

# Extending the Kaleidoscope Career Model: Understanding Career Needs of Midcareer Elite Head Coaches

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Today's workforce, with trends toward aging and greater gender diversity, looks dramatically different than past decades, creating a need to more closely examine the midcareer stages of employees. In sport, midcareer head coaches have developed a broad skill set and an ability to manage both internal and external stakeholders. Thus, they are valuable, experienced employees who have successfully navigated the coaching profession. Using the Kaleidoscope Career Model as a framework, this study explored male and female head coaches' career experiences, needs, and management strategies in the midcareer stages. The findings indicate that coaches follow an alpha career pattern, prioritizing authenticity over balance and challenge. Yet, the participants suggested different approaches to achieving authenticity, balance, and challenge within the midcareer stages, which may be more nuanced than traditionally expected. Understanding these needs and management strategies are a necessary first step toward more nuanced theoretical understandings and customized human resource management plans that will enhance career longevity and performance.

**Keywords:** career needs, gender and sport, human resource management, midcareer

Today's workforce looks dramatically different than past decades, creating both challenges and opportunities for managing employees and for maximizing both individual and organizational performance in a complex work environment (Vance, 2006). Evidence suggests that employees typically feel more engaged when they believe their employer understands their career needs and provides avenues for career growth and longevity (Vance, 2006). To enhance this understanding both theoretically and practically, this study explored the multifaceted career needs, experiences, and coping strategies of midcareer coaches.

## Workforce and Career Trends: A Focus on Midcareer Experiences

Three notable trends contribute to the complexity of managing today's workforce. First, the workforce overall is aging. Since 2001, the teenage workforce decreased by 33%, whereas employees aged 55 years and older increased by 40% (Brooks, 2015). Second, the share of women in the labor force has progressively increased since 1950, reaching 46.8% of the total U.S. labor force (Toossi & Morisi, 2017). Third, scholars have recognized a shift in the traditional "upward climb" career path to a more dynamic, changing, and multidirectional career path (Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015). We now have different types of careers and a wider meaning of career success (Baruch, 2004).

Career longevity can be defined as persistence in a vocation over a long duration of time, typically for a large portion of an individual's career span (Mazerolle, Eason, Lazar, & Mensch, 2016). This is a fundamental metric that influences the overall legacy of an employee because, for many individuals, success is strongly linked to career length (Petersen, Jung, Yang, & Stanley, 2011; Simonton, 1988; Williams, Lacasa, & Latora, 2019). For coaches, career longevity is typically dependent on talent, productivity, and reputation (Petersen et al., 2011). Research demonstrates that seasoned professionals compared with early career individuals feel a stronger psychological contract with their employing organizations (August, 2011) and have more pride in their jobs, cheerfulness, and reliability (Brooke & Taylor, 2005). Older workers also feel especially obligated to work extra hours if necessary, to work well with others, and to provide quality products and services (Schalk et al., 2010; Thrasher, Zabel, Wynne, & Baltes, 2015).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that the career experiences of men and women are different at every career stage (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). For example, women retire earlier than men (Sommer, 2018) and report more work-life balance issues across the career span (Darcy, McCarthy, Hill, & Grady, 2012). Thus, in addition to exploring midcareer experiences in general, there may also be value in understanding gender differences.

In the sport industry, coaches are an essential group of employees to understand and manage well. Coaches are central to the delivery of the core sport product (which is the sport game experience itself) and often represent a direct link to athlete and organizational performance (e.g., Frick & Simmons, 2008; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Within the National Collegiate Athletic Association, head coaches have been characterized as analogous in job function and scope to

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CEOs of organizations (Humphreys, Paul, & Weinbach, 2016). Over time, these head coaches have developed a broad skill set and the ability to manage both internal and external stakeholders (Humphreys et al., 2016). Thus, midcareer head coaches represent a cohort of valuable, experienced employees who have successfully navigated the coaching profession. Seasoned coaches have perspective, make significant contributions to their organization, and serve as examples to the younger generation of coaches. Understanding these coaches' experiences and the differences of needs and coping strategies between career stages and across gender can help build management practices that will enhance career longevity and performance.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand the differences in the career experiences of American intercollegiate head coaches by gender and career stage, especially in the midcareer. Using the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) as a framework, this study explored male and female head coaches' career experiences, needs, and management strategies in the midcareer stages. This study contributes to sport management career development theory, (e.g., Dabbs & Pastore, 2017; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Shaw & Leberman, 2015) and fills an important gap in the sport and coaching literature regarding midcareer stages. Unfortunately, most existing studies of sport employees (particularly coaches) have either not included career stage as a point of inquiry (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Graham & Dixon, 2017; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Shaw & Leberman, 2015) or have focused on early career stages (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2007), which are markedly different than later career stages (e.g., Darcy et al., 2012; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006). This study also will contribute to practice by illuminating organizational and personal management tactics, policies, and practices for retaining and maintaining productivity among a group of valuable sport employees (see also Darcy et al., 2012; Humphreys et al., 2016).

