engaged in sexual aggression prevention. Below we provide quotes that shape and illustrate these themes. We use the nomenclature KI# to refer to one of the key informants and FG# to refer to one of the focus group participants.

### Theme 1: Coaches Have an Influence on Athletes' Character and Life on and off the Field

The coaches in this study believed that they had influence on the character and behavior of the young men they coached. KI 2, a coaching administrator, endorsed this view, "I do think that the coaches play a tremendous role in a lot of what happens in the mind of the student athletes and particularly the young men."

Because they need to hear it from other folks and, as coaches or teachers, I think we have played a big part in their life as far as exposing them to what we feel like is right. That's where we've all got to believe that what we're doing is right too and that what we're trying to get across to them is right. (unidentifiable FG respondent).

If you work hard to gain the respect and trust of the kids and their parents, you can influence those kids to do anything. I mean you see it every day. (KI 7)

All of these coaches realized that they have an influence on their athletes that went beyond the sport environment and extended into various aspects of the athletes' lives. Both KI 4 and an unidentified focus group respondent describe how coaches can shape the athlete as a whole person, even shaping their romantic relationships.

I'm not only coach but I teach Auto Mechanics; I know that some days we may start talking about carburetors and we may end up talking about life. And it's more than just one day, and I feel just as good or better about the talking about the life issues then I do . . . you know I don't feel bad about leaving off putting on carburetors to another day because it's not just athletes, it's kids. You know it's not just our athletes that are having problems today, its kids in general. I've had many a time where I've had parents come by and say so and so is in your second period Auto Mechanics class and he comes home and talks about all the things that you talk about in class and I'm so glad you're giving him exposure to life skills. (unidentifiable FG Respondent)

The coach is involved in the development of the athlete. This includes the physical, academic, and emotional development of the athlete. If a kid is having a hard time at home, it is okay for a coach to step in and try to help the kid. If the kid is having difficulty in school, the coach should try and help the kid, such as talking to teachers. If the young man is having problems in a relationship, the coach is there to listen and offer advice. (KI 4)

The coaches who participated in this study knew they could have a long-term influence and valued their roles as mentors. Several included stories of former athletes coming back at some point to thank them for influencing their lives.

One night about oh, I guess it was about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning he called and he said, "Coach this is Jerry." He said, "I'm working for the FBI. I'm doing this. I got married, got a kid. I just called to say thank you." (KI 5)

The first clinic I went to after he graduated, I was in a State clinic and I was sitting down there and he sat beside me, he said, "Coach," he said, "the only reason I'm here at this coach's clinic is because of you." And here I am sitting in the lobby of the Holiday Inn down there with tears streaming down my eyes with my arm around this boy and everybody thinking you're kind of funny. (Laughter) But it just, you know it touches you. It just gets to you. (KI 6)

#### Theme 2: Coaches' Lack of Knowledge About Gender-Based Sexual Aggression

High school coaches have had to address character, alcohol abuse, and aggressive play on the field, but they have not focused on sexual assault. Coaches were aware of professional athlete sexual assault scandals, but they did not know much about sexual assault. Although coaches were given a guiding definition of sexual aggression during the interview ("forced or coerced sexual activity in a dating relationship, friendship, or acquaintanceship that may or may not be physical assault or even considered criminal") and were provided with current statistics about sexual aggression, this did not prevent confusion. KI 1, who was a coach and administrator, expressed doubt about the statistics presented that 50% of the girls who go to college have already been the victim of some form of sexual aggression by the time they get to college, saying

But could that be as much as a proposition? Is that considered assault? See, I think most men would say, "Well gosh, that's gone on forever, that's not going to stop." (KI 1)

Both coaches and administrators readily admitted that coaches were not educated about sexual aggression, as KI 6 says, “I mean I would be willing to bet you that no one that no one that’s coaching, 90% of the coaches there have never been spoken to about it.” When specifically asked whether they would know how to deal with a player involved in a sexual assault allegation, KI 3 (a coach and an administrator) states, “I think the basic answer to that is by and large most of them don’t know how to deal with these situations.” When KI 2, a coaching administrator, was asked whether coaches are aware of the problem of sexual aggression, she responded, “I don’t think so. I don’t know they’re educated enough to know that. I don’t think there’s been enough out there for us to know that.”

