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“I’m Avoiding Getting Sued for Concussion for those Kids”: Pedagogical Responses of Youth Soccer Coaches to New Guidelines on Heading
Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to describe nine youth soccer coaches’ pedagogical responses to the implementation of the new guidelines on heading introduced by the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). The specific research questions we attempted to answer were:

(a) What were the coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading? and

(b) What factors shaped the coaches’ perspectives and practices?

Method: The theoretical framework employed was occupational socialization. Data were collected using four qualitative techniques and reduced to themes using analytic induction and constant comparison.

Findings: Key findings were that the coaches fell into one of three groups: rejectors, acceptors, and skeptics. Differences in the coaches’ acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization were responsible for the coaches differing responses to the new guidelines on heading.

Conclusions: Should they transfer to other coaches, these findings should help coach educators to develop stronger programs.

Key words: Injuries, occupational socialization, sport pedagogy
“It’s Avoiding Getting Sued for Concussion for those Kids”: Pedagogical Responses of Youth Soccer Coaches to New Guidelines on Heading

In the last 15 years, there have been growing and considerable concerns about the long-term and serious effects of head injuries in adult (Mizobuchi & Nagahiro, 2016) and youth (Crowe et al., 2010) sport. For example, research indicating that concussions and repeated sub-concussive blows to the head are associated with the onset of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and dementia in professional American football (Omalu et al., 2010) and rugby (McMillan et al., 2017) players, as well boxers (McCrary et al., 2007), has led to some changes in the youth versions of these sports (e.g., flag football, Waltzman et al., 2021) and a decline in the number of youth participating in them (Aspen Institute, 2021). The considerable publicity the research findings have been given through film (e.g., the Hollywood movie “Concussion,” Landesman, 2015), television (e.g., the BBC documentary “Rugby: The Cost of Concussion,” Thomas, 2021) and the print media (e.g., the Nature article “Why Sports Concussions are Worse for Women,” Sanderson, 2021) have made the public, parents, and youth sport governing bodies and coaches more aware of this issue.

Little research has been completed on the long-term effects of heading (i.e., repeated sub-concussive blows to the head by performing this skill in practices and games) in soccer on the onset of CTE, dementia, or other debilitating and potentially life-threatening diseases and, to date, a cause and effect link has not been established (Tarnutzer et al. 2017). One recent study, however, provided strong anecdotal evidence of such a link in that four of six deceased professional soccer players examined were found to have CTE, and three of these players had been center forwards or defenders, positions in which heading is more likely to occur (Ling et al., 2017). Furthermore, though not completed in the field, a second recent study indicated that
brain activity was disrupted by 20 consecutive headers (i.e., sub-concussive blows), during a 10-minute period, coming from a distance of 6.5 meters, at 25 miles per hour (Di Virgilio et al., 2016). Again, findings such as these have been given a great deal of publicity through television (Doran, 2016) and the print media (Ames, 2022; Clarey, 2016).

As a result of the research and subsequent publicity, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) provided a set of guidelines to aid youth soccer organizations throughout the country. Key guidelines in the organization’s “concussion initiative” for children and youth aged 6 to 11 years were that players should not be permitted to head the ball, either purposely or accidentally, during competitive games and that if they did an indirect free-kick be awarded against them (United States Soccer [USS], 2017). During practices, the guidelines for this age group were that heading could be taught as “an isolated skill . . . away from any form of opposition or other aspects of the game” provided “lightweight balls” (e.g., foam balls or balloons) were used (USS, 2017, p. 28). The guidelines also suggested that players aged 12 years and older should be allowed to head the ball during competitive games and engage in limited practice of the skill with a normal soccer ball when aged between 11 and 13 years (USS, 2017). All state youth soccer associations decided to follow the guidelines. Some associations went further and eliminated heading altogether for players aged 11 years and younger and many associations provided a more direct definition of “limited practice” for youth aged between 11 and 13 years. For example, in Vermont coaches were notified that players should be permitted to practice heading for up to 30 minutes a week and that this would involve each player heading the ball 15 to 20 times (Vermont Soccer Association, 2021, p. 1).