## Theoretical Framework of the KCM

The KCM is a concept used to explain individual career needs and choices over time. Using a kaleidoscope metaphor, the KCM suggests individuals have three career needs: authenticity, balance, and challenge (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006). Over time, these aspects shift and, like a kaleidoscope, create different patterns. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) defined these three career needs in the KCM as (a) *authenticity*—when an individual's internal values are aligned with his/her external behaviors and the values of the employing organization; (b) *balance*—when the individual strives to reach an equilibrium between work and nonwork (e.g., family, friends, personal interests) demands; and (c) *challenge*—an individual's need for stimulating work (e.g., responsibility, autonomy), as well as career advancement. As one of the career needs takes on greater intensity at different career points, the other two remain active, yet take a lower priority (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006).

Although the KCM was created in response to the "opt-out" revolution to help determine why women leave the workplace or stop advancing (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), the model was tested with both men and women (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) found that both men and women rotate and prioritize their career needs to find the best fit between their work demands/roles and their personal relationships, values, and interests. Women followed a *beta career pattern*, with a focus on challenge in their early career, issues of

balance becoming more important in midcareer, and a desire for authenticity becoming the primary need in late career. Conversely, men followed an *alpha career pattern*, which also begins with an emphasis on challenge in their early career, then moving to a greater need or desire for authenticity in midcareer, and finally needs for balance in late career. The relevance of the tenets of the KCM have been tested across gender and career stage.

## Gender and Career Stage of KCM

As noted, early KCM studies focused on women's career patterns and needs. Cabrera (2007) produced one of the first KCM empirical studies to further understand why women were leaving or "opting out" of the workforce. She found that women were more likely to have career interruptions stemming from the work environment, having children, being laid off, family moves, and changing career focus (see also Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007, 2008). In addition, Cabrera (2009) found that women followed the beta career pattern (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007), and women in full midcareer (15–25 years in the workforce) placed the largest emphasis on balance, which aligns with other research (Dabbs, Graham, & Dixon, 2016; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). In the later part of their careers, women directed their career path to pursue their need for authenticity (Cabrera, 2009).

This coincides with August's (2011) research into women's late career experiences. In this study, the participants expressed a desire for authenticity, which mainly revolved around the idea of focusing on one's own needs and taking better care of oneself. August (2011) also found that, in late career, women used several strategies to achieve balance and recognize the positive and negative spillover between work and nonwork. Finally, women described challenge as a desire to grow, demonstrate competence, and develop an intrinsic interest of work.

In general, the midcareer stage is when individuals are confronted with multiple intersecting roles and responsibilities, both within work and nonwork domains. At this stage, individuals have developed expertise and may seek promotional opportunities or career alternatives; many look for a work–life balance, and some have become more passionate about their field (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). In light of these factors and the importance of this stage, scholars have recognized that the originally defined midcareer stage was too broad, and they worked to classify this career stage into substages to capture this nuance (e.g., Mainiero & Gibson, 2018).

To advance theory around the midcareer, Mainiero and Gibson (2018) created subcategories of "midcareer" stages to include early career (the first 10 years of working life), early midcareer (having worked at least 10–15 years), midcareer (having worked at least 15–25 years), late midcareer (having worked 25 plus years), and late career (within 5 years before projected retirement date). The segments were created "to more accurately determine reactions to the parameters in early midcareer, full midcareer, and late midcareer, rather than using 'midcareer' as a single segment of the data based on age ranges" (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018, p. 368). These subcategories allow researchers to assess this dynamic midcareer stage more specifically.

Mainiero and Gibson's (2018) model, while potentially useful, has been developed utilizing a sample of unemployed individuals seeking career transitions. They argued for the need to test this model with currently employed individuals and other contexts. The current study answers that call in both ways, utilizing a sample of currently employed individuals and examining their midcareer

model in a sport context, which may have markedly different career experiences than in other industry sectors (Dabbs & Pastore, 2017; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

## KCM in Sport

In sport management, several scholars have utilized the KCM for exploring the career needs of college head coaches across gender (Dabbs et al., 2016; Dabbs & Pastore, 2017) and career span (Dabbs et al., 2016), as well as the career needs and experiences of female CEOs in sport organizations (Shaw & Leberman, 2015). For example, Dabbs and Pastore (2017) sought to better understand the career experiences of head coaches using the KCM. Coaches, regardless of gender, placed greater value on the challenge career need, compared with authenticity and balance.