Lack of knowledge was not universal among our sample, but only KI 7 reported any awareness of the issue when he related overhearing a student describe an incident while walking down the hall,

Well, I’ve heard of cases here. Just by walking by students, I heard one kid in the locker room one day say he went out on a date and he forced this girl to do something. I don’t remember it, you know, a group of guys together, I couldn’t remember who the kid was. This was like two years ago and, but yeah, I would think this level, even in the 9th grade level, you know it could be a problem. (KI 7)

### Theme 3: Coaches Endorse Rape Myths

Perhaps in part because of their lack of education about sexual aggression, coaches’ discussions were laced with remarks that embody many myths about rape. These rape myths include such beliefs as victims are to blame for their assault, often by wearing revealing clothing, by drinking or flirting; men can’t restrain their sexual urges; only “certain” type of women are raped; and women often lie about being assaulted (Burt, 1980). Overall, participants held a narrow and rather simplistic view of sexual assault, expressing beliefs that girls who consent to any sexual activity are consenting to all sexual activity and that “promiscuous” girls are to blame for being or putting themselves in a bad situation. The boys, in turn, are not to blame because they can’t control their hormone-driven sexual urges. These urges are especially hard to control when the girls are dressed in revealing clothing. Girls were then ashamed of themselves for violating moral standards and so they “cried rape” to make themselves feel blameless.

### Girls “cry rape” after regretting consensual sexual activity

Perhaps the most well-known rape myth is that women often fabricate stories of rape due to regret or desire for revenge. Several informants talked about girls who “cry rape” after they regret consensual sex, as FG 4 does here:

...you know, sometimes the girls will give the guy a green light thinking and all of a sudden it hit her, “Oh my boyfriend is going to find out about this” and then she’ll come back and go hey, “He touched me or he forced himself or he assaulted me.” And I think some of the messages they send amongst each other, I’m not saying that it doesn’t happen, but I think there’s a degree out there about how the youngster wants to interpret it. And sometimes they fear that they’re going to get into trouble or somebody is going to

hear about this and they scream rape or assault. And when that happens I don't think they know the consequences they're putting on that other person and his life. (FG 4)

Once it starts to get to a certain point, girls or guys maybe I don't know, sometimes if it's [the sex] violent the girl probably just says uh, the morals or whatever flag pops up. (FG 1)

Several informants again blamed the girls' sexuality as the root cause of these "false" sexual assault allegations. KI 8 added that he thought these girls initially consented to sexual activity for mercenary reasons, "Or maybe this girl said come on and have fun, [but later says] 'Well I didn't tell him he could do that' [because] maybe she thought he'd marry her, you know."

Girls' sexuality leads to a "green light" for intercourse

Many of the informants believe that boys are understandably confused when faced with accusations of sexual assault. They believe that the women's sexual behavior signals a "green light" for intercourse. This corresponds to the rape myth that if a girl engages in minimal sexual contact (e.g., necking, heavy petting), then it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her. What happens, according to FG 3, is that boys that keep going because they're so eager to have sex,

Yeah and then they [the girls] get right to that, right to that edge and they go, "I'm not"; obviously the boys don't know how to handle it because they're just grabbing at it. It's like, you know, I've seen when they had those big, what do they call it . . . a piñata, you break that piñata open and then those little son of a bitches are all in there getting that candy like crazy you know. [Laughter] Well this is how I visualize what you guys are talking about. You know they're just all going after it. (FG 3)

Informants blamed girls who provoked boys' uncontrollable sexual urges, which dissolved boys' responsibility for their actions, as suggested by FG 3, "You can't stop a hard . . . [laughter]. I mean let's face it. And that's what it comes down to." According to these informants, once girls engage in some sexuality they give up their right to say "no." The informants decried the level of overt sexuality shown by students in general, and girls in particular, as demonstrated by KI 5,