As sport pedagogists, we were interested in the impact these guidelines regarding heading would have on youth soccer coaches. Gaining an understanding of what youth soccer coaches
thought about the new guidelines and how they reacted to them, we believed, would enable improvements to be made to youth soccer coach education courses and governing body policy statements. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to describe youth soccer coaches’ pedagogical responses to the implementation of the new USSF guidelines (USS, 2017) on heading. The specific research questions we attempted to answer were: (a) What were the coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading? and (b) What factors shaped the coaches’ perspectives and practices?

Theoretical Framework

Sport pedagogy researchers have employed occupational socialization theory (Lawson, 1983a, 1983b; Richards et al., 2014) as a lens through which to examine why physical education teachers and university teacher education faculty think and act as they do (e.g., Park & Curtner-Smith, 2018; Prior & Curtner-Smith, 2020). Their primary goal has been to pinpoint socializing agents that shape the perspectives and behaviors of teachers and teacher educators while recognizing that socialization is a dialectical process (Richards et al., 2014). Some scholars, however, have adapted socialization theory so that it can be employed in other sport and activity contexts. For example, George and Curtner-Smith (2016, 2017, 2018) used the theory to examine how children’s, parents’, and principals’ views about physical education were developed and Susnara and her colleagues employed this perspective to describe the influence of an out-of-school swimming program on children and youth and their instructors (Susnara & Curtner-Smith, 2022; Susnara et al., 2022). Moreover, two recent studies (Authors, 2022a, 2022b) explored the impact of coach education programs on grassroots youth sport coaches though the lens of occupational socialization.
In the current study, we examined how coaches’ differing patterns of socialization influenced their reading of and responses to the new USSF guidelines (USS, 2017) on heading. Specifically, we were interested in discovering the degree to which, and how, the coaches’ perspectives and practices were influenced by their acculturation (i.e., cultural and personal influences on the coaches), professional socialization (i.e., impact of formal coach education), and organizational socialization (i.e., impact of the coaches’ soccer club cultures). Prior research suggested that acculturation would be the most potent part of the coaches’ socialization (Cushion et al., 2003) and that the key cultural socialization agent would be the portrayal of the “heading issue” in the media. Key personal influences on the coaches’ responses to the new heading rules, we thought, might include their experiences of playing soccer, particularly as a child and youth, the level at which they had played, the position in which they had played, past head injuries or concussions the coaches had suffered, their perceptions of their own ability to head a soccer ball, and the degree to which the coaches believed heading was integral to the game of soccer.

Mirroring the findings with physical education teachers, Cushion et al. (2003) suggested that professional socialization would have least impact on coaches in general. In the current study, we theorized that key influences might include the views of coach educators and course content, particularly on heading. Finally, regarding organizational socialization, we hypothesized that the coaches’ perspectives and practices would be influenced other coaches with whom they worked, parents, and players.

Prior to the study, and in line with the research on other sport instructors (Jowers et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2014), we also theorized that during their professional and organizational socialization the coaches would employ one of two coping strategies when they disagreed with the perspectives and practices about heading in youth soccer that were being promoted.
Specifically, we thought that some coaches would strategically comply (Lacey, 1977) with these perspectives and practices. That is feign going along with them while secretly disagreeing. Other coaches, we thought, might attempt to strategically redefine (Lacey, 1977), fight back against, and change the perspectives and practices with which they disagreed.

Method

Participants

Nine youth sport coaches who identified as male and White participated in the study. The coaches were purposefully selected because they worked with different age groups of boys and girls affected by the new heading guidelines; worked in two southeastern American states and for five soccer clubs ranging in size and focus; and varied in terms of age, playing level, position played, perceptions of their own heading ability, history of concussion/head injury, coaching experience, employment status, and coaching qualifications (see Table 1). In congruence with our university’s institutional review board’s requirements, the coaches signed consent forms prior to the study commencing. They were also assigned pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

Data Collection

The first author collected data with four qualitative techniques. Non-participant observation involved the first author observing each coach during two practices and two competitive games played against other teams. All practices and games took place outside at club facilities or at local youth tournaments. Practice length ranged from 65.50 to 93.25 minutes and competitive games ranged from 50.00 to 61.25 minutes. During these observations, the first author took copious notes or made voice recordings on the coaches’ adherence to the new guidelines on heading; any specific teaching of heading that occurred within skill practices and
drills in isolation; the coaches’ reactions and responses when a potential heading situation occurred during small-sided, conditioned, and full game play; the coaches’ reactions to player head injuries; and the responses of players, parents, other coaches, and referees, to the coaches’ pedagogy regarding heading. Voice recordings were transcribed verbatim.

