

CAREER PROGRESSION, ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONSHIPS  
OF SUCCESSFUL FULL-TIME ASSISTANT COACHES IN CANADIAN  
UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL

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## Abstract

Coaches play a crucial role in the development of athletes of all age and ability levels. In order to fulfil their numerous roles, coaches rely on their support staff for assistance. Gilbert and Trudel (2004) noted that assistant coaches are involved in player evaluations, competition strategies, and the organization and planning of practices. In football, assistant coaches are particularly important due to large roster sizes and the specialization of playing positions. In Canadian University football, most coaching staffs have up to nine assistant coaches in addition to the head coach and three coordinators. Additionally, it is not uncommon for teams to have four or more of their football coaches hired on a full-time basis. Despite the important role of assistant coaches, the topic has been underrepresented in the coaching science literature. The purpose of the current study was to explore the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of full-time head assistant coaches in Canadian University football. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with six successful Canadian University football assistant coaches who had been serving in this position for a minimum of five years and who were recommended by a panel of experts familiar with this sport as among the best in their profession. According to the participants, their athletic careers helped them acquire both the knowledge and access that led to an assistant coaching position in Canadian University football. Once they started coaching, their progression was facilitated by attending various coaching clinics and interacting with professional coaches on a regular basis. A large part of their roles and responsibilities related to their appointment as unit coordinators (offence, defence, or special teams). Additionally, development and implementation of the team's vision along with involvement in the recruiting process of prospective student-athletes were all described as key elements of the job. The participants also explained the key relational aspects of their jobs with student-athletes, the head coach, and other members of the coaching staff. In sum, these results represent one of the first empirical accounts of the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of assistant coaches in team sports from the perspective of the assistant coach. The outcomes could lead to curriculum advancements of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) with regards to the development and coaching responsibilities of assistant coaches.

## Résumé

Les entraîneurs jouent un rôle clé dans le développement d'athlètes de tous âges et degrés d'habiletés. Pour remplir leur nombreux rôles et responsabilités, les entraîneurs ont recours à une groupe de soutien. Gilbert et Trudel (2004) ont en effet démontré que les assistants entraîneurs sont impliqués avec l'entraîneur chef dans l'évaluation des joueurs, les stratégies de matchs, ainsi que la planification et l'organisation des séances d'entraînement. Au football, les assistants entraîneurs sont particulièrement importants de par le nombre élevé de joueurs dans une équipe et la spécialisation des différentes positions de jeu. Au football universitaire canadien, la plupart des personnels d'entraîneurs comptent jusqu'à neuf entraîneurs en plus des trois coordonnateurs d'unités et de l'entraîneur-chef. De plus, il est fréquent de voir quatre ou plus de ces entraîneurs engagés à temps-plein par le programme de football. Même si les assistants entraîneur sont excessivement importants, le sujet est toutefois sous-représenté dans la littérature scientifique sportive liée. L'objectif de cette étude était donc d'explorer la progression de carrière, les rôles, responsabilités et relations professionnelles des assistants entraîneurs-chef engagés à temps plein dans le football universitaire canadien. Des entretiens ouverts semi-structurés ont été menés avec six assistants entraîneurs-chef en football universitaire canadiens qui avaient été identifiés à priori par un panel d'experts en football canadien et qui exercent la profession depuis au moins cinq ans. Les participants ont mentionnés que leur carrière athlétique avait été très bénéfique dans l'obtention d'un poste d'entraîneur puisqu'ils y avaient acquis plusieurs connaissances requises. Une fois leur carrière d'entraîneur débutée, leur progression a été accélérée par leur présence à de nombreuses cliniques techniques ainsi que par des interactions régulières avec des entraîneurs du niveau professionnel. Quant à leurs rôles et responsabilités, la plupart d'entre eux proviennent du fait qu'ils sont coordonnateurs d'une des trois unités (attaque, défense, unités spéciales). De plus, le développement et l'implantation de la vision de l'équipe ainsi que le recrutement d'étudiants-athlètes sont également des composantes importantes de la position. Les participants ont également parlés de leurs relations avec l'entraîneur chef, leur collègues entraîneurs et les étudiants-athlètes. En résumé, ces résultats constituent la première représentation empirique de la progression de carrière, des rôles, responsabilités et relations professionnelles des assistants entraîneurs dans le sport, de leur propre perspective. Les retombées pourraient mener à la spécialisation du Programme National de Certification des Entraîneurs quant à la compréhension et au développement de la position d'assistant entraîneur.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Coaches play a crucial role in the development of athletes of all ages (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Côté, 2006; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979). Their roles and responsibilities are numerous. They provide detailed and accurate feedback and motivation (Stein, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2012) are responsible for teaching their athlete's technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills (Bloom, 2011; Nater & Gallimore, 2010), and are concerned with their personal development (Davies, Bloom, & Salmela, 2005; Duchesne, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2011; Nater & Gallimore, 2010; Trestman & Bernstein, 2010; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). The current head football coach of the Chicago Bears and former University football coach Marc Trestman noted that he was a teacher, a father, a confidante, and a mentor to his athletes (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010). Another outstanding American University coach, John Wooden, was famous for teaching both basketball and life skills to his athletes (Nater & Gallimore, 2010). He believed the fundamental principles of teaching were the same in the classroom and on the playing field and he often spoke about the personal relationships he developed with his athletes outside of the basketball court (Nater & Gallimore, 2010). Along the same line, empirical research of expert Canadian University team sport coaches has demonstrated the importance of athletes' personal growth and development (Davies et al., 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). This research also alluded to the many administrative responsibilities which ranged from recruiting, fund raising, budgeting, community involvement, publicity, and interactions with the school's athletic director. Taken together, coaches' roles and responsibilities in North American university sport take place during training and competition, and also include the personal development of their athletes.

In order to fulfill their numerous roles, coaches often rely on their support staff for assistance. The importance that head coaches place on their assistant coaches is present in the coaching literature (e.g., Bloom, 1997; Billick, 2001; Gilbert & Trudel, 2000, 2004; Nater & Gallimore, 2010; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2014; Solomon, 2001, 2002; Snyder, 2001; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). For example, Bloom found that head coaches placed great importance on hiring competent and loyal support staff. Gilbert and Trudel (2000, 2004) also demonstrated that sports teams coaches relied on a staff of assistant coaches who were involved in player evaluations, competition strategies, and the organization and planning of practices. John Wooden explained that every planning session was done with his assistant coaches (Nater & Gallimore, 2010). Brian Billick, long time NFL head coach, said that his assistant coaches were instrumental for implementing game day strategies (Billick, 2001). Likewise, Rathwell and colleagues showed the assistant coaches were involved in preparing the game plan before competitions along with modifications during competitions. Assistant coaches were also shown to bring a different perspective than head coaches when evaluating athletes and interacting with them (Solomon, 2001, 2002). Therefore, the impact of the assistant coaches on team sports is wide ranging and significant.

One team sport in particular, football, is gaining interest and participation in Canada (Canadian Interuniversity Sport, 2012). For instance, the number of University football programs has doubled in the province of Quebec over the past 15 years. The Canadian Interuniversity Sports (CIS) football league is formed of 26 teams, six of which are based in Quebec. An increase in the number of teams also means an increase in the number of coaching positions. A CIS football team is comprised of approximately 80 student-athletes playing many different positions (e.g., quarterback, defensive lineman, kicker). Therefore,

most CIS football team coaching staffs have up to nine assistant coaches in addition to the head coach. Since football teams are divided into three distinct and independent units (offense, defense, and special teams), each unit is coordinated by one of the assistant coaches. It is not uncommon for CIS football teams to employ all of the coordinators, as well as the head coach, on a full-time basis (Canadian Interuniversity Sport, 2012). Consequently, while University football has become more prominent in Canada, the need for competent coaches has increased.

The understanding of the position of full-time assistant coaches in Canadian University football is limited, mainly since the assistant coach's position has been underrepresented in the coaching literature (Solomon, 2002). Rangeon and Gilbert (2009) developed a reference list of coaching articles published between 1970 and 2008, which contained over 900 coaching-related articles. Only 18 of these articles included assistant coaching as one of the main topics, which represents less than two percent of all coaching literature. Eleven of these articles addressed the impact of gender and race in assistant coaches (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2003, 2004; Stumph & Sagas, 2005). The other studies focused on coaching topics such as athlete's perceptions of social support (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001) and leadership development in a team (Williams & Quarterman, 2008). Moreover, no studies have focused solely on the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches from the assistant coaches' perspective.

While there is a lack of empirical attention focused on assistant coaches, there is a large amount of research on the knowledge and strategies of head coaches of team sports (e.g., Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012; Davies et al., 2005; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). With regards to Canadian University football, only a limited

number of research studies have appeared (e.g., Pronovost, 2011; Rathwell et al., 2014). For example, Pronovost explored effective coaching methods used by an offensive lineman coach. Rathwell and colleagues studied the perspectives of CIS head football coaches on the selection and development of their assistant coaches. Findings indicated that head coaches looked for loyal assistants who cared about their athletes, valued education, and possessed strong leadership skills and good football knowledge. Taken together these studies provided knowledge from the head coaches' perspective, and thus investigating similar information from the assistant coaches' perspective is timely and warranted.

The Coaching Model (CM) is one theoretical framework that has addressed the coaching process (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995). The CM explains which factors are most important in the coaching process and which relationships among these factors are most significant. Bloom (2002) stated:

Although each athlete or team is unique, the CM provides a general structure that increases the likelihood of a coach being successful, including abilities to organize, train, and guide the athlete or team through all phases of competition (p. 438).

The components included in the CM allow for a description of a coach's work from the head coach's perspective. However, the role of the assistant coach within the CM has not yet been investigated. The core of the CM consists of the coaching process, which incorporates the components of *competition*, *training*, and *organization*, areas equally important for assistant coaches.

Aside from their coaching roles and responsibilities, assistant coaches also must develop and maintain relationships with their athletes, head coach, and other assistant coaches on the team. The high number of athletes and coaches on a CIS football team potentially increases the amount and importance of these relationships. The 3 C's + 1 model

is a conceptual framework that addresses the different components of coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Lavalley, 2007). Through the constructs of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation, the 3 C's + 1 model details the feelings, expectations, and perceptions of coaches and athletes involved in an athletic relationship. Therefore, the current study utilized the 3 Cs' + 1 model for understanding the emotional relationships between the head full-time assistant coach and the athletes, as well as the between the head full-time assistant coach and the other coaches on staff.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of full-time football assistant coaches in Canadian Interuniversity Sport.

### **Research Questions**

How does the assistant coach's background, progression in coaching, and individual characteristics influence his current position? What are the assistant coach's football specific roles and responsibilities with regards to organization, training, and competition? What are the assistant coach's roles and responsibilities outside of football? Lastly, what are the professional and personal relationships of the assistant coach with his athletes, head coach, and other assistant coaches on the team?

### **Significance of the Study**

The majority of coaching science research has focused exclusively on head coaches. This study aims to broaden the coaching literature by examining assistant coaches. The findings could offer insight to current and aspiring assistant coaches by providing them with knowledge about their roles and responsibilities from the perspective of current assistant

coaches. Additionally, the relationships of the head assistant coach with his athletes, with the other assistant coaches, and with the head coach will be addressed. Furthermore, this study may provide a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches for athletes, parents, and team administrators. The awareness of the position could result in more efficient interactions between them and the assistant coach. The outcomes might also lead to curriculum advancements of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP). The NCCP encompasses coaching development in Canada (Coaching Association of Canada, 2012). The *competitive stream* of their program does not differentiate between the position of head and assistant coach. Therefore, results from this study might be adopted by the NCCP and included in future curriculum reforms. Finally, the current research is part of a series of studies carried out at the sport psychology laboratory at McGill University that may lead to the development of a model for explaining the head coach-assistant coach relationship.

### **Delimitations**

For the purpose of this study the following delimitations were identified:

1. Participants had been an assistant coach in the CIS for a minimum of five years.
2. They were, at the time of the study, currently full-time paid assistant coaches and had been identified by their respective head coach as their assistant coach with the most responsibilities and authority.

### **Limitations**

The following limitations were identified for the purpose of this study:

1. Participants will respond truthfully to the interview questions.
2. Results may only be applicable to Canadian University football coaches.

Results may only be applicable to the head assistant coach of CIS teams.

### **Operational Definition**

For the purpose of this study, the following definition will be used:

*Head assistant coach* will be defined as the full-time assistant coach who has the most responsibility and authority and who likely receives the highest salary of the assistant coaches on their staff.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This chapter will consist of two main sections. First, the Coaching Model will be presented in relation to the roles and responsibilities of the head assistant coach. Second, the coach and athlete relationship aspect will be examined using the 3 C's + 1 model.

#### The Coaching Model (CM)

The Coaching Model (CM; Appendix A) provides a framework to explain the main factors involved in coaching and the relationships that exist amongst those factors (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995). Through their inquiry of elite gymnastics coaches, Côté and colleagues found the overall goal of the coach was to develop athletes. Similarly, Côté and Gilbert (2009) noted that the most observable outcome of coaching was athletes' development in their sport. The Coaching Model has six instrumental components that affect athlete's development which are divided into two categories: the coaching process and the peripheral components. The coaching process incorporates *competition, training, and organization* and the peripheral components include *the coach's personal characteristics, the athlete's developmental level and personal characteristics, and the contextual factors*. The interaction between the coaching process and the peripheral components is represented by the *coach's mental model of athlete's potential*. This is the coach's mental representation of the potential of his/her athlete(s). To form their mental model, coaches assess the three peripheral components and their influence on the team's goal. Coaches' mental model then dictates how they organize the three components of the coaching process.

Gilbert and Trudel (2000) tested the validity of the components of the CM in a team sport context (ice hockey), and found that the six components of the CM were consistent in

both individual and team sports contexts. Some of the differences concerned the importance of tactical skills development in team sports and coach-athlete interactions during competitions. In his study of the optimal coaching methods of a Canadian University football coach, Pronovost (2011) also found that the components of the CM were applicable in a team sport context. Finally, Bloom (2002) stated “although each athlete or team is unique, the Coaching Model provides a general structure that increases the likelihood of a coach being successful, including abilities to organize, train, and guide the athlete or team through all phases of competition” (p. 438).

### **The Coaching Process**

This section will focus on the coaching process and its three main components: *organization, training, and competition*. Côté and colleagues (1995) identified the coaching process as central to their model, as it directly affected the athletes' development and was influenced by the peripheral components.

**Organization.** Côté and colleagues (1995) and Côté and Salmela (1996) described organization as the establishment of optimal conditions for training and competition. Organization occurred before, during, or after competition and training, and involved working with parents, working with assistant coaches, dealing with athletes' personal concerns, planning training, and monitoring weight and aesthetics. Furthermore, elite university sports coaches summarized organizational skills as an important part of their job (Vallée & Bloom, 1995). They agreed on the importance of planning for practices and competition but also emphasized recruiting, community involvement, and fundraising. Similarly, Gilbert, Côté, and Mallett (2006) showed that community college football coaches in the United States averaged 581.4 hours per year (approximately half of the total amount of

working hours) on administrative duties. Administrative duties were defined as practice preparation, competition strategies, recruiting, scouting, etc. Assistant coaches are also involved in administrative duties (Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012). For example, Bucci and colleagues noted that elite ice hockey coaches' interactions and collaborations with their assistant coaches with regards to administrative duties were instrumental in the success of their team. Similarly, Gallimore and Tharp (2004) studied John Wooden, UCLA's men's basketball coach from 1948 to 1975 (recognized as the greatest college coach of the 20th century by ESPN), and cited his perspective on organization and planning:

Everything was planned out each day. In fact, in my later years at UCLA I would spend two hours every morning with my assistants organizing that day's practice sessions (even though the practice itself might be less than two hours long). I would spend almost as much time planning a practice as conducting it. Everything was listed on three-by-five cards down to the very last detail. (p.125)

Marc Trestman, head coach of the Chicago Bears in the National Football League and former university football coach, also mentioned the importance of planning in his biography:

In football programs everywhere, sections of practice are organized with scripts that inform players and coaches what plays will be called. This script is a pre-set plan with every play to be run written down so it can be followed by the coaches and players. (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010, p. 103)

The role of organization was further summarized by Short and Short (2005) who said that organization also included the less glamorous parts of the coach's duties such as planning of transportation and recruiting.

The development of a team vision is another core element of organization on sport teams (Short & Short, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). For example, Short and Short demonstrated that coaches began every season by outlining the steps necessary to achieve success and developed a precise plan or vision. Similarly, Vallée and Bloom investigated five female Canadian University coaches and found team vision emerged as an essential

component to the success of their teams. Furthermore, the vision was shown to influence the organizational skills displayed by the head coach. Coaches kept the team's vision in mind when planning, recruiting, organizing, competing, and fund-raising. Therefore, the development of their vision was an integral part of their coaching duties, and it was crucial to get their athletes to buy into their vision. In order to do so, coaches recognized that athletes had to trust them. In the case of Canadian University football programs, the structure of the coaching staff presents a different challenge with regard to the team vision. The presence of three independent units on the team (offense, defense, special teams), which are each led by a different assistant coach, means that players on those units are in constant contact with different coaches. Therefore, assistant coaches might have a more significant role in developing trust with their athletes. As such, assistants must be consistent with the head coach and share the team vision. Our study will allow for an understanding of the role head assistant coaches have in selling the team's vision to athletes.

**Training.** The training component was described as the transfer of knowledge between coaches and athletes to improve their acquisition and performance of different skills in training (Côté et al., 1995). Gilbert and colleagues (2006) defined training from the coaches' perspective as “time spent in direct contact with athletes at practice sessions” (p. 73). Expert coaches have been shown to possess the ability to motivate athletes and to teach technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Bloom, 2002; Bucci et al., 2012; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Nater & Gallimore, 2010). In their inquiry of the perceptions and strategies of full-time coaches, Bennie and O'Connor (2011) interviewed seven coaches of Australia's professional rugby teams and found that coaches favored training sessions that emphasized game specific tactical drills in practice that could be

adjusted to individual player needs and specialties. This finding could be practical to head assistant coaches of a Canadian University football program. Their role as coordinator of one of the three units on the team (i.e. offense, defense, special teams) means that they are responsible for preparing athletes to perform the plays and strategies in a game (i.e., using game specific tactical drills in practice). Furthermore, the need to adapt training to the athletes' specialties is also crucial since there are more than 10 different positions on a football team.

Gallimore and Tharp's (2004) study on the coaching methods of legendary UCLA men's basketball coach John Wooden showed the importance of efficient training sessions. The authors observed multiple training sessions of coach Wooden and noted, "Practices were tightly organized and conducted with clock-like precision. There was constant activity, with players moving from drill to drill quickly and efficiently, so that the intensity level was kept at a remarkably high level" (p. 123). John Wooden revolutionized the world of coaching in many ways. His use of fast paced practices insured his players could withstand the physical demands of competition while increasing productivity of practice. Gus Malzahn, one of the most prominent full-time assistants in university football in the United States, transformed the football world in the early 2000s by implementing a fast-paced offense that didn't rely on the huddle (i.e. a pause between each plays where players get together to receive the strategy from the coaches) between plays. In his autobiography, Malzahn (2003) explained the importance of implementing this system: "By applying the hurry-up to all facets of your practices, you will program your coaches and players to execute the offense at a much quicker pace that will carry over to your game days" (p. 51). This example reinforces the concept of emphasizing game specific drills in practice (Bennie & O'connor, 2011). Head

assistant coaches in Canadian University football teams are responsible for implementing their own playing system. It will therefore be interesting to learn about the importance of training and practices with these coaches.

Video analysis is another important element that has been used consistently in training (Bucci et al., 2012; Trestman & Bernstein, 2010). For example, elite ice hockey coaches mentioned that video analysis was used to improve their athletes' development (Bucci et al., 2012). The athletes' technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills were addressed when doing video analysis of their performance. Video analysis is also used on a daily basis by football coaches. Coach Marc Trestman explained how his meetings were run with his athletes when he was an assistant coach in the American collegiate ranks, "I covered everything slowly and methodically, using transparencies, chalk boards and plenty of video tape" (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010, p. 79). The head assistant coaches in Canadian University football have the responsibility to analyze the performance of their athletes on their respective unit. Our inquiry will allow for a more detailed understanding of how video analysis is integrated to their coaching practice.

**Competition.** This component of the coaching process deals with the maximization of athletes' performances during competition (Côté et al., 1995). Included in this component are categories such as coaches' roles both before and during the competition. On the day of competition, the coach must attend to various tasks although they differ from sport to sport. Team sports coaches have a more active role in competitions than individual sport coaches since they make athlete substitutions, call time-outs, adapt and modify game plans, and interact with officials (Bloom, 1997; Short & Short, 2005). All of these are dependent on the ability of the coach to read the flow of the game as well as the strategies used by their

opponents. In order to do so, coaches follow a game plan that has been laid out during the week of preparation. For the game plan to be implemented effectively, every member of the coaching staff has to be aware of their role during the competition. Brian Billick, offensive coordinator and head coach in the NFL for over 15 years, explained the importance of his coaching staff on the execution of a game plan on game day:

Coaching assignment can be one of the more difficult parts of implementing a game plan. In reality, it can be hard for some coaches to avoid getting caught up in the action and become a spectator who watch the game. As such, it is important that each coach be given a specific assignment and that he maintains his focus on his particular job. We give each coach a specific part of the play to watch and be accountable for (Billick, 2001, p. 74).

As important as the game plan is, the intermissions are also important for team sport coaches (Bloom, 1997; Gilbert & Trudel, 2000). Intermissions are the only sustained time that coaches can speak with their assistant, re-evaluate their game plan, and make modifications (Bloom, 1997). In terms of head assistant coaches in Canadian university football, they have the opportunity to talk to the players on their respective units during the intermission. However, before relaying the message to the athletes, the input of the head coach might have to be taken into consideration.

### **Peripheral Components**

The following section will present the peripheral components of the CM: the coach's personal characteristics, the athlete's personal characteristics, and contextual factors. Each component impacts the coach's mental model of athletes' potential and influences the coaching process and its three components (Côté et al., 1995).

**Coach's Personal Characteristics.** Côté and colleagues (1995) described coach's personal characteristics as their philosophy, perceptions, and beliefs that influenced their work in organization, training and competition. Similarly, Bennie and O'Connor (2011)

affirmed that coach's personal characteristics and philosophy combined with their technical and tactical knowledge was instrumental in their leadership abilities, communicative skills, player-management, and planning. In support for the link between coach's personal characteristics and organization, Bennie and O'Connor also mentioned that coaches' leadership approach, management skills, and ability to communicate influenced the way in which they planned training sessions, organized team meetings, and made technical and tactical decisions. Rathwell and colleagues (2014) noted that loyalty, trustworthiness, and strong personal values were deemed important by head coaches when they were choosing their assistant coaches.

Côté and Gilbert (2009) demonstrated that education and experience influenced the coach's knowledge and behaviours. Similarly, Carter and Bloom (2009) found that expert coaches identified the study of kinesiology or physical education as an important coaching development aid that influenced their coaching knowledge and characteristics. Additionally, expert Canadian university football coaches described learning valuable teaching and organizational skills and constructing their personality and what would become their coaching philosophy, while completing their university degrees, often in kinesiology and physical education while competing as varsity athletes (Rathwell et al., 2014). Precisely, their leadership, technical and tactical knowledge, pedagogical approach and social skills were all constructed and/or influenced during their academic and athletic careers. Hence, the education of coaches isn't always done as formally as other professions and involves a combination of formal training, practical experiences, and informal learning opportunities (Wilson, Bloom, & Harvey, 2010).

Coaches' characteristics, knowledge, and philosophies have been greatly influenced



by other coaches they have worked with during their careers (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Trestman & Bernstein, 2010). For example, in their inquiry of 21 expert Canadian team sports coaches, Bloom and colleagues revealed that mentoring was one of the principal sources of knowledge acquisition during the coaches' career. Having been mentored by more experienced coaches, they gained a lot of knowledge and insights which helped them formulate their coaching style and philosophy. Similarly, Marc Trestman (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010) recalled his experience as an assistant coach in the National Football League (NFL) working under legendary Minnesota Vikings head coach, Bud Grant:

I learned and have applied so many of Bud's life lessons to my own coaching style. He invested in me and now I do the same for my assistants. The infinite number of situations and possibilities that come up in the preparation, practice, and game of football leave an open door each day to learn something new. (p. 110)

Furthermore, when talking about his previous head coaching position with the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League (CFL), coach Trestman mentioned:

This job gave me a chance to step back and be mindful of all the coaches I had worked for and with over the years. I had taken everything in over the years from all of them and was now applying it to my own players and staff. (p. 237)

Therefore, mentors and colleagues influence coaches' styles and philosophies, which then affect the organization, training, and competition components of a team. As for assistant coaches, their style and philosophy is also influenced by their head coach. Our study will examine the personal characteristics, coaching progression and sources of influence of the head assistant coaches in Canadian University football and how their personal characteristics affect their profession.

As much as the personal characteristics of a coach can influence his approach to his profession, a coach's awareness of his own characteristics, coaching methods and behaviours

also seems to play a role in his success. Pronovost (2011) studied the daily in-season coaching methods of a Canadian University football assistant coach. He found that a coach using self-evaluation of his personal characteristics, coaching style, and methods was beneficial to the improvement of his athletes. Pronovost showed that this self-awareness optimized the future training sessions, as the coach was better able to recognize the effects of his interventions on his athletes. Since the full-time assistant coach's philosophy is linked with the head coach's, it will also be of interest to see if the latter has a role to play in the self-evaluation process of the former.

**Athlete's Developmental Level and Personal Characteristics.** Athlete's developmental level and personal characteristics encompassed the athletes' stage of learning, their personal abilities, and any other personal characteristics that could have an impact on the coaching process (Côté et al., 1995). More specifically, it explains how the athletes' background and individual differences influence the components of organization, training, and competition. Côté, Young, Duffy, and North (2007) have demonstrated that effective coaches' competencies have to be congruent with the needs of their athletes and the context in which these athletes are competing. The authors presented four typologies of coaching: participation coaches for children, participation for teens and adults, performance coaches for young adolescents, and performance coaches for late adolescents and adults. The difference in the athletes' ages, characteristics, developmental level and needs means that coaches in each level need to possess different knowledge and skills and develop a different mental model of their respective situation. Canadian University football coaches fall under the performance coaches for late adolescents and adults' category. Côté and colleagues explained that those coaches deal with athletes that are willing to invest sufficient time in their sport to

reach the highest ranks. Their desire for performance surpasses their desire for pleasure and recreation. Furthermore, they are motivated by extrinsic sources like winning, competing at national and international levels, and developing a professional career in sport. Additionally, in their investigation of the psychological characteristics of ten U.S.A. Olympic champions, Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) found the elite athletes were confident, resilient, coachable, optimistic, and competitive. They also possessed the ability to cope with and control anxiety, set and achieve goals, and focus by blocking out distractions. Accordingly, coaches should be aware of the characteristics of their athletes in order to develop a team environment that takes full advantages of the individual makeup of its athletes. This could present a significant challenge for Canadian University football coaches who work with a high number of athletes with different individual characteristics, developmental level, and backgrounds.

**Contextual Factors.** Contextual factors are unstable factors aside from coaches and athletes such as assistant coaches, parents, working conditions, and administration that play a role in the coaching process. Coaches have to be adaptable as they work in a multitude of contexts that differ in terms of support, resources, equipment, facilities, and staff (Côté et al., 2007). Davies, Bloom, and Salmela (2005) interviewed six Canadian University head basketball coaches who mentioned that their job satisfaction was significantly impacted by factors such as their relation with the athletic director, recruiting, publicity, and the University environment. Scholarship allotment and budget restrictions were other constraints that head coaches dealt with on a regular basis (Short & Short, 2005). This holds true in Canadian University football, possibly due to the fact that each team has access to different resources/money. The lack of regulation has allowed for the implication of private

enterprises that facilitate a football program's access to financial resources. Teams compete on an uneven playing field with regard to the number of full-time coaches, recruiting budget, facilities, and scholarships. Head assistant coaches' roles and responsibilities can therefore vary depending which program they work for.

Media presence is another contextual factor that plays a role with football coaches. In the biography of Bill Belichick (Halbertstam, 2005), head coach of the Super Bowl winning New England Patriots in 2001, 2003, 2004, the importance of the media is explained:

In 1991 he [Bill Belichick] got a chance to become the head coach at Cleveland, and there he was judged to have fallen on his face. The Cleveland tour had created a view that he might be the perfect defensive coordinator, but somehow lacked the requisite charisma to be an NFL head coach. He was something of a genius-nerd, someone who was doomed to make a more charismatic coach look better. (p. 33)

Even if he was recognized as a qualified and successful assistant coach, media and fans wanted a more personable and entertaining head coach. Similarly, coach Marc Trestman spent more than 25 seasons in the NFL and the CFL and was recognized by many as one of the best offensive tacticians in the league but was never considered for a head coaching position until 2013. Ernie Accorsi, longtime NFL general manager when describing Trestman mentioned, "He is not a politician. He doesn't try to manipulate people or maneuver for jobs either. He is very humble and has a lot of humility, almost to a fault" (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010, p. 136). Joe Theismann, Super Bowl winning quarterback and current NFL television analyst, when asked why Trestman never got a head coaching position in the NFL said, "It has become a league of "It's not what you know, but who you know" in terms of getting a head coaching position." (Trestman & Bernstein, 2010, p. 25).

These examples are taken from the top professional football league in the world. However, Canadian University football has experienced a major increase in exposure over

the past decade. Games are broadcasted nationally and media are following teams on a daily basis during the season. Therefore, coaching staffs across the country are under constant pressure from the outside world, including assistant coaches.

### **The 3 C's + 1 Model**

Interpersonal relationships are defined as situations in which two people's emotions, cognitions, and behaviours are interconnected (Kelley et al., 1983). Jowett and Lavalley (2007) described the coach-athlete relationship as a dynamic interrelation between a coach and athlete's emotions, behaviours, and cognitions. According to Jowett and colleagues, the interdependence between these three variables forms the premise of the 3 C's + 1 model used to study coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2001). This section will present the evolution of the model, as well as describe its use in research on motivation, team cohesion, and coach-athlete interactions. Of importance, the construct of *co-orientation* was one of the original 3 C's of the coach-athlete relationship model, but was later replaced by the construct of *commitment* (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2001). Years later, *co-orientation* was reintroduced under a different definition and became the fourth construct (the + 1) of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002).

The make-up of the 3 C's + 1 model has evolved over time. Initially, in their examination of four married coach-athlete dyads, Jowett and Meek (2000) identified three constructs of coach-athlete relationships: *closeness*, *complementarity*, and *co-orientation*. Jowett (2003) used the same three constructs to study an Olympic coach-athlete dyad. Both studies provided definitions of the three constructs that became known as the 3 C's of the coach-athlete relationships. *Closeness* was defined as the connectedness and emotional

attachment between coaches and athletes, which was reflected by their mutual feelings of trust, respect, and appreciation for each other. The beliefs coaches and athletes had about one another were shown to be crucial in achieving closeness. However, coaches' belief about their athletes was identified as more important to the relationship. *Complementarity* was the behavioural component of coach-athlete relationships, and involved the coach and athletes' level of cooperation. For instance, being aware of their respective roles, and demonstrating friendly behaviours during training sessions were examples of actions promoting *complementarity*. Finally, *co-orientation* represented both members understanding of their common interests and goals and was defined by the shared knowledge and understanding of the members of the dyad. In order to establish co-orientation, effective communication was required from both coaches and athletes. Therefore, communication was considered a building block, allowing co-orientation to develop. In summary, *closeness*, *complementarity*, and *co-orientation* were the original components used to describe a successful coach-athlete relationship. Accordingly, lack of *closeness*, *complementarity*, and *co-orientation* were associated with interpersonal conflicts in coach-athlete relationships (Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett, 2003).

In their attempt to develop an assessment tool for coach-athlete relationships, Jowett and Ntoumanis (2001) created an initial questionnaire made of 25 items that represented the constructs of *closeness*, *complementarity*, and *co-orientation*. A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) demonstrated that 6 items that were initially associated with co-orientation were unreliable and were eliminated from the questionnaire. In addition, one co-orientation item along with three closeness items were identified as being better represented by the emerging construct of *commitment*. The addition of commitment was described to represent

the long-term orientation and future expectations in close relationships (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), as well as coaches' and athletes' intention to maintain their athletic relationship (Jowett and Ntoumanis, 2001). The 3 C's of coach-athlete relationships were now changed to closeness, commitment, and complementarity. With these changes, commitment now presented the cognitive aspect of the dyad, closeness demonstrated the emotional aspect, and complementarity evaluated the behavioural aspect.

One year later, Jowett and Cockerill (2002) presented an argument for the “return” of the construct co-orientation. From that point, the model became the 3 C's + 1 model of coach-athlete relationships, and co-orientation was added to the constructs of closeness, commitment, and complementarity. However, Jowett and Cockerill provided a new definition of co-orientation than the original offered by Jowett and Meek (2000). Where co-orientation was originally a measure of communication in the dyad, it now allowed for the evaluation of the perceptions of the coach and the athlete. The authors described co-orientation as the coaches' and athletes' mutual perceptions of closeness, commitment, and complementarity. Furthermore, co-orientation was divided in two perspectives: the direct perspective and the meta-perspective. The direct perspective assessed one member's perception of his/her partner in relation to closeness, commitment, and complementarity. The meta-perspective assessed how accurately one member could infer the other members' perception of the relationship in relation to closeness, commitment, and complementarity (Jowett; 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Lavalley, 2007). An example of the direct perspective of an athlete would be saying, “I am committed to my coach”, and a coach's meta-perspective would be “My athlete is committed to me” (Jowett, 2005). The direct and meta-perspective also allowed for three additional components of co-orientation to emerge:

*assumed similarity*, *actual similarity*, and *empathic understanding* (Jowett & Lavalley, 2007).

These components served for comparison between the perspective of the coach and the perspective of the athlete. Assumed similarity reflected how one member's assumption of how he/she feels, thinks, and behaves (e.g., “I trust my coach”) was shared by the other member of the dyad (e.g., “my coach trusts me”). Actual similarity represented the congruence between both members’ perceptions (e.g., athlete: “I trust my coach”; coach: “I trust my athlete”). Finally, Jowett noted that empathic understanding referred to how one member understands the thoughts, feelings, and action of the other member (e.g., athlete: “I think my coach trusts me”; coach: “I trust my athlete”). In sum, the “new” co-orientation construct allowed for an evaluation of the degree of symbiosis in the coach-athlete relationship. Along with the constructs of closeness, commitment, and complementarity, it formed the 3 C's + 1 model that is known and used today. This model offers a sport-specific framework as well as a methodology to study coach-athlete relationships in sports.

In order to measure the relational components of closeness, commitment, and complementarity in the coach–athlete dyad from a direct and a meta-perspective, Jowett and Ntoumanis (2001) developed and validated the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q). The CART-Q is an eleven-item questionnaire that reveals the affective (closeness), cognitive (commitment), and behavioural (complementarity) aspects of the dyadic relationship from both the direct and the meta-perspectives of the athlete and the coach (co-orientation). A comparison between coaches' and athletes' direct and meta-perspectives offers an understanding of the dyad's level of co-orientation regarding closeness, commitment, and complementarity in the relationship. This questionnaire has been used to evaluate one or more of those four constructs in a number of coach-athlete relationships'



studies (e.g., Jowett & Chaundy, 2004; Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006; Jowett & Nezlek, 2011; Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2006; Lavoie, 2007; Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008).

Since the 3 C's + 1 model went through a significant evolution, it is important to summarize its three distinct phases. Jowett and Meek (2000) initially presented three constructs (3 C's) to conceptualize the coach-athlete relationship. Closeness referred to the affective ties that athletes and their coaches experienced in their daily interactions. Co-orientation addressed coaches' and athlete's shared knowledge and understanding of each other's roles, objectives, and values. Complementarity described their actions of associations and cooperation. In 2002, Jowett and Ntoumanis demonstrated that the construct of co-orientation wasn't effective in describing coach-athlete relationships. They suggested that the construct of commitment should replace it. Commitment reflected coaches' and athletes' intentions or desires to maintain their athletic partnership over time. Closeness, commitment, and complementarity became the 3 C's of coach-athlete relationships. Finally, Jowett and Cockerill (2002) showed that co-orientation could still be part of a conceptual model of coach-athlete relationships under a new definition. Co-orientation was added as the fourth C and together with the existing constructs became the 3 C's + 1 model of coach-athlete relationships. Co-orientation addressed the coaches' and athletes' perceptions about each other from a direct and a meta-perspective.

To put the 3 Cs' + 1 model in perspective with our study it is important to understand that Canadian University football teams are formed with over 80 athletes. As a result of the large team size, it is generally accepted that assistant coaches have a crucial role in developing and maintaining relationships with their athletes. Since the 3 Cs' + 1 model

allows the study of the coach-athlete relationship, it could therefore be used as a conceptual framework for studying the relationships of head assistant coaches in Canadian University football. Closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation have been shown to be key constructs used to evaluate the coach-athlete relationships. Furthermore, University football coaching staffs are generally composed of over 10 coaches, allowing for a significant amount of interactions between coaches. More specifically, the head assistant coach has been shown to work in close proximity with the head coach (Rathwell et al., 2014). Feelings of like, trust, respect, and appreciation are all essential to maintaining an effective working relationship. Likewise, cooperation between head and assistant coaches, as well as a desire to preserve their relationship are instrumental in the success of their team. Therefore, the 3 Cs' + 1 model is also appropriate for studying the head-coach head-assistant-coach relationship.

Research investigating the 3 C's + 1 model have examined the effects of coach-athlete relationships on motivational climate (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008), team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundry, 2004), and coach-athlete interactions (Jowett & Nezlek, 2011; Lavoie, 2007; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Those inquiries have solely focused on the relationships between the head coach and the athletes. For example, Olympiou et al. examined the impact of the coach's motivational climate on the coach-athlete relationships on 591 British team sport athletes. The motivational climate refers to the orientation of the team's goals, which is affected by the coach's personal goal orientation and behaviours (Stein, Bloom, & Sabiston, 2012). Olympiou and colleagues found that when coaches' motivational climate was task involving, hence emphasizing role distribution, co-operative learning, and effort improvement, athletes felt more closeness, commitment, and complementarity with their coaches. In contrast, athletes who perceived unequal recognition felt a lack of closeness,

commitment, and complementarity with their coaches. It has been shown that a lack of closeness, commitment, and complementarity in the coach-athlete relationship was associated with interpersonal conflicts (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). Accordingly, a coach promoting skill development while emphasizing cooperation and effort in his/her interactions with his/her athletes will increase the likelihood of them feeling close and committed and of having a complimentary relationship. Those findings indicate that the motivational climate promoted by the coach influences the coach-athlete relationship. Research has yet to examine how this relationship applies to the assistant coach. Because of the presence of independent units on football teams (i.e. offense, defense, and special teams), the head assistant coach (who is often either the offensive or defensive coordinator) has more personal interactions with the athletes on his respective unit. This could increase the likelihood of the assistant coach and his athletes feeling close and committed and having a complimentary relationship.

Emphasizing athletes' cooperation can also positively affect team cohesion (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005). Similarly, team cohesion can be affected by athletes' relationships with their coach. Team cohesion is composed of both social and task components (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985). Social cohesion is described as the degree to which members of a team enjoy each other's presence, and task cohesion is defined as the degree to which members of a team work together towards the achievement of a common performance goals. In their survey of 111 British University team sports athletes, Jowett and Chaundy (2004) found that leadership and relationship variables (i.e. closeness, commitment, and complementarity) were predictors of task cohesion. This suggests that coaches who want to develop cooperation within their team might benefit from building

effective relationships with each team member. In addition, Jowett and Chaundy suggested that athletes' assumed similarity with their coach could help develop close rapport within their team. More precisely, if the athletes' perception of their coach was reciprocal from the coach's perspective, it might lead the athletes to develop a closer bond with their teammates. The dynamics of Canadian University football teams might present a different perspective. In order to have an accurate estimate of assumed similarity between athletes and coaches, the unit (i.e. offense, defense, special teams) of the coach and the athlete studied has to be considered. For example, the assumed similarity between an offensive player and a defensive coach might differ from that of an offensive player and an offensive coach. Also, the assumed similarity between an athlete and their head coach might be different than that of an athlete and an assistant coach. As a result, team cohesion differently.

Coach-athlete relationships also influence the way coaches and athletes interact. Short and Short (2005) noted that coaches developed strong relationships with their athletes through a process that involved being a positive role model, discussing problems, sharing successes, offering support, and providing counseling when necessary. These factors can have a significant effect on the athletes' perception of the relationship they have with their coach, which can then affect their performance (Short & Short, 2005). The interactions between athletes and coaches are therefore instrumental for their success. Philippe and Seiler (2006) used the 3 C's + 1 model to explore the relationships between male coaches and male athletes. They demonstrated that closeness allowed the athletes to bond and familiarize with their coach, which led to optimal athlete development. Accordingly, each athlete in their study stressed the importance of developing effective relations with the coach. They also identified that respect, admiration, esteem, admiration, and professional relationships were all

essential in developing and maintaining closeness. Moreover, the authors discussed the two main components of co-orientation: communication and goal/objective setting.

Communication was important when giving technical instruction and positive reinforcement, as well as in problem solving. Objectives and goal setting were shown by the development and attainment of common goals, and by the respect of the athletes towards those goals.

Athletes mentioned that succeeding in their sport was directly linked with effective goal setting. Finally, athletes addressed the importance of being aware of their role and of their coaches' roles and stressed the importance of respecting these roles. These results indicated

that having a close, committed, and complementarity relationship with the coach leads to a maximization of athletes' potentials in training and in competition. Where Philippe and

Seiler studied the impact of closeness, commitment, and complementarity on athletes' performances, Lavoie (2007) only focused on the closeness construct of the 3 C's + 1 model.

Lavoie's study examined NCAA Division I and III student-athletes who competed in a wide range of individual and team sports. The objective was to find out what constructed a close relationship between athletes and coaches. The results showed that competitive male team

sports athletes identified communication, trustworthiness, and respect as the three most

important elements to a close and satisfying coach-athlete relationship. Furthermore, the

athletes recognized that coach-athlete closeness encompassed affective, cognitive and

behavioural dimensions, which were intertwined, complex, and dynamic. This demonstrates

that from an athlete's perspective, a close coach-athlete relationship has to be more than just about the athletic performance. The athletes mentioned that it was important for their coach

to acknowledge their feelings and intellectual abilities. Interestingly, some athletes

mentioned that developing closeness in the coach-athlete relationship required effort and

responsibility from both members in the coach-athlete relationship. However, a majority of them described the process as more unidirectional, thus placing more responsibility on the coach to develop the relationship. The results are of interest because it allows for a better understanding of the preferred coaching characteristics from the athletes' perspective. This illustrates that an effective head coach should be aware of the coaches' characteristics preferred by his/her athletes and be able to hire a head assistant coach that fits those needs and potentially compensate for some of these characteristics that the head coach doesn't possess. Accordingly, the development and maintenance of a close relationship with the athletes is generally believed to be one important responsibility of an assistant University football coaches. Therefore, much could be gained by studying the perspective of the head assistant coach.

Finally, coaches' and athletes' interdependence and satisfaction with their relationships were studied through the constructs of the 3 C's + 1 model (Jowett and Nezelek, 2001). Interdependence between coaches and athletes was positively linked with their satisfaction with the training, instruction, performance, commitment to the sport, and social support received. Accordingly, the degree of interdependence between coaches and athletes was related to the degree to which they positively evaluated the relationship and how they valued the input of the other member in the relationship. Furthermore, associations between satisfaction and interdependence were stronger for longer lasting relationships. The presence of closeness, commitment, and complementarity benefits the coach-athlete relationships as it increases interdependence between the coach and his athletes. An assistant coach that would be able to develop interdependence with his/her athletes would therefore improve their appreciation of their overall athletic experience on the team. However, since the assistant

coach is working almost exclusively with the offense, the defense, or the special teams, the interdependence developed with the athletes on his unit will potentially be different than with the other athletes on the team.

In sum, the coach-athlete relationship has a significant role on athletes, coaches, and teams. Athletes felt more motivated and more cohesive (in team sports) when they perceived their coach exhibited higher levels of the 3 C's. Having a close, committed, and complementarity relationship with the coach was mentioned by elite athletes as maximizing their potential in training and in competition. Furthermore, athletes and coaches accurately perceiving their counterparts 3 C's levels were usually involved in higher quality relationships. Similarly, the quality of relationship was influenced by the interdependence between coaches and athletes. Additionally, the length of the relationship was shown to influence the interdependence as well as the satisfaction in the coach-athlete relationship. Finally, closeness in male team sports was influenced by communication, respect, trustworthiness, and comfort between the athletes and the coaches.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methods**

This chapter presents the methodological foundations of this qualitative study. The participants, procedures, data gathering, and validity aspects are explained. The current study followed the data analysis guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993).

#### **Participants**

According to Marshall (1996), an appropriate sample size in qualitative research answers the research question(s) through data saturation. Guest, Arwen, and Johnson (2006) noted that data saturation can often be achieved with samples between six and 12 participants. More specifically, other qualitative inquiries of expert coaches have reached data saturation with five to six participants (e.g., Bucci et al., 2012; Duchesne et al., 2011; Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

The selection process for the current study was based on three criteria. First, the participants were paid on a full-time basis as assistant football coaches in the CIS, and were identified by their respective head coach as their head assistant. Second, they had been an assistant coach in the CIS for a minimum of five years. Third, they were recommended as a successful head assistant coach by a group of experts familiar with CIS football. The group included current and former CIS head football coaches, an athletic director in the CIS, as well as members of the research team. Table 1 offers a detailed description of the six participants' athletic and coaching backgrounds, as well as accomplishments prior to commencement of this study.



**Table 1***Background and accomplishments of participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>C2</b>	<b>C3</b>	<b>C4</b>	<b>C5</b>	<b>C6</b>
<b>Age Range</b>	25-29	40-49	30-39	30-39	40-49	30-39
<b>Coaching Experience</b>	6 years	10 years	6 years	10 years	18 years	12 years
<b>Coaching Experience With Current Head Coach</b>	6 years	4 years	2 years	4 years	18 years	12 years
<b>Athletic Achievements</b>	CIS Football/ CIS Basketball	CIS Football/CIS Swimming	NFL Camp/ CFL	CIS Football	CFL	CFL
<b>Coaching Title</b>	Head-assistant Coach/ Offensive Coordinator/ QB Coach	Head-assistant coach/ Special Teams Coordinator/ Recruiting Coordinator/ Running Backs Coach	Head-assistant Coach/ Defensive Coordinator/ Defensive Backs Coach	Head-assistant coach/ Recruiting Coordinator/ O-Line Coach	Head-assistant Coach/ Defensive Coordinator/ Defensive Backs Coach	Head-assistant Coach/ Defensive Coordinator
<b>Education</b>	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Education	Bachelor of Leisure Sciences	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor in Intervention Sportive (In progress)	Bachelor of Education (Physical and Health)

**Procedures**

After receiving University ethics approval, the researcher contacted participants by telephone or e-mail with a recruitment script (Appendix B) to inform them of the nature of the study. Once they agreed to participate, each participant identified a time and location for the face-to-face interview to take place. Each coach participated in one face-to-face interview. Prior to beginning the interview questions, coaches were verbally explained their

rights as a research participant asked to complete a consent form (Appendix C) and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). All coaches were interviewed individually for a period of time ranging from one to two hours. The researcher established rapport with the participant by generating a general discussion about football, including aspects of his own experiences as a CIS athlete and coach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Of importance, the researcher was at the time a part-time assistant coach with the McGill University Redmen football team. He was also a player and team captain for the McGill football team from 2006-2010. As such, building rapport with this sample of participants was made easier than someone without these experiences.

### **Data Gathering**

This study collected data by using interviews, a prominent qualitative method of data collection in sport psychology research (Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012). More specifically, the current study used semi-structured open-ended interviews. This interview technique is situated on a continuum between structured interviews (e.g., pre-established questions and limited response categories) and unstructured interviews (e.g., open discussion of a topic with few questions in mind) (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The interviewer's role was to focus and guide the discussion with the interviewee, while allowing him the freedom to answer questions openly without restrictions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It is designed to replicate a more conventional conversation, where the interviewee is actively engaged in the discussion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method has successfully captured the essence of the interviewee's experiences in previous inquiries of expert Canadian University coaches (e.g., Carter, & Bloom, 2009; Davies, et al., 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

## **Interview Guide**

An interview guide (Appendix E) was created by the research team. The first section contained introductory questions designed to initiate discussion (e.g., Briefly describe your progression into coaching, up to your current position.). The second section contained the main questions concerning the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of head assistant coaches in Canadian University football. Specifically, this section covered information based on the Coaching Model (e.g., Describe your roles and responsibilities specific to coaching football; What do you think your current head coach was looking for when he hired you?), and on the 3 Cs' + 1 model (e.g., Describe your interactions with your athletes?). Finally, the final section contained concluding questions to clarify some topics covered in the interview. They provided the researcher the ability to clarify areas of the participant's knowledge and experience that might have been overlooked (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and offered final comments.

## **Data Analysis**

A thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (or themes) across interviews that represented the head assistant coaches' perceptions' of his roles, responsibilities, and coaching relationships. The themes were identified using an inductive or "bottom up" approach as opposed to a theoretical or "top down" method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, themes emerged from the data obtained from the interviews as opposed to being already identified prior to the analysis. In this sense, our analysis was data driven. Data analysis followed the guidelines for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method included six steps: (a) familiarising yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing

themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As well, the steps outlines by Côté and colleagues (1993) were used to help categorize and organize the data.

The data analysis procedure began with a transcription of the verbal data collected. The Nvivo 10 computer software system was used to produce a verbatim account of all verbal utterances. Once transcribed, the researcher familiarized himself with the data by doing an active read of the transcript (i.e., searching for meanings and patterns of the data). The researcher then produced the initial codes, which highlighted an element of the data that appeared important to the researcher. Once all the codes were identified, the researcher grouped those codes into broader themes called properties (Côté et al., 1993). The next phase involved the refinement of those properties (Côté et al., 1993). It was accomplished in two different levels. The first one consisted of reading coded extracts of each theme to verify if they individually formed a coherent pattern. The second level involved a similar process, but with regards to the entire data set. Every theme was evaluated to understand their interactions and verify if they accurately represented the entire data set. By this stage, the different themes became more evident, how they fitted together, and the overall story they told about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fifth stage, the essence of each theme was identified as a short summary of their content was written and a name was given to each one. Finally, the sixth stage of the thematic analysis consisted of producing a report of the collected data. This final analysis of the data provided a "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tells" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23).

## Validity

Validity is an objective of any qualitative research study (Yardley, 2008). This section will present four procedures that were used by the research team to optimize the validity of the study.

**Triangulating researchers' Perspectives.** The term triangulation refers to "the practice of calculating location from three different reference points" (Yardley, 2008, p. 239). One of the ways this can be achieved is by comparing two or more researcher's coding of the same data set. In the current study, the primary researcher analysed the data and generated codes, properties and categories, which were then discussed and compared with an external and impartial graduate student studying sport psychology. This individual was familiar with the coaching literature as well as Canadian University football. Prior to the peer review, the author of this study analysed the six interviews and broke down the meaning units into codes. 25 percent of the codes were randomly selected (118 codes in total) and provided the peer reviewer along with a list of the 53 tags that were created by the lead author and supervisor. The peer reviewer was then instructed to associate each code with a corresponding tag. The peer reviewer accurately matched 101 of the 118 codes with the tags that had been previously assigned to them by the author of the study, producing an overall reliability rate of 85.5 %. The discrepancy of the remaining 17 codes was then discussed and the team came to the conclusion that those were caused by a misunderstanding of the nature of the corresponding tags. Of those remaining 17 codes, 11 stayed unchanged and the other 6 were changed accordingly. For example, the tag *HC - trust* was changed to *HC - personal relationship* as the quote better represented the development of the relationship between the head coach and

his head assistant. Similarly, *Paid coaching positions* was changed to *Career goals* as the quote better represented the professional ambitions of the head assistant coach.

For the next step of the review process, the properties were created by combining tags with similar meanings. Definitions were also created for each property. The reviewer was then asked to classify each of the 53 tags within a list of 10 properties created by the research team. He was given a list of the properties and their definitions. The reviewer accurately placed 44 of the 53 tags under the appropriate property, yielding a reliability rate of 83%. Upon clarification of the definitions and brief justifications of our initial choices, the reviewer agreed that it was more appropriate for them to remain unchanged. For example, the tags *AC - age* and *Educational Background* had initially been placed under the property *Coaching as a Career* as they were both considered elements that impacted the accessibility and evolution of the coach's career. However, the peer reviewer had identified those two tags with the property *Personal Characteristics*. The research team had identified *Personal Characteristics* as representing the coach's traits that influenced their career. Hence, the author and peer reviewer reached agreements with the tags and properties before moving forward with the analysis.

The final step of the peer review process involved providing the peer reviewer with a list of categories (three) with their corresponding definitions. The reviewer was asked to place each of the 10 properties under the most fitting category. The peer reviewer accurately placed all 10 properties in the category that had been initially identified by the author of the study. Subsequently, the reviewer generated an inter-rater reliability of 100% for the final step. This process validated the researcher's analysis and led to adjustments and/or

modifications of codes, properties and categories. It also increased the consistency and coherence of the analysis (Yardley, 2008).

**Participants' Feedback.** Also known as respondent validation, participant feedback involved obtaining participants' views on the analysis and made sure that their input had been properly represented (Yardley, 2008). It also gave the participants the opportunity to add, remove, or modify some of the information. Specific to the current study, this was done at three different times. The first instance occurred at the end of each interview, where the participant had the possibility of adding, removing, or modifying what has been shared to the researcher. Second, once the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, the participants received a copy and were given the freedom of sharing their feedback. Finally, the participants had the ability to state any concerns, questions, or comments regarding the findings after the results were collected. This process of participants' feedback insured researcher's transparency in the analysis process (Yardley, 2008).

**Commitment and Rigour.** The researcher demonstrated commitment and rigour by showing that the analysis had been carried out in depth and that the study furthered the topic researched (Yardley, 2008). First, this was accomplished by selecting participants who had significant relevance to the study topic, the head assistant coach position in CIS football. Also, the previous involvement of the researcher as an assistant coach and ex-athlete in CIS football provided him with applied experience concerning the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of head assistant coaches in CIS football. These experiences provided the primary researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the environment, culture, and terminology of CIS football.

**Paper Trail.** A paper trail consisted of the traces of the work done through the entire analysis so that individuals reading the final report were able to consult the notes from every stage of the process (Yardley, 2008). Throughout the process, the researcher kept detailed written (or electronic) transcripts with the description of the development of themes and codes and interpretations (i.e. notes, memos, diagrams that were used in the analytical reasoning). The paper trail provided evidence that the current study was completed and documented rigorously and professionally.

In addition to insuring validity with those four techniques, the professionalism of this study was optimized by training the researcher in qualitative interviewing. The researcher developed interview skills by conducting pilot interviews under the supervision of an experienced interviewer. The interviews were videotaped, examined and evaluated with an experienced interviewer, who provided feedback on the researcher's interview technique and interview guide. Additionally, at the end of each pilot interview, participants were involved in the evaluation process by providing feedback on the format of the interview questions and on the researcher's interviewing behaviours.



## Chapter 4

### Results

This chapter will present the results of the six interviews conducted with the Canadian university head assistant football coaches. First, a brief summary of the data will be provided. Following this, the three higher order categories that emerged from the analysis, *Coaches' personality, experiences and career progression*, *Coaches' roles and responsibilities*, and *Personal and professional working relationships* will be presented.

#### Nature of Data

The six interviews that comprised this study resulted in a total of 459 meaning units. From the 459 meaning units, 53 tags were created. Table 2 (Appendix F) presents an alphabetized list of each of the tags and their frequency as discussed by each participant. The number of meaning units by each participant varied from 58 (C5) to 97 (C1). A higher number of meaning units does not necessarily imply that more or even better information was shared by the participant. Some coaches may have expressed their thoughts more clearly or concisely than others. The difference in the number of meaning units shared by each coach is common given the open-ended interview format that allowed the coaches to freely discuss their perspectives. For example, C1 talked about *Coaching hierarchy* in more detail than any other participant. This could be explained by some personal characteristics of the coach such as his age or experience with his current head coach. Similarly, C3 spoke more about *Support staff - personal relationship* than the other coaches. Furthermore, not all themes were discussed by each one of the participants. As a result, the frequency of each tag from the total sample varied from two to 20. This variation in tag distribution may be due to how important different topics were perceived by the coaches. For example, the tag *Coaching Influence - CFL* was frequently cited by the participants, which could be a reflection of the importance

and frequency of the interactions the participants have with members of the Canadian Football League. On the other hand, the tags *Community outreach* and *HC - interactions in training* were seldom discussed ( $n = 2$ ) by the coaches, potentially indicating that those aren't instrumental in their day to day duties. As for the 53 tags, they were organized into ten properties according to their correspondences in nature and are shown in Table 2. Lastly, the ten properties were organized into three higher-order categories and were labeled *Coaches' personality, experiences and career progression*, *Coaches' roles and responsibilities*, and *Personal and professional relationships*. Table 3 illustrates the ten properties compiled within the three higher-order categories.

Table 2

*Properties and tags with frequencies as expressed by each participant*

Properties and Tags	Total	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
<b>Athletic Background</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Athletic experiences	19	3	3	5	1	3	4
Coaching influence as an athlete – High School coach	4	2	0	0	1	0	1
Coaching influence as an athlete – university coach	11	2	4	1	1	2	1
<b>Coaching Experiences and Professional Development</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>
Coaching clinics	7	2	0	1	1	1	2
Coaching influence – Canadian Football League	20	5	4	2	3	2	4
Coaching influence – other university coaches	4	0	0	2	1	1	0
Previous assistant coaching experiences	8	1	1	3	1	0	2
Previous head coaching experiences	3	1	2	0	0	0	0
<b>Coaching as a Career</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>
Assistant Coach - age	4	3	0	0	1	0	0
Career goals	12	2	5	4	0	0	1

Coaching as teaching	13	1	3	2	1	4	2
Coaching hierarchy	9	6	1	0	1	1	0
Coaching opportunity	7	1	2	1	1	1	1
Educational background	7	2	1	0	1	2	1
Familiarity with the program	7	4	1	0	0	1	1
Paid coaching positions	5	1	3	0	1	0	0
<b>Athlete Interaction and Development</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>
Athletes - general feedback	12	2	0	2	3	3	2
Athletes - interactions in competition	12	2	1	6	2	0	1
Athletes - interactions in training	5	2	1	2	0	0	0
Athletes - personal background	7	2	0	3	0	1	1
Athletes - support and friendship	16	2	4	2	4	2	2
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>
Multitasking	5	1	0	0	2	2	0
Motivator	9	0	3	2	0	2	2
Passion	10	2	1	1	4	1	1
Personal reflections	3	0	1	1	1	0	0
Work ethic	11	3	1	1	5	1	0
<b>Planning</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>
Coaching a position	6	3	1	0	0	1	1
Competition planning	8	0	0	2	3	2	1
Coordinating a unit	11	1	2	3	0	3	2
Football as war	3	1	0	0	1	0	1
Practice planning	6	1	0	1	2	0	2
Team vision	14	3	1	1	4	1	4
<b>Head Coach Relationships</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
Coaching influence – current Head Coach	8	2	0	0	6	0	0
Head Coach – athlete relationships	14	1	2	5	2	2	2

Head Coach – interactions in competition	6	1	2	1	1	1	0
Head Coach – interactions in training	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
Head Coach – personal relationships	20	5	4	2	4	1	4
Head Coach – professional relationships	8	1	1	4	2	0	0
Head Coach – trust	11	0	2	2	4	2	1
<b>Non-coaching Responsibilities</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>
Academics	10	3	1	1	1	3	1
Administrative duties	8	2	1	3	1	0	1
Community outreach	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
Fundraising	5	1	0	2	2	0	0
Organizing football camp	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
Strength and conditioning	6	1	0	1	0	4	0
<b>Recruiting</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
Recruiting – academics	2	1	0	1	0	0	0
Recruiting – process	12	4	1	1	4	1	1
Recruiting – social	19	4	3	5	4	0	3
Recruiting – talent identification	6	3	1	1	1	0	0
<b>Support Staff Relationships</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
Balanced coaching staff	12	0	3	1	2	3	3
Support staff – interactions in competition	6	1	0	2	0	1	2
Support staff – personal relationships	13	2	0	8	1	1	1
Support staff – professional relationships	9	2	2	1	1	2	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>

\* Bolded items in Table 2 represent properties

Table 3

*Categories and properties with frequencies as expressed by each participant*

Properties and Categories	Total	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
<b>Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>
Personal Characteristics	38	6	6	5	12	6	3
Athletic Background	34	7	7	6	3	5	6
Coaching as a Career	64	20	16	7	6	9	6
Coaching Experiences and Professional Development	42	9	7	8	6	4	8
<b>Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>
Planning	48	9	4	7	10	7	11
Recruiting	39	12	5	8	9	1	4
Non-coaching Responsibilities	33	9	4	7	4	7	2
<b>Personal and Professional Working Relationships</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>
Athlete Interaction and Development	52	10	6	15	9	6	6
Head Coach Relationships	69	10	12	14	20	6	7
Support Staff Relationships	40	5	5	12	4	7	7
<b>Totals</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>

\* Bolded items in Table 3 represent categories

### **Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression**

This higher order category included 178 meaning units and represented 39% of the total data set. It provided information regarding the coach's personal traits and characteristics, as well as their athletic development and learning experiences that shaped their decision to pursue a career in coaching.

**Personal Characteristics.** The traits and characteristics of the participants and how they influenced their coaching careers are presented in this property. The majority of participants described the importance of being passionate about their profession: "There are some coaches who don't know everything, but they bring so much energy and passion to work every day that players want to play for them." (C2). "I believe I'm passionate and driven. I put in the hours not only to compete but because I think about the passion and that drive to achieve our vision for the team." (C4)

In a related manner, each participant also explained that their work ethic was equally as important as their passion: "When my current head coach hired me, he was looking for someone who was eager to learn and hard working." (C1)

The external pressure that comes to (head coach's name) ends up coming down the pipe to us as well. You need to be a driven guy and you need to want to win as well. That's the one thing I respect about (head coach's name). He is here first in the morning and for twelve hours a day minimum. I try to come to work earlier than him. (C4)

The participants also highlighted how their ability to motivate athletes affected their programs: "In the offseason, my job is to make all the athletes feel like starters in order for them to feel good about themselves. I try to increase their self-confidence and to maximize their potential." (C6)

As an assistant, you see the kids that will play for you and run through a wall for you. You treat them the same way that you would have wanted to be treated at that age. But on the field you can't treat them that way. You need to tell them when it is time to work. (C3)

Today's athletes are a bit different than before. I think in general you can't motivate people the same way you used to. Today, in order to motivate athletes you have to start with building that relationship. If you have a good relationship then you're better equipped to motivate an athlete on the field. They trust you and even if they don't like you, they respect you because you have time for them. (C2)

In sum, passion, work ethic, and motivation were shown to be essential personal characteristics of our participants. Three of our participants also explained the role of self-reflecting about their coaching practices and behaviours: "A good coach is able to evaluate and assess what he does at the end of every year. If you're not open-minded enough to do that, you become very stagnant and you stop progressing." (C2)

Often you second-guess yourself when lying in bed late at night. But you are better off not doing that because it could drive you crazy. You did what you did for a reason and if you made a bad call, then you can learn from the mistake and improve for next time. (C3)

**Athletic Background.** Before the participants' coaching careers began, all of them had distinguished athletic careers. Three of the coaches played football professionally in the CFL or NFL, while the other three played in the CIS. They all felt their athletic careers helped accelerate their coaching progression:

My professional experience has allowed me to reach the university level much faster. Also, when you begin coaching, it is definitely easier to establish your authority with the players because you played professionally. Nonetheless, if you have nothing to say, no substance and limited knowledge, this authority will quickly fade. Playing at such a high level acts as an initial tool to provide you with opportunity but shortly after, you need to prove your capabilities nonetheless. (C6)

I don't think having previous athletic experience is 100% necessary to become a successful assistant coach. There are many high-profile coaches who weren't great athletes. Moreover, not every great athlete can become a great coach. However, having athletic experience can speed up the learning curve. If you have done it, then you've been there and you've been exposed to certain things play wise and coaching

wise. You understand how the game works, the X's & O's (part of it at least). You have been on the sidelines and in the trenches and you therefore understand that it's a circus. You understand the game day interactions amongst players and coaches and that's important. To not have all this would make it very difficult to try to progress. (C1)

Even if having an athletic background was not directly related with coaching success, a majority of our participants felt that the intangible skills acquired as elite athletes were important in their coaching progression:

You have to develop a level of discipline and structure to your life as a player participating in any sport in the CIS. Otherwise, you won't be successful on the field or in school. You need to understand how to be organised and how to manage your time, which can translate to your professional career. As a coach, these qualities also are transferred to the programs you coach. (C2)

My previous athletic experience contributed less to my employment than my organization and rigor. If I had been a star player but at the same time disorganized and ill behaved, I don't think that (name of coach) would have hired me. When he interviewed me, I showed him my mini "scouting reports" that I made as a player. He was reassured that I was serious in my preparation. (C5)

The participants also talked about the importance of their coach-athlete interactions and how it affects their current job: "You basically evolve as a coach but you take a lot of the stuff from what you were taught. If you perceived it as positive, then that is how you will coach." (C4)

In terms of sharing my game plan with my athletes, I took a lot of it from my years as an athlete. I took what worked best for myself and some of my teammates back then. I now work with the other coaches to identify what works best for all of our athletes. We coach players in similar ways to how we were coached, although we tweak it to match our philosophy. (C3)

More specifically, many of our participants talked about the technical, tactical, organizational, and pedagogical influences of their high school and university coaches:

As an athlete, (Name of coach) was my head coach. He won a Vanier Cup here and was one of the most knowledgeable coaches I've been around. He taught me that as



a head coach you can't only know your own area of expertise. He knew so much about the defensive side of the ball even as an offensive coach. He knew everything about the special teams as well. He put in so many hours and was an excellent recruiter. Overall, he was a very complete head coach. Also, (Name of coach), who is now the head coach at (name of university), was an amazing motivator. I came to realize that sometimes even if you don't have the best schemes and systems, you can make your players believe that you do, which is just as good. (C2)

I played under 3 head coaches. I was recruited by (Name of coach) at (name of university). He's one of the most successful coaches in the CIS over the past 15 years and he has thus greatly influenced me. With (name of coach) I learned the preparation aspect: the meeting times, the details, doing things a certain way and sticking to your guns. We would run the same play 20 times in a row to get it right because he had a certain way he wanted it to be done. I realised that the little things do matter. (C1)

**Coaching as a Career.** The participants talked about a number of elements that impacted their decision to choose a career in coaching. For all six participants, the first opportunity to coach came either near the end of their athletic career or right after they stopped competing:

I first started when I was still playing with the (CFL team). Because I was injured and unable to play, the defensive coordinator at the time gave me the opportunity to help the coach. That's where it started. It started with the defensive backs. (C3)

I started my coaching career in 1996 after graduating from (name of university) and having just finished my career as an athlete. I was going to begin a bachelor's degree in Physical Activity. I did not want to remove myself from sport completely so enrolling in a degree in Physical Activity allowed me to remain involved in sport. (C5)

Having experienced the transition between their athletic and coaching careers, the participants alluded to the challenges of assistant coaches who were close in age with their athletes: "From an age standpoint, the assistant coach provides an easier connection from the players' perspective." (C4)

There are drawbacks to being young. If you are younger, you don't have as much experience coaching as an older coach would. As well, it's a challenge for younger

coaches to separate social from professional environments. It is hard because I am young and thus probably closer to age of the players than to the coaches. (C1)

When talking about their first coaching opportunities, a majority of our participants highlighted the importance of being familiar with the school and their football program. In most cases, the hiring process favored internal hiring, prioritizing former players: "Often we hire internally [former players]. You don't need to have been interviewed because it was done throughout your years as a player. You were interviewed over the past five years." (C5). Another participant also said: "The fact that I was an alumni helped in my hiring process." (C2)

I think it helped that I knew the university, the people, the coaches and the administrative staff. I don't think my head coach would have brought someone from outside the "family" because it wouldn't have worked for what he needed at the time. I knew our offense, our guys, our personnel, etc. and that helped me. (C1)

Additionally, five of the head assistant coaches emphasized the importance placed on their educational background. Three of them specifically said that having a teaching background was an element the head coach looked for when hiring his assistants:

I think coach (name of the coach) cares about the educational background of his assistant coaches. He has a teacher's degree from the (name of university). He was a teacher before he began his career as a coach at (name of university). He's got that background. He firmly believes in the educational process. It is a core belief of his that coaching is teaching. (C1)

Here at (name of school), it was decided to prioritize the Kinesiology/Physical Education backgrounds and experiences of the assistant coaches. Unlike other programs, we couldn't recruit only the best recruits; rather, we had to recruit some inferior players. Their development is therefore essential and thus it is crucial to have very good physical trainers to push the athletes while also having very good teachers to develop the athletes. Some players were not ready to play their first year, but if they were well developed, they could potentially become just as good as athletes from other schools. (C6)

Accordingly, all of the participants made parallels between their role as coaches and the role of teachers. Their coaching approaches were deeply rooted in educational and pedagogical concepts: "One thing that (Name of the coach) always says is that it's not just what you know, it's what the athletes know. At the end of the day, the athletes are the ones playing the game." (C4)

Any kind of teaching, regardless of the content, is like coaching. Coaching is teaching. It's just that you aren't coaching kids and a curriculum. You're coaching somewhat grown men and football. But you're still teaching. That has always intrigued me and I know that helped me. There was no coincidence for me, it was either this or teaching. (C1)

Since I started as a coach, I have seen a lot of great coaches and identified with them. The perfect melt of a coach is someone who doesn't only have a great amount of knowledge but someone who is also a great teacher. Often, even at the professional level, you see guys that know a ton of things but can't articulate what they know or they can't inspire their athletes. I think at the end of the day, coaching comes down to teaching. There's some great crossover knowledge and skills that you develop as a teacher that help you in your coaching life. (C2)

The coaches' ages and their athletic and educational backgrounds all played a role in their career choice and progression. The financial situation of coaches in Canadian University football is another contextual element that affected their careers. Three of the participants talked about the financial implications of coaching in Canadian University football:

One thing that really defines why there aren't a lot of long-term full-time assistant coaches is the financial aspect. Generally, in the CIS, head coaches are compensated better than they were 20 years ago, however, they are still not paid what they are worth. The average assistant head coach makes around \$50,000 to \$55,000 a year. This salary can be sufficient, however in bigger cities it may be a problem. Thus, the stresses as an assistant coach are to either quit coaching or to move on and become a head coach. You're either trying to increase your pay by becoming a head coach, change your job completely, or have two jobs. These are the determining factors of being an assistant coach in the CIS. I hope that this changes in the near future. (C2)

Lastly, three of the participants talked about their career goals as coaches and how their current head coach was involved in the realization of those goals:

(Name of coach) is helping me progress, in a passive way, by getting me involved with different CIS-related activities. For example, going to the East-West All Star game where you get some good interactions with other head coaches. I also went to the CIS football meetings when the Vanier Cup was here. I met with all the other head coaches and I think that those are experiences that allow you to see what it is to be a head coach. (C2)

I want to become a head coach and my head coach knows that. The majority of football coaches have this same objective and I don't think they will prevent me. I think that they would rather keep me but at the same time, I am convinced they would help me in the process and would not prevent me from leaving my current position. Our trustworthy relationship helps this. My goal is never to leave them hanging. I would let them know in advance that I am going to be interviewed. (C6)

**Coaching Experiences and Professional Development.** This property addressed the head assistant coaches' external and internal influences and learning opportunities. These allowed them to develop their technical, tactical, pedagogical and social skills.

All of them started by coaching individual positions, which gave them the knowledge and credentials necessary to climb the coaching ladder:

I began my career as a receiver's coach. The next year, I began to coach the defensive-backs and the special units. I coached at (name of university) for six years, five of which were with (name of coach) and one of which was with (name of coach) in 2007. After this, I followed (name of coach) to (name of School). (C6)

All six participants mentioned professional development as a main source of coaching knowledge acquisition. Coaching clinics were mentioned as crucial in their coaching development:

Professional development is important for me because I need outside influence; need to get outside of this campus. I played here and coached here, and if you don't have that other influences you can only regurgitate what you have been taught. If you've only been exposed to one place, that can be dangerous. For me, I try to do some things outside of here. Clinics are one thing. (C1)

The first reason why I go to coaching clinics is for continuous learning in order to keep my mind open. Sometimes is not only what they do there but it gets me thinking about what I do and how I could make it better. I also want to make sure I have a complete understanding of what, how, and why they do some things. From there I can try to apply it to what we do. (C6)

The Canadian Football League is another great source of professional development for Canadian university coaches. All the participants talked about what they got from CFL coaches and how it applies to their coaching:

I would say the techniques taught in the CFL translate well to the CIS because they are fundamentally good and efficient. However, the implementation of those techniques doesn't translate as well because of two reasons. The amount of film time and study and the ability of coaches and athletes to immerse yourself in some of those techniques is better in the pro. Those techniques are more complex and specific and it makes it harder in the CIS. In the pros, it's the job of the athletes. They will spend way more time understanding and applying those techniques. For me, I can maybe take 15 minutes per week on a specific technique with our athletes, whereas in the pros the guys will spend so much time watching it on film and practicing it. But, when I interact with professional coaches, I come in with my philosophy as my basis. My analogy with regards to that is the tree and the branches. My philosophy is the trunk, and then I add stuff every year (the branches), which will leads me in different directions. (C2)

Finally, three of the coaches talked about the influence of other Canadian university coaches. One coach discussed an interesting point in explaining how Canadian university football could learn from their professional counterpart (CFL) with regards to sharing coaching related knowledge with other coaches:

Canadian university football coaches should learn from professional coaches. If university coaches weren't as paranoid and if there was more of a brotherhood between coaches, it would be easier to share knowledge and everyone would end up benefiting from it. We would also get to know each other better. We currently go more towards professional coaches because at that level they have nothing to hide, they don't feel threaten, and aren't jealous or envious. I love talking about football with others; it would be very interesting if I could have football talks with university colleagues. (C5)

## Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities

This higher order category included 120 meaning units and represented 26% of the total data set. It provided information regarding the head assistant coach's specific roles, responsibilities, and coaching duties that involved both football and non-football matters.

**Planning.** The organizational aspects of the team vision, of competition and of training are explained in this property. Planning is presented as an ongoing and evolving team process that starts during the off-season and continues through training and competition. Seasonal planning began with a team vision that was created by the head coach and relayed to all the assistant coaches:

I would consider myself to be involved in the development and implementation of the team direction and the team vision. I give suggestions but he makes the final decision. I'm involved both formally and informally. Whichever message our head coach is selling, it's my job as an assistant to help implement that vision. A good assistant coach has to help his head coach implement that vision no matter what. If the assistant disagrees with that vision, then the head coach either has to find someone else who believes in that vision or the assistant has to leave. (C1)

My head coach and I had developed a plan on how to run a university program and our experience and background helped us implement that vision. We split the team into "departments" (physical preparation, academics, recruitment, etc.). All we do now is adjust that plan according to what happens. (C6)

The vision influenced every component of the team. More specifically, a university football program is composed of three units (offense, defense, special teams) and every participant was a unit coordinator on their team:

My biggest football role is to be the special teams coordinator. I'm in charge of creating and initiating the plan. I'm in charge of watching all of our films, trying to figure out the teams we're playing against, their areas of weakness, what we need to work on, what our game plans are, etc. As well, not only do I need to plan and run our meetings but I also manage the roster and the depth chart. (C2)

I'm a defensive coordinator. That's what they pay me for. Basically, I make sure that everything about the defence is done and done well before doing anything else. Whether it is the development of the game plan, video analysis, and development of

schemes and game strategies. This is what accounts for the bulk of my position throughout the season, and makes up 95% of my job. (C5)

In addition to coordinating a unit, four of the coaches were in charge of a specific position on that unit:

During practice I'm still the QB coach. That's a big part of what I do because it's the hardest position to play. I try to be hands on with them. I think that working with these guys on a day-to-day basis and making sure they understand what we're trying to do are very important roles and therefore I will never give up this position. (C1)

As coordinators and position coaches, the participants talked about the preparation involved in practice planning: "We organize the practice as a whole coaching staff. " (C3)

I'm responsible for most of the practice planning on a day-to-day basis. Examples include helping with the pacing of practice and ensuring that the other coaches receive the daily practice plans. We try to practice at a high tempo, so I make sure that things are going quickly, smoothly and moving at the right pace. (C1)

Practices serve to prepare athletes and coaches for competition. Head assistant coaches said they were actively involved in that preparation:

From a football-specific perspective, I play a huge role in planning the offense. In preparation for our upcoming opponents, I break down all the films for the fronts. I'll detail what type of front they use on what percentage of the time, down and distance, field position, any blitzes/stunts. I basically break down 3-4 games. So once I've gained that information, I print a report of that team we're facing. I give all the information of every player we're going to face such as his height/weight, where he's from, where he played in high school. Working from that knowledge with the staff, we come up with ideas and concepts on how to beat our opponents and their schemes. We also have to be able to teach it to the kids. (C3)

**Recruiting.** In addition to their specific coaching duties, every coach detailed their involvement in the recruitment of prospective student-athletes. All of them felt it was a core component of running a university football program, as evident in this quote:

My head coach undoubtedly looks for someone with recruiting abilities when hiring. At the university level, recruitment is the "name of the game". It is very important

and it is an important part of my job. If I was not a good recruiter I'm not sure I would have my job. But in fact, I consider that when you are a good coach, you're a good recruiter. Bad recruiters, generally, are not good coaches. (C6)

More specifically, head assistant coaches explained how their team went about recruiting and the system developed to facilitate that process:

In terms of what I do in the recruiting process, we break it down into three main parts: Identify, Evaluate, and Personalize. You identify everyone, you evaluate and then you personalise your approach according to the guys you think are the best. We feel that these are the three most important things to do. I'd say that the defensive coordinator, the head coach, and myself are involved in all three areas. Identification falls more for our assistants, who then pass it on to us for evaluation. Then, we decide who we like and where they will fit. Finally, we personalise our approach for every kid. (C1)

We have a system where the recruiting coordinator does the initial calls to kids and verifies the information we have on him. On my side, I make a few calls to reinforce the recruiting process. I have to focus on how to attract a player. I have to show them the attractions of (name of city), my game system, and where I see him in my defense, etc. (C6)

As mentioned, talent identification is a key element of recruiting. A majority of the coaches emphasized the importance of not only bringing in good players but mainly good student-athletes that fit their team's needs and philosophy:

Recruiting is the most important thing we do other than play football. If you don't get the right kids, you can't win. You can't coach pylons. You need the right kids that you can work with and mould into your system. There's a lot of work put in recruiting. It's important to us and we dedicate a lot of resources and man-hours to make sure we do it right. (C1)

We had one of the best defenses at (name of university), mainly because we would bring in the right athletes. We were always able to keep up with the other teams because of recruiting. It's the phase of the game that some coaches overlook, because they think X's & O's are most important but realistically recruiting is what matters. (C3)

In order to be an efficient recruiter, coaches talked about the importance of interacting and relating efficiently with the prospective student-athletes and their parents:



To be a good recruiter, you need to enjoy talking. You have to enjoy connecting with people and you need to be interested in more than just getting a kid into your school. You need a genuine interest in talking on the phone and finding out more about the young men. Recruiting is all about relationship building. You also have to be a bit of salesman. To some extent, you're selling a product; you're selling your school and your program. You also have to be persistent; you need to be willing to make 20-30 phone calls to get one kid. You have to do that over a long period of time. You have to build long-term relationships with them. Some coaches don't have the patience to do that. (C2)

I found out that when you talk to the kids upon recruiting them, you should be as honest as you can be. That's what they're looking for. You build the relationship/rapport with them and they'll feel that trust with you. Also, I feel what makes a good recruiter is one who gets to know the parents. Make the parents certain that the coaching staff will look after their kid. They are the children they have raised for 17 or 18 years and now they are going to pass them off for four or five years. They want to make sure they are going into good hands. As a recruiter, you got to feel that out with the parents and get a feel for what they are like and what they are looking for. (C3)

Lastly, academics were mentioned as another core component of the recruiting process:

You have to know the academic side as well as the athletic side when recruiting. If you're only preaching football, you're missing half of the equation. There has to be an academic fit as well. Understanding what faculties/programs/graduate schools are offered. That knowledge is extremely important. (C1)

**Non-coaching Responsibilities.** Other than their coaching and recruiting duties, head assistant coaches had a multitude of duties that are unrelated to football. These involved administrative duties, academics, community outreach, and physical preparation of their student-athletes.

Working in an academic institution, interactions with the university's administrators are numerous and typical for the head assistant coach: "I think that the ability to deal with the administrative jobs is required for an assistant. Our head coach felt I was organized and he knew I could stay on top of the administrative part of CIS football." (C2)

We have many interactions with admissions because everything must pass through them. In a university, just like in any other field, it is crucial to have good relations with the administrative people. Every day, we interact with them and work together for the development of the program. (C6)

When recruiting prospective student-athletes, participants mentioned the importance of monitoring their academic achievements. Similarly, a lot of effort and energy was put in making sure their current student-athletes maintained satisfactory academic standings:

I do the day-to-day management of our players in the off-season. I make sure they can stay in school and I monitor their academic progress. We have a lady in our department who is the academic advisor for our athletes. I work closely with her in the recruiting process as well as in the retention process (retaining our student-athletes). She has direct access to their grades and she follows up with us to let us know who's red flagged and who is in need of assistance. We follow up closely with her to make sure we don't lose any kids because of academic reasons. We want our graduation rate to be 100%. (C1)

We put a lot of effort on the academic supervision of the players. For example, we have tutors so that all the young people graduate. But one thing is for sure, we want players who go through our program to graduate. It is a value we put forward. We do not have a graduation rate of 100%, but that is our goal. We encourage graduation. I put a lot of effort towards it. (C5)

Canadian university football programs also devote significant energy into their community: "I'm also involved with the community outreach activities which includes talking to youth coaches and players and promoting football in general. (C2). "We run three day-camps for kids. I'm involved intensively in the development and implementation of these camps." (C1)

Lastly, participants talked about their involvement with the strength and conditioning programs of their student-athletes. For some of them it represented a bulk of their off-season work and for others it was more of a complimentary role: "Off-season, I do all the physical preparation for the team. I like to be with the players, to see their progress, to develop new training programs, etc. This is where I learn the most about the players." (C5)

I don't have a huge knowledge base in strength and conditioning. We have strength and conditioning coordinator in our department that works with our football team. My main role within strength and conditioning is attendance and accountability. My role is really just to make sure that our players are lifting and doing the program. (C1)

### **Personal and Professional Working Relationships**

This higher order category included 161 meaning units and represented 35% of the total data set. It offered information regarding the interactions and relationships between the head coach, the head assistant coach, the student-athletes and the support staff.

**Athlete Interaction and Development.** Coaches are in constant interactions with their student-athletes. The participants explained that coach-athletes interactions have many different contexts and purposes:

When I'm talking, everyone should be listening. In the classroom, there's only one voice, mine (unless I ask for opinions). All these things are part of coaching kids, building relationships with them on different levels and teaching them the importance of respecting those levels. The athletes will be yelled at but at the end of the day, I will still love them. It's important for them to know that and for us to teach them the game. At the end, it's all about developing that relationship and having fun doing it. (C3)

No player intends to make mistakes. Football is a sport of mistakes. When a player makes errors it does not bother me. Sometimes I'll be tough with a player towards his performance, not towards the individual. I will not reach for his integrity or his desire to improve. We must make better people. It goes beyond the victory. (C6)

A majority of the coaches explained how the tense atmosphere of competitions influenced their athlete interactions in this element of their job:

I interact differently with players on game day. Seeing the kids I coach now, I can joke with them before game starts and drop some lines on what they did the night before. This makes you realize that they're kids. If you teach them what to do when it's go time, then on game day your relationships don't need to change whatsoever. In between those 60 minutes, they know it's all business even though they're having fun. (C3)

Other than their football related interactions with the student-athletes, all coaches talked about the personal interactions with them:

I try to prepare the athletes for when they grow up, become adults, and start a family. I interact with them about my daughter, my family, and how important family is. I try to build relationships and be like a mentor. I talk about my life experience, what I've been through, my experiences as a player and as a father after playing... I try to make them understand what the values are in life. At the same time, I try go down to their level and joke and mess around with them. It makes them feel like: "Man I can go to coach and interact about anything, he is real." (C3)

I have daily interactions with athletes. It's nice because our offices are near the locker room so the athletes often pass by. This happens from morning to night. We arrive early so the guys come say hello, inform us about how they're doing in school, their schedules, their personal lives. (C6)

The coaches alluded to the importance of trust and honesty in developing relationships with their student-athletes:

The key is to be as genuine as you can. Being honest with them is the basis for your entire relationship with them on and off the field. We have a good separation here where we're firm with our guys on the field. Off the field, the line moves a bit. That has created a nice environment around here. When I was a player here, our coaches almost never talked to the players. I thought they were non-approachable. (Name of coach) has fostered a family-type of environment here. The door is always open and players will come in and talk about anything. But we have managed to keep that separation on the field so that kids know that there's a time for a football and a time for small talk (C2)

I know everyone's name and where they are from. I want to make them feel good and important and I want them to know that they can come and see me whenever. I would say that I could be perceived as a players-coach. Not that I'm not hard - I do push them and I do have high expectations but I also like to have a bit of fun. At the end of the day, it's still a game. We're not performing heart surgeries, no one will die. (C4)

**Head Coach Relationships.** The head assistant coach position involves a close relationship with the head coach. The participants explained the type of interactions they had

with their boss, the influence they had on them, and how the head coach's interactions with student-athletes differed from theirs:

I don't necessarily think that the head coach can be the guy that players can go to all the time. There needs to be a bit of separation between the head coach and his players because he's the authoritative figure. I try to fill that role because they need to go somewhere if they have problems or issues. It can't always be the head coach, nor should it be. (C1)

When talking about the interactional differences with student-athletes, a majority of the participating coaches referred to the concept of good cop, bad cop:

My message and the head coach's message is the same. Our way of thinking is similar but not identical, while our interactions are not exactly the same. My approach is a little different. It is a little bit like good cop, bad cop. The head coach is usually the bad cop, but it's not always fun to be the bad cop, so sometimes I become the bad cop. But we are harmonious with respect to this. We communicate a lot. (C6)

The head assistant coaches talked about the professional relationships they developed with their head coach and how they interacted at work:

My professional relationship with my head coach is great. He is very easy to work for and he is very flexible. Before I started working with my current head coach, I was required to be in the office six to seven days a week, all year around. I used to devote so many hours to my job and rarely see my family. That's something that my current head coach is good with. He's flexible with hours for all our staff. He could improve with making sure guys are doing their jobs, being organized and doing follow-ups but I'm not going to complain because he's better than what I used to work with. (C3)

I also try to be a confidante to (Name of coach) and play devil's advocate, if necessary. During games, for example, if we want to kick or receive the ball at the beginning of the game, or go for it on third and short. If he needs to bounce ideas off someone, I'm there for him. (C1)

With regards to personal relationships, participants differed on their perception of the level of closeness with their head coach. Some explained becoming good friends off the field, whereas other only had a professional relationship with their head coach:

I think it's an advantage to have a personal relationship with your head coach. If you only know one perspective of a co-worker's life, you may not be able to appreciate a lot of things they do. If you only act in one way because you're the employee and he's the boss, then you will only have one dynamic. With our coaching staff having a personal side to our relationship, there's more of a chance to let loose and the head coach has the chance to see different strengths you have in other aspects. Your relationships with your coaches are more efficient if you have that personal side to it. (C2)

I have more of a professional relationship with my head coach. We do talk during the week about things other than football but I would not consider (Name of coach) to be my friend. I think that it's okay that way because at the end of the day, he is my boss, I am his employee and we have a very respectful relationship. I am able to give my opinion, even though I am an employee but I would not want to use our relationship to my advantage. It should not become personal. (C5)

My head coach and I don't have that much of a relationship. We only see each other for work-related things. We haven't done much outside of football as a staff. Maybe it's just a different style and view of the head coach and what he likes to do. I think him and I have a great work relationship but at a personal level there's not much. There's nothing wrong with that, I think that's how he likes it as an individual. Not having any personal relationship doesn't affect the dynamics of the team. It doesn't affect the team or myself. (C3)

Whether they have personal or professional relationships with their head coach, the participants all mentioned the importance of trust in the dyad:

I think part of him hiring me is to have another offensive guy that he trusts. He needed a guy who knows as much as he did. It took a little while because even though he knew I knew what I was doing, he liked to be in control. You really have to earn the trust and respect of your head coach for him to relinquish that. It took a couple of years, but it has happened. (C4)

It's been 17 years since (Name of coach) and I have been together. What he (head coach) really looks for is loyalty. We share a few of the same goals and we both want the program to work. We have the goodness of the program in our hearts. We will do what must be done to make sure that things work properly. (C5)

The interactions, the personal and professional relationships and the trust between the head coach and his head assistant coach were all part of being the head assistant coach. The participants talked about how they had been influenced by their current head coach:

I learned that you shouldn't always give your opinion and be obnoxious. (Name of coach) is a tyrant on the field but he takes good care of the coaches and knows that how you are perceived is important. I've learned a ton from him. You coach similarly to how you were coached and who you have coached with. (Name of coach) is the most driven and competitive guy I know and that's why I love him. I want to be around him. (C4)

**Support Staff Relationships.** The head assistant coaches mentioned that their own assistant coaches (on their respective unit) were instrumental to the team's success. The participants talked about the importance of having a balanced and complimentary group of coaches:

(Name of coach) has been amazing at building a very well rounded staff. Obviously, at the very core of hiring assistants, they have to have a basic level of football knowledge. That's the first bar to get over, but behind that, what coach was looking for was some well-rounded guys. Each coach here has his own niche and his own area of expertise outside of football. The areas are assigned to us according to our personal characteristics and strengths. (Name of coach) is very astute at finding people who complement each other. We're all pretty balanced but we all have our strengths. (C2)

Because of the high number of coaches on a university football team, the interactions between coaches during competitions were important and had to be highly efficient. The head assistant coaches talked about how they interacted with the assistants on their respective unit:

During the game, I take down the information that my assistants share with me (i.e., Is the game plan met? Did we make the proper calls? Are the players doing the plays we prepared?) So while I do trust what they see from above, there is not so much questioning, since overall, we follow the script. You only need to leave the script if something occurs that was not planned. At that moment, I take over their perspective because they see better from above. I cannot see everything. But if it goes as planned, there is not so much exchange. I expect that they are aware of their roles and that they fulfill the roles properly. They take note of calls, situations and the calls made by the other team. (C6)

Similarly to with the head coach, head assistant coaches talked about the professional relationships they developed with the other assistant coaches and how it impacted the group's dynamic:

With the other assistant coaches, there are no levels. We all feel equal. I can have a conversation and a debate with another coach because I believe in my point. We can have a lot of spirited discussions and we can end up disagreeing, whereas with the head coach you'll end up doing it the head coach's way. With assistants, we are all colleagues and equal whether you are paid as a full-time coach or as a part-time coach. This is partly because we have a really strong staff. (C2)

Most of my assistants are part-time people. I respect that a lot. The rules are clear in the beginning. I do not ask my assistants to do something in particular. I will ask them what they have to offer me and I'll ask them to do it over 13 weeks. If they tell me that this is what they are capable of doing then I will ask them to do that the same way every week. I'm not super challenging but I am demanding with regards to the exact task you have to do. (C5)

Finally, they talked about the development of personal relationships with their assistants. Again, some participants considered them good friends and others only colleagues:

The assistant coaches want to hang out and socialize but I don't have that much in common with them other than this place and our football program. I wouldn't necessarily consider my assistant coaches as my friends, but we work together and have the same goals in mind. (C1)

I also have close relationships with the other assistants. You want to work hard, grind and be efficient but my philosophy in life is "Work Hard, Play Hard". If everyone enjoys the environment they work in, they'll work hard. If they don't, they'll find ways to call in sick and to duck out of things. (C4)

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of head assistant coaches in Canadian University football. Participants included six purposefully selected coaches who had been coaching full-time in this country for a range of six to 18 years and who had been identified by their respective



head coach as their assistant coach with the most responsibility and authority. The selected participants were also recommended by a panel of experts familiar with this sport as some of the most accomplished head assistant football coaches in Canada. An inductive analysis of the interview data produced three higher order categories, which were labelled as *Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression*, *Coaches Roles and Responsibilities*, and *Personal and Professional Working Relationships*. This summary will explain the main findings in each of the three categories.

All six participants described their personal traits and characteristics, their athletic development, as well as some of the key learning experiences that impacted their coaching career. Their work ethic helped them get hired and played a big role in their progression within the coaching profession. Their ability to motivate, especially the newer generation of university football players, was also an important characteristic that impacted their career. Finally, the coaches talked about the importance of self-reflecting on most aspects of their coaching practices.

The participants also spoke about their athletic and educational backgrounds. As athletes, all 6 participants competed in either university or professional football, which they believed helped them acquire their first University coaching position. Besides the knowledge they acquired through their athletic careers, they also learned a lot (what to do and what not to do) from some of their coaches. The participants also felt their educational background, which generally included a teaching degree, was essential in their career progression. Finally, they felt that they learned a lot from attending coaching clinics and interacting with professional coaches.

Since the purpose of this study was to describe the various roles and responsibilities of the head assistant coach, it is not surprising that a great deal of information emerged on this topic. They all spoke about their involvement as unit coordinator which included helping develop, plan, and implement the team vision, as well as plan and coordinate aspects of training and competition. Recruiting prospective student-athletes was mentioned as a core component of their job outside the gridiron. Efficient recruiting involved talent identification, personnel evaluation, and individual interactions with the student-athletes and their parents. Other non-coaching responsibilities of the head assistant coaches involved supervising academics of their student-athletes, interacting with school administrators, leading the community outreach initiatives, and organizing and/or supervising the strength and conditioning program.

Another component of the assistant head coach's position was his relationships with the student-athletes, the head coach, and his own assistant coaches (the support staff). Because of the team hierarchy, the head coach had different interactions with the student-athletes compared to the head assistant coach. They referred to the concept of good cop/bad cop, where they felt like they had to develop closer relationships with the student-athletes than the head coach. Also, the participants explained that the types of interactions they had with student-athletes were constantly changing according to the situation. Head assistant coaches had both personal and football-related interactions with their student-athletes. Their personal relationships were more informal, whereas their interactions in training and competition were more task-oriented. In both instances, coaches alluded to the importance of trust and honesty.

The relationships the head assistant coaches had with their respective head coach varied between participants. Some of them said they had developed personal relationships, which were beneficial to their career. Conversely, some explained they did not have a close relationship with their boss, and they didn't feel this negatively affected their professional relationship or their work with the team. Similarly, head assistant coaches explained having different types of personal relationships with their own assistant coaches. They also stressed the importance of having a qualified and balanced support staff.

In sum, the findings of this study represent the first empirical account of the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of assistant coaches in team sports from the perspective of the assistant coach. The position of assistant coach had been described in small parts in the coaching literature from the head coach's perspective. The results of this study allow us to fully understand the background of the head assistant coach, their coaching progression, and ultimately how these prepared them for the demands of their current position. Their current position had a wide-ranging list of responsibilities both on and off the field, which differed from those of the head coach and ultimately reveals the complexity of this profession. This study allows for a description of what is needed to become an effective head assistant coach in Canadian University football and most importantly what is expected of the position.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to provide a rich, detailed description of the head assistant coach in Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS). Specifically, this study presented assistant coaches' attributes that made them successful, their main roles and responsibilities within a university football program, as well as their personal and professional relationships. The three higher-order categories that emerged from this study will each be discussed in this part of the thesis.

#### **Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression**

This higher order category explained the coaches' personal characteristics as well as their athletic and professional experiences and background, which influenced their evolution into the coaching profession. More specifically, the coaches' detailed how their athletic and early coaching experiences shaped their career progression and enabled them to become successful head assistant coaches in CIS football.

All of the participants in this study were CIS football athletes prior to becoming coaches in the league. In fact, they reported that their athletic football-playing experiences were instrumental to their progression as CIS football coaches, a point that has not been consistently reported in the literature (e.g., Carter & Bloom 2009; Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). For example, Erickson and colleagues interviewed 19 high-performance coaches at the CIS level who had prominent athletic careers. Although those coaches believed that their athletic experiences helped them acquire and develop leadership skills required to be a coach, they did not feel that being an elite athlete was necessary for coaching success. Similarly, Carter and Bloom found that CIS coaches had successful coaching careers

without having elite athletic experiences. Interestingly, participants in the current study reported their athletic experiences allowed them to gain access to a university-level coaching position despite having limited coaching experience. When they began coaching at the CIS level, they were put in charge of the position they played (e.g. quarterbacks coach, offensive linemen coach, linebackers coach). Perhaps this explains why participants in this study felt their playing experiences gave them the specialized technical and tactical knowledge needed and why head CIS football coaches preferred that their assistants had football-playing experiences at the university level (Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughead, 2014). Thus, findings from this study suggest that elite athletic experiences may be important for assistant football coaches due to the sport's high degree of specialization.

As influential as their athletic careers were, five of the six participants also highlighted the importance of their educational backgrounds in helping them acquire their assistant coaching positions. A number of studies found a coach's education strengthened their curriculum vitae and increased their probability of obtaining a coaching position (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Rathwell et al., 2014; Wilson, Bloom, & Harvey, 2010). Specific to the CIS context, expert head coaches said that studying Kinesiology or Physical Education was particularly beneficial to their acquisition of knowledge and growth and development as a coach (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Rathwell et al., 2014; Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995). In the current study, four of the assistant coaches who completed a degree in Kinesiology or Physical Education explained how studying in this discipline them acquire the pedagogical, organizational, technical, and physiological knowledge and skills necessary to be a CIS assistant football coach. Thus, our findings concur with previous empirical studies that possessing a university education with a specialization in sport sciences is instrumental to a

coaching career. These results suggest that head assistant coaches might rely more on their academic training in their current job as, in most cases, they more recently completed their studies than head coaches would.

In addition to their athletic and academic experiences, participants said their coaching progression was influenced by various formal and informal learning opportunities.

Specifically, the participants highlighted the importance of attending formal professional development such as coaching clinics. This differs from previous research (Erickson et al., 2007; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006) who found that head coaches placed little importance on formal learning situations, such as coaching-education classes and clinics. Given that the current participants were at earlier stages of their coaching careers, they may have benefitted more from attending formal coaching clinics compared to more experienced coaches. In addition, coaching clinics in football are often focused on technical and tactical knowledge that may have been important for the head assistant football coaches in this study as they were all unit coordinators (i.e. offense, defense, or special teams) on their teams and were responsible for the development, implementation, and selection of their units' technical and strategic orientations.

Although assistant coaches stressed that formal learning experiences were important for their career progression, they also discussed informal learning experiences with professional football coaches. Rathwell and colleagues (2014) found that the CIS head football coaches in their sample felt their assistants could benefit from interactions with professional coaches. Participants in this study said they acquired technical, tactical, and pedagogical knowledge from professional coaches at Canadian Football League training camps. Interestingly, the participants noted that professional coaches regularly exchanged

ideas and knowledge with their peers on other professional teams, which they did not believe was a common practice for the majority of CIS football coaches. Participants reported that CIS football coaches are reluctant to share information with other coaches for fear of losing a competitive edge, a finding that has previously been reported (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Occhino, Mallett, & Rynne, 2013). Given that professional football coaches have benefitted from learning and exchanging ideas with peers, head and assistant CIS football coaches could profit from engaging in more formal and informal learning opportunities with peers from other CIS football programs and further develop their own community of practice.

Participants also explained the personal characteristics and attributes that made them a successful head assistant coach. Similar to other studies on successful coaches, participants in this study said they were passionate, hard-working, and effective motivators (Bloom & Salmela, 2000; Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012; Carter & Bloom, 2009; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Nater & Gallimore, 2010). Given that participants in this study were also in charge of coordinating a unit on the team (e.g., offensive, defensive, or special teams), the current results suggest that successful head assistant football coaches must be able to combine passion, energy, and enthusiasm with teaching their athletes highly-specialized technical and tactical strategies and game plans.

In defining the key components of their coaching practices and behaviours, participants stressed the importance of reflecting on their actions and behaviours. Consistent with Côté and Gilbert's (2009) definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise, participants believed they had to be open-minded and have the ability to review, revisit, and reflect on their actions and behaviours in order to learn and improve from their mistakes.

Likewise, Pronovost (2011) said it was beneficial for coaches, and ultimately their student-athletes, to be self-evaluative of their personal characteristics, coaching style, and methods. Self-reflection may be even more important for assistant coaches. For example, assistant coaches may have to adapt, adjust, and/or modify their coaching strategies according to their head coach's philosophy and coaching practices. This suggests that self-reflection is a critical component for developing assistant coaches.

### **Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities**

This higher order category explained the head assistant coaches' job responsibilities in a CIS football program. More specifically, the coaches' detailed their responsibilities in the organization of their team and of its vision, which influenced various aspects of team functioning that included training sessions, competitions, recruiting student-athletes, team administration, and community outreach initiatives.

All head assistant coaches in this study believed their main role was to coordinate one of the three major units on their team (i.e., offense, defense, or special teams). As unit coordinators, they were intimately involved in the organization and planning of practices, as well as the various demands during competitions. These represent the major responsibilities of head coaches as noted in the Coaching Model (CM; Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995). With respect to organization, some of the most successful head coaches have reported that planning was an essential factor for their success (e.g., Carter & Bloom, 2009; Côté et al., 1995; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2014; Short & Short, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). In the previous studies, the head coaches explained their active involvement in planning, which often included the help provided of their assistant coaches. The current results, on the other hand, reveal a more in-



depth examination of the planning and organization responsibilities of the assistant coach. Thus, findings from the current study expand on previous findings and suggest that head assistant CIS football coaches play a more significant role in organization and planning than assistant coaches from other team sports due to their leadership position within a unit. Moreover, these suggest that successful head assistant CIS football coaches need to possess strong organizational skills.

Participants felt the organization component of their coaching practice was shaped by the team vision, for which they had contributed to its development and implementation. Research results revealed the importance of developing a strong team vision but have never highlighted the involvement of assistant coaches in the conception and establishment of the vision (Côté et al., 1995; Desjardins, 1996; Rathwell et al., 2014; Short & Short, 2005; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Short and Short demonstrated that head coaches in team sports began every season by developing a precise plan or vision. Similarly, Vallée and Bloom interviewed head CIS coaches who said their team vision influenced their actions and behaviours throughout the season and, ultimately, enabled them to have success in the postseason. Specific to CIS football, head coaches felt it was important for their assistants to believe in their team vision in order for the message to be effectively conveyed to their student-athletes (Rathwell et al., 2014). Head assistant coaches in the current study also believed their coaching philosophy was aligned with the team vision, which influenced their technical, tactical, and pedagogical interventions with their respective unit. Of significance, they also believed their head coach sought their input prior to making major decisions on the direction and vision of the team, which included how the team approached training and competition, academics, and recruiting. Thus, it may be particularly important for head

football coaches to include their assistants in the development of the team vision given their close personal relationships with athletes in their unit. Hence, results from this study support the importance of developing and implementing a team vision in football and further suggest that head coaches can benefit from involving their head assistant coach in the whole developmental process of the team vision, as it may empower their assistants as well as ensure its transmission to all team members. The current findings are among the first to demonstrate the impact of the team vision between a head coach and an assistant coach, from the perspective of the assistant coach.

Participants in this study reported that recruiting was another main responsibility of being a head assistant CIS football coach. In fact, some believed their ability to recruit was an important reason why they were hired and/or promoted to their current position. Previous studies have reported the importance of recruiting for head coaches in university football and the importance of hiring assistant coaches who were efficient recruiters (Langelett, 2003; Rathwell et al., 2014). Specifically, Rathwell and colleagues explained head coaches believed that recruiting was the most crucial element in developing a successful university football program and they specifically hired head assistants who had demonstrated abilities to recruit. Similarly, Langelett found that American university football teams who recruited successfully had better winning percentages the following five years than teams with less successful recruiting classes. Although previous empirical findings have stressed the importance of recruiting and that assistant coaches were important in the process, results from the current study detailed the entire recruiting process from the perspective of the head assistant coach. Although the head coaches oversaw the entire recruiting process, most of the work was carried out by the head assistant coach beginning with talent identification and

through visits with the recruit and his family members. Future research is encouraged to further delineate the recruiting process, the interrelationships of those involved as well as its correlation with team success.

Another responsibility discussed by the head assistant football coaches in this study was the administrative aspect of working in an academic institution. Previous studies had highlighted the administration of a CIS program from the head coaches' perspectives (Davies, Bloom, & Salmela, 2005; Rathwell et al., 2014). Davies and colleagues found that head coaches in CIS sports felt administrative duties very time consuming. Rathwell and colleagues confirmed the complexity of the administration of a CIS team but showed that head CIS football coaches believed their program's success was reliant on their head assistant's involvement in the many administrative duties. Interestingly, head assistant coaches in the current study confirmed the significant amount of time they allocated to administrative duties such as alumni relations, fundraising, community outreach initiatives, and academic monitoring. This suggests that the roles and responsibilities of head assistant coaches in CIS go far beyond their sport specific coaching duties. Additionally, it reinforces the importance of possessing strong organizational skills, as they have to efficiently manage their time to combine their numerous athletic and administrative tasks. In sum, results from this study confirm the administrative duties that accompany University sport coaching jobs and expand previous findings by offering the assistant coaches' perspective of the administration of a university sport program.

Interestingly, these results are closely linked with the different components of the Coaching Model (CM; Côté et al., 1995), a framework that has previously been used to explain the head coaching process. Results from this study indicate the CM may also be

useful to guide the study of assistant coaches. Head assistant coaches in this study all discussed the importance of the three core components of the CM, which are *organization*, *training* and *competition*. For example, head assistant coaches noted they spent the majority of their time organizing and planning for the various demands of practices and games. In addition, they noted they were involved in the development and implementation of the team vision, which is a crucial aspect of the organizational component of the CM. Specific to the training component of the CM, head assistant coaches highlighted the importance of their role in disseminating technical and tactical knowledge to their athletes. Participants also discussed the competition component of the CM, whereby they were responsible for implementing their unit's game plan and ensuring that players performed well on game day. Taken together, results from this study indicate that the core components of the CM may also be used to study and understand the coaching process for assistant coaches.

In addition to the core components, participants in this study discussed the CM's peripheral components which are *coaches' personal characteristics*, *contextual factors*, and *athletes' personal characteristics*. For instance, they explained how their personal characteristics were shaped by their athletics and coaching experiences and ultimately influenced their coaching philosophies. They also believed there were many contextual factors that affected the demands of their position; such as their administrative duties and the constraints that stemmed from the academic environment they worked in. Lastly, when emphasizing their role in developing and maintaining personal and professional relationships, head assistant coaches explained that the personal characteristics of the student-athletes greatly affected how they went about those interactions.

Hence, in describing their roles, responsibilities, and relationships, head assistant coaches alluded to core and peripheral components of the CM, which demonstrates this model could be adapted to study the coaching process for assistant coaches.

### **Personal and Professional Working Relationships**

This higher order category offered information on the head assistant coaches' interactions and relationships with their student-athletes, head coach, and support staff. Specifically, participants detailed the various aspects of these interactions while highlighting the key components of positive, lasting personal and professional relationships.

Head assistant coaches valued interactions with their student-athletes both on a personal and professional level as they believed strong, positive coach-athlete relationships were reflected in their student-athletes' efforts on the field of play. Research has demonstrated the coach-athlete relationship plays a significant role in team success (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2001). Jowett's 3 C's + 1 model highlight the four main components (i.e., *closeness*, *complementarity*, *commitment*, and *co-orientation*) of successful and efficient interactions between head coaches and their athletes. According to this model, relationships are optimal when head coaches and athletes are emotionally connected and committed to mutual goals, and have a similar perceptions of their relationship (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008; Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005; Short & Short, 2005). Head assistant coaches in the current study stressed the importance of having a trusting and honest relationship with their student-athletes, which Jowett (2003) described as fundamental to the *closeness* component of the 3 C's + 1 model. This finding suggests that developing *closeness* is also an important element for efficient relationships between head assistant

coaches and student-athletes. Further to this, research has found that assistant coaches interact with athletes more often than head coaches (e.g., Rathwell et al., 2014), which indicates that it may be more natural for assistant coaches to develop *closeness* with athletes. Thus, head assistant coaches should strive to develop personal relationships with their athletes that are based on mutual trust and loyalty.

Participants felt the nature of their interactions with student-athletes changed depending whether they occurred on or off the field. The head assistant coaches emphasized the importance of not letting their personal relationships with student-athletes influence sport-specific interactions, which has previously been reported with research on head coaches (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Jowett, 2003). Carron and colleagues found that head coaches who cultivated socially- and task-oriented relationships with their athletes had the most cohesive team environments. Research has also found that the task oriented interactions of expert coaches focused on teaching technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Bloom, 2002; Bucci et al., 2012; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Nater & Gallimore, 2010). Furthermore, Jowett demonstrated that head coaches believed *closeness* with athletes had to be developed and nurtured primarily during the off-season. Results from this study found that head assistant coaches primarily developed closeness with student-athletes off-the field and interactions during training and competition were mainly directive and sport oriented. These findings suggest that head assistant coaches and athletes should develop relationships that are composed of both a social and task specific phase, and both parties have to be differentiate between those two phases of the relationship, despite their potentially close, off-field relationships. Hence, similar to elite head coaches, assistants

must be adaptable when developing personal and professional relationships with their student-athletes.

Whereas the adaptability of head assistant coaches and head coaches was perceived similarly, head assistant coaches in the current study believed they had closer relationships with student-athletes than their head coaches did, findings that have emerged in previous studies (Solomon et al., 1996; Solomon, 2001, 2002; Rathwell et al., 2014). Canadian university head football coaches said their head assistant coaches interacted more frequently with student-athletes, had an active role in their development, and provided different types of knowledge and training (Rathwell et al., 2014). Solomon and colleagues (1996) showed that assistant coaches interacted and evaluated student-athletes differently than head coaches. Findings from this study indicate that head assistant coaches' role in developing and maintaining solid and efficient relationships with student-athletes may be more significant on teams with large rosters, such as football, as they can offer different types of knowledge and training for athletes as well as alternative coaching styles. For example, participants in the current study alluded to the concept of "good cop/bad cop", whereby assistant coaches were the former and the head coaches the latter. Taken together, results from the current study suggest that it is important for head coaches, especially those who coach teams with large rosters, to insulate their coaching staff with assistants who compliment their coaching style and with who student-athletes would be comfortable interacting. These findings also demonstrate that head assistant coaches develop and maintain different relationships with student-athletes than head coaches.

Although head coaches and assistant coaches have varying degrees of relationships with student-athletes, the current participants felt they maintained positive personal and

professional relationships with their head coach. A number of researchers have demonstrated the benefits of maintaining strong relationships among head and assistant coaches (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Rathwell et al., 2014; Trestman & Bernstein, 2010). Rathwell and colleagues reported that head coaches socialized with assistant coaches and their families outside of sport to improve the work atmosphere, even if they did not consider their assistant coaches to be close friends. Moreover, investing time with assistant coaches inside and outside the sport setting is one of the ways in which head coaches have mentored their assistant coaches (Bloom et al., 1998; Trestman & Bernstein, 2010).

Specifically, Trestman and Bernstein noted that many successful football coaches attributed their personal and professional growth and development to the various life lessons passed on by their former head coaches, a finding that was also reported by some of the head assistant coaches in this study. Interestingly, participants also felt the cornerstones of their personal and/or professional relationships were trust and loyalty with their bosses. However, they were divided on the importance of having a personal relationship with their head coach.

Whereas some believed their personal relationship was an advantage and helped each other better understand and contextualize the other's approach, others mentioned their lack of personal relationships wasn't negative and actually allowed for a more professional work structure. These findings suggest that individual personalities and expectations of both the head assistant coach and head coach might play a role in determining if a personal relationship should be developed. As such, the *closeness* component of the 3 C's + 1 model may again offer insights into detailing these relationships given that trust and loyalty were the cornerstones of their personal and professional relationships with their head coaches.

Because this model has only been used to study coach-athlete relationships, future research is



needed in order to examine the intricacies of the relationship between members of the coaching staff and the applicability of the 3 C's + 1 model.

In addition to the relationship with their head coach, participants discussed their relationships with the other assistant coaches on their staff. Specific to football, research has found that successful and balanced coaching staffs relied on each individual's specific area of expertise to complement one another and help the team achieve its goals (Billick, 2001; Rathwell et al., 2014). Head assistant coaches in the current study relied on constant input from the other assistant coaches working with them to most effectively coordinate their unit. Head assistant coaches highlighted the importance of being surrounded by colleagues who had different perspectives and challenged them, while still being aligned within the team and unit objectives. Interestingly, this finding aligns with the *complementarity* component of the 3 C's + 1 model (Jowett, 2003), as it represents the cooperation between both parties and the awareness of each other's role. However the model has never been used to study relationships among members of the same coaching staff. Thus, in addition to the *closeness* aspect of the 3C's + 1 model, the *complementarity* component could potentially be used to study the relationships between and among the assistant coaches. The high degree of complementarity between the assistant coaches in this study may be unique to the sport of football given the high number of coaches and players on university football teams. Nevertheless, these findings demonstrate the importance of having assistant coaches who can challenge each other yet work towards the common goal of achieving team success.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary**

Coaching science research has focused extensively on the knowledge and behaviours of head coaches. Specifically, research has investigated head coaches' roles and responsibilities, personal and professional relationships, and knowledge in training and competition. To date, few studies have examined the knowledge, characteristics, and roles of assistant coaches, especially from the assistant coach's perspective. The purpose of this study was to address this gap in the literature by examining their career progression, roles, responsibilities, and personal and professional relationships.

The participants were six purposefully selected head assistant coaches at Canadian university football who were also recommended by a panel of experts familiar with Canadian university football as among the most distinguished in the country. All coaches participated in individual interviews that lasted between 60 to 90 minutes at a mutually agreeable time and location in Canada.

Data were collected using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide that was created by the primary researcher and members of the research team. Prior to the interview, each participant was made aware of the primary researcher's involvement and experience in Canadian university football, which helped establish rapport. Prior to commencing the interview, participants had their rights as a research participant explained to them both verbally and in writing and signed a consent form that was approved by the McGill Research Ethics Board. Additionally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Once the interviews were completed they were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic content analysis. Three higher order categories emerged from the analysis, which highlighted

the head assistant coaches' progression, duties, and relationships with student-athletes and colleagues. These categories were labelled *Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression*, *Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities*, and *Personal and Professional Working Relationships*. *Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression* discussed head assistant coaches' athletic and educational background, which laid the foundation for their evolution into the coaching world, their professional influences, and the importance of professional development. *Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities* detailed participants' roles as a unit coordinator, involvement in recruiting prospective student-athletes, as well as other non-coaching responsibilities. *Personal and Professional Working Relationships* included the personal and professional relationships with student-athletes, head coaches, and other members of the coaching staff. Moreover, this category described the ways in which these relationships were influenced by the various contexts in which they interacted.

Although each coach had different experiences, several commonalities existed among the participants. For instance, all participants identified and articulated the importance of both their elite athletic and university educational backgrounds in the development of their coaching approach and philosophy, which they felt helped them acquire an entry level coaching position at the university level. Furthermore, the participants agreed their work ethic and attitude positively impacted their career. With regards to their main role, all head assistant coaches were responsible for coordinating one of the team's three units (i.e., offense, defense, special teams). Moreover, non-coaching responsibilities such as recruiting, administration, academic supervision, and community involvement were identified as integral aspects of the head assistant coaching position. Participants also felt they were actively involved in developing and implementing the team vision with their head coach. All

coaches described their relationships with student-athletes and others members of their coaching staff. Participants believed their role in developing and maintaining positive personal and personal relationships with their student-athletes was one of the most important aspects of the head assistant coaching position. This study provided the first comprehensive description of the head assistant coaching position from their point of view.

## **Conclusions**

### **Coaches' Personality, Experiences and Career Progression**

- The majority of coaches grew up playing football and reached elite levels of competition, which ranged from the CIS to professional.
- Coaching styles and philosophies were partly shaped by interactions with influential coaches and teammates during their athletic careers.
- Five coaches possessed undergraduate degrees and one coach was currently enrolled in a university degree program. Among those who completed their tertiary education, two studied in Education while two others studied in Sport Sciences.
- Instrumental teaching and organizational skills were developed while completing their University degrees. The assistant coaches also felt their university education strengthened their resume and chances of obtaining an opportunity to coach at the university level.
- Starting their university coaching careers as positional coaches was a way to acquire knowledge, gain experience, and develop confidence.
- Mentorship from head coaches was influential on participants' career development and goal achievement.

- Professional development (i.e., coaching clinics) and interactions with coaches in the Canadian Football League (i.e., training camps) were cited as important methods of coaching knowledge acquisition.
- Participants stressed the importance of a very strong work ethic.
- Motivating student-athletes was an important aspect of their role.

### **Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities Duties**

- Each head assistant coach was in charge of coordinating one of the team's three units (i.e., offense, defense, special teams).
- Head assistant coaches' ensured their coaching approach coincided with the team vision.
- In collaboration with their head coaches, participants contributed to the development and implementation of the team vision.
- Head assistant coaches felt that recruiting was the single most important task in Canadian university football and was one of their main responsibilities.
- Recruiting involved (a) identifying top student-athletes who fit within the team vision and (b) developing bonds with athletes and their families.
- Head assistant coaches allocated a significant amount of time to administrative duties such as alumni relations, fundraising, community outreach initiatives, and academic monitoring.
- Possessing strong organizational skills was an important aspect of the head assistant coaching position, as it allowed them to manage their numerous athletic and administrative tasks.

- Given that head coaches gave head assistant coaches full autonomy to coordinate practices for their respective units, participants noted they spent much of their time planning and working with other members of the support staff.
- During competition, head assistant coaches' tasks included creating and adapting game plans, selecting the plays, and providing feedback for their athletes and support staff.

### **Personal and Professional Working Relationships**

- Head assistant coaches valued interactions with their student-athletes, both on a personal and professional level.
- Head assistant coaches felt that positive coach-athlete relationships were reflected in student-athletes' performances on the field of play.
- Head assistant coaches believed they developed closer relationships with student-athletes than their head coaches.
- It was important for both head assistant coaches and student-athletes to differentiate between their personal and professional interactions and understand the various contexts in which they occurred.
- Adaptability was an important trait for head assistant coaches, as they had to adapt their interactions with student-athletes and other coaches based on personalities and coaching contexts.
- Whereas some believed personal relationships improved their professional relationships, others felt the absence of a personal relationship with their head coach did not affect the work environment. Nevertheless, participants said they maintained positive personal and professional relationships with their head coaches.

- Participants believe that balanced coaching staffs, where each member brought a unique area of expertise and perspective, increased the team's likelihood of success.
- Head assistant coaches detailed their relationships and interactions with other assistant coaches on the staff and believed that positive interactions improved their work environment and team success.
- The 3 C's + 1 model of coach-athlete relationships could be used to explain relationships between members of the coaching staff, such as the relationship between the head and assistant coaches as well as between and among the assistant coaches.

### **Practical Implications**

The current study represents one of the first empirical accounts of head assistant coaches' perspectives of their duties and responsibilities on an interacting sport team. The results are of interest to members of University sport programs, which includes current and aspiring assistant coaches, head coaches, athletic directors, and head assistant coaches.

Participants in this study valued the lessons learned as athletes from their coaches. They believed the teaching and mentoring they received helped form their coaching identities and philosophies. This point is of interest to aspiring head assistant coaches in the CIS. Additionally, professional development was highlighted by participants as a key component of coaching progression. Hence, aspiring coaches and even current student-athletes interested in the profession should try to attend as many coaching related events and/or clinics as possible and further their knowledge and coaching philosophies by being exposed to various coaching perspectives and experiences.

In addition to current and aspiring assistant coaches, head university coaches may also be interested in these results. More precisely, the current study highlights head assistant

coaches' perceptions of their most important roles on university teams and how their involvement influences team success. Moreover, given that participants stressed the importance of having a balanced coaching staff, head coaches might use this information to delegate responsibilities to assistant coaches according to their strengths, weaknesses, and areas of expertise (i.e. recruiting, academics, community outreach initiatives, fund raising, etc.). Findings from this study may also inform athletic directors about the importance of the assistant coaching position by detailing their instrumental involvement in the daily operations of university team sports. As a result, athletic directors may explore opportunities to increase the number of remunerated assistant coaching positions at their schools.

Head assistant coaches noted that personal and professional relationships with student-athletes, head coaches, and other members of the staff were important aspects of the position and impacted team dynamics. For example, participants alluded to the concept of good cop/bad cop, and suggested it was important for head coaches to hire head assistants who were personable and able to develop close personal relationships with student-athletes, given that head football coaches often establish an authority rapport with athletes.

With regards to the head assistant coaches' relationship with their bosses, the results indicated that each dyad had different levels of closeness. Whereas some believed their close personal relationship helped their professional relationship, others felt their lack of closeness outside of work was probably a good thing as both understood their role well and the line was never blurred between friendship and work. As a result, head and assistant coaches should reflect on their personal situations and consider how developing relationships with other members of the coaching staff may improve or detract from their professional abilities. Participants also felt that it was beneficial to work with other assistants who they could



become friends with outside of work (i.e., possessed similar personalities and interests). The current results allude to the often-misunderstood personal relationships that exist between members of a coaching staff, and more importantly, how to balance the personal and professional aspects of their job.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The purpose of the current study was to explore the career progression, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of head assistant coaches in Canadian University football. Although this study investigated head assistant coaches' insights and perspectives on their development, influences, involvements and interactions, a number of limitations must be addressed. While the findings provide a better understanding of the head assistant coaching position, it would be interesting to obtain athletes' perspectives of the head assistant coaching position. Given that head assistant coaches detailed the frequent interactions they had with student-athletes, especially those within their unit, it appears important to obtain athletes' perceptions of their head assistant coaches. Similarly, future investigations could ascertain the support staff's perceptions on the roles and responsibilities of the head assistant coach. Examining the perspective of athletes and other members of the coaching staff would allow for a more complete understanding of the head assistant coaching position.

The sample size and purposeful selection of participants may not allow for these results to be generalized outside the context of Canadian University football programs. Future research may consider investigating professional head assistant football coaches, or university football coaches in other contexts such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I in the United States. NCAA University football generates enormous amount of revenue, media coverage, and attention when compared to Canadian

university football. Future investigations could also focus on levels of competition that do not remunerate coaches on a full-time basis, which could lead to a different prioritization of roles and responsibilities. This would also potentially allow for an in-depth evaluation of the applicability of the Coaching Model to the assistant coaches' realities in other competitive contexts. In addition, research should examine assistant coaches from other sports given that the size of the coaching staff in football is unique and likely creates different working dynamics and hierarchy amongst coaches. Relationships and group dynamics may be perceived differently in other contexts such as coacting and independent sports, coaching staffs that include males and females, and teams that employ co-head coaches. The 3 C's + 1 model of coach-athlete relationships was insightful in detailing the components of the head assistant coaches' relationships with the student-athletes. Interestingly, it also offered details on the personal and professional relationships of head assistant coaches with other coaches on staff. Hence, future investigations could evaluate the applicability of the model in studying relationships between members of the coaching staff. Similar to previous research, participants noted that recruiting prospective athletes in Canadian University sport was a key to team success and an important aspect of their position. Thus, it is recommended that future research investigate the intricacies of recruiting and its impact on university sport.

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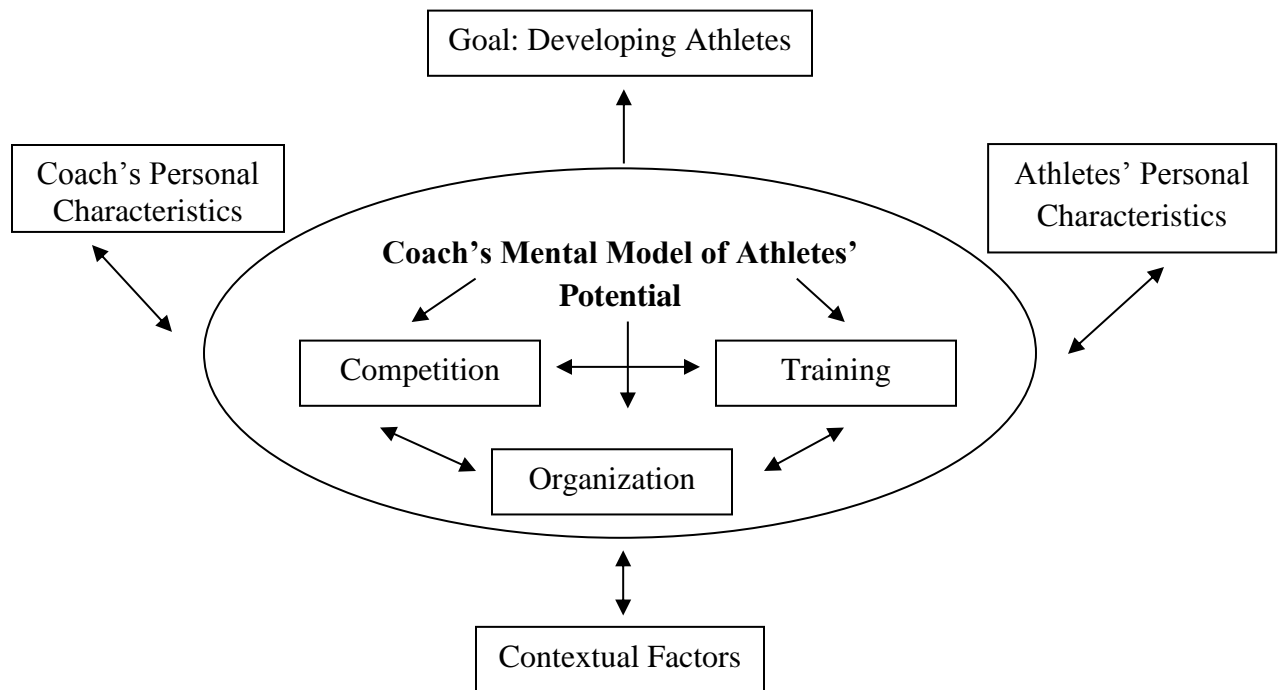
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**Appendices**  
**Appendix A**  
**The Coaching Model (CM)**



Adapted from:

Côté, J., Salmela, J. H., Trudel, P., Baria, A., & Russell, S. J. (1995). The coaching model:

A grounded assessment of expert gymnastic coaches' knowledge. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 17, 1–17.

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Script**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Charles-Antoine Sinotte and I am currently completing a Master's degree in sport psychology under the supervision of Dr. Gordon Bloom in the department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at McGill University. We are contacting you to invite you to participate in our research on successful University assistant coaches. This study is exploring the roles, responsibilities, and working relationships of full-time football assistant coaches at the CIS level. You will be asked questions about your present occupation if you choose to participate in our study.

The McGill University Research Ethics Board has reviewed this study for its adherence to ethical guidelines. Any information you provide during this study will remain confidential. If you choose to participate, I will conduct a 1-2 hour interview with you in the location of your choosing. If more information is required, then a follow up telephone conversation will occur.

Should you have any questions concerning this study, please contact myself or my supervisor using the information provided at the bottom of the page. The McGill sport psychology laboratory has a history of producing influential research on coaching and leadership. If you would like to learn more about the research completed at the sport psychology lab, then please visit: <http://sportpsychology.mcgill.ca/index.html>.

Thank you for your consideration of this research project, and I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Sincerely,  
Charles-Antoine Sinotte

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## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

This study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts for Charles-Antoine Sinotte, a graduate student, in sport psychology, in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at McGill University. The purpose of this study is to look at the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of full-time football assistant coaches at the CIS level. If you participate in this study you will be requested, without payment, to partake in a 90 minute interview where you will be asked to discuss your roles and responsibilities on your team, as well as your interactions with athletes and coaches. If more information is necessary, then a follow-up telephone interview may occur. It is common practice that research interviews are audio recorded in order to produce a transcript of the session.

Once the interview is complete, you will obtain a typed transcript, which may be edited at your discretion. Prior to publishing, you will also receive copies of the results and conclusions of the study. The information you provide here will **remain confidential**. All data, audio recordings, and paper copies of questionnaires and consent forms will be securely stored in a password protected computer and locked cabinet for a period of 5 years. The data, audio recordings, and all paper copies will be destroyed 5 years after the study ends. The information disclosed during the interview will remain confidential and will be used for publication purposes and scholarly journals or for presentations at conferences. The researchers will not disclose names or identify the study participants at any time. This study has been reviewed by the McGill Research Ethics Board.

**Your participation in this study is voluntary and not mandatory. You are free to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from participation at any time, for any reason, without penalty or prejudice.**

After reading the above statement and having had the directions verbally explained, it is now possible for you to freely consent and voluntarily agree to participate in this research project based on the terms outlined in this consent form. You may refuse to continue participation at any time, without penalty, and all information gathered will remain confidential. Please contact the Research Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831 if you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights and welfare as a participant in this research study. Please sign below if you agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to the audio-taping of the interviews with the understanding that these recordings will be used solely for the purpose of transcribing these sessions. Yes ☐ No ☐ \_\_\_\_\_ Initials

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**Appendix D**  
**Demographic Questionnaire**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. E-mail:
4. Address:
5. Phone Numbers (home, work, cell):
6. As an athlete, what sports have you participated in and what was the highest level of competition you reached in each sport?
7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
8. What is the highest level of coaching certification you have completed (new and old stream)?
9. How many years did you coach at the CIS level before becoming a paid full-time assistant coach?
10. List all other coaching positions at the CIS level before the current one.
11. What is your current coaching position?
12. How long have you held your current coaching position?
13. How long have you been working with your current head coach?



## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Guide**

**Pre-Interview Routine:** Explain my sport background and current position.

Introduction

Consent Form

Demographic Questionnaire

#### **Opening Questions**

1. Briefly describe your progression into coaching, up to your current position.
  - Previous positions as head and assistant coach at various levels (high school, CEGEP, provincial programs).
2. Not including your current head coach, what coach(es) influenced you the most, (a) as an athlete? (b) as a coach? Describe what you learned/admired about this coach?
  - Mentoring

#### **Key Questions:**

3. What do you think your current head coach was looking for when he hired you?
  - Personal characteristics
  - Football knowledge
  - Career goals
  - Past athletic experiences
  - Previous coaching experiences
  - Recruiting skills
  - Educational background
4. Describe your roles and responsibilities specific to football.
  - Organization
    - Team vision
  - Training
  - Competition
    - Pre-game
    - During game
    - Post-game

5. Describe your roles and responsibilities outside the football field.
  - School's administration
  - Academics
  - Relationship with parents
  - Recruiting
  - Media
6. Describe your interactions with your athletes. Do they differ from the head coach's?
  - In training
  - In competition
  - In school
  - In life - outside of school
7. Describe your professional and personal relationships with your head coach.
  - Trust
  - Respect
  - Communication
  - Goal setting
  - Commitment
  - Perceptions of each other and of the relationship
8. Describe your professional and personal relationships with other assistant coaches on the staff.
  - Trust
  - Respect
  - Communication
  - Goal setting
  - Commitment
  - Perceptions of each other and of the relationship

**Concluding Questions:**

9. Would you like to add anything else related to our interview?
10. Do you have any final comments or questions?