Kids want to go so fast and do things now. The things that I was doing at 17 and 16, kids are now doing at 10 or 11. And you have the girls who aren't afraid to have sex, don't know any better but they end up getting pregnant and they have problems here and stuff like that. (KI 5)

Coaches' comments conveyed beliefs that girls' promiscuity gets them into this kind of trouble. For example, FG 3 stated a hypothetical question, to which the other coaches murmured agreement,

Do you think that the girls are trying to experiment with trying to get attention and then all of a sudden, you know, you said the kids are just running, that they get out there and it's like, "Oh shit, I don't know what to do now?" (FG 3)

KI 8 comments that it's not rape because these immoral girls are consenting to some sex,

Most of the time with the way moral standards have gone today there doesn't need to be any violence. Girls are pretty promiscuous and you know peer pressure is on as far as that kind of thing is concerned. (KI 8)

Informants believed that these sexually precocious girls who are raped usually did something careless to put themselves in that situation. Several of the informants minimized young men's responsibility for their own behavior and instead focused on the girls who were supposedly victims, with comments along the lines of "rape is wrong, *but . . .*," such as KI 5, who initially said, "You know if a guy goes out with a girl and if she permits him to do something but she says no and she means no but he doesn't take it as no, it's rape." But later remarks by KI 5 revealed beliefs that girls make themselves a target of rape by earning a reputation for "putting out,"

Put yourself in a bad position, like a lot of times, it's funny you know, the guys on the team say, well she's an easy person to get or the vice versa and if you don't score then you haven't . . . initiation where you're supposed to go with a certain girl and stuff like that. (KI 5)

Many of these comments involved hypothetical scenarios involving informants' daughters, such as those made by FG 1, an administrator:

I mean like Mike Tyson when he first got into that trouble with that girl and I'd tell my wife all the time I said, "Look, if that was my daughter, I'm not pressing charges. I [sic] gonna beat the heck out of her." Because why are you going up to a room at 2:30 in the morning, getting half naked and not thinking that someone is going to do something. And like you said, then they cry rape. (FG 1)

FG 3 related a story of one of his athletes who was brought before the school administration for inappropriate sexual conduct. This respondent stated, "I think he got the green light and I don't think he did anything wrong." He did believe that the boy shouldn't have done it, but it wasn't necessarily wrong because he thought that the girl led the boy on,

Well you know if that was my daughter I'd be pissed, but I'd be also pissed at my daughter, 'Why did you go in that stairwell with that son of a bitch?' You know, 'You let it happen.'" (FG 3)

KI put the onus of prevention on girls by saying, "Because my biggest thing with girls is don't put yourself in a position to be in trouble."

Boys are victims of their hormones

Many of the comments by focus group respondents reflected the concept that women are the gatekeepers of sexuality and that boys' sexual behavior is ruled by their uncontrollable hormones. FG 6 tries to put himself as a student in his school today, "I'm getting older and about

to get Alzheimer [sic] but I can still remember when my hormones were flowing and I was 15 or 16 . . . , folks if I was 15 or 16 and walked into our school today I don't know what I'd do." FG 3 responds, "Oh I wanted to touch a pussy so bad. I was scared to death." When asked to describe sexual assault, FG 1 says that it is a result of hormone-driven adolescent boys trying to get sex any way they can in order to keep up with their friends

[What is sexual assault?] You're talking about the 9th graders. I think it's just a hormone thing where it's just something that maybe one of the friends or something like that has had sex and they just like, it's like they got to get it just so they can be part of the group. However they got to do it, they've got to get it. You know their hormones at 9th grade, their hormones are there, their buddy's had sex or they're hanging with this and you know all of a sudden their dick gets hard and then it's like, "I've got to find someone, I've got to do . . ." (FG 1)

FG 2 responds with, "Where am I going to put this thing? Tired of going to the bathroom . . . "

Girls' revealing clothing as "bait."