The first author informally interviewed the coaches as often as possible prior to, following, and during breaks within the practices and competitive games. These short conversations were aimed at filling out and confirming observational data. They involved the first author making notes or voice recordings as soon after they had occurred as possible. Again, voice recordings were transcribed verbatim.

The first author also formally interviewed each coach at a location of his choosing. Six formal interviews were conducted face-to-face and three by phone. Demographic and background data collected during formal interviews included the coach’s gender, race, age, state, and the focus and size of his soccer club. In congruence with the research questions we were trying to answer, the lead questions posed during the formal interviews were focused on (a) the coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading following the introduction of the USSF’s new guidelines (USS, 2017) and (b) the factors that shaped these perspectives and practices within their acculturation (i.e., media portrayal of the “heading issue, playing experience, position played, experiences of serious head injuries and concussions, and views on the importance of heading in soccer), professional socialization (i.e., amount and content of formal coach education, coach educators), and organizational socialization (i.e., experience coaching, other coaches, players, and parents). The formal interviews were semi-structured (Patton, 2015) and allowed for multiple follow-up prompts to lead questions. They were also audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
Finally, document analysis involved the first author gathering a number of salient documents and writing notes about their contents related to heading. These included the United States Youth Soccer (USYS) laws of the game (USYS, 2019) and the USSF player development initiative (USS, 2017). In addition, the first author collected curriculum and policy documents from the two state youth soccer associations to which the coaches belonged, as well as the coaches’ club policy, philosophy, and curriculum documents, minutes from club meetings, and examples of coaching plans or written materials the coaches had prepared themselves.

**Data Analysis**

In congruence with the study’s research questions, during phase 1 of the analysis the first author separated data into subsets pertaining to (a) the coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading and (b) the factors that shaped the coaches’ perspectives and practices. In phase 2, the first author employed analytic induction and constant comparison (Patton, 2015) to reduce the data to themes. Specifically, he separated the data in each subset into data chunks on specific thoughts, views, actions, behaviors, and responses. These data chunks were then given a numerical code and a descriptor. Coded data were grouped to form categories and categories were collapsed to form themes. During this phase, the second author acted as a critical friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and critiqued and provided feedback on emerging codes, categories, and themes.

Trustworthiness and credibility were established through member checking, the search for negative cases, and triangulation (Patton, 2015). Member checks were performed during informal interviews and by asking the coaches to examine an early draft of this manuscript for factual accuracy. When negative cases were identified in the data, they were used to modify
codes, categories, and themes. Triangulation involved checking the congruence of findings across all four data sources.

**Researchers Positionality**

Readers should be aware that the first author had been heavily involved with both youth and adult soccer coaching and coach education at a variety of levels for a number of years. Moreover, the second author had extensive experience of coaching school soccer teams, working with younger recreational players outside schools, and conducting sessions on teaching soccer for physical educators. Both of us had coached soccer in the United States and the United Kingdom.

**Findings**

We begin this section by examining the coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading. Next we describe the factors that shaped the coaches’ perspectives and practices.

**Coaches’ Perspectives and Practices Regarding the Coaching of Heading**

Three groups of coaches with different sets of perspectives and practices regarding the coaching of heading were identified during the study. These were *rejectors*, *acceptors*, and *skeptics* (see Table 1).

**Rejectors**

Although they mostly followed the USSF guidelines (USS, 2017) on heading, three of the nine coaches (Miles, Nathaniel, and Yannick) did so reluctantly and rejected them. This was mainly because they believed that the guidelines had a negative impact on player development:

I'm not a fan at all [of the new guidelines]. You know, I firmly believe in teaching them the proper way to head the ball at, you know, 8, 9, 10 years old. And it doesn't have to be
40-yard balls serving in, but some soft tosses from 5 to 10 yards away to teach them the
technique would be a good thing. (Miles, rejector, formal interview)

To reinforce their views, the three rejectors pointed to what occurred in competitive games when
their players were observed “ducking” to avoid the ball when it was in the air and attempting to
“use their chests” at corner-kicks, rather than heading, as they would have done without
restrictions. In addition, the rejectors noted that because their players could not head the ball
during games there had been an increase in “unintentional dangerous plays” and players “getting
kicked in the face” when “feet [were] flying way up in the air.”

