Challenges experienced by women high performance coaches

and it’s association with sustainability in the profession

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Abstract

High performance (HP) coaching is a demanding profession (Didymus, 2017). The proportion of woman HP coaches is reported to be in the range of 8.4% - 20% (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2016a; Kidd, 2013). Mental health concerns in elite sports have recently gained attention, but mainly focusing on athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019). Beyond coach burnout, limited attention has been given to coaches’ mental health. A recent coach burnout review (Olusoga, Bentzen, & Kenttä, 2019) included only one paper that focused exclusively on women. It has been argued that women HP coaches face greater challenges in a male-dominated coaching culture. The purpose of this study was to explore challenges experienced by women HP coaches and their perceived associations with sustainability and mental health. Thirty-seven female HP coaches participated by answering a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire. All responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, which resulted in two general dimensions: Challenges of Working as a WHPC and Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC. Overall, results indicate that challenges reported might be common for all HP coaches, but also highlight gender specific elements. Consequently, coach retention and sustainability would benefit from more attention on well-being and mental health among HP coaches.

Key words: female, coaching, challenges, sustainability, mental health
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High performance (HP) coaching is a demanding profession that challenges mental health and sustainability in the profession (Didymus, 2017). Coaches face constant pressure related to performance expectations, along with the perennial threat of negative consequences such as funding cuts and job loss. High performance coaches often work long, irregular hours and travel extensively (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). This and the unspoken expectation that coaches are ‘on duty 24/7’ can ultimately lead to work home interference (Bentzen et al., 2016a). Alongside media demands, and the often isolated nature of the role, it is job-insecurity that captures the stressful nature of the HP coaching context. Within elite sports, the typical role and expectation for the coach is to primarily look after their athletes' performance, physical health and well-being (Olusoga, Maynard, Hays, & Butt, 2012), which consequently places coaches' self-care in the back seat. Moreover, elite sport is typically a male dominated culture (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012) in which the dominant paradigm is one of ‘stereotypically male’ mental strength (i.e., not showing vulnerability, a lack of help-seeking, and suppression of emotional difficulties; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). This potentially adds an additional challenge for the limited number of women high performance coaches attempting to thrive in this male-dominated coaching culture.

In the 2016 white paper Women, Naturally Better Leaders for the 21st Century, Young examined the strengths and unique skills associated with female leadership and their value within the modern workplace. Despite this recognition, leadership positions across professions are still predominately male, with just under 5% of the Fortune 500 CEOs and only 22% of their boards (Pew Research Center, 2018), and only 6.3% of world leaders being women (WIIP, 2018). Female leadership in high performance sport is no exception, with female HP coaches reported to be in the
The implications of the under-representation of female leadership and subsequent lack of female role models within HP sport might have an impact on and for these women. It is suggested that female coaches face additional mental health challenges beyond general demands in the context that they need to overcome (Carson, McCormack, & Walsh, 2018). For example, it is often reported that female coaches experience challenges with work-life balance, lack of trust from organizations, lack of job security, and limited networking opportunities to a larger extent than males (Norman et al., 2010a; 2010b). While it is important to acknowledge that the underlying reasons are many and critically discussed, research has shown that in the general population, women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or unipolar depression as compared to men (e.g., DSM V, 2013; Remes, Brayne, van der Linde, & Lafortune, 2016). Furthermore, mental health concerns in the general population and sick leave rates associated with stress and burnout have increased dramatically in Sweden, particularly among women (Perski, Grossi, Perski, & Niemi, 2017).

Mental health is also receiving more attention in the community of elite sports, as evidenced by five recent position statements on mental health targeting athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019; Moesch, Kentä, Kleinert, Quignon-Fleuret, Cecil, & Bertollo Moesch, 2018; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018; Reardon et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). However, with the exception of research on burnout in coaching, coaches’ mental health has been largely neglected to date. In a recent review of 45 coach burnout papers (Olusoga et al., 2019), only nine studies focused on coaches at the elite level, and only one paper focused exclusively on women (teacher-coaches, n = 2). Beyond burnout, however, research on major mental health disorders in the coaching population is still lacking, as evidenced by a notable absence of studies exploring depression, anxiety disorders,
addiction, and sleep disorders in coaching. Mental health in sports has been defined in various ways, but poor mental health, associated with a limited capacity to sustain a career in sports commonly includes both psychiatric disorders and symptoms of psychological distress. Essentially, this has a substantial impact on quality of life, and causes functional impairment in work, social activities, or other important areas in life (Reardon et al., 2019).

Possible reasons for the low percentage of woman in sports coaching have been studied since the late 1980s (e.g., Knoppers, 1987; Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, & Forrest, 1989). The findings related to various challenges for woman coaches have been organized, using the ecological model, into four different levels (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; LaVoi, 2016a): individual, interpersonal, organizational, and socio-structural. Research within the individual perspective has focused on explaining the lack of retention in women's high performance coaching (WHPC) and has attempted to gain insight into the perceptions of women regarding their skills, abilities, and confidence as coaches, and the coaching role not being compatible with general well-being and living a healthy family life (Carson et al., 2018). Consequently, these studies have led to the development of female coach specific initiatives and programs that offer a focus on helping female coaches develop skills and peer support networking (e.g. Kilty, 2006). Such programs can enhance the skills or confidence of the individual female coach, or help the individual to be more aware of their potential support systems (LaVoi, 2016a). However, criticism towards this perspective has argued that interventions like these make the individual female coaches responsible for their own underrepresentation. Thus, there is a risk that women are encouraged to self-blame, toughen up, or change in order to "fix" the problem (LaVoi, 2016b), thus potentially adding to the unique stressors associated with WHPC.

Within the interpersonal level, research has focused on how women in the coaching profession lack the support from systems around them, such as that from a partner or from the
organization (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Furthermore, the NCAA Coaching and Gender Equity Report (Drago, Hennighausen, Rogers, Vescio & Stauffer, 2005) found that the majority of female collegiate athletes never had a female head coach at any point in their sport career, and that they did not want to play for a female head coach. The negative and harmful stereotypes regarding female HP coaches have been documented in the literature (e.g. Kauer & Krane, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). A widespread strategy within this interpersonal perspective has been to find appropriate mentors for female coaches within the sport organization (Bruening, Dixon, Burton, & Madsen, 2013; LaVoi, 2016b), which might alleviate some of the gender specific challenges faced by women in this HP coaching context.

At the organizational level, research has explored whether and how organizational policies and professional practices have influenced, systematically, the low percentage of woman in coaching (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Suggested strategies for change at the organizational levels have, for instance, explored revising organizational policies and responsibilities towards non-discrimination, allowing for job sharing of coaching duties, providing paid babysitters at the workplace, and implementing job training to arise awareness of gender biases for those who are hiring and recruiting coaches (LaVoi, 2016b, p. 259). Altogether, these policies may enhance both well-being and retention in WHPC.

Despite this research focusing both on causes and suggestions for improvements and/or interventions at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels (LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012), woman today are still being systematically over-challenged and sidestepped in the context of HP coaching (Kane & LaVoi, 2018). It is timely to ask whether a shift in perspective on the absence of woman leaders in sport could add some nuances to the already existing literature on barriers and challenges in WHPC. In 2013, Fasting, Sand, and Knorre argued that more focus is
needed on what it is about the culture of sport that is not allowing more women to thrive. Following this line of argument, more research and attention on barriers and support associated with sustainability and well-being in WHPC is needed. Furthermore, a question that could be raised is whether coach well-being in women is something other/different than coach well-being in men.

More recently, scholars have focused on well-being and ill-being for all coaches, in order to encourage a more healthy, sustainable and fulfilling career in the coach profession (Bentzen et al., 2016b; Stebbings, Taylor, & Spray, 2015).

While researchers have begun to examine the experience of the professional coach (e.g. Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016; Purdy & Potrac, 2014), examination of the foundation of the professional experience across a wider section of individuals is needed, so that commonalities of the profession can be explored before unique lenses such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and parenthood are considered. This call is also described by LaVoi (2016) and it is based on her updated Intersectional Ecological Model. The model was originally presented by LaVoi and Dutove in 2012 and suggests that an individual’s experience must be considered not only based on the factors unique to the individual, but also within the sociocultural, interpersonal, and organizational contexts of their situation. More specifically, this suggests that barriers and supports for women in coaching are multifaceted and compounded by a wide variety of influences, many of which are outside of the individual’s realm of influence, such as those present at the organizational level. To our knowledge, while studies have discussed the multidimensional concerns over the masculine culture of sport creating a glass ceiling for women within coaching (e.g., Kamphoff, 2010; Lewis, Roberts, & Andrews, 2018), few studies have explored sustainability and mental health specifically with female coaches in the HP context. Thus, the aim of this paper was to explore the challenges that are
experienced by women within the unique context of HP sports coaching, and their perceived associations with sustainability and mental health issues facing women in HP coaching.

