

## Balanced Excellence: Juggling Relationships and Demanding Careers

Louise **Zitzelsberger** and Terry **Orlick**, University of Ottawa, Canada

### Abstract

Is it possible to achieve a balance between a highly demanding profession and meaningful relationships? Twenty full-time national team coaches were interviewed to determine the nature of their job demands and the perceived impact of these demands on relationships with their partner/family. The coaching occupation at the elite level requires a huge time, energy and emotional commitment as well as extensive travel. Coaches, on the whole, believed that this commitment was necessary to achieve their high level goals and that their devotion to their work impacted on the quality of their relationships. Even with this commitment, however, most coaches felt that it was potentially possible to achieve excellence in both their occupation and their relationships if certain conditions were attained. Some necessary prerequisites for balanced excellence are discussed.

### Introduction

One of the core factors necessary for achieving excellence in any domain is an intense commitment to one's pursuit. Such a commitment implies that over a period of time a unitary focus is crucial to the development of skills required for success. Most adults are faced with trying to juggle, at minimum, a profession, family and personal needs. Does excellence in one area of one's life preclude excellence in others? This question was explored by examining the experiences of individuals in one highly demanding profession: full-time high level sport coaching.

Much of the literature on the coaching profession has centered on qualities and skills associated with effective coaching. The focus has been on how the individual impacts on the profession rather than on how the profession impacts on the individual. Only recently has sport research begun to look at the effect of coaching demands on individ-

ual well-being (Sage, 1987; Weiss & Sisley, 1987; Wentzell, 1986; Wilson, Haggerty & Bird, 1986; Wilson and Bird, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the following three questions: (a) What are the occupational demands of high level sport coaches?; (b) Did coaches feel that these demands affected their ability to maintain satisfying relationships?; and (c) Did these coaches feel that excellence can be achieved in both career and relationships concurrently?

### Method

#### Participants

Twenty national team coaches who were employed full-time by a national sport organization were involved in the study. Coaches were not preselected on the basis of marital status. It was felt that regardless of status, coaches would be able to comment on the topic of the study.

The twenty coaches ranged in age from 29-59 years of age; the mean age was 40.8 years. The majority of the coaches were male (n=16). Only a small number of female coaches were involved which reflects the small number of women coaching full-time at the national level. Due to the small number of female participants, male-female comparisons were not conducted.

Sixty percent of the group (n=12) were married at the time of the interview: one female and eleven males. The remainder were either divorced or had never married (although one male had lived for an extensive period with a partner). One quarter of the group had experienced a divorce during the course of their national coaching career. The majority of the currently married coaches had children (n=9).

In terms of coaching at the national team level, the range of experience was one to twenty years. The mean length of time coaching at this level for the group as a whole was 9.9 years.

### **Interview Construction and Protocol**

An interview format was considered most appropriate for collecting the type of data desired for this study: detailed descriptions of individual perspectives. An interview guide was developed based on topics that emerged from the review of literature and on input from individuals with elite level coaching experience. The questions in the National Coaches' Interview Guide focused on four areas: the demands of the coaching profession at the elite level, the perceived effect of the occupation on relationships with a partner, their perceived role in the relationship and the possibility of achieving excellence in

both career and relationship. The majority of the questions were open-ended.

The National Coaches' Interview Guide was used to attempt to reduce potential interviewer bias. The guide ensured that a standardized, uniform approach was used with each participant. The flexibility of the interview format, however, allowed the participants to address issues deemed relevant to the topic and allowed both parties to ask for clarification if necessary.

The interview guide was pre-tested on three experienced coaches in order to ensure relevancy and clarity of questions. Some minor adjustments were made based on recommendations from the coaches.

### **Procedure**

The Coaching Association of Canada sent a cover letter to those coaches who fitted the criteria for the study: full-time coaches employed by a National Sport Organization. The letter explained the nature and the relevance of the study, ensured confidentiality and indicated to the coach that he or she would be contacted in the near future for an interview.