In addition, the three rejectors suggested that the new guidelines were not needed since
very little heading actually occurred during competitive or practice games played by the children
they coached, the implication being that this amount of heading was not a health concern:

To be completely honest, I thought it [i.e., the implementation of the new guidelines] was
ridiculous . . . from the standpoint of the amount of headers I’ve seen in a game. There are
maybe four or five or six. And most of them are unintentional. (Nathaniel, rejector formal
interview)

Moreover, and following Babbs (2001), this group of coaches suggested that not learning
to head properly at an early age could actually be detrimental to players’ health and lead to injury
and concussion when they were allowed to perform this skill in games:

Because if they've never headed a ball and all of a sudden they're playing U13 [i.e., under
13] 11v11 games, kids are punting the ball all over the place. Then they're more likely to
not know how to head it [properly] and won't be effective as a player. And [the players]
are also potentially more likely to get themselves injured because they're not familiar
with proper heading technique. (Yannick, rejector, formal interview)
With these views, not surprisingly and in compliance with the guidelines, the rejectors taught heading in isolation during practices using a series of drills and practices with “softer balls” or, as Miles noted, starting “with a balloon [with] the youngest age group . . . just to teach them . . . the right technique.” In addition, however, they also allowed heading to occur in small-sided games during practices:

But in a scrimmage situation, even with the U10 [i.e., under 10] kids that I have, I let them head the ball . . . I'm not going to stop the scrimmage and say that's a foul because they're going to have to learn how to head the ball. And so once we get into games I think it [i.e., the guidelines on heading] are detrimental to the game itself. (Yannick, rejector, formal interview)

Furthermore, the rejectors did not provide corrective feedback when their players headed the ball in competitive games and argued with referees when free-kicks were awarded against their players for “accidental headers.” They also encouraged “big throw-ins” or “big punts” so as to gain an advantage due to the difficulty opposition players had controlling “long balls” without being able to head them.

Acceptors

Three of the coaches (Julián, Luka, and Yohan) were at the other end of the spectrum, fully embraced the new guidelines on heading, and followed them to the letter. As well as protecting players’ health, a key part of their rationale for this course of action was that the rules aided outfield player development in terms of learning to play a technically advanced game involving shorter passes that were kept on the ground:

So the health side is great . . . It means we're going to play some proper football [soccer] too. Balls should be kept on the ground a lot more . . . Hitting it long, feeding the better
athletes [is an inferior way to play]. Let's feed the players who can actually play. So, it's kind of a two-headed bonus for me. You get rid of the unhealthy side as well as you get, hopefully, better players out of it. (Julián, acceptor, formal interview)

With this issue with CTE, I think it's a really good idea. And, generally, as I'm trying to teach players and improve their technical ability on the ball, it hasn't really affected . . . anything I do because we weren't really pumping long balls forward anyway. So I think it's a good idea. (Yohan, acceptor, formal interview)

The three acceptors also pointed out that the new guidelines on heading helped goalkeeper development. This was because in order to adapt to the new rules goalkeepers had to be taught that their “first option” was to “maintain possession” with a short throw or pass to a teammate, as opposed to punting the ball a long distance. As Julián noted in his formal interview:

“First thing I'm always telling the goalkeeper to do is to take your time, weigh up your options, and find the best outlet that gives you the highest percentage of retaining the ball.” Similarly, in his formal interview Yohan explained that “if there's any way at all my goalkeepers, [when] playing out from the back, they are not going to punt the ball.”

In line with these views, the three acceptors believed that it was developmentally appropriate to teach heading at a later stage without any issues:

I’m a strong believer in using volleyballs even at 15, 16, 17. It goes farther. It thumps [just like a soccer ball]. They get the confidence. Then on Saturday they hit on the same place [i.e., the forehead]. It feels the same way. (Luka, acceptor, formal interview)

For this reason, the acceptors were not observed teaching heading at all in practices and, unlike the rejectors, were not concerned about the occasions when their players had to deal with high balls without heading them during competitive games:
Yohan continues to coach his players to play short out of the back to develop their ability to maintain possession despite the other team using long passes and punts from the goalkeeper against them. When this occurs, Yohan coaches techniques used to control the ball, other than head it, or to play first-time away from pressure. (Yohan, acceptor, field notes, game 1)

**Skeptics**

Three of the coaches (Glenn, Joel, and Gábor) took a position somewhere between the rejectors and acceptors. While they followed the new guidelines on heading without fail, like the acceptors they were skeptical of the “real” reasons that they were being asked to take this course of action. Specifically, all three skeptics were not convinced that the “scientific evidence” linking heading and brain injuries was accurate:

I’m kind of 50-50 on the fence. I get why they [i.e., the USSF] are doing it. I appreciate the idea, but I’m also of the mindset that it’s a pretty influential part of the game. And if it’s taught correct—the correct form, and correct technique to head—I don’t necessarily see a whole lot of danger with it. (Joel, skeptic, formal interview)

In addition, the skeptics were not sure that the USSF had introduced the new guidelines on heading in order to improve player safety. Rather, they believed that their governing body had taken this course of action to protect themselves from lawsuits:

I honestly thought more than anything, somebody was trying to cover themselves in case they're being sued. . . . And my first thoughts were somebody's setting themselves up so that there's not a lawsuit. And were they really fearful of the trauma of heading for youth soccer? I don't know that I believe that that's what the motive was. But again, with you
Part of it is player safety and, certainly, I can handle that. But I also think, heavily, it’s avoiding getting sued for concussion for those kids. And that becomes the coaches’ problem, not USSF, not the local club, not anybody else. That’s the coaches’ fault for not following protocol. (Gábor, skeptic, formal interview)

Harboring these beliefs, the skeptics mostly eschewed teaching heading in practices, “other than a little intro heading,” incorrectly believing that doing so was against the USSF guidelines. In addition, the skeptics were not overly concerned about the influence, good or bad, the new guidelines had on the competitive games in which their players engaged or their players’ overall development:

I do not think . . . [the guidelines have changed how games are played]. I mean most kids aren’t at the point where they are going to hit long balls in the air anyway. So the ball stays on the ground a lot. And if they do, it’s a clearance. (Gábor, skeptic, formal interview)

Instead, the key concern of the skeptics was to avoid “getting sued” themselves. As Glenn explained: “We don't want to leave ourselves open [to a lawsuit]. We don't want to be responsible for a kid being injured when we're clearly told if it's an injury you err on the side of caution.” Consequently, when their players were in a position where they could head the ball in games the skeptics directed them not to. For example, Joel, was observed telling his players to “get in line with the flight of the ball to take it down [with their feet].” In addition, the skeptics were quick to check on a players’ wellbeing “after a bumping together.”
Factors that Shaped the Coaches’ Perspectives and Practices Regarding Heading

Acculturation

The acculturation part of their socialization was a powerful influence on the views of the three groups of coaches regarding heading. The key socializing agent that led to their differing perspectives and practices was their exposure to and interpretation of the media coverage of heading and injury in soccer. As illustrated in the three data extracts below, rejectors were persuaded by arguments that they heard on television or read in the print media or online that suggested the evidence for heading being related to injuries was weak, acceptors were convinced by arguments they read and watched that suggested the link between heading and injury was strong, and skeptics agreed with those in the media who were unsure of the arguments for or against heading leading to serious injury:

There's been times with him [referring to a television soccer commentator] where a player may have headed the ball and he's just going on this massive rant about that person should not be allowed back in the game. . . . He would be . . . the main voice of, you know, almost taking it to the extreme. There's doctors and medical professionals that are on top of these players that are evaluating them. And he's making these decisions based on what he's seeing from the press box . . . and saying that these kids can't play. (Miles, rejector, formal interview)

Within the last six months they [referring to two radio soccer pundits] were talking about there's trials out there . . . for soccer without heading or soccer with modified heading rules where you can only head the ball inside the 18 yard box . . . Or they're running trials where games are being played without heading at all. . . . I really liked that idea. I
think that's a fantastic way to go for all age groups, not necessarily just children. (Julián, acceptor, formal interview)

I wouldn't be shocked either way if [some] studies said it's [i.e., heading a soccer ball] really harmful to the developing brain, [and] some studies said no, with good technique the amount of force hitting a human skull is not damaging.” (Glenn, skeptic, formal interview)

There were no obvious patterns in the data that indicated that the coaches’ level of soccer playing, the positions they played, their perceptions of their own heading ability, and the number of concussions they had suffered dictated, in a uniform manner, to which of the three groups the coaches belonged (see Table 1). Specifically, coaches in all three groups had played soccer at different levels and in a variety of positions, had differing perceptions of their ability to head the ball, and had suffered multiple concussions.

Julián, Luka, and Yohan, however, noted that their acceptance of the new guidelines was partly based on their own experience of head injury:

But I can remember two or three times going to win a ball knowing I was going to win it. And then a couple of seconds later . . . I'm lying on the floor [concussed]. . . . It wasn't uncommon I don't think. I can name 10 other people that happened to during games.

(Julián, acceptor, formal interview)

Conversely, Yannick, Miles, Joel, and Gábor indicated that their rejection of or skepticism about the new guidelines on heading were partly based on their not having suffered any serious head injury themselves and their coaches not being concerned about any “minor” head injuries they did receive:
I think I’ve probably had a minor concussion once. But you know it wasn't diagnosed. It was in a high school game and I think someone elbowed me in the jaw. . . . And so I subbed out of the game. . . . And I said to coach, “Man, I've got this ringing in my ears.” And he said, “Well make it stop because you got to go back in.” . . . But I don't know if it was [a concussion]. It could have been a minor concussion, but we never did anything about it. (Yannick, rejector, formal interview)

Finally, a key personal influence on the coaches’ beliefs about the new guidelines on heading was the style of soccer they had grown up playing in their youth. Specifically, while all the coaches now espoused a short passing ground game in which heading was relatively unimportant, the acceptors generally had more experience of this kind of play or came to it earlier in their youth:

I mean my preference is as a player and as a coach—I'd rather not have the ball in the air. I'd rather keep it on the ground as much as we possibly can and to play it into feet. (Yohan, acceptor, formal interview)

In contrast, the rejectors and skeptics generally had less experience of this short passing game during their youth and more experience of a style of play in which “long balls” were played and a premium was put on “getting the ball forward quickly,” tactics which necessitated a good deal of heading to execute effectively or negate:

Field conditions had a lot to do with [playing a long ball game]. . . . In the Midwest area where I was from [the soccer pitches consisted of] long grass. . . . You know, where your entire shoe disappears in the grass. And so . . . running with the ball was not necessarily possible. (Nathaniel, rejector, formal interview)
Professional Socialization

Inspection of the coaching qualification data in Table 1 indicates that, although there was some overlap, there were differences between the amount and levels of education and training the coaches in the different groups had received. Specifically, as a group, the acceptors had received more and higher level training than the rejectors and skeptics. Not surprisingly, the acceptors, particularly Luka and Yohan, appeared to be influenced by their training to a greater degree than the rejectors and skeptics when it came to coaching the aforementioned short passing game with its relatively low reliance on heading, and on the teaching of heading itself. Yohan, for example, explained that the training he had received when obtaining various USSF qualifications was “really good . . . particularly if you are coaching youth soccer players.”

Furthermore, the acceptors spoke about the influence of specific coach educators on their beliefs and pedagogies who they had “admired and respected” and who had run the courses through which they had been certified:

My college coach . . . was my instructor for my B license and my A license. So he's been a big mentor. But [he] was definitely into trying to build through the lines [i.e., play a short passing game] and play a lot of pattern play, a lot of shadow play, stuff like that.

(Luka, acceptor, formal interview)

In contrast, the rejectors and skeptics, who had received less coach education, were more likely to have disagreed with material relevant to the new heading guidelines that had been presented to them during formal courses. In addition, three of the coaches in these two groups (Miles, Nathaniel, and Joel) did not realize that as well as attempting to eradicate concussions caused by collisions, elbows, and head clashes during the heading act, the new guidelines were also intended to halt any issues caused by the accumulation of sub-concussive headers.
Consequently, three of the coaches categorized as rejectors and skeptics (Nathaniel, Glenn, and Gábor) strategically complied with these new guidelines (see Table 1):

There was really never any intentional heading [in practices and games]. So I thought the intentions [of the guidelines] were good but maybe misguided. . . . Why are we even banning something that's not used? So I thought it was a little ridiculous. (Nathaniel, rejector, formal interview)