The focus group informants talked about the revealing clothing girls wear and its role in sexual assault. Such clothing, combined with "flirty" behavior, results in girls sending mixed messages to boys, as colorfully described by FG 3, followed by agreement from FG 2.

They get to that point where they're getting the kids to look at 'em, I mean they're coming to school with the artillery, the bait is on you know, it's like going fishing with no bait, well they've got the damn worms all over 'em and they're ready to have those guys just go right at 'em." FG 2: "Got 'em out there." (FG 3, FG 2)

Informants shared anecdotes about examples of girls dressing inappropriately at school and school-sponsored events like prom. FG 5 bemoans that the dress codes are not enforced—apparently believing that enforcing this code would prevent sexual assault—but this comment is followed by a joking comment by another focus group member that he's fine with it:

It states in the rules no spaghetti [straps], you know, the no support, that when they stand up they can't, the shorts got to go to the thumb or whatever, you know, and they get there and they get in front of the administrator or something like that and they just let it, and they'll walk right by an administrator. (FG 5)

An unidentified commenter laughed and replied, "It doesn't bother me!"

FG 5 acknowledges that revealing clothing is not always a sexual come-on, but believes that it still incites rape because the boys are more aggressive now than in the past,

. . . one of the girls [stopped by the principal for inappropriate attire] wore the mini dresses or whatever, you know it was just part of their attire. Not a lot of 'em wore 'em but it wasn't such a big deal because I think a lot because the boys weren't as aggressive as they are now. (FG 5)

FG 6 believes that the parents need to keep a closer eye on what their daughters are wearing, as he does, "Daddy's there to say, 'Honey, you can't wear that.'"

#### Theme 4: Coaches Minimize the Problem of Sexually Aggressive Actions and Attitudes

Some of the coaches rationalized an athlete's sexually aggressive behavior even if the athlete has done something that would merit a suspension or expulsion from the team or, in some extreme cases, legal action. Three coaches told stories of their athletes who were accused of sexual misconduct, all of whom were described supposedly getting the green light from girls.

I'm not sure because I really think with my player that I dealt with, I think he got the green light and I don't think he did anything wrong because when he was called in on it, he was shocked, totally shocked. But he had to be punished for it, but we had to go through all this red tape of dealing with, you know we're going to have to call the parent, tell the parent this has happened. Cover our ass and it all comes back down to "Are we making more out of this situation than what we really have?" He grabbed her cheeks. You know reached down and grabbed her cheeks (KI 1).

KI 4 shares a similar story:

I've had a couple of situations where one of my players has felt that this young lady was flirting with him and he probably responded inappropriately but he was given the, he was thinking he was getting the green light and the situation completely turned on him and he ended up paying the consequences for it. In his mind, and when we sat down and discussed this issue with him, I don't think he thought down the road that he was doing anything that would be considered wrong. (KI 4)

FG 4 had a situation where one of his athletes was accused of sexual assault. He prefacing his discussion of this with, "And sometimes they fear that they're going to get into trouble or somebody is going to hear about this and they scream rape or assault. And when that happens I don't think they know the consequences they're putting on that other person and his life." He goes on to say how he got caught up in the incident,

I spotted something in this kid as a freshman but academically he struggled because his mother and father . . . he's coming from domestic violence and that but I hung in there with him and he's now at the point where I feel he's one of the most talented players I've ever coached. And a situation happened where he uh, put himself in a situation where he thought he was okay, didn't even think there would be consequences and the person turned it all around and made him look like the aggressor. (FG 4)

#### Theme 5: Coaches Resist Being Involved in Sexual Aggression Prevention

Many of our respondents were resistant to the idea of coaches being involved in any sexual assault prevention education or programs. The three main reasons were that preventing sexual aggression is not a priority, they already feel overloaded in job duties, and athletes would be

unfairly targeted as perpetrators of sexual assaults. In addition, they have a hard time believing the high numbers of assaults and that any of their athletes may be perpetrators.