Method

Study design, data collection procedures, and participants

The Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) has, since 2000, arranged a network for HP female coaches and leaders connected to a national team as support staff in any role. The aim of this network is to nurture strength and support the development of women leaders in sports based on peer-learning, formal education, and shared experiences. After invitation from the SSC, the researchers gained accesses to collect data during one of the network meetings where 37 women participated. The researchers provided information about the background and aim of the study, and the members were invited to participate. Those willing and interested signed a written informed consent prior to participation. The ethics were judged by faculty members at the university to ensure that the Declaration of Helsinki’s ethical principles for research involving human subjects were complied with before approval to conduct the study was granted.

As the aim of this study was to better understand the experiences and perceptions of all the participants in this exclusive group gathered at this meeting, the method for data collection needed to be tailored with respect to the limited timeframe (i.e., 30 minutes) given for collecting the data. This group of participants were purposefully targeted due to their specific experience and competencies related to the aim of the study, as recommended in purposeful sampling (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This study had a cross sectional design, and due to the relatively large sample of participants, the data in this survey was collected via an open-ended questionnaire on paper during the meeting.

In an attempt to capture the experiences of the participants, the questionnaire was developed by the researchers based on existing literature and the aim of the study, with seven themed, open-
Participants were asked to freely respond to each of the questions based on their experiences and associations, and a blank space (a half to a full page) was provided for each question to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. As an example of the survey question phrasing, the first open-ended question asked: "Based on your experiences and what you have learned, please outline/develop your thoughts about the challenges of being a coach, keeping in mind that we wish to have more female coaches at the high performance level."

Further, the seven themes were designed to (a) explore the participant’s perceived challenges based being a HPC, (b) how they care for their own health (well-being/ill-being), (c) their motivation to stay in the profession, (d) their experiences combining work and their private life, (e) self-awareness with special attention to being female in a male dominated culture, (f) thoughts about expressing vulnerability in elite sport, and (g) their perception of how others accept their role as a female HP coach. As all the participants were Swedish, the data was collected in their native language. The complete questionnaire can be provided by request to the corresponding author.

In total, all of the 37 coaches at the network meeting agreed to participate in the study. They represented 25 different sports, including para-disciplines, team and individual, summer and winter sports. Even though some of the participants now work in HP sport leadership, they all had experience working as HP coaches, reporting on average 7.7 years coaching experience (SD = 6.5) with a range of 1 – 27 years. Their age ranged from 27 – 61 years old, with an average of 42.3 years (SD = 9.5).

Data Analyses

After data collection, a research assistant transcribed all the data into an excel document. Further, thematic analysis following Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-phase approach was used to guide the data analysis in this study.
In phase one of the data analysis, both researchers read all the data thoroughly to get an overall perception of the data as a whole. During the second phase, initial codes were inductively created for all the data within each question, using pen and paper. During this phase, the content of the data was evaluated both semantically and conceptually, as the researchers discussed the codes that emerged directly from the text, and interpreted the meaning found in-between the lines (Clark & Braun, 2013). It should be noted that during phase two, the data from the question regarding the participants’ perceived acceptance by others of their role as a female HP coach from four various contexts was coded into the three lower-order themes "Well accepted", "Both well and poorly accepted (mixed)", and "Poorly accepted". These data were therefore excluded from the rest of the overall data analysis, and will be presented more quantitatively at the end of the results.

During phase three and four, both the lower-order themes and the higher-order themes emerged from across the initial codes of all questions when searching for meaningful patterns across the dataset. The analytic process during these phases was also inductive. The researchers used both pen and paper, and a large blackboard, to guide this process. As the emerging lower-order themes became clearer, some of the initial codes were both replaced and combined (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which resulted in clearer placing of the lower-order themes under higher-order themes. This phase ended with a finalized draft of 95 initial codes, 26 lower-order themes, and four higher-order themes. However, at a final level of abstraction, two General Dimensions were also created reflecting the initial coding and representing the challenges associated with WHPC and efforts to maintain sustainability and well-being in the profession.

Due to the language of the gathered data, the first and second author conducted phases one through five. These two researchers contributed equally in a joint effort when cooperating
and discussing alternative interpretation at all phases of the data analysis. Analysis during phases one to four was done in the original language. An important aspect of phase four included reviewing the coded raw data extracts and evaluating whether these reflected the full data set (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Discussing possible interpretations of the analyses to that point was a central element of this phase to counteract possible biases within the qualitative analyses (Patton, 2002; Watt, 2002). These discussions and reflections led to some adjustments and refinements both in naming the lower-order and higher-order themes, and when choosing the quotes that best illustrated the core findings of the data during phase five. Also during phase five, initial codes, lower-order, and higher-order themes were translated into English in a collaborative effort by the two first authors. The two non-native speaking authors joined the analytical process thereafter, serving as critical friends when discussing alternative interpretations of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Discussions between all co-authors took place at this stage to ensure the best choice of language and that translations retained the original meanings. Quotes are also displayed in the results to better ensure trustworthiness of the data, as the readers themselves can evaluate and interpret parts of the data by getting insights from both the quotes, and the lower- and higher-order themes (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001).

Results

The results derived from the thematic analysis are presented in two separate figures. More specifically, Figure 1 represents the General Dimension, Challenges of Working as a WHPC, comprising of two higher-order themes: Stereotypical male culture/coach and Work-life balance. These themes were represented by nine and four lower-order themes respectively. Figure 2 represents the General Dimension, Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC, which comprised
two further higher-order themes: Coping with the stereotypical male culture/coach and Managing work-life balance. These higher-order themes were represented by four and nine lower-order themes respectively.

Challenges of Working as a WHPC

Stereotypical male culture/coach emerged as a major challenge and was a higher-order theme more specifically represented by several lower-order themes (lack of role models, no equality yet, men chose men, prejudice against female coaches, male dominated culture, macho culture, not okay to show vulnerability, lack self-confidence, and competence compared to men - See Figure 1). Lack of equality and men choose men were two specific, but related lower-order themes. The latter was represented by the following quote: “Men have each other’s backs and want those who are like-minded – a man wants a man” (ID27). In addition, several responses addressed the challenge of a male dominated culture (i.e., more men in the coaching environment) and a macho culture (i.e., an environment characterized by sexist and inappropriate language that made female coaches uncomfortable). A number of participants explicitly reported that the lack of role models (i.e., a lack of female HP-coaches, authors note) was a challenging factor as was prejudice against female coaches. A final challenge that emerged was represented by the lower-order theme labelled competence is compared to men, in which women perceived that their competence is assumed by others to be inferior to male counterparts. This was described by one coach who stated that, "I often perceive that people I meet in my sport expect me to be less knowledgeable, experienced, and dedicated in comparison to my male colleagues" (ID23). Several participants reported lack of self-confidence as a challenging factor for women that seems related to their competence being compared to men. Specifically, one coach said, "Your coach confidence is diminished when you coach male athletes, because you
know what they think about a female coach, and how could I possibly prove them wrong, making them think that they could actually learn from me" (ID26). Finally, the fact that it is not ok to show vulnerability in sport was reported as a challenging factor in order to stay in HP coaching, as expressed like this by one of the coaches: "But it is a world (HP sport) that has a long way to go regarding acceptance of vulnerability without shame" (ID4).

The other higher-order theme that emerged, reflecting a major challenge for being a female HP coach, was Work-life balance, represented by the following lower-order themes: Work-home-interference (WHI), demand of travel, time demands and high workload. Demands of travel, work-home interference, and high workload were independent, albeit related lower-order themes. As one coach answered: "I think even workhours, it is a lot of evenings and weekends that altogether serves as a hindrance. This along with high travel demands, which leads to time without friends and family, becomes exhausting in a way" (ID22). Several of the coaches described WHI as leading to negative consequence of the three other demands related to the HP context, and explicitly questioned whether HP coaching is a job that can be combined with having a family life: "Having children seems like a challenge and not something positive for the organization, but this is not just about women it also includes men" (ID12). This quote also illustrates that struggling with work-life balance (WLB) is not only a female HP coach issue, rather a challenging factor for all HP coaches in this context. Indeed, all the four lower-order themes can, at first glance, seem to be challenges in HP coaching irrespective of gender.

However, the data also indicated that WHI was perceived to be a specifically difficult challenge for female coaches, with this quote seeming to showcase gender specificity; "When I discuss this problem with my male coach colleagues they don’t understand the problem, since they all have
full service at home (by their wives) that allow them to more easily manage coach work also at
home" (ID28).

Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC

The first higher-order theme within this General Dimension was Coping with the
stereotypical male culture/coach. Specifically, this higher-order theme consisted of four lower-
order themes: Adjust to macho behaviour, equality/no problem, courage and knowledge about
showing vulnerability, and overachievement. Underlying the lower-order theme adjusting to
macho culture were findings indicating that the female HP coaches just tried to adjust to and
accept this culture, rather than fighting or challenging it, in order to focus on getting their jobs
done. For instance these two quotes exemplify how two coaches reacted and adjusted to the
macho-language within the HP context; "Sometimes you just have to act dumb and play along
and just let it "bounce off" (ID18); "I have toughened up because of all the bullshit" (ID1).

Further, the data also indicated that the female HP coaches were aware of their own behaviour
changes made in order to try to fit in; "Normally, I like to make jokes to contribute to the
environment, however, in a male-dominated sports world, I hold back. I get more quiet and
careful about what I am saying so I won't seem like an idiot" (ID9).

Overachievement, which captures findings about the female HP coaches’ perceptions
that they have to achieve better to prove their knowledge and competencies as female HP
coaches in comparison to their male HP colleagues, was evidenced in the following quote: "I am
aware that I try to be extra serious and 'important' to avoid becoming 'the small girl' (which I
often become anyway)" (ID9). Another coach expressed some of the same feelings by answering:
"I have always been in a male-dominated world of sport, even as an athlete. I analyse a lot and
ruminate about how I should do things so I would be perceived in a certain manner" (ID22).
More explicitly regarding overachievement, the coaches seemed quite aware of how harshly they are judged on their performances as female HP coaches: "As a woman I have to be better to be accepted, and even now (when I am quite famous) I become a threat to some (male) colleagues" (ID27).

Despite all the previously reported findings, it is also of importance to acknowledge that about half of the coaches experienced equality between genders in HP coaching, did not consider gender issues as a problem within their job. As one coach expressed it: "In our sport it is mostly men, however, I experience it as equal based on how we treat each other" (ID33).

Managing work-life balance was the other higher-order theme within the General Dimension of Sustainability and Wellbeing as a WHPC. Nine different lower-order themes emerged from the data indicating a range of different adaptive coping strategies (exercise, time with family, recovery strategies, strategies to balance workload, family support, balance ok/good, and monitor workload and recovery). Spending time with family and perceiving family support emerged as two important, yet distinct lower-order themes for many of the coaches. Merely having time with family emerged as an important strategy for managing sustainability and well-being: "Time for myself and with my family is important. That we do something together! Finding a way to calm down. What we do is not of importance, however, it is spending time together that is of importance" (ID7). However, knowing that the family was there in support was also a key factor: "My husband supports me" (ID5). Deliberately choosing activities to psychologically detach by occupying their time with recovery was also frequently mentioned as important. One lower-order theme related to this was exercise, mentioned by several coaches: "I strictly take care of my own health by frequently exercising and eating properly" (ID28). "I exercise a lot and make sure I have time to do this during my work hours" (ID26). However,
other recovery activities (i.e., calm activities to enhance positive emotions) were also discussed: "I do mindfulness activities" (ID33). Several of the coaches also mentioned that they were both aware of the importance, and carefully monitored the balance between workload and recovery in order to maintain a good balance in life. In the lower-order theme, monitor workload and recovery, coached discussed several strategies, for example, "I plan my days like an elite athlete – training, breakfast, work, pleasure, etc." (ID34). Some of the coaches also had specific strategies about avoiding work during their off times: "On the week-ends when we are not at competitions, I don’t answer phone calls from my athletes (ID30). Some coaches were also conscientious about finding strategies for a balanced workload when traveling with athletes (train camps/competition): "I don’t understand how many leaders find the energy to sit up late, grab some beers, sleep few hours. I am often "the boring one" who doesn’t show up, but it is necessary to look after my health, though I know I miss out on some important conversations" (ID20).

Altogether, the results indicated that the female coaches had a range of adaptive coping strategies in order to maintain a balance that they feel is healthy, however, the findings also clearly yielded two different lower-order themes revealing maladaptive, or non-existing, coping strategies (no strategies and difficult finding strategies). About half of the coaches answered that even though they were aware of different types of coping strategies related to balance in life, it was very difficult to find time, or prioritize time, and actually act upon them. The consequences of this were non-existing or maladaptive coping strategies, resulting in work-overload: "It (finding balance) is very difficult for me. I try to turn off the sound on my cell phone and think about something else, but it is hard" (ID15). Further, one of the other coaches expressed how this unbalanced work-home relationship seems to occur periodically in time: "During some periods, I
find it (balance) really hard to manage. But my family reminds me about taking care of myself "(ID37). A considerable amount of the coaches expressed that they did not have strategies for balance between job and private life at all: "Not at all actually (about finding time for recovery/balance). I just keep on going as long as it is possible "(ID 6). Moreover, some of the coaches also expressed insight on how the lack of balance had negative consequences for their private life: "I don't find the balance. I go all in in my leader role during intense periods, which affects my private life in a negative manner" (ID3).  

Acceptance for working as a female HP coach

Finally, the third topic of interest in the findings was the higher-order theme related to acceptance for working as a high performance coaches in various contexts. The responses in these categories were inductively and qualitatively categorized as either "well accepted", "both well and poorly accepted (both)" and "poorly accepted" and thereby quantified in each of the contexts. In total, the coaches perceived themselves as "well accepted" from their athletes (n = 25) versus "both" (n = 4) and "poorly accepted" (n = 4), and this is how one of the coaches describes the acceptance from the athletes: "I perceive high acceptance and a good response in all situations. I feel that many athletes enjoy working with female coaches" (ID15).  

Similar findings were apparent looking at perceived acceptance from their leaders and support team, "well accepted" (n = 24) versus "both" (n = 10) and "poorly accepted" (n = 6). This is illustrated by this quote: "In my closest support team most staff members are men, but there are more females at higher levels in my sport federation and I have never experienced any a problem of acceptance of females or female leadership" (ID3).  

From the HP environment in general, the coaches have a more mixed experiences of acceptance; "well accepted" (n = 18), "both" (n = 11), and "poorly accepted" (n = 12). As an
example of "both": "Mostly, I am met with respect. But sometimes I experience that some people more easily accept and turn to my male colleagues. Especially internationally, they think I am my male colleague’s company and sometimes they do not even greet me" (ID26).

These findings of perceived mixed acceptance for being a female HP coach were also mirrored looking into their experiences with society in general: "well accepted" (n = 20), "both" (n = 9), and "poorly accepted" (n = 11). The following quotes exemplifies how two coaches are met by a lack of understanding for their work and poorly accepted as female HP coaches: "They (other people) wonder what I do (for work), what is your work "in real life"? (ID26) and ""Do you work with this? In your leisure time? How strange". They (other people) really do not understand it" (ID37).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges that are experienced by women within the unique context of HP sports coaching, and their perceived associations with sustainability and mental health issues. The findings of the current study both mirror and extend previous research exploring challenges related to being a female HP coach. To a large extent, findings indicate that female HP coaches experience the same challenges related to being a HP coach as have been reported in research conducted within the HP coaching profession in general (Joncheray, Burlot, & Julla-Marcy, 2019). For example, WHI was reported here as a challenge echoing the same issue that has been highlighted in research with largely (e.g., 92.5%) male samples (Bentzen et al., 2016a). Nevertheless, as previously noted, additional challenges may be placed upon women because of motherhood or persisting cultural expectations on women to
manage household duties and other family responsibilities (Dyrdal, Røysamb, Bang Nes, & Vittersø, 2019).

It should also be noted that while the labelling of the overall General Dimensions (challenges associated with WHPC and issues related to sustainability) was influenced by existing literature and our research question, they merely reflected the initial coding and analysis and captured the higher- and lower-order themes that emerged from the data. However, the challenges tied more specifically to being a female HP coach found in the present study can also be discussed and mirrored according to the ecological model by LaVoi and Dutove (2012). These challenges have been associated to what LaVoi and Dutove described as the masculine and male dominated nature of sport spaces. In summary, our key findings describe that female HP coaches perceive and report that they have to adapt to the stereotypical male culture, rather than trying to change the culture in order to sustain in the profession and maintain their mental health. In the following sections, the two main higher-order themes experienced as Challenges of Working as a WHPC, will be discussed jointly with the issues regarding Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC that were reported.

**Stereotypical male culture and coping strategies**

The higher-order theme Stereotypical male culture had the most lower-order themes attached to it, yet these findings, suggesting the multifaceted and challenging nature of such male-dominated cultures has a negative impact on HP coaching for women, mirror previous research. The male dominated HP context, and occasionally macho culture, stood out as a distinct 'old fashioned gender stereotypes' within the HP context. What is associated with masculine and male dominated sport environments has previously been viewed from multiple perspectives (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Fasting & Pfister, 2000). In the current study this theme
CHALLENGES AMONG WOMAN HIGH PERFORMANCE COACHES

explicitly emerged as inappropriate language (e.g., sexual undertone), that men were looking out for one another, and that the female HP coaches perceived that gender equality was not yet within reach in the HP community. Altogether, most lower-order themes that relate to a stereotypical male culture seem to closely align with the sociocultural level of the ecological model of barriers and support to female coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

It is understandable that a central theme emerged that was about coping with the stereotypical masculine culture and adjusting to it, rather than fighting or challenging it, in order to "survive" and prioritizing energy in getting the job done. These coping strategies further align with LaVoi and Duvotes model (2012), mostly at the individual and interpersonal level. Unfortunately, these coping strategies at the individual and interpersonal levels are not likely to change such an environment to become healthier or better. Interestingly, the masculine and male dominant culture in HP sport can also be harmful to the mental health of the male population, but arguably to a lesser extent (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). However, it should be emphasized that the responsibility to change such a "harmful"/narrow subculture, should not be put on the female coaches themselves, rather it is a responsibility for the sport environment, its stakeholders, and organizations to be aware of and act upon this need for change (i.e., at the organizational level).

Moreover, it is suggested that these efforts in general should include a greater emphasis on mental health and well-being strategies, and more specifically address challenges that female HP coaching professionals face.

Despite results that showed the stereotypical male culture continues to be a challenging factor in coaching for women, it is of importance to look at some of the other findings of the current study. Of importance, the female coaches experienced higher acceptance for being a HP coach from their own athletes and their closest colleagues, than compared to the HP environment
in general and in society outside sport. The acceptance from their closest companions is presumably of great importance, as these are the prominent stakeholders affecting the individual’s well-being and ability to thrive at work (Allan & Shaw, 2009). However, the findings showing that half of the coaches reported either being accepted poorly or both accepted/not accepted in the HP environment or by society are alarming. Lack of acceptance and relatedness will thwart basic psychological needs and has been linked to poor mental health and ill-being (Stebbings et al., 2012). This issue requires attention both in practice and in future research. In contrast, the results also indicated a lower-order theme that gave a more optimistic prospect of a more balanced proportion of HP coaches regarding gender for the future, since a meaningful proportion of the coaches did not experience inequality as a problem/issue.

Lack of female role models was cited by several female HP coaches as a challenge for them in their job, as has been reported in previous research (Drago et al, 2005). Female role models are of importance at the HP level, and striving for this would facilitate more female coaches not only in getting HP coaching jobs, but also in remaining in coaching at the HP level. In the present study, some female HP coaches reported experiencing a lack of self-confidence in their jobs, and felt they had to overachieve as female coaches to prove their competencies, something that has previously been described as a burden and a strain on mental health by other elite female coaches (Norman, 2010a; 2010b). It could be argued that these findings of few role models and lack of self-confidence/overachieving co-exist in a negative cycle. These negative cycles are described in the literature (e.g., Bickenstaff, 2005), and serve as part of the foundations upon which specific female coach programs are built. Despite several initiatives in the last decades, the 'problem' with the low proportion of HP female coaches in the sports world clearly has not yet been solved, given the low numbers of female coaches reported in recent studies
(e.g., Bentzen et al., 2016a; 2016b; Kidd, 2013). Consequently, we ask whether the current women-specific coach programs are sufficient, and suggest that other complementary strategies with a different perspective need to be considered to reach the goal of larger diversity in the coach population. It is suggested that context-specific strategies are also needed to address how to enhance the retention of female coaches that enter the HP context without compromising their mental health and well-being.

**WLB and coping strategies**

The results support previous findings in that female HP coaches found it difficult and challenging to have a balanced work life in combination with private life (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Bruening, Dixon, Burton, & Madsen, 2013). This topic has recently gained increasingly attention, as a number of studies have indicated that working as a HP coach, regardless of gender, is a demanding and highly stressful occupation (Didymus, 2017; Joncheray et al, 2019). This is due to work hours without boundaries, job-insecurity, and extreme travel schedules that, taken together, challenge the notion of a healthy work-life balance. Ultimately, this lack of balance between work and life commitments might well put coaches at risk for burnout and other mental health problems such as depression-, anxiety-, sleep-, dependency disorders (Olusoga et al., 2019). In summary, these findings suggest that the challenges related to work-life balance may have both gender neutral and gender specific issues that require attention. More specifically, we suggest that WLB is a challenging factor related to the “old school” stereotypical male coach role that needs to be revised and applied in a manner that would consider sustainability and mental health to a greater extent in HPC and that would take into considerations the complexities of compounding variables such as gender and societal expectations. A greater balance between private life and professional life, might result in a professional culture that would support greater
diversity among professionals willing to commit to HP coaching as a career, without giving up a private life and thereby expanding the typical expectation of the coaching role. Role models that represents a greater diversity among HP coach professionals could encourage and motivate more people to enter the coaching profession with the aspiration and desire of becoming a HP coach and pursuing a career in HP sport. This could include younger coaches both male and females, coaches with small children, male coaches not fitting in the typical macho-roles, several female coaches, older and more experienced coaches, and coaches with disabilities. It should also be noted that the main theme of work-life balance aligns well with LaVoi and Duvote's model (2012) primarily at the interpersonal level, but they are driven by job demands situated at the organizational level.