Furthermore, studies in sport found that male coaches experience balance differently from female coaches (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dabbs et al., 2016; Dabbs & Pastore, 2017). This finding supports the general literature (see Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006) that suggests women's need for balance is more salient than men's over time. To extend, Dabbs et al. (2016) assessed the impact of cohort (age/career stage) and gender on college head coaches' work–family conflict and family–work conflict. The results found that coaches in general experienced high levels of conflict; specifically, female coaches experienced higher levels of work–family conflict throughout their career, whereas male coaches experienced higher levels of conflict in their early career.

Shaw and Leberman (2015) studied female CEOs of sport organizations and found that women described the KCM career aspects more extensively to include passion and relationship building (authenticity), self-awareness and influencing the organization (balance), and taking opportunities and working in sport's gendered environment (challenge). These female leaders positively expressed that self-awareness is a vital component to balance. The women interviewed ranged from early 30s to late 50s, potentially representing early to late career stages, but career stage differences were not considered in this study.

Collectively, this valuable work in sport management points out the complexities of men's and women's career experiences, and it demonstrates that career needs in sport may differ from those in nonsport careers (e.g., Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). However, it does not provide direct comparisons of career stage *or* gender.

That is, previous work in sport management has largely focused on the career experiences of coaches at the early career stages (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2007, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017; Leberman & Palmer, 2009). These studies indicate that management practices such as flexible scheduling, childcare assistance, and direct supervisor support are helpful for increasing retention and for alleviating work–family conflict. However, the kinds of policies and practices that are effective for helping employees succeed early in their career may look very different than those needed in midcareer, leading a number of scholars to suggest that more attention needs to be given to the needs of employees at later career stages (Beck & Wilson, 2001; Darcy et al., 2012; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1994; Newton, Torges, & Stewart, 2012; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

To summarize, little is known about the midcareer experiences of sport employees. The KCM has been a useful framework for career exploration across a number of careers, including those in sport. Within this framework, gender (Dabbs et al., 2016; Dabbs & Pastore, 2017; Shaw & Leberman, 2015) and career stage (August,

2011; Dabbs et al., 2016; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007) both seem to influence professional and personal outcomes. Yet, we lack direct comparisons of men's and women's career experiences, we lack a nuanced exploration of the complexities of the breadth of mid-career experiences, and we lack knowledge about the ways that coaches actively manage their career needs in the midst of their current career stage. Therefore, to advance the research in these three ways, this study has compared men's and women's experiences of the midcareer stage through the lens of the KCM, dividing midcareer into three substages: early mid, mid, and late mid (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). In so doing, we examined the salient patterns, differences, and coping strategies that will help scholars and practitioners to understand and support these valuable employees more fully. The following research questions (RQs) guided our inquiry:

RQ1: How do the career needs of coaches differ based on career stage?

RQ2: How do the career needs of coaches differ based on gender?

RQ3: How do the career needs of coaches impact individual and organizational coping and support strategies?

## Methods

Qualitative descriptive studies, based in a social constructivist approach, focus on advancing an area of inquiry by providing insight, description, context, and basic interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000). Thus, a qualitative descriptive approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010) was used to provide insight into the lived experiences of midcareer college coaches.

### Participants

To understand the career experiences of midcareer coaches, snowball and purposive sampling of individuals aged 35 years or older with at least one child was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Our initial list of contacts included eight coaches and two administrators from the researchers' personal networks, and after snowball sampling, 26 head coaches representative of various sports and conferences agreed to participate. Of the 26 head coaches, the majority were male (15 males and 11 females), with a mean age of approximately 48 years old and 20 years of experience. See Table 1 for the participant demographics and Table 2 for the descriptive statistics across the sample of participants.

### Instrument and Interview Process

Semistructured interviews ranging from 40 to 75 min were conducted with the head coaches. We used the interview to understand the everyday lives of people in their words and descriptions rather than predetermined constructs (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). The majority of the interviews were conducted in person ( $n = 17$ ) at the coach's office, while nine of the interviews were completed via telephone, Skype, or FaceTime for participant convenience. To protect the participants' identity, the institution names and identifying factors were omitted and the participants had an option to share their first name or use a pseudonym. To maintain consistency, all interviews were conducted by the lead researcher.

Following the interview guide, all interviews began with an open-ended prompt asking the coaches to speak about their

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Coach name	Sport	Age (years)	Number of children	Years in career	Years at current organization
Michelle	Women's rowing	38	2	15	4
Nolan	Men's lacrosse	39	2	15	10
Mary	Men's and women's swimming/diving	40	2	17	10
Larissa	Women's volleyball	41	1	18	3
Maddox	Baseball	41	4	10	3
Kathy	Cheerleading	43	2	18	2
Miles	Women's soccer	43	2	23	20
Jeff	Women's lacrosse	45	2	15	6
Amanda	Softball	47	2	28	25
Denise	Softball	47	2	22	18
Hal	Women's volleyball	47	2	17	7
Jackie	Women's lacrosse	47	3	26	23
Mitch	Men's soccer	47	3	18	18
Drew	Football	48	3	22	9
Milo	Men's and women's track and field	48	2	23	5
Ben	Men's and women's swimming/diving	50	4	28	10
Jordan	Men's lacrosse	50	5	26	10
James	Men's and women's track and field	51	2	20	3
Lauren	Track and field	51	1	20	3
Troy	Golf	51	2	18	18
Jamie	Women's basketball	53	2	30	12
Jacob	Golf	55	2	22	22
Mac	Men's soccer	56	2	30	9
Caleb	Football	57	3	22	2
Heidi	Synchronized swimming	57	3	30	7
Brittany	Equestrian	59	1	28	21

coaching career, daily schedule, and career/family goals. The second part of the interview asked coaches to detail their career needs and experiences, including questions such as “What are your biggest career needs at this point in your path?” “How do those needs compare with other career stages?” and “Looking forward, what career goals do you have?” Then, they were asked about their work–life interface, including questions such as “When you think about your work and family roles, and what’s required of you, what is going well at this point in your career and life, and are there ever any tension between these two roles?” “Thinking about comparing your current life stage to when you were younger or just starting out coaching, how have the sources of tension and enrichment in your life changed?” and “How do you manage it all?” The questions were derived from previous work in the areas of work–life theory in sport (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dabbs et al., 2016; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017) and KCM sport studies (see Dabbs & Pastore, 2017; Shaw & Leberman, 2015). All questions were asked of all participants, although not necessarily in the same order.

In accordance with the institutional review board, after written consent was received, interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were professionally transcribed in full. To help ensure privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and the names of locations, colleagues, and family members have either been omitted or changed to also increase confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a multistep coding procedure (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). After having the interviews transcribed, each of the three research team members read through the interview transcription while listening to the audio file to check the accuracy of the transcription and to refamiliarize ourselves with the data. We then sent the transcripts back to the participants for interviewee review, asking them to confirm the trustworthiness of the transcription and accuracy of their description and meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

After ensuring accuracy, the team members read through each transcript a second time, this time utilizing theoretical coding to hand code each meaning unit individually. We labeled each potential meaning unit with a single descriptive code (Miles et al., 2013). During the third examination, we modified the descriptive and developing subcodes.

As part of this process, a master list of codes and a codebook were developed based on the KCM for theoretical coding. For example, themes of authenticity, balance, and challenge were derived from previous literature (e.g., August, 2011; Cabrera, 2007, 2009; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007, 2008), and career stages were drawn from Mainiero and Gibson (2018). All interviews were coded in the same three-step process, creating new codes where necessary, and adding those new codes to the master list. Where

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics of Participants

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Sport		
Softball	2	7.69
Women's soccer	1	3.84
Men's and women's swimming/diving	2	7.69
Equestrian	1	3.84
Football	2	7.69
Baseball	1	3.84
Women's volleyball	2	7.69
Synchronized swimming	1	3.84
Golf	2	7.69
Women's basketball	1	3.84
Men's lacrosse	2	7.69
Men's and women's track and field	3	11.5
Women's lacrosse	2	7.69
Cheerleading	1	3.84
Men's soccer	2	7.69
Women's rowing	1	3.84
Age (years)		
<40	2	7.69
40–49	13	50.0
50–59	11	42.3
Number of children		
0	0	0.0
1	3	11.5
2	15	57.7
3	5	19.2
4	2	7.69
5	1	3.84
Years in career		
<15	1	3.84
15–20	11	42.3
21–25	8	30.8
26–30	6	23.1
Years at current org		
<5	7	26.9
5–10	10	38.5
11–15	1	3.84
16–20	4	15.4
21–25	4	15.4

raters disagreed on coding or thematic placement, the three team members discussed and reached a resolution. For example, in the area of “influencