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Coaching Generation Z Athletes

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How Generation Z athletes' (those born after 1996) characteristics influence coaching practice has not been examined. This study examines coaches' perceptions of Gen Z athlete characteristics, challenges, and effective coaching strategies. Twelve highly experienced coaches and sport science providers were interviewed and revealed that coaches characterized Gen Z athletes as having excellent technology skills, high expectations for success, short attention spans, poor communication skills, and an inability to deal with adversity. Challenges included connecting with them and working with their support networks. Strategies included connecting process with performance, teaching communication skills, being direct, setting clear expectations, and building resiliency.

Lay Summary Coaches' perceptions of Gen Z athletes (athletes born after 1996 and having grown up in a totally digital world) characteristics, the challenges working with them, and effective Gen Z coaching strategies were examined. Interviews with 12 highly experienced tennis coaches revealed both positive (e.g., highly educated, high expectations for success) and negative (e.g., finding ways to connect with them, working with support network) characteristics, as well as strategies for effectively coaching them (e.g., connecting process with performance, teaching basic communication skills).

Great coaches individualize their coaching actions and practices based on the characteristics and needs of their athletes (Becker, 2012; Erickson & Côté, 2016). Speaking to this point, legendary Olympic swimming coach, James “Doc” Councilman, an individual who was instrumental in establishing the scientific foundations of swim coaching, indicated that the science of coaching was the identification of the general coaching principles derived by scientific research, whereas the art of coaching centered on knowing when, with whom, and in what situations to apply those principles (Kimiecik & Gould, 1987).

Taking a more theoretical approach, Horn, Lox, and Labrador (2001) discussed the importance of individualizing one's coaching approach when they articulated the coach expectation-performance relationship cycle. According to this view, coaches form expectations based on performance information and personal cues of their athletes. These expectations, then, influence their coaching behaviors that, in turn, affect athlete performance. In the final step of the cycle, athlete performance reinforces the original expectations of the coach. Horn and her colleagues contended, then, that it is appropriate that coaches form

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expectations about their athletes' capabilities and use those expectations to guide their coaching actions. However, they warned that such expectations must be based on accurate information versus stereotypes or unsubstantiated biases.

Although it has always been essential that coaches adapt their coaching to athlete characteristics, this may be more important today than ever before as coaches adjust to a new generation of athletes who have grown up in a total digital age, which has had major effects on their characteristics and ways of behaving. The head of player development for the United States Tennis Association (USTA) who has extensive experience as a coach, for instance, told the first author that although working with today's players has many benefits, numerous challenges are presented as well (M. Blackman, personal communication, September 2016). Specifically, today's players can be difficult to effectively communicate with, have short attention spans, can lack intrinsic motivation, and can sometimes lack mental toughness. These sentiments resonated with our research team, as we had all heard similar comments from other coaches and noted similar changes in the undergraduate student population we teach. Because of this state of affairs, we began to search the general psychology research literature to learn more about the generation that makes up the pool of contemporary young athletes.

Today's young athletes represent Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z athletes are youth born after 1996, making up 26% of the U.S. population and 27% of the world population (Hampton & Keys, 2016). Also being called the post-millennial or iGeneration, Gen Z youth are the demographic cohort following the millennials. Demographic cohorts are important because individuals within cohort groups like the baby boomers, millennials, or now Gen Z have been found to have unique characteristics shaped by the social context and world events occurring during their formative years (Hampton & Keys, 2016). In the case of Gen Z youth, they have been influenced by socioeconomic uncertainty (e.g., the global recession of 2008), international terrorism (e.g., 9/11) and natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina). Gen Z youth are characterized by being the best-educated generation in history and are the first generation of youth who have grown up in a totally digital environment, which has resulted in Gen Z youth having excellent technology skills (Twenge, 2017). At the same time, because of the amount of time they spend on technology, they are thought to have shorter attention spans, the need for frequent feedback, and a lack of independence.

In their book *Generation Z Goes to College*, Seemiller and Grace (2016) summarized the results of their extensive study of Gen Z college students. They indicate that this cohort group is responsible, compassionate, realistic, open-minded, and accepting of diversity. Gen Z students also have strong beliefs that the information they need is at their fingertips and believe what is on the Internet is true. They are highly connected, averaging more than 100 text messages a day, and they spend numerous hours on social media. When not online, they often fear that they are missing out and are used to getting information quickly, which at times leads to procrastination.

Social psychologist Jean Twenge (2017), who has extensively studied both millennials and Gen Z youth (which she labels iGen), has recently summarized much of the research on this cohort group. The research indicates that today's youth grow up more slowly (e.g., engage in sex at a later age, hold off longer on obtaining a driver's license, engage in alcohol consumption later than their millennial predecessors) and are the most protected and safest generation ever but at the same time avoid adult responsibilities such as moving out of the house and becoming financially independent. Gen Z youth are motivated to go to college and want to be successful but are somewhat guarded and realistic after witnessing their parents' struggles during the great worldwide recession of 2008. Growing up in the

digital world, they spend less time in direct contact with their friends and loved ones. Twenge (2017) argued that this is one reason they have highest ever generational reports of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Finally, growing up in a highly engaging digital world, Gen Z youth's attention spans are shorter, and they often multitask even when this may not be effective.

Twenge (2017) also showed that although generational change tended to be more gradual and steady in previous cohorts, many changes in Gen Z youth have been much more rapid, a factor she associates with the onset of the smartphone and extensive smartphone use by this generation. The rapid onset of these changes may catch adults, like teachers and coaches, working with them by surprise.

It is not surprising, then, that scholars from a variety of disciplines suggest that the characteristics of Gen Z youth influence the most effective ways to teach them. Keengwe, Schnellert, and Jonas (2014), for instance, discussed how the widespread use of smartphones serves as both a distraction in the form of multitasking during class and an opportunity to enhance lectures via the recording of video segments, real-time class polling, or note taking. Similarly, Hampton and Keys (2016) discussed how the characteristics of Gen Z students are changing and influencing nursing education, requiring the need for shorter lectures, an expectation that Internet resources will be available to help students learn, a preference for active learning, engagement with video, and a preference for class discussions and team activities (vs. lectures). Finally, Rosen, Carrier, and Cheever (2013) discussed how technological distractions impact academic learning, suggesting that students be taught metacognitive strategies to help manage studying interruptions and the importance of taking 1-min technology breaks during class.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to examine how Gen Z athlete characteristics influence sport instruction and coaching. Some initial studies have been conducted on athlete social media use, something that characterizes Gen Z individuals. Specifically, Encel, Mesagno, and Brown (2017) surveyed 298 British athletes to determine both their Facebook use and if Facebook use was related to anxiety. Results revealed that 68% of the athletes used Facebook within 2 hr of competition, and time spent on social media was related to the Concentration Disruption subscale of the Sport Anxiety Scale. In another study DesClouds, Laamarti, Durrand-Bush, and El Saddik (2018) tested the feasibility of smartphone usability on athlete performance and well-being. They argued that smartphone usage can have both positive (e.g., enhance self-regulation skills) and negative (e.g., cause anxiety) effects on athletes. Furthermore, in tracking five college athletes' smartphone use, they found that these athletes spent an average of 31.7 hr a week on their phones, mostly using social media. Although they involved Gen Z athletes, these studies did not focus on how identifying the characteristics of these athletes or how their use or application of technology influenced best coaching practices. In addition, these studies focused only on technological characteristics and did not provide a holistic, whole-person understanding of Gen Z individuals. In fact, our research team was unable to identify any studies describing the characteristics of Gen Z athletes or strategies for effectively teaching or coaching them. Hence, there is a need for research in this area to inform coaches and applied sport science providers currently working with Gen Z athletes.

The lack of research examining the characteristics of Gen Z athletes and strategies for coaching them was the impetus for conducting this study. Because so little research has been conducted on the topic, qualitative interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of choice. It was also thought that interviewing individual sport coaches and applied sport science providers (e.g., strength coach, mental training specialist) would be most informative, as these individuals spend extensive periods working one-on-one with

young athletes. Hence, the purpose of this study was to determine experienced USTA coaches and sport science providers' perceptions of the attention, motivation, and communication characteristics of today's elite Gen Z tennis players, as well as barriers and keys to helping players develop and improve their games.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 highly experienced USTA Player Development coaches and sport providers working with junior elite players. Participants consisted of 11 men and one woman (age, $M=45.83$, range = 30–59) and included one mental skills training specialist, seven on-court coaches, two strength and conditioning coaches, one athletic trainer, and one coach/administrator. Participants had an average of 18.13 (range = 2–40) years working with junior aged players and worked with individuals at the national or elite level who ranged from ages 10 to 35 years.

Participant Recruitment

Following approval from the university Human Research Protection Program, an e-mail was sent to potential participants who were currently working with elite-level youth athletes with information about the study and a request to reply if interested in participating. Interested participants were then contacted to schedule a convenient time for the phone interview to occur.

Semistructured Interviews

Using the phenomenographic approach to understand how sport providers are perceiving Gen Z athletes and their experience working with them, a semistructured interview guide was developed (Marton, 1981; 1986). The interview guide included questions based on characteristics of Gen Z athletes, challenges of working with them, and strategies for working with Gen Z athletes effectively. The interview guide was developed based on previous literature on Gen Z individuals (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017) and included open-ended questions to explore the participants' perceptions (e.g., How would you describe today's junior players?). The researchers took field notes during the interviews to outline the more important information related to the research questions that were then used to adjust the interview guide as needed. All 12 interviews were conducted on the telephone and were audio-recorded. Interviews ranged 40–78 min, with an average of 61 min. At the completion of each interview, the audio recording was transcribed by the research assistants.

Paradigmatic and Methodological Perspective

The researchers identified their assumptions and beliefs regarding their paradigmatic views of science and qualitative research. Although the researchers do not align fully with one paradigmatic view, they do align most closely with both postpositivistic and constructivist paradigms (Creswell, 2013). That is, the researchers believe rigorous data collection and analysis procedures in qualitative research while understanding that their interaction with participants may influence their perception of reality toward Gen Z youth. The

researchers aim was to take a pragmatic approach to explain the phenomenon of coaching Gen Z athletes. They also adopted elements of a phenomenological approach focused on analyzing and understanding the experiences of individuals relative to a certain phenomenon. The goal of this approach is to understand how people perceive, experience, and conceptualize a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Thus, phenomenography explores the qualitatively diverse ways that individuals experience, understand, and give meaning to a phenomenon in the world. Ultimately, the goal is to emphasize the collective meaning and commonalities of understanding rather than individual experiences (Barnard et al., 1999). To fulfill this goal, this approach works to identify similarities and differences among individuals in their phenomenal meaning (Åkerlind, 2012).

The rigor of the data analysis process was ensured by four steps. First, all researchers were trained and had prior training in qualitative research and data analysis. The lead researcher has extensive experience in qualitative methods, and additional researchers have been trained via graduate-level courses in qualitative research. Second, the researchers discussed the opinions and or assumptions they held about Gen Z youth characteristics from reading the literature or based on their own experiences (e.g., Gen Z youth have short attention spans) and worked to ensure that, both in the interviews and data analysis, these assumptions did not unduly influence the results (e.g., made sure questions were not asked in a way that assumed Gen Z youth have short attention spans, looked for refuting evidence as well as evidence of short attention spans in Gen Z players). Third, an audit trail was used to examine the process of research and the trustworthiness of the results. The researchers took field notes during each interview, and a research log of all activities and decisions were kept for accounts of the thought process involved in the analysis. Last, triangulation and peer debriefing was included through independent coding, discussion of meaning units, categories and themes, and then arriving at consensus. This triangulation and peer debriefing was used to confirm that the data representation was an accurate account of what the participants had discussed in their interviews.

Data Analysis

A hierarchical content analysis was conducted by the researchers to identify common themes within the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). A deductive and inductive four-step approach was used, with the first three steps conducted by the researchers separately and then together to provide consensus at each stage of the data analysis process. First, the researchers used an open-coding phenomenographic approach to create meaning units for each participant's interview transcription to describe their perspective on coaching Gen Z athletes. Second, meaning units were combined for all participants and used to inductively create categories based on the combined meaning units. Third, the categories were then deductively analyzed to place into higher order themes based on the research questions. Fourth, higher order themes, categories, and meaning units were given to the lead researcher to provide feedback on the analysis and helped to ensure credible findings.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Gen Z Athletes

When discussing Gen Z athletes' characteristics, coaches discussed attributes such as goal setting, ability to deal with adversity, attentional characteristics, personal responsibility, motivation, and communication skills. Although all spoke of what they believed

characterized Gen Z athletes, all acknowledged the difficulty of generalizing across a generation. However, with this being said, their perceptions offer valuable insight into common Gen Z athlete characteristics.

Goal Setting Characteristics

Participants believed that Gen Z athletes were goal directed, with their time spent on the tennis court directed at their short- and long-term goals. For the goals they set, coaches believed that Gen Z athletes tended to set outcome goals and were focused on their results rather than the training process. The coaches cited several types of athlete outcome goals, including playing professionally, achieving a high ranking, playing tennis in college, and winning. With these outcome goals, coaches also felt that the athletes were results oriented and were more focused on short-term results rather than the time and effort it takes to reach their goals. This was clear from Participant 10, who said, “Their goal is always more short-term goal, results. You know, winning the tournament they are playing, winning a match they are playing.”

Coaches also felt that Gen Z athletes set high expectations for themselves. Athletes expected success and expected to achieve highly in everything they did related to tennis. This high expectation for success was evident by the following quote:

They all have high expectations. All of the juniors I work with, all the way up to 21. They have very high expectations and they have pressure that they or other people put on themselves. I think they definitely all have high expectations of themselves like this is what they are going to do and they are going to be able to get there. (Participant 12)

Coaches believed that the high expectations that Gen Z athletes had for themselves may be resulting in negative consequences. Some coaches felt that by expecting to win, their focus was no longer on progress or development, whereas others stated that when those expectations weren’t met, athletes had difficulty coping. For instance, Participant 9 said, “They sometimes have a sense that they’re supposed to achieve highly in everything that they do. So, when that doesn’t occur they can be devastated.”

Ability to Deal with Adversity

At the beginning stages of working with Gen Z athletes, coaches felt that athletes lacked the ability deal with adversity. Athletes had not been exposed to adversity prior to starting their tennis participation at the elite level. As one coach stated:

There’s this feeling that in tennis that players grow up pretty free of adversity. Typically, their parents have money, are high achievers, they have a pretty good life, and so everything is geared towards their tennis and adversity is not something that they experience a lot. (Participant 1)

Due to the lack of exposure to adversity in life outside of tennis, coaches discussed how Gen Z athletes were not prepared to deal with adversity that can occur in sport and therefore had poor coping mechanisms when they encountered challenging or stressful situations. Avoidance and manifestation of an injury were two poor coping behaviors that coaches had observed of Gen Z athletes.

Overtime, with structured resilience-building practices, coaches observed an improvement in Gen Z athletes’ abilities to handle adversity. By creating stressful practice situations and coaching athletes through them, Gen Z athletes improved their resiliency and

were able to cope more effectively when adversity occurred. When confronted with situations that required resilience, athletes learned how to be mentally tough, had positive coping mechanisms, and were more confident in their ability to overcome adversity. However, coaches acknowledged that this improvement may be a reason why these players reached the elite level, with those still struggling to handle adversity dropping out of their elite training.

Related to dealing with adversity, coaches felt that Gen Z athletes did not respond well to negative feedback. Athletes often took negative feedback personally and would get upset when confronted with criticism. Coaches discussed how athletes had difficulty separating themselves as a person and as a tennis player and when given negative feedback on their tennis performance often took it as a measure of their self-worth.

Attentional Characteristics

Overwhelmingly, coaches characterized Gen Z athletes with short attention spans. Paying attention and focusing over long periods was difficult for Gen Z athletes, with some coaches noticing that they would stop listening if spoken to for too long. This was the case for Participant 8, who said, “Their attention is, I think is a little bit shorter. So, you have to be pretty direct with your points and grab their attention from the beginning or else they won’t listen as well, they won’t be as receptive.”

Coaches also found that Gen Z athletes were easily distracted and had difficulty blocking out distractions. For example, one coach discussed how athletes would have trouble focusing on their own match yet know the score of the match on the next court, “I’ve had a lot of players come off the court and they can tell you pretty much the score and what has happened in the match next to them” (Participant 5).

In terms of Gen Z athletes’ ability to multitask, coaches had varying opinions. Although all agreed that Gen Z players engaged in multitasking frequently, some believed they were good at managing their attention on different tasks, whereas other coaches believed that athletes lacked the ability to multitask well. For example, one coach discussed, “I bet they’re more competent than the older generations at multitasking as far as from a technological, doing multiple things at once like that” (Participant 4), whereas another coach said, “I think they do try to multitask a lot but I don’t think they’re very good at it to be honest” (Participant 1).

Personal Responsibility

Consistent across almost all coaches, Gen Z athletes were perceived to need structure and boundaries to guide them through their tennis development. Coaches felt that athletes relied and were dependent on the structure and boundaries provided for them by both parents and coaches. Within this structure, however, athletes wanted a customized experienced in which the structure is tailored to their goals and individual characteristics. This was evident from the following quote from Participant 8: “They want their own things, their own training, their goals have to be very, very precise and individualized for them.” Within this structure, coaches felt that Gen Z athletes were responsible, for the most part, as they had to balance tennis practice, school work, family, and social life. Coaches did notice that Gen Z athletes failed to manage their time well. However, this mismanage of time was not perceived as intentional; rather, coaches felt that Gen Z athletes were unaware of the importance of time management and lacked the skills necessary to effectively manage their time.

Motivational Characteristics

In terms of motivation, coaches felt that Gen Z athletes were mostly extrinsically motivated by results, material things, and social comparison. Coaches discussed how pressure from parents and coaches served as extrinsic sources that drove players motivation. For example, Participant 11 stated, “They realize if I do good, my parents treat me different, if I do good, you know, they get stuff, whether it be from companies, rackets, shoes, clothes, yes it's [motivation] more about that stuff.” Coaches had mixed opinions on the level of self-drive of Gen Z athletes, with some coaches believing that they had high self-drive and others believing that Gen Z athletes lacked self-drive; a third group thought that this depended on the individual. In terms of work ethic, most coaches discussed how Gen Z athletes worked hard and had a strong work ethic once on the tennis court. However, they believed that the athletes were unaware of the necessary level of hard work that it takes to reach their goals, as Participant 5 stated, “I think sometimes kids think that they have a very good work ethic but if their goals are to be professional tennis players, their work ethic is not as good as it needs to be.” Last, coaches felt that for Gen Z athletes to be motivated, they need to know the “why.” Gen Z athletes want to understand why something they have been asked to do in practice or training is related to improvements in their performance. This was made clear by a coach who said:

I think if the work that is not directed, if the work that they are asked to do is positioned as being kind of homework or drudgery, I think they really push back against that. ... I do think that they're able to get into a kind of a deep learning zone in certain environments and circumstances when they really feel connected and they feel the relevance of what they're learning. (Participant 7)

Communicational Characteristics

Overall, coaches felt that Gen Z athletes had poor communication skills. Coaches believed that players had difficulty expressing their emotions, were shy and hesitant to speak up, and lacked basic conversational skills (i.e., eye contact). Coaches perceived Gen Z athletes as preferring impersonal communication methods such as texting rather than face-to-face conversations or phone calls. Furthermore, they believed that Gen Z athletes were more open via text, with one coach stating, “I’ll text the players and sometimes, they’re actually more open via text then they are face-to-face. It’s unbelievable” (Participant 1). In terms of listening skills, coaches felt that Gen Z players had weak listening skills and cited listening as a challenge for them in their training.

Coaches also felt that Gen Z players would check what they were told by the coach and were not quick to believe something just because the coach had said it. This was clear from Participant 6, who said, “They’ll look at you and they’ll still obey, they’re not disrespectful in any way but they will check and they will double-check and make sure that what you say is true and then sometimes even question you.” Last, coaches felt that after building a relationship with their coach, Gen Z athletes were more open and would reach out more when communicating. This was discussed by Participant 11, who said:

I think that once you start a great relationship with the athlete, then everything becomes easy from there. I mean they can open up, and they can approach you, and have conversations. I think that it’s all about building relationships.

Sociocultural and Environmental Influences

When discussing Gen Z athletes, coaches consistently spoke about the role that society and the environment had on shaping Gen Z individuals. Two themes regarding the influence of society and the environment were discussed and included the role of

technology and the support network around the athlete. First, coaches felt that in today's world an abundance of information is available with easy access. This bombardment of information resulted in Gen Z athletes being knowledgeable but lacking the ability to distinguish between good and bad information. They felt that this easy access to technology was related to their preoccupation with social media and cell phones, as one coach said, "When they're in school, they're always on social media. They just cannot stay away from checking their Facebook, or whatever they're doing" (Participant 11). The support network around the players also had an influence on Gen Z characteristics, with coaches feeling that athletes were too dependent on their large support network and the structure that was set for them by their parents. Participant 3 discussed this dependence when he said, "They need to be led a lot rather than taking the initiative or figuring it out for themselves. They're always looking for someone else to give them an answer."

Strengths of Gen Z Athletes

Although coaches focused mainly on the aforementioned characteristics of Gen Z athletes, they also discussed some strengths that they had observed of the Gen Z players they worked with. First, coaches felt that today's athletes were more educated than in past generations as they had access to an abundance of information online and had excellent technology skills that made finding information easy for them. This was the case for Participant 7, who said:

Their dexterity with technology is a strength, online and manipulating technology to kinda dig into different things that they're looking for, searching for things. If we share analysis with them through different platforms, it's very easy for them to access that, look at it and process it.

Second, Gen Z athletes were perceived to be visual learners, which was discussed as a strength, as coaches were able to incorporate technology as a learning aid during practice and training. Last, coaches felt that athletes were curious and open to learning from coaches through their need to understand the "why" and the connection to performance.

Challenges of Coaching Gen Z Athletes

Challenging Player Characteristics

Overall, coaches identified four characteristics that made working with Gen Z athletes challenging. First, short attention spans were a major concern for coaches. Coaches identified challenging issues related to short attention spans such as athletes' difficulty focusing, capturing athletes' attention, and designing ways to extend their attention for more than a few minutes. Second, coaches stated that a lack of independence and responsibility from adults is a challenge of coaching Gen Z athletes. For example, one coach compared Gen Z athletes to past generations regarding independence and responsibility:

Back in the old days, you go to the tennis club and just meet up with people there or you call someone or arrange on your own with someone to play tennis. These kids do not arrange their own practices, do not arrange people they're going to play with, they just do whatever or their coaches do that and I'm not saying they're not capable of doing it, they're not allowed to do it. (Participant 2)

Third, coaches were concerned with entitlement and ungratefulness of Gen Z athletes. The athletes were described as “spoiled,” “less appreciative,” and “ungrateful” for the sport opportunities that they were given. This was considered a challenge for coaches due to demotivating factors that these characteristics created. Participant 7 stated, “I think the most frustrating thing is that their ability to be grateful is not very well developed.” Fourth, Gen Z athletes preoccupation with social media and cell phone usage had become a perceived challenge of coaches. Several coaches saw this preoccupation as a major barrier to effectively coaching this generation. These coaches saw cell phone usage as distracting, disengaging, and a time-wasting habit that took their focus away from their tennis development.

Working with Athletes’ Support Network

Two challenges emerged regarding having to work with Gen Z athletes’ support networks. Specifically, coaches cited the overinvolvement of parents and the difficulty of balancing other adult influences. First, parental overinvolvement was a key theme describing challenges regarding Gen Z individuals. Coaches described parents as setting the goals and living vicariously through their children, and that “dealing” with parents a source of frustration. Second, an increase in the number of individuals in the elite athlete’s support networks had created additional challenges for coaches. For example, issues related to confusion about the numerous sources of adult input, differing opinions on tennis games and development, and the overall feeling that support networks were too large. Participant 6 described this overloading of support and information as he said, “There’s so many people. ... The kids get confused and it’s harder to keep them on track because parents have access to so many, sometimes they get sidetracked because they get so much information.”

Connecting with Gen Z Athletes

Communicating and connecting with Gen Z athletes was considered another challenge for coaches. Several coaches described this challenge as “understanding” the Gen Z athlete and learning the “expectations” that Gen Z athletes had for their coaches. In addition, Participant 7 shared that their program has had to spend “a lot of work off-court to regulate program standards.” Communicating, connecting, and “dealing” with Gen Z were all challenges mentioned by coaches. In addition, some coaches mentioned frustration with having to teach basic skills and concepts and having to finding methods of effectively communicating those strategies to Gen Z athletes.

Coaching Strategies to Use with Gen Z Athletes

Coaches offered numerous strategies for effectively working with Gen Z athletes. These strategies were categorized into eight themes, which included motivating athletes, communicating effectively, working with the attention span, setting expectations, creating independent players, building resiliency, and individualizing training and development. In addition, specific to working with this generation of athletes, coaches spoke of specific coaching qualities they have incorporated into their coaching style.

Motivating Athletes

Coaches discussed four strategies for motivating Gen Z athletes. First, coaches set daily process goals with the athletes to help them focus on improving and to make their long-term goals appear more attainable. Second, coaches continued to keep the athletes’ focus on the process by maintaining a work mind-set and encouraging hard work. Third, coaches

tried to capitalize on the athlete's intrinsic motivation sources and their passion as a means to keep them motivated. For example, Participant 4 stated:

First, ask them a lot of questions to help center where you can find the passion of what motivates them. And so by knowing what motivates them, it's a lot easier to keep bringing them back to that when you need to motivate them.

Last, as previously stated, Gen Z athletes wanted to know the connection between the process and their performance. For this reason, coaches have found that Gen Z athletes were more motivated when they understood the connection between practice and training activities and their performance. This was clear from Participant 1, who said, "Make the argument from a performance standpoint because that's what really sells to these players."

Communicating Effectively

Although coaches felt that Gen Z athletes lacked basic communication skills, they had strategies for both communicating with athletes and improving their communication skills. To communicate effectively, coaches felt that using open-ended questions was critical to facilitate feedback and give athletes a voice in their tennis development. As Participant 7 stated,

The question part of it is so important. Because when you do get into the habit of asking questions, you kind of facilitate that feedback and then it becomes much easier to pick up on how the player is feeling.

As for texting, coaches felt that it was best to use texting primarily for logistical communication, as it is easy and was the preferred method of communication for Gen Z athletes. However, for more important conversations, coaches recommended face-to-face conversations to give athletes more experience in using and practicing communication skills. Technology was also cited as a method of communication by using visual aids in the form of videos or articles sent to athletes to communicate different training objectives.

To improve communication with Gen Z athletes, coaches felt that it was critical to build a good relationship with the athletes. By spending time with the athletes off the tennis court and connecting with players, athletes would open up and be more receptive to communication from the coach. For example, Participant 8 stated:

I would say it's very important to try to find a way to connect with the players first. You know, how do I relay this message that I want to this player in the right way so that he'll be the most receptive.

Last, coaches felt that it was important to teach basic communication skills such as introducing oneself, making eye contact, common friendly behaviors, and respectful communication.

Working with Attention Span

With the perceived short attention span of Gen Z athletes, coaches found that being direct and to the point with instructions and objectives during practice was critical. As

Participant 3 said:

Something that I've learned working with this generation, don't talk too much, don't talk too long, if you talk too long you'll lose them. So, if you've got a point to make, you try and make to pretty distinctly and they will listen to you right off the bat but as more time passes they'll listen to you less, that's my experience.

Coaches also discussed being intentional about keeping players engaged and focused on the court by creating environments that require a singular focus and having expectations for the level of athlete's focus. Another strategy discussed by coaches was focusing on the quality of training rather than quantity. As Participant 11 said, "You have to come up with ways to either structure the practice differently or keep it shorter, so you can maximize the time that they're on the court."