### Sexual assault prevention is not priority

The informants believed that coaches would be resistant because it is not a priority for them. Their priorities are sports and academics, not preventing sexual assault. Preventing sexual assault is not in their job description. Two of the coaches who expressed this form of resistance the most, KI 1 and KI 3, were also administrators.

I mean I've been helping with the golf team now and I can't imagine . . . the context that we would bring that up in it wouldn't sound . . . you know the guys, "What is he talking about. Where is that coming from?" (KI 1) I think that coaches will also tell you it's not my responsibility to raise these kids. You know they say that all the time, they'll say that "I'm not supposed to teach them morals, okay?" Even though they spend an inordinate amount of time with them, some of them will say, "But I'm not their mommas and I'm not their daddies so that's not my responsibility to teach them about sex." (KI 3)

KI 1 also talked about jurisdictional issues, as he talked about a known case of a boy hitting a girl in the parking lot, "Well, the only sanction would be a legal one because it's all off campus. I mean, everything you're talking about just about is going to be off campus, right?" KI 1 later said, "I mean until one of your kids is involved, it's somebody else's problem, that doesn't happen here."

KI 3 suggests that there are so many problems to be addressed that sexual assault isn't an issue that makes the priority list.

Years ago you didn't even worry about all those kind of problems. You might worry that the kid was maybe smoking a cigarette or that he maybe would go somewhere and somebody would convince him to drink a beer but you know now, now I mean you know you've got all these illegal drugs out there and so that kind of overshadows then the violence that is occurring and therefore it doesn't get the attention that I believe it needs. (KI 3)

When asked about how to get the message to coaches, most said that the only way is to provide mandatory coaching clinics for all coaches, specifically targeted to how they could apply and use this information.

They need to know that this is a workshop where I'm going to get something that's going to help me do my job better and will help my team be more successful. That's the bottom line. In our programs, you know coaches are like "How's this going to help me?" You know, "Is this going to help my team win?" (KI 3)

### Coaches already feel overloaded

The informants felt that coaches were already expected to do too much. When asked whether he thought that coaches and athletes believed that relationship violence was an issue, KI 1 immediately said, "No. Coaches are asked to do too much now beyond what coaching is." Later, KI 1 emphasizes this point again by saying, "Okay, well what more guidelines do you want to put on my job? What other things am I supposed to be doing here?" KI 4 clarified that the problem involved a combination of lack of time, energy, and performance ability.

And see you're talking about something that's . . . time is the issue in all this stuff. Nobody has enough time to do anything. And when they do have the time they're tired from doing everything else that it doesn't do any good. (KI 4)

KI 8 held the same opinion, saying that

Coaches would be resistant to it just because of the time factor. They don't really have that much time. Say that you're a coach coaching three sports and you're also teaching five classes. When are you going to have time to do this? We've had things in the summer time, we've had clinics for our new coaches and people who don't know what the rules are and that kind of thing and the attendance has been extremely poor. Unless superintendents mandate it, it's not going to get done. (KI 8)

Coaches feel like athletes would be unfairly targeted

The informants had a hard time believing the high numbers of assaults and questioned that any of their athletes may be perpetrators. Some informants expressed concern that the questions were implying that athletes were more violent, as implied by FG 6, "I really can't say that our 9th grade male athletes at our school are at anymore of a risk than any 9th grade person at our school."

I thought you were leading towards because a kid's a good ballplayer, there's a higher degree of dating violence that he's going to be a part of as opposed to a guy that's in the band. (KI 4)

KI 1: [How should we package or present prevention programs to coaches?] "It almost seems like you're talking only of male sports coaches. I feel like they're being singled out pretty directly." . . . "I think we would have to feel like our athletes were predominantly guilty or something like that. I mean I'm sitting here saying, 'These stats are really hard to believe.'"

KI 3 expressed concern that having coaches involved in sexual aggression prevention efforts would imply that athletes were perpetrators.

I don't want people to think that my sport teaches people to behave this way outside of the playing arena, so you know I know they're not doing that. You know maybe there's so other reasons but I think that probably is one of those . . . maybe because I know coaches are very protective of their sport, you know it's kind of like this is our family. (KI 3)

The main voice of encouragement was from administrator KI 2, with some nominal support from KI 3.

I think, would they come? That's really going to be up to how well we can sell our associations on pushing it. We've got so many people concerned about behavior on the soccer field and they're looking for ways to positively impact their teams and their players that I think it would be something that the administrative end would encourage. I think that the coaching, a majority would be receptive. (KI 2)

When asked whether coaches see sexual violence as a moral issue, KI 3 says no, but that they may still be concerned, but mostly if it touches their athletes.

I don't think they'll see that necessarily as a moral issue. I think they will see that as everybody's responsibility. That as a coach and you know that you have players on your team who are abusing their girlfriend, boyfriend. (KI 3)

## **Discussion**

The goal of the study was to examine the potential for high school coaches to be a vehicle for male-focused gender-based sexual aggression prevention. Our findings suggest, however, that coaches hold an array of misperceptions of and prejudices about female sexuality and sexual assault and may be unprepared to manage situations that contain sexually aggressive behavior. Our analysis reveals that although coaches believed they have influence over young men's character and behavior, they may be both unwilling and unable to play a positive role in helping prevent sexual aggression. They are unwilling because they believe they already feel like they're asked to do too much, they have other more important priorities that compete for their time, and they're concerned about linking athletes with violence. They are unable because they generally have a very poor working knowledge of the realities of sexual aggression and the skills to manage it; they also endorse a variety of rape myths that blame young women for their own victimization, minimize male responsibility, and justify male sexual aggression.

Only one informant consistently articulated support for coaches' involvement in any potential prevention programs; this informant was a female administrator. The other two administrators had also coached and expressed both a strong resistance to involvement and attitudes that endorsed rape myths and that justified sexual aggression. All of the administrators and coaches believed that sports play an important role in the lives of their athletes, that it is good for building character, and they see themselves as influential in the lives of their athletes. Almost all the coaches said that getting involved in the personal lives of their athletes was positive and even vital, yet they felt that helping their athletes with their personal problems was part of their role only if they thought the problems affected the athletes' games or their academics. Sexual aggression was not on their list of reasons to become involved in athletes' lives outside of their athletic performance. Even when coaches discussed personal cases of their athletes who were accused of sexual misconduct, they minimized the issue and blamed the girls involved. The coaches believed that they do try and convey positive life skills to their athletes, but they did not connect these life skills to the prevention of sexual aggression.

Coaches brought up legitimate issues of being overburdened and mystified about how to bring about a discussion of athletes' relationships. Feeling overloaded is the top reason coaches quit coaching (Weiss & Sisley, 1984). Partly as a result, they do not see prevention of sexual aggression as their responsibility. Our findings are consistent with those reported by Gould et al. (2006), who found that sexual assault was the last on a long list of problems coaches reported encountering and coaches reported almost never having experienced sexual aggression as a problem in their sport. These authors also found that although coaches reported that they often became counselors to their athletes, they were unprepared and unsuccessful in dealing with athletes' problems, and they did not view it as part of their role as a coach. Coaching is a role for which many may lack formal training (Stewart & Sweet, 1992); if coaches lack formal training for current requirements of their job, it is unlikely that they would be prepared to help prevent sexual aggression, which is generally not considered part of their job or responsibility. Coaches believe that their personal development issues with athletes center around helping develop sportsmanship and leadership and, to a certain extent, responding to violence that occurs during, or as a direct consequence of, a game.

Coaches' lack of interest in sexual aggression prevention is fostered by the many beliefs they hold that are rooted in culturally accepted rape myths (Burt, 1980) that serve to minimize young men's responsibility for their own sexual behavior. Athletes are more likely than nonathletes to believe these rape myths (Boeringer, 1999; Forbes et al., 2006; Sawyer et al., 2002). Like the athletes in McMahon's (2007) study, the coaches in the present study endorsed the rape myths that girls fabricate claims of assault and if something did happen, the girls are largely to blame by their sexualized dress and behavior. These coaches additionally blamed victims because young men's hormones resulted in a natural and uncontrollable sexual response. The endorsement of rape myths are learned by exposure. It is possible that these beliefs may unfortunately be passed along from coaches to their athletes alongside the positive life skills that coaches hope to instill. Researchers have found that men who are exposed to stories—even just the headlines—that include rape-supportive beliefs are more likely to judge potential perpetrators (including athletes) as not guilty than those who aren't exposed to them (Franiuk, Seefelt, Cepress, & Vandello, 2008; Franiuk, Seefelt, & Vandello, 2008). Exposure to rape myths actually increases men's self-reported proclivity to rape (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Eyssel, Bohner, & Siebler, 2006). Thus, rape myths may also be both a cause and an effect of perpetration of sexual aggression.

### Study Limitations

This study was limited by its collection of data in one geographic region and the small sample used. The coaches we interviewed may not be representative of their profession; however, administrators of statewide athletic/coaching associations referred them to the study and they were selected from among all coaches attending an annual required statewide coaching clinic. The strength of this study was its qualitative nature and triangulation of methods (both individual and group interviews). The strength of qualitative research is that it allows for an exploration of the intricacies of a subject and the meanings people attach to ideas and experiences (van Manen, 1990). We were able to check for internal validity by examining whether the data were consistent, complementary, and whether they coherently form a conceptual framework (Ward-

Schofield, 1993). We reached a saturation point in the key informant interviews, where informants discussed similar concepts. We did find that the focus group evoked some unique themes and some language not found in the key informant interviews. These participants may have egged each other on with more open language, but they did not contradict the interviews.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Neither athletes nor coaches are blank slates; thus, any prevention program will be interpreted through their schemas of sexuality, masculinity, and victimization. This study suggests the need to explore in more depth the beliefs about sexual aggression that coaches may be transmitting to athletes. Since the coaches we interviewed held rape-supportive beliefs, one area of research is how to best target coaches for potential sexual assault prevention programs. Future research is needed to assess how to best educate and motivate coaches. This study suggests we need to examine the attitudes the coaches are transmitting and engage them in programming.

There are coach training programs currently in place, such as the Coach Effectiveness Training (CET; Smith & Smoll, 1996). The CET program primarily shows coaches how to provide effective and supportive feedback to athletes, but it also focuses on youth development, including specific suggestions for dealing with common problems in sport and athletes. This and other existing programs may consider incorporating content about sexual aggression as one such problem. Tests of CET have shown that it increases socially desirable behaviors in coaches (Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1995) and has a positive effect on athletes' self-concepts (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993). Folding discussions of sexual aggression prevention into such programs may be useful, given that the coaches in our study believed they influenced their athletes' characters and that they believed that coaches would be interested in such programs only to the extent to which it helped them win games.

### Conclusions

Prevention at the primary level involves changes to the structural systems and norms that transmit lessons to young men and women that normalize the use of sexual coercion and control in relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2004; Douglas et al., 2008). Primary prevention efforts should focus on the methods by which norms of coercion, dominance, and control are learned and the domains in which they become entrenched (Smith et al., 2009). These data suggest that high school athletics may be one social structure in which these norms are learned and possibly even conveyed to athletes by the coaches themselves. Rape myths lead to an atmosphere supportive of rape, to a desensitized attitude toward victims, and to the support of coercive control of women (Koppelaar et al., 1997; Townsend & Campbell, 2008). It is possible, then, that the rape-supportive beliefs held by coaches may lead to an atmosphere supportive of sexual aggression and to a desensitized attitude toward women who are sexually assaulted.

The coaches in the current study believed that they were role models and that coaches do have an influence in shaping young athletes' character and beliefs. In addition, our study suggests that coaches hold attitudes supportive of rape myths. For this reason, coaches themselves may need

in-depth training on gender-based sexual aggression so that even if they are not part of a community's solution to preventing sexual aggression, they will not be part of the problem.

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