It is also of importance to point to the mental health challenges that specifically relate to being a woman in a HP coaching context, for example, having to overachieve to demonstrate and prove competencies, perceiving less support at home in comparison to their male colleagues, and at times not being accepted in the coaching role. Minority groups often tend to have fewer resources, and less power and status as compared to the dominant groups in any context, and this is a possible explanation for some of our findings. Aligned with this is the proposed minority stress hypothesis suggested by Schwartz and Meyer (2010). Future research should address these topics in order to develop more adaptive strategies and content for future coach education and professional development support that should foster diversity and well-being and speak to the beneficial nature of it. Moreover, coach education should address the importance of stress and recovery imbalance that can result from overachievement and the lack of coping resources that was reported by several participants in our study. This is especially important in the culture of HP sports since vulnerability is often perceived as a weakness and thereby limiting help-seeking
behavior with the risk of coaches attempting to mask severe mental health problems. This notion was also reported by participants in our study. More recently, organizations such as ISSP and FEPSAC have published position statement on mental health that have focused on athletes with limited attention to minority groups (Henriksen et al., 2019; Moesch et al., 2018). It is suggested that future research should address mental health in the profession of coaching with special attention to work-life balance and how the current male dominant culture may be challenging to mental health across genders. Moreover, more longitudinal approaches to evaluate the effect of various initiatives that aim to support women coaches to strive, sustain and stay healthy in high performance sports are warranted. That could, for example, be specific coach programs or initiatives (Kilty, 2006), or more enduring networks with female HP coaches as hosted by The Swedish Sports Confederation. This type of research may better empirically support future initiatives. An interesting finding in this study was that nearly half of the sample perceived gender equality. The level and perception of gender equality and its impact on sustainability in the profession and mental health should be examined in future research.

Limitations

The design of this study was an open-ended questionnaire making it possible to reach out to a large number of female HP coaches. However, even though the coaches could freely elaborate on their thoughts about the question asked, the written format limits to this one answer, and follow up questions or further elaborations are not possible. The method would have been strengthened by in-depth follow up interviews with these coaches and, as such, a mixed method approach would have strengthened this study (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2010).

Conclusions
The authors argue, that while some of the challenges reported in the current study may be common for all HP coaches to a large extent, gender specific concerns continue to persist, particularly for females in the HP sport environment. Specifically, the coaches in this study discussed the stereotypical male culture associated with sport (e.g., macho culture, and men looking out for each other) as a particular challenge for women coaches. Moreover, findings revealed that rather than attempting to instigate any significant cultural shift within organizations or engage in problem-focused coping solutions, women coaches instead tended to adapt to the stereotypical male culture in which they found themselves operating, in order merely to "survive". This has obvious implications for the sustainability of the profession as the women in our study highlighted the need to divert and focus energy into getting the job done, with limited resources left to manage the unique stressors associated with the role. Instead of reviewing arguments and motives to support the notion that more women coaches are needed, we need to start focusing on a more sustainable work life balance for coaches in general as well as address the specific support needs of the many subpopulations within the coaching profession. Sport organizations have a responsibility to recognize both the general challenges regarding HPC, and the specific challenges for WHPCs. For the specific strategies, retention of and support for women coaches in HP environments must be carefully considered, as our findings suggest that the actions taken at individual and interpersonal levels are often not sustainable, and could lead to mental health issues and burnout (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2017; Olusoga, et al., 2019). Sustainability and mental health in the HP-coaching profession will be challenged to another level during and after motherhood. An important task for future research would be to explore this “critical period” with an effort to identify and implement support systems. Ultimately, both the general, and the specific strategies will lead to a more diverse coach population including mothers.
Future research should address the specific challenges for WHPCs in different cultures and also across different sports. Finally, it can be argued that HPC will always be highly demanding, taxing and thus somewhat unsustainable by its very nature. For this reason, explicit efforts in research and practice that strive to enhance work-life balance, sustainability and mental health can make this profession less dominated by stereo-typical male culture and more attractive to a diverse population.
CHALLENGES AMONG WOMAN HIGH PERFORMANCE COACHES

References


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Figure 1. Themes related to the Challenges of working as a WHPC

### General Dimensions

- Challenges of working as a WHPC
- Work Life Balance

### Higher-order themes

- Stereotypical Male Culture / Coach
  - Lack of role models
  - No equality yet
  - Men choose men
  - Prejudice against female coaches
  - Male dominated culture
  - Macho culture
  - Not okay to show vulnerability
  - Lack of self-confidence
  - Competence compared to men

### Lower-order themes

- Work-home interference
  - Travel
  - Time demands
  - High workload
Figure 2. Themes related to *Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC*

### General Dimensions
- Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC
- Managing Work Life Balance

### Higher-order themes
- Coping With The Stereotypical Male Culture/Coach

### Lower-order themes
- Adjust to macho behaviour
- There is Equality/No problem
- Courage and knowledge about showing vulnerability
- Overachievement

- Exercise
  - Time family
  - Recovery-activities
- Strategies for a balance workload
  - Family support
  - Balance ok/good
- Monitor workload and recovery
  - No strategies
  - Difficult to find strategies