Agreement to be interviewed implied consent. Prior to each interview, permission was given by all participants to tape the interview. Tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

A number of transcripts were subsequently sent to coaches for confirmation of their accuracy. Coaches indicated that what was recorded was a valid account of their perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was of a qualitative nature. Each transcript was read through a number of times to familiarize the researcher with its content. Key phrases in each transcript related to the study topic were highlighted. Key phrases from all of the interviews were then aggregated to establish major themes common to the majority of the transcripts. The phrase contents of these themes were then reviewed to ensure that they were appropriately categorized. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate key themes in the words of the participants themselves.

In order to establish reliability of theme identification, another researcher familiar with qualitative methodology read through selected interview transcripts. Using theme labels, this researcher categorized phrases from the interviews. Results were then compared to the original categorizations. Inter-rater reliability was 90%.

### **Results**

#### **The Effect of Coaching Demands on Relationships**

Prior to addressing the issue of whether balance can be achieved, the extent of occupational demands was identified. Coaches were asked for details of their jobs including what a typical daily, weekly and yearly schedule was like for them.

Coaching demands that affected an ability to lead a balanced life could be classified into two main areas: time and travel. Common to all coaches interviewed was the enormous amount of time and energy they put into their jobs. Two sub-themes arose from the interview analyses regarding time involve-

ment. The first was the sheer volume of time that coaching at this level requires, and the second was related to the kind of commitment coaches felt was necessary to be successful. Time spent away from the family in travel is discussed separately, as specific difficulties seem to arise in connection with leaving, being away and returning to the partner/family.

How these demands influenced their relationships was the main question explored with the underlying theme being that of whether coaches felt they could balance work and relationship demands. Comments on the nature of the coaching occupation and how coaches, partners and families juggled occupational demands are integrated into the following section.

#### **Time Requirements**

Theberge (1987) in an analysis of female Canadian coaches stated, "At elite levels, coaching is demanding work involving intense relationships with athletes, long and irregular working hours, and often, extensive time away from home for travel to competitions and camps" (p.185). The national coaches interviewed for this study described similar demands.

The time requirements of national coaching were described in terms of irregularity of hours and the immense volume of time the job required. Coaching at the elite level is definitely not a nine to five, Monday to Friday job. Coaches said they were often making and receiving phone calls well into the night, working on equipment late at night, dropping into the training center on their days off and taking work with them on their holidays: "...at 11:00 last night I was trying to hire a new coach."

Not only are the hours irregular, the volume of time put in by coaches was great. As one coach stated it, "*Unless it's holidays, there's something going on all the time. It's just amazing the amount of stuff.*"

One reason for this volume was the multi-dimensional nature of the job. National team coaching involves duties that go beyond working with athletes. One coach described the duties as: training athletes, organizing tours, speaking to parents and personal coaches of athletes, answering calls from athletes, entering athletes in tournaments, ensuring that tournament entries are organized, "...and then I usually have other projects, sort of the bureaucracy of sport, things like filing reports. Every tour that we do we have to do a report at the end that goes to the players and their coaches and there's also the expense report."

Although the time required to fulfill these duties was generally very great, it increased at certain times, for example, with the approach of an Olympics or with a rise in success or recognition. The more successful some coaches became, the more demands increased. These burgeoning demands were sometimes seen as unwelcome intrusions on the little free time the coach had.

There's other things like seminars, symposiums and the more successful you become, the more you're asked to attend those or speak at them or clinics or what have you. And if you don't do it, you feel guilty, you feel as though you're not giving back something to the sport but by the same token, it's more of your time that's given up for (the sport) that you could be using for yourself.

With little and unpredictable free time available, certain aspects of their personal relationships were affected.

One feature of the relationships most disturbed by the coach's time involvement in sport was the amount of one-on-one time available for family members. An important component in relationship satisfaction is effective communication (Havemann and Lehtinen, 1986; Hendrick and Hendrick, 1983). A key aspect of effective communication is frequent communication (Boss, 1983). The hectic schedules that the coaches followed made frequent contact difficult to achieve.

*The whole concept of an evening disappears and of course, with competitions, the concept of a weekend disappears... Travelling is a real demand but lots of people travel. I think the real demands are day-to-day; there's crazy hours in coaching.*

Not only was time with the family scarce, other problems arose which minimized time that might have been available. One problem was interruptions at home due to work-related phone calls morning and night. Another problem mentioned by some coaches was simply not having the energy at the end of the day to interact in the way they would like, especially with their children.

