

# **A Qualitative Description of Canadian High School Coaches' Perceived Challenges and Recommendations Related to Social Justice**

Presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> European Congress of Sport and Exercise Psychology in  
Padova, Italy, July 2022

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# Canadian High School Sport

- 750,000 student-athletes
- 52,000 coaches
- 3,200 schools



# Social Justice in Sport

- Sport offers distinct opportunities to promote social justice but can also simultaneously endorse stereotypes and reinforce systemic inequities

(Bredemeier & Shields, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2021).



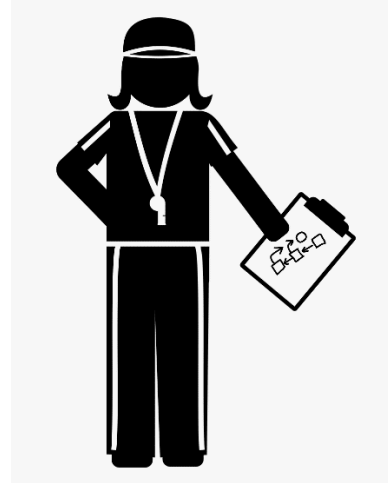
# The Role of the Coach

- Coach support is known to influence athlete social justice activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018).
- More research is needed



# Purpose of Study

- Investigate, through qualitative description/thematic analysis, Canadian high school coaches' perceived challenges and recommendations related to social justice



# Study Procedure

- Online survey distributed to coaches across Canada
- Six open-ended questions about attitudes on social justice



# Participants

- Coaches in the Canadian high school sport system during the 2021/2022 school year.
- 394 coaches (62% men, 85% White) answered at least one of six open-ended questions.

# Survey Questions

## Social Justice Challenge Questions (1028 entries)

- **1. Challenges with your high school sport team**
- **2. Challenges at your high school**
- **3. Challenges with your school board**

## Social Justice Recommendation Questions (794 entries)

- **4. Recommendations to address the challenges with your high school sport team**
- **5. Recommendations to address the challenges at your high school**
- **6. Recommendations to address the challenges with your school board**



# Data Analysis

- Qualitative description: Low-inference interpretation and straight descriptions of coaches' perceptions (Sandelowski, 2010).
- Thematic Analysis: identifying, analysis, interpreting patterns across coaches' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2020).



# Findings

- Three groups of coaches:
  1. **Social Justice Coaches**  
High school sport faces social justice issues (53%)
  2. **Silent Coaches**  
No challenges/recommendations to report (44%)
  3. **Normative Coaches**  
Urgency regarding social justice is overblown (3%)

# Challenge: Racism

- “Players being racist to players on the other team. Saying racist terms while playing.”
- “Being a First Nations school, we face many issues that relate to systemic racism in our community”

# Challenge: Poverty

- “Socioeconomic status for some athletes on the team does not allow them to attend each and every practice because they must work to provide for their family.”

# Challenge: LGBTQ+ Equity

- “Most are ill-educated on the LGB[TQ+] community and show little respect [...] they use the words ‘gay’ and ‘homo’ derogatorily.”

# Challenge: Lack of Desire to Change

- “Generally, a tokenistic approach to social justice, particularly in relation to incorporating non-colonial perspectives into curriculum.”
- “Lack of diversity in leadership leading to lack of prioritization of marginalized groups.”

# Recommendation: Social Justice Education

- “There NEEDS to be a class in all high schools that teaches about social justice. We need education, not just a conversation here and there.”

# Recommendations: Funding/Lower Fees

- “Funding should be available for sports to be accessible for ALL.”



# Recommendation: Dialogue

- “Coaches need to openly talk about these issues and be positive role models.”

# Recommendation: More Real Support

- “Boards are often buried in policy and forget that the real work is in the schools. That is where the support needs to happen, not at the board office level.”

# Sport as Meritocracy

- “Sport and social justice issues should remain separate. Sport is a bastion of merit. In high schools we should no longer allow a social justice lens to taint sports.”

# Colour-Blindness

- “We dedicate our lives to helping INDIVIDUALS regardless of the social justice aspect that our world is so obsessed with.”

# Discussion: Silent Coaches

- Large number of coaches who identified no challenges/recommendations related to social justice.
- **White privilege** (McIntosh, 1988).
- **White silence** (DiAngelo, 2012).
- Many coaches continue to miss opportunities to address social justice with youth athletes (Newman et al., 2021).

# Discussion: Normative Coaches

- Discursive statements that uphold normative, functionalist coaching practices (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020; Spaaij et al., 2020).
- Myths of meritocracy, egalitarianism, colour-blindness (Fletcher & Hylton, 2016).

# Discussion: Challenges, Recommendations

- Social justice challenges exist in Canadian high school sport
- Need for social justice coach education (Gearity et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2021).
- Need to reimagine youth coaching for social justice (Camiré et al., 2021; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020).

# Future Directions

- Develop social justice coach education resources that address privilege as well as normative and functionalist coaching practices
- Explore social justice attitudes of other stakeholders (i.e., school board members, administrators, student-athletes)



# Conclusion

- Many coaches continue to ignore/miss social justice issues in Canadian high school sport.
- Social justice coach education can be designed and implemented to help coaches recognize and act upon social injustices/inequities.

# Thank You!

- Questions?

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