Setting Expectations

Coaches felt that setting clear expectations was critical to working with Gen Z athletes. They felt that it was the coach's role to set clear expectations for practice, behavior, and engagement that were understood by the athletes. For example, as Participant 10 said, "I think it's huge. We need to have that. They need to understand what our expectation is and so they know what we are looking for." These expectations need to be clearly set and agreed upon with the athletes in order for the athlete's to be bought in. This was evident by the following quote from Participant 3:

So their expectations, that absolutely needs to be set, needs to be clear, needs to be agreed upon by the player if you're gonna have success going forward. And to me, if you do those things well then the results and the winning will take care of themselves.

Coaches also believed that expectations should be set specifically for cell phone usage to reduce the distractions that players have by being preoccupied with their phones and social media. Coaches had rules including no cell phones at team dinners, no cell phones on the court, and limiting cell phone use an hour before matches. Coaches also shared the importance of modeling appropriate behaviors by not using cell phones at meals or when engaged in conversations with the athletes.

Creating Independent Players

To build independence in the Gen Z athletes, coaches discussed two strategies. First, coaches provided the structure that Gen Z athletes need but gave them autonomy within that structure. To create autonomy, coaches spoke about giving players choices and responsibilities within the structure, such as packing their equipment, being on time, and practicing alone. After giving this responsibility, coaches felt that it was critical to then hold them accountable for their actions. In addition to giving them autonomy, coaches felt that it was important to give the athletes ownership and voice in their developmental plan. As Participant 1 said:

Coaches need to give the players choices, give them voice, help them set their goals but let them voice their self-determined goals. I would say that this generation still needs a lot, quite a bit of structure but within that we must be able to let them explore you know different shots, different drills, preparing in different ways.

Building Resiliency

Building resiliency was an important element of coaching Gen Z athletes for coaches in this study. To build resiliency, coaches put athletes through stressful and challenging situations in practice while giving them the tools to cope with the adversity. Coaches felt that it was important to create stress in an appropriate way during training and spend time talking with athletes about thriving through psychological and emotional stress they experience both on court and off. By experiencing stress and successfully coping with it, coaches felt Gen Z athletes became more confident during similar situations in competition.

Individualizing Training and Development

To individualize training, coaches first built strong relationships to tailor training plans to each athlete. By building a strong relationship, coaches were able to understand how players process and respond to information and found that athletes bought in more to their training when they believed it was customized for them. Although individualizing training was important, coaches also felt there needed to be a balance between group and individual training. In group practice, coaches would individualize the objectives of the drill or practice, so each player was working on a skill that he or she needed to improve and felt a sense of customization.

Exhibiting Specific Coaching Qualities

Beyond the major strategies just presented, coaches also discussed four qualities that Gen Z coaches need to exhibit. First, coaches need to learn and adapt to the generational changes of Gen Z athletes. By doing this, coaches can capitalize on the strengths of Gen Z athletes instead of falling prey to the weaknesses they may have as compared to past generations. Participant 1 made this clear: “Maybe they do have some of the stereotypical characteristics of that generation but then it’s our responsibility to help them capitalize on the strengths of those stereotypical characteristics and then fill in and facilitate where they’re missing things.”

The second quality that Gen Z coaches need to exhibit is a focus on developing trusting and strong relationships as relationships were a key aspect of the developing of skills that coaches felt Gen Z athletes lacked such as communication and motivation. Third, coaches felt that it was essential for coaches to manage the team and parents around the athletes to prevent confusion that can occur when there are too many voices and opinions in an athlete’s development. Last, coaches felt it was necessary to develop both people and athletes through coaching. Through tennis, coaches felt it was critical for them to teach transferable life skills that will help the athletes off the court as well as on the tennis court.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to assess coaches/sport science providers’ views of the attention, motivation, and communication characteristics of today’s Gen Z tennis players, as well as the coaching barriers faced and coaching strategies used to help these players develop and improve their games. The 12 participants identified a number of important characteristics of today’s Gen Z player. Strengths included being curious and open to learning, being well informed, and having excellent skills at searching out and finding information on the Internet. They were also seen as having excellent visual learning skills. A short-term outcome goal focus, difficulties coping with negative feedback and failure, short attention spans, the need for structure and boundaries while desiring individualized

training, weak time management, and interpersonal communication skill deficits were noted as characteristics that caused concerns. These results parallel many of the attributes that have been identified in research on Gen Z youth in general (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017) and show that these generational characteristics are perceived by coaches as influencing athlete behavior and coach–athlete interaction. It is important to note, however, that although the coaches all identified a number of characteristics of today’s Gen Z players, they also emphasized the importance of recognizing vast individual differences within these players as a group. This suggests that coaches should use knowledge of Gen Z characteristics to guide their general understanding of players while striving to continue to gain a more in-depth understanding of each player as an individual.