*I think an important thing with our job is that after a really hard day, I'm really physically tired and what I would love to do is get the basketball and...play with (son) and there are times when I'm just too tired and I can't do it. And I resent that. And I think he probably does too.*

One of the single coaches also mentioned that lack of energy made trying to establish a relationship difficult: *"It's easier to go home and read a book because you're too tired to have a decent conversation with someone"*.

The coaches discussed two perspectives regarding the potential time they had for their partners/families. Some coaches simply felt that time for their relationships was not available: *"We didn't make time. The administrative demands would have made it impossible to do stuff like that together"*. Others made a definite commitment to make time for their family. For twenty-five percent of the coaches, when they were at home, all of their spare time was spent with the partner/family.

*I realize that this is a tough relationship so when I am home I do everything with my wife. I mean there's no going off and playing golf with the boys. I play golf with my wife, we go biking or we go to the movies together, we do everything together and there's no consideration for anybody else. I've always told her when I'm home, my commitment is to her and that at any time she feels I'm not honoring that commitment, I want her to speak up.*

Some research has shown that it is not necessarily the amount of time spent away from the family that influences satisfaction with a relationship (Guillota & Donohue, 1981), rather it is what one does with the time together. In cases where husbands spent most of their spare time with their partner, wives expressed greater satisfaction with the relationship (Clark, Nye & Gecas, 1978).

Coaches made various attempts to create more one-on-one time including: putting their children to bed early one night a week in order to have time alone with their partners, making an effort to set aside time with a partner and each child individually or dedicating one day a week to the partner/family when in town. Most coaches also planned a yearly vacation with the partner/family. Vacations were an opportunity for both partners to renew the relationship away from all other priorities. Although these are simple measures, most coaches recognized the importance of making a commitment to act upon them to maintain meaningful family relationships.

*In dealing with people around you...it's real easy to get caught up in everything you're doing and cut them (partner/family) out too. It's really important that you go back to caring enough to be honest, caring enough to communicate wholeheartedly with them and caring enough to ... be aware of what's going on for them too.*

Not only did the huge time involvement of coaches influence the time available each day to spend with one's partner, it was a salient factor in long-term family planning. The majority of married coaches (75%) in this study had children. For almost all of those who did not, the extent of the job requirements and their devotion to their occupation directly influenced the decision of whether or not to have children. These coaches felt that it would be unfair for the children and the partner at home to be an absent parent.

*We would not have had a child if I was still coaching, that's for sure. We'd maybe still be together, but I'd never go*



*as far as to say, 'Well, see you (partner's name), bring up the child'. There was no way with children that I thought it was good for them if they hardly knew who their dad was.*

Even though most coaches said they tried to spend as much of their spare time as possible with their partner/family and to get involved in their partner's interests when at home, the reality was that the partner/family spent much time on their own. Coaches felt that their partners had developed both coping strategies and qualities, which were critical to the continuation of the relationship.

Literature which has examined how the spouse of the coach has coped with the lifestyle identified several coping strategies including the development of support groups, and becoming involved in the coach's sport (e.g., as team assistants, travelling to camps and competitions etc.) (Sabock & Jones, 1978; Wentzell, 1986). The coaches interviewed for the current study said that their partners had developed similar strategies.

Coaches also mentioned certain qualities that their spouses possessed that were integral to the maintenance of their relationship, the two most important being self-sufficiency and a willingness to make sacrifices. Three of the coaches made reference to the fact that their partners made more sacrifices for the relationship than they had.

*You have to have a special person. To hold the whole thing together, I'd say that (partner) certainly made much more sacrifice than I did...I certainly made a lot of effort but she was the one who certainly had to adjust her*

*life more than I adjusted mine. I was still going on the same schedule; away, come back for a little while, have quality time and then be gone again.*

Linked to this recognition of the contribution spouses made to the relationship was the awareness by some coaches that their own contribution was often not what it should be.