Conversely, the remaining three rejectors and skeptics (Miles, Yannick, and Joel) attempted to strategically redefine the new guidelines by fighting back against or ignoring them (see Table 1):

And I think what's really . . . personally affected us is . . . if you go to the trainer and give them any one of those [concussion] triggers: “Oh, I’m a little dizzy,” or anything like that, it’s [a minimum of] two weeks [not playing]. . . . I had a player [with a concussion trigger] and she was fine, but it took a while to get her cleared. I had to go [convince the officials]. (Miles, rejector, formal interview)

Finally, prior to data collection all the coaches, along with other coaches not in the study, had to attend annual short mandatory refresher courses specifically on how to deal with concussions to their players should they occur, in which the coach educators training them followed the curricula and used the materials from the “HEADS UP” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021) or SafeSport” (United States Center for Safesport, 2022) programs. While the acceptors viewed these courses as “valuable” and “helpful,” the rejectors and skeptics viewed them as “comical” and a “waste of time” and strategically complied with their content:

I look at the CDC videos and I mean anyone who doesn't know that stuff prior to [watching the videos]. . . . They are meant to address the coaches who might be overly
competitive. But, right, at some level they're a bit comical because the kids [in the
videos] clash heads. You check to see if they're alright. If they are showing signs of not
being alright, even though they say they are alright, you go sit them down. (Gábor,
skeptic, formal interview)

Organizational Socialization

There were no obvious patterns in the data suggesting that the coaches’ experience or
employment status influenced their reading of the USSF’s new guidelines on heading (USS,
2017) (see Table 1). Moreover, the ages and views of the coaches’ players and the size and type
of the soccer clubs at which they coached appeared to have no influence on the coaches’ beliefs
and coaching behaviors at all. As we theorized, however, the cultures of the coaches’ soccer
clubs varied in the degree to which and how they influenced the coaches’ perspectives and
practices. Key in these cultures were the views of other coaches, club officials, and parents.
The acceptors’ views and actions were supported by the cultures of their clubs (see Table
1):

[Our club] has a 12-week curriculum training program with sessions outlined on
Mondays and Tuesday nights. And Thursday night is coach's choice. . . . And when we
do work on heading we used those [i.e., guidelines] and that's with the 12s and 13s and
14s. (Luka, acceptor, formal interview)

Four of the rejectors and skeptics (Nathaniel, Yannick, Glenn, and Joel) also indicated
that the cultures of their soccer clubs supported their views and actions regarding heading (see
Table 1). For example, Glenn explained that parents were not saying that they did not “want
Johnny to head the ball in training because we're afraid he's going to get . . . some damage to his
head later.” Glenn also relayed that he had actually seen a decrease in players wearing
“protective head gear” at practices and games following the introduction of the new guidelines. In addition, Joel noted that other coaches at his club disagreed with the guidelines and planned to introduce heading to their players despite not knowing if they were “technically allowed” to. The remaining two rejectors and skeptics (Miles and Gábor) acknowledged that the majority of club officials, fellow coaches, and parents did not agree with their views (see Table 1) and so they strategically complied with them:

I did have one of my [players] whose mom would not let her head the ball. . . She would move out of the way and everything. And so obviously, the mom had been influenced in a way she would not allow her daughter to do it. . . It was very frustrating. (Miles, rejector, formal interview)

Finally, it was apparent that the filtering of the new USSF guidelines (USS, 2017) on heading through several layers of bureaucracy, each of which had slightly different interpretations of the guidelines, and the confusion this caused, provided the coaches in all three groups with support or cover for their own perspectives and practices and allowed them to choose the interpretations they aligned with. For example, USYS, an organization that existed a layer below the USSF, mandated that players under 10 years of age would not be allowed to head the ball during practices or games (USYS, 2019). By contrast, the two state associations to which the coaches’ clubs belonged banned heading in games for players on under 11 teams, whereas other nearby state organizations did not. Furthermore, the tournaments to which the coaches took their teams, and that were organized by different clubs, had their own and differing interpretations of the new USSF heading guidelines as well. Often these clubs ignored the new guidelines altogether, thus serving to legitimize and reinforce the perspectives and practices of the rejectors and skeptics. At Gábor’s club, for instance, an under 10 team attended a tournament
where heading was “allowed.” Similarly, Yannick explained that when a coach took a team to a tournament, the best policy was to “ask the referee [what the rules regarding heading were] before the game and go, ‘Hey, can we head the ball?’ And usually they would let us do it.”

During the study, it also became apparent that most referees did not enforce the USSF guidelines either. Specifically, on the few occasions that heading was observed referees did not give indirect free-kicks against the perpetrator because the header was “not intentional.” This form of officiating by referees also served to support the perspectives and practices of the rejectors and skeptics in the study:

I’ve seen plenty of these [unintentional headers] this weekend not called [as indirect free kicks]. The last coach we played against was a referee assignor and he said accidental headers should not be called as a foul. Calling them only disrupts the flow of the game.

(Miles, rejector, field notes, game 2)

Summary and Conclusions

To our knowledge, this was the first study that described youth soccer coaches’ perspectives and practices regarding the teaching and coaching of heading following the USSF’s (USS, 2017) introduction of new guidelines regarding this soccer skill. In addition, it was the first study to examine how coaches’ perspectives and practices were shaped by their occupational socialization. Key findings were that the coaches fell into one of three groups. Rejectors mostly followed the guidelines, but were reluctant to do so because they did not think they were necessary to protect their players’ health and thought they had a negative impact on player development. Acceptors fully embraced the new guidelines because they believed they kept players safe and had a positive impact on player development. Skeptics questioned the scientific evidence linking heading to brain injury and believed the new guidelines had been
introduced by the USSF to avoid lawsuits. Consequently, their main motivation for following the new guidelines carefully was to avoid the legal consequences of not doing so.

The study also revealed that the coaches’ acculturation had a powerful impact on their reading and interpretation of the new guidelines on heading. The primary socialization agent was the media coverage of heading and its links to brain injury. There was also some indication that the degree to which the coaches had suffered from concussions and the style of soccer they had grown up playing influenced their views and actions. The acceptors’ coach education served to reinforce their views about coaching heading, whereas the rejectors and skeptics disagreed with their formal training and strategically complied with or attempted to strategically redefine it.

Similarly, the cultures of their soccer clubs reinforced the acceptors’ and some rejectors’ and skeptics’ beliefs about coaching heading. Other rejectors and skeptics, however, encountered soccer club cultures that clashed with their own views on heading and so strategically complied with them. The confusion caused by differing interpretations of the new guidelines regarding heading by different governing bodies, organizations, clubs, and referees allowed each group of coaches to justify its own perspectives and practices.

If the findings of the current study transfer to other coaches, they suggest four main practical implications for youth soccer in the United States. First, coach educators need to be aware of the different ways in which coaches perceive and react to the new guidelines on heading so that they can counter faulty perspectives more effectively. Second, those in more powerful positions within the different organizations through which youth soccer is delivered at the various levels in the United States should strive to provide a more uniform interpretation of the new guidelines on heading so as to avoid confusion among coaches (and referees) and allow multiple readings of new guidelines to flourish in the first place. Finally, and more generally,
knowledge of how the different forms of socialization interact to shape the views and pedagogies of coaches, and the ways in which coaches sometimes fight back against this socialization, should enable coach educators to develop more effective programs.

Future research in this area obviously needs to be carried out to determine to what extent the findings of the current study transfer to other male coaches in other parts of the country. There is also a need to conduct similar research with female soccer coaches and coaches of color. Perhaps the patterns of socialization differ for female coaches or coaches of color and new perspectives and practices on the teaching and coaching heading will be unearthed. More research of this nature also needs to be completed if and when the science linking heading with injury changes or becomes more nuanced and facilitates changes in the guidelines covering heading in youth soccer.
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Table 1

*Coaches’ Socialization Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biographic Detail</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Skeptics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rejectors</td>
<td>Acceptors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yannick</td>
<td>Nathaniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
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<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size/focus of soccer club</td>
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<td>Large/</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest playing level</td>
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<td>High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positions played</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Defender</td>
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<td>Perceptions of heading ability</td>
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<td>Estimated number of concussions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching qualifications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping strategy during coach</td>
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<td>education</td>
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<td>Compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club culture</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* ¹Denotes under 9 years of age, under 10 years of age, and under 11 years of age. ²The A license is the highest USSF qualification for youth coaches and the E license is the lowest qualification.