Several of the specific findings are interesting to consider in light of current sport psychology theory and research. They also have important implications for coaching today’s athletes. For example, the coaches’ sentiments about the player’s focus on short-term outcome goals suggests that it is particularly important that coaches work hard to establish task-oriented motivational climates (Duda, 2013; Roberts, 2012) and a growth mind-set (Dweck, 2006). Emphasizing a task orientation should also help alleviate the pressure either players place on themselves or that are placed on them by significant others (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007).

Difficulties coping with adversity and dealing with negative feedback were also identified as characteristics of the Gen Z player. This suggests that helping players develop mental toughness and resiliency skills is of the utmost importance and something that has been a focus of study by sport psychology researchers (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009). Of interest, the coaches in this study also identified helping athletes handle stress by exposing them to manageable levels of adversity in practices and certain competitions as important and something that has been identified as effective in the psychology of coaching literature (Pierce, Gould, Cowburn, & Driska, 2016).

The findings related to Gen Z players’ attention spans were interesting, as the coaches identified issues with players’ shorter attention spans, multitasking, and becoming distracted during practices and competitions. These findings are consistent with the general psychological literature which shows that today’s young people averaged less than 6 min on a task before switching and that increased task switching was related to lowered academic performance (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). Coaches would do well then to follow guidelines that have been suggested for educators relative to establishing policies and procedures for incorporating technology into the educational contexts (Keengwe, Schnellert, & Jonas, 2014). For example, some of the coaches in this study discussed rules about when players could use smartphones in practices and competitions, and given our findings this seems like an important coaching strategy. It is important to recognize, however, that simply banning all technology or social media may be unproductive, as “fear of missing out” has been shown to cause anxiety in Gen Z youth (Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand, & Chamarro, 2017). In addition, because Gen Z players seem to be particularly good visual learners, coaches might want to use technology like tablets and smartphones to provide demonstrations and visual feedback to their athletes during practices and competitions.

Relative to motivation, the coaches’ responses were mixed, with some indicating that this generation of players were highly motivated and others citing motivational concerns. The one exception to this pattern was the coaches as a group consistently mentioning the need to provide explanations and meet today’s athletes need to know “why” they should adhere to coaching recommendations. This finding suggests, then, that with this generation of athletes, autonomous-supportive coaching, which not only places importance on giving

athletes choices but providing rationales and explanations for coaching actions, is particularly important (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Mallett, 2005). An excellent way to help do this is to employ the GROW model of asking questions, in which the coach systematically asks questions concerning Goals, the current Reality, Options, and the Will or Way forward. Popularized by Sir John Whitmore (2017), this approach to coaching focuses on empowering athletes to take responsibility for their own learning and allows them to derive their own responses to challenges faced (vs. being told by the coach what to do). It will also help ensure the players understand the “why” behind what coaches are asking them to do.

The coaches also identified that Gen Z players as less comfortable with interpersonal communication and instead were more comfortable with texting. They also were thought to have some listening skill deficits. The implications of these findings is that coaches will need to adapt to the characteristics of Gen Z athletes and meet them where they are (text them vs. sending e-mails that they are unlikely to read or phone calls they may not answer) while helping them develop skill sets that may be lacking, such as making eye contact when engaging in interpersonal interactions or learning how to listen.

The coaches discussed the importance of working with the athletes’ support networks, as they felt the athletes received information and advice from a variety of sources (e.g., parents, other interested parties, other coaches) and can become overwhelmed because of this excess of advice and information. Relative to parental involvement and advice, this observation is consistent with the general Gen Z research that has found that this generation of youth have parents who are highly involved in their lives for a much longer period than previous generations (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). These findings also speak to the increased professionalization of sports, where today’s talented young athletes often have a team of individuals (e.g., nutritionist, agent, footwork coach) working with them. This requires that a coach move beyond traditional coaching duties and also develop skills that allow him or her to become a coordinator of services and integrator/distiller of information offered by various individuals in the athlete’s life (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004).

Finally, although thought provoking, these initial results must be viewed as preliminary, as only a small group of coaches from one individual sport were interviewed. Additional studies with coaches from other sports and individuals who coach less elite and more diverse samples of athletes are in order. Surveys with large groups of coaches would also make it possible to assess the scale and scope of how coaches perceive the characteristics of and best strategies to use with Gen Z athletes would be important. Investigators should not limit themselves to surveys and interviews in examining characteristics of Gen Z athletes. Observational studies would be especially helpful, as well as intervention studies aimed at examining ways to help Gen Z players improve regarding deficit areas such as the inability to interpersonally communicate effectively or deal more effectively with negative feedback. Examinations of how coaches use Gen Z characteristic knowledge to guide their coaching, perhaps using the Horn et al. (2001) expectancy-performance model, would be especially helpful at identifying the cognitive processes underlying coaches’ use of Gen Z type information to guide practice.

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