*I saw my role as being someone who could be there unconditionally for her, that could support and provide assistance to her in every way, shape or form. But again, in so many cases I denied living that because although that was what I set as an objective, my priorities didn't live that way and so a lot of things kind of got pushed and shovelled back and compromised where they shouldn't have been. So what I actually projected as my role and what I actually lived as my role didn't mesh. They were two different things.*

### **The Commitment Needed for Coaching Success**

It was evident during the interviews that coaching was viewed not simply as a job but as an obsession. Coaches were asked during the interview how they felt about the amount of time they spent at work versus at home. For the most part, coaches accepted the enormous time commitment as a requirement of success at their job. Only three coaches out of the twenty mentioned they would like to take time away from their job to have more time at home.

*I thought that I had to work as hard as I did in order to have the quality of results that we got. And then for me to spend more time with (partner), I would*

*have had to work less and therefore, the quality of coaching and the team and everything else would have been much less. At the moment I'm considered among the top three coaches in the world and I wouldn't have accomplished that if I couldn't have had anything less than the effort that was put into it.*

Some coaches made an extensive time commitment even more extensive by bringing work home. Bringing work home in this case refers not only to physically carrying it home but mentally carrying it home and spending much of time at home thinking about the job. Some (25%) felt it was impossible not to bring it home; they could not forget about it.

*You're never really able, especially in the competitive season, to put it away for a period of time where you can forget about it....Things just pop into your mind and sort of bring you back to the job, it doesn't matter what the situation is.*

A number of coaches said that even on their days off they would find themselves dropping into work or if on vacation, brought a suitcase of work with them.

*This was the one week to ten days (in the year) that we can actually say we had time just for each other...and even on those I always took a full briefcase. The first one I remember, I used to work. She'd be down by the pool and I'd be up in the room. She'd just shake her head and go, 'This guy's weird!'. I got better, but it was true I used to take a full briefcase at least the first three to four years.*

Three coaches made a determined effort to separate home and work. For example, they limited the amount of time spent thinking and talking about work when at home, limited phone calls to emergencies or used the time between work and home to put away the day.

*I live about an hour from here (work) so once I'm home, I don't work. Nobody really calls me at home unless it's an emergency and all the national team members know if they want to reach me they can leave messages here (work) from 8:30 to 4:30 and only really in extreme cases will they call me at home. When I'm here (work), it's action packed. I don't have a break and then when I go home, I sort of have that hour to unwind... I think (partner) respects the fact that once I leave work at 4:30 and I'm home, it's off limits for anyone to call me unless it's an emergency and then we don't mind dealing with it...so work isn't really coming into our personal life unless I'm discussing something with (partner) or bringing up a problem.*

Separating work and home life or at least limiting the intrusion of work on home life are recommended strategies in preventing burnout (Maslach, 1982). All coaches in this study did bring work home to some extent, however, in that they shared work experiences with their partners. Coaches varied in the type and amount of information they shared. For example, some coaches felt it was important to share only the positive experiences of the day. Most coaches used their partners as sounding boards and appreciated receiving an outside perspective.

Three coaches mentioned one difficulty with respect to discussing

frustrating work issues at home. Sharing the story took energy from both the coach and partner but rarely resulted in the problem being solved as neither had control over the situations being discussed.

*I wouldn't always say it works out well because sometimes she gets into it and doesn't know. She's not aware of all the things surrounding the situation and then it gets into either you've got to provide more information which then becomes tiring because you want to get away from work or she makes comments not knowing all the information which gets you into a little bit of a row. So I don't know if it's good to do that. You're better off to have your own time, to have something else to talk about.*

Some of these frustrations at home could be avoided if it was clear to both partners what kind of support is required, e.g., a sympathetic ear. In addition, it may be beneficial for coaches to discuss these issues with other coaches or trusted support staff. Issues can then be raised with others who have experience with the issues and who are potentially in a better position to understand and/or help the coach resolve the issues at hand.

### **Travel**

Another demand common to national team coaches that made a balanced home life more difficult was travel away from home. The amount of time coaches were away varied due to the sport and the scheduling of camps and competitions, however, it was typical for a coach to be away from one-half up to three-quarters of the year. While some coaches considered this amount of time away from home extensive, others ac-

cepted it as part of the job. One coach (whose partner also coached in the same sport) saw it as an opportunity for them to visit exciting places.

The literature concerning those families where one member is often away due to travel suggests that the events of leaving and returning can be difficult ones for the entire family (Bey & Lange, 1974; Mitchell & Cronson, 1987). Disruptions to routines, shifting roles and discrepancies in expectations were the main difficulties faced. Coaches and their partners/families faced many of the same difficulties. However, they developed some positive strategies for leaving and returning that appeared to facilitate these events.

### **Leaving**

For almost three-quarters of the married coaches, leaving was or used to be an upsetting time. Parting was anticipated for some time before it actually occurred and was marked by partners becoming more distant or upset. Some coaches found it upsetting because their partner was upset and for others, because they were going to miss their partner/family.

*I wanted it (leaving) to be special and good and to leave knowing that everything was great and I find that because they know I'm going away, they become more distant because they don't want to have that cut-off point. So they tend to be more distant; I'm trying to be closer and it ends up making the week before very rough.*

For three coaches and their families, they had been through so many departures that the whole process had become routine.



Measures which coaches and their partners/families took to facilitate the leaving process fell into three main categories. They increased the amount of time they spent with partners/families in the period before leaving and planned some special events, e.g., a dinner or a movie. They tried to attend to as many of their home duties as possible in advance. For example, if coaches were responsible for the household accounts, they would pay all the bills paid ahead of time. Advance organization by others included getting their children involved in extracurricular activities so the partner had some free time when the coach was away and arranging for a friend to periodically call the partner to ensure all was well.

The most frequently mentioned strategy was the use of a calendar. Knowing when the coach would be away helped the partner/family anticipate and plan for that time, both in terms of scheduling family events between camps and competitions and in terms of scheduling the time for when the coach was gone. For example, some partners used that time to travel themselves or to see friends they would not see otherwise.

As useful as calendars were, it was detrimental to rely too heavily on the exactness of the dates. Once a partner had prepared for the upcoming time away, any changes in the schedule, which were common, became extra-disruptive.

*One of the problems has been that the schedule changes a lot...she wants to know so she gets fixed on it and when it changes, it upsets her...I used to say, 'I'm going to be gone (let's say we*

*had a tournament the sixth to the fifteenth), I'm going to be gone from the sixth to the fifteenth of August' and she'd write that down and then all of a sudden we couldn't get a flight on the fifth. She said, 'Every time you tell me a date, it's always longer, never shorter'. So now I block out a big period so that she doesn't get all wrapped up in exact dates.*

### **Being away**

When away, many coaches experienced a narrowing of focus toward the team and job. Thoughts of the family were minimized.

*When I was away, I could balance my time better and my time was probably 95% team and 5% myself. I could totally dedicate myself to the team, as long as I had the feeling that I left enough money at home and they were safe and secure. I didn't have the daily demands that would be required if I was home, the daily pressures of family and children. Not that that was good because I was putting all that pressure on my wife to raise my children, raise the family but from a coaching standpoint, it meant that almost all my time was spent with the team or thinking about the team....Almost when I'd get on the airplane, I'd try to click into a gear that says, 'There's absolutely nothing I can do at this point; I've done what I can now I'll spend this time with the team'.*

An interesting point raised by three coaches was that they felt that it was easier for them to be away than it was for their partner to be at home. For the coach, days were busy and often involved an enjoyable social component, e.g., seeing other coaches, former players. The partner, however, came home to

a mateless house and typically had not only his or her own duties, but those of the travelling partner to contend with. Partners, therefore, had extra burdens added to their workload and at the same time, were deprived of their main emotional support (Bey & Lange, 1974; Mitchell & Cronson, 1987).

The time the coach was away was made easier for some partners by geographical relocation so that the partner could be close to his or her family. Coaches also mentioned that their partners dealt with the time alone by travelling themselves, becoming more involved in their own careers, taking on extra projects and/or by developing strong friendships.

*In the summer, she plays softball with a group of ladies and they were a very good support group because they socialized as well. She needed that because she needed to get away from the kids in all fairness to her. She would have gone bananas just staying at home with the kids.*

Being away from their partners/families so often and for long periods resulted in some personal reflections on the part of some coaches. Seeing other cultures and other families helped them realize how much they valued their own families and lifestyle. It also made them aware of the things they were missing: birthdays, anniversaries, watching their children grow and the simple sharing of daily events.

*There are so many... experiences in life that go on from day-to-day that you go, 'I wish they could see this' or 'I wish we could share this' and you can't and you try to tell them about it, you try*

*and write about it but it's not the same. So many things like that get lost that you start to lose ties together and I mean the whole deal of having a relationship is having shared experiences, having ties with the other person through those shared experiences and when you start to lose those things, you know the relationship can deteriorate fairly rapidly unless there's a real concerted effort to keep it glued together.*

For some coaches, especially those in the early stages of a relationship, there was concern that the lack of time together and what was missed would jeopardize the survival of the relationship. Coaches reflected upon questions such as: do we really know each other, what if we have nothing in common, have I missed too many important events, and how will we cope when I leave the profession and we have to be together all the time? Coaches felt that as they are away so much, it made it difficult to establish a good basis for a meaningful relationship.

### **Returning home**

Coming home was marked by a period of readjustment for both the coach and the partner/family. For almost half of the coaches, the main emotion associated with their return was one of tension.

*When I would come home from trips and it would be upwards of five weeks away from home...I would have to try and fit in to their schedule and there was an adjustment period that would take one to two weeks sometimes. Because I'd come home and I'd think I'd fit right back in. Well, my goodness, I didn't because she had to plan extremely close because she was raising kids and doing*

*her own social things. So all of a sudden, I'd come back in and I'd upset the way she was going. So there were periods of adjustment where we" have to find each other again but fortunately we did and it always seemed to make the bond a little stronger. The first trip I didn't understand it. Boy, I got my knuckles slapped so I realized pretty quick that I had put her under a stress.*

Difficulties arose from a difference in expectations. The coach expected the family routine to be the same as before he or she left. However, the family had established their own routine in the coach's absence, which was then disrupted when the coach returned. Expectations also differed in that the coach would often come home wanting only to rest to be faced with a desk full of work that had accumulated in his or her absence and a partner/family who eagerly anticipated spending time with the coach upon return.

In families with children, shifts in the roles of authority could also cause problems for both parents and children. The home partner was often the authority figure while the coach was away. On return, the coach expected to assume that role while the partner did not want to give it up. For the children, as the authority figure changed, often the rules did too.

*It seems like the house at times has two rules: rules when Daddy's home and rules when Daddy's not home. I come home, I change the rules...so it's tough sometimes on the kids and on my wife...Sometimes I do have time to reflect and I say, 'Hold it, hold it, you haven't been here for the last two weeks, you*

*don't know what's been happening'. But it's something I wrestle with all the time.*

Coaches discussed some simple but effective things they did to facilitate re-entry into the family such as taking time off immediately upon the arrival at home to re-energize themselves and gradually re-establish the family unit. Some coaches made a point of doing special things with their partners/families such as staying at home with the children so the partner could get out of the house or planning special activities.

### **Priorities and Balance**

Looking at the occupational requirements of elite level coaching, it appears that balance in terms of equal time spent on work and family relationships was virtually impossible to achieve. One question asked of coaches was what they perceived their priorities to be and how they would rank them.

All of the single coaches said that coaching was essentially all they did in their lives, thus, it was their top priority. Whether the job was given top consideration because of the lack of a relationship or whether work demands made a relationship impossible was not determined. However, single coaches did mention the difficulty in establishing a meaningful relationship because of the nature of the job. One problem encountered was that it was difficult to find someone who accepted his or her commitment to or passion for the occupation. In addition, because of the time away, the coach had a limited opportunity to establish a social life outside of coaching. The majority of single coaches expressed concern over the singular focus of their lives.

*You know, sometimes I'll be standing on the deck, talking to myself and wondering what I'm doing. Sure I love the sport and sure I love coaching, but that's not everything. And I'm starting to question that more and more.*

Most of the single coaches also recognized that they needed to make an effort to change their situation.

*It's easy to sit there and say, 'Heh, you have to do something for yourself, you've got to get some other outside life other than (the sport)'. It's easy to tell yourself that but what do you do? You can't just walk out there and say, 'Here I am'. So I think I'm going to have to force myself to go out and join some club, maybe totally outside of sport. That's not easy.*

Nine of the twelve married coaches said that both their coaching and their partners/families were important to them. For most of these coaches, it was difficult to say which was more important, their family or their job. One coach said that his position took so much energy that his wife was often low on the priority list. If forced to make a choice between the two, four said that the family would come first. Two of the coaches interviewed left elite level coaching to take a job that allowed them more time with their families. Others expressed concern that their contribution to the relationship fell short of what they wanted it to be.

For some coaches, priorities changed at times as a result of certain life events, for example, achieving a career goal, seasonal variations in workload, overload, having a child, beginning a meaningful relationship, or facing a marital separation. These events resulted

in some coaches re-evaluating their priorities.

*I made a mistake when I worked at the academy as the head coach. We were on the court at 5:30 in the morning and I basically got home at 8:00 at night and then was doing planning and other things and I had no break, travelling with the kids (athletes) almost every weekend and it was just disaster. I had no personal time at all for myself or for my partner and there was a lot of strain on our marriage. We didn't exactly break up but it was very close to it and then I had to set my priorities straight, which I ended up doing. But it was just from neglect, not thinking about it, just being abused by other people and wanting to do everything as much as possible.*

Although few of the coaches lived lives where the job and the relationship were considered equal in terms of priorities, most of the coaches (n=16) did feel it was potentially possible to achieve balance in terms of excellence in both facets of their lives.

*Boy, it's tough. I really think it's tough and I wish the general public understood, I wish Sport Canada (management) understood. I think very few people understand that balance is really tricky and hard to achieve. I don't know how many coaches have destroyed relationships, hurt relationships, lost relationships because it's so demanding. Those athletes, they are almost like wives or partners themselves, they are so demanding of your time, they really take, they really sap the coach's energies physically and psychologically. So that whatever time you have left, you try and put it into a relationship, you're pretty sapped.*

Four coaches felt that achieving balance depended on their partner and the nature of the relationship with their partner. Coaches said that their partners were more understanding and giving than they were. The partner's expectation of the nature of the coaching lifestyle was also a factor in the success of the relationship. In a number of cases, the partner either knew the coach when he or she was an athlete or became involved with the coach when he or she was already coaching.

*He certainly knew what I was like as a player. When we dated and were engaged, I was playing professionally and really not home much at all. I mean, as a pro, I probably travelled 30-35 weeks (8 months) a year so I think he thought anything less than that was great. So I think he knew what to expect.*

Maintaining a successful relationship also depended on open communication between the coach and partner. Another four coaches said that it was the coach who was responsible for making balance possible.

*I see myself as a good example. Sure it's not perfect. If I had to categorize 50 national coaches, I'd put myself in the top 5% with being organized and being able to balance both. I think that being a woman plus having a family... and still being able to do it, I feel if I can do it, there's no reason why any of the male coaches can't do it. And if they can't do it, maybe it's because they don't want to do it.*

Part of making balanced excellence possible was setting balance as a goal, being aware of what is necessary to achieve it, committing to it and acquir-

ing the personal and organizational skills to make it possible.

*You'd better know the responsibilities of this job; you'd better know what it means when you talk about excellence in international competition - that it's a never ending battle and it's going to take all that you have to give. You'd better be able to have the energy to give at the relationship end also; you have two things to love here, your wife and your job....if you're going home every night, where you might walk in the door and talk to your wife for two minutes and then go down in the cellar while she's upstairs working at the sewing machine, I don't think you can be that casual.*

Six coaches believed that an individual's definition of excellence and their personal goals determine whether balance is possible. In many cases coaches did not fully understand the parameters of the job when they first took on the position as head coach. One of the key recommendations by coaches was to find out, first of all, what they are getting into when they take an elite level coaching job and secondly, to remain realistic and optimistic about what can be accomplished.

*I think I can (have balance), the problem is what we're willing to accept as excellence. And if you've got 90 athletes and you're dumb enough to commit to the job, then you're going to have a lot of sacrifices.*

Coaches described a tendency in the early days on the job to do a lot of work for small reward because they were excited about what they wanted to accomplish. With time, and in some cases, after experiencing burnout, coaches re-



alized that what was being accomplished did not match the time and energy that was being invested. It was suggested that coaches need to learn to identify their needs both professionally and personally, accept doing a little less in order to stay healthy and find ways to get extra help.

*When I first started this job, I'd do this for nothing....But realistically, you have to survive and support yourself. All of a sudden because of the exhaustion and feelings of exasperation... 'What's the end result? What's in it for me?'. Well, I can be more demanding with the people who hired me. There are things I need to do a good job and also to look after myself as a person.*

Finally, three coaches felt that there was a role for National Sport Organizations to play in helping national coaches through salary increases, providing better preparation in terms of understanding the job demands and recognizing the importance of the family's role in the coach's life and success.

*I think it (balance) is possible but I think there's a lot of things that have to change. I think salaries have to be higher; I think there has to be more perks....Maybe I could spring for them (family) to go to a nice resort so that they feel they're being taken care of....Here a lot of time they just see the grief we get and how we have to pay for bills out of our own pocket, like paying for phone calls to home when you're on the road, having meetings on the weekend rather than during the week.*

For those four coaches who felt excellence in both occupation and relationship was impossible, the majority

said that their current demands made balance unthinkable.

*I do not have the demands of a regular relationship that pulls me away. If I did and I had to make a choice, then I would be in serious trouble. So with that stressor not there, I know this is where I want to be, this is what I want to be, this is who I want to be, I have balance within but I've cheated. I'm balancing only the people and things that fit...But should the occasion arise, say it were a person who said that our relationship is such that they were not going to live with this, then you see the true spectrum has come into being and I have to make the choice. And what I'm saying is that there is no way you can balance it. Something has to go, not away but get less of, either your relationship, your health, your team, your mental state, something has to go. So I really don't think it can be balanced....*

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

National level coaches felt that their occupation had a definite effect on their relationships. The demands of the coaching profession in terms of time and travel as well as the commitment coaches made to excel in their jobs made it difficult for some and impossible for others to attain balanced excellence in both their profession and their relationship(s). Coaches and their families did, however, act in certain ways that helped them to maintain the quality of their relationship. Balance was felt to be potentially achievable, if not easily achievable, by most of the coaches.

Balance in life is a critical challenge for all those who pursue excellence. We need to take a close look at those exceptional people who are able to

excel in their professions and in their relationships. We need to learn from their perspectives and experiences.

Some of the important lessons that emerged from this study with respect to the relationship include:

1. Find a supportive partner who understands and respects what you do.
2. Care enough to be honest, to communicate and to understand your partner's feelings.
3. Find ways to remind your partner that they are important (e.g., get involved in their interests, know what is important for them).
4. Plan to make time for each member of your family including yourself. Orlick (1992) spoke of four different Quality Time Zones for growth within families: time for you, one-on-one time with your partner, one-on-one time with your child and time together as a family.
5. Make the best of your time together no matter how long or short it may be. Orlick (1993) suggests looking for the good things in your relationship. Most important is being there, men-

tally and physically, when you are with your partner: listening intently, feeling what they are feeling, connecting completely in your interactions and fully focusing on what you are doing.

6. Plan a vacation together that is not connected to work.
7. Limit the intrusion of work on home; to those at home you're a partner/parent not a coach.
8. Plan departure and arrival routines with your partner/family.
9. Remember that to a large extent, balance is a personal choice. Make it a priority and a commitment.

Most of the coaches in this study were not highly successful in achieving excellence in both their demanding professions and their family relationships. However, this does not mean that it is an impossible challenge, as some were capable of balancing excellence in both. We need to find models of balanced excellence and learn from their experiences. We can all gain from their wisdom, as they carry the essence of human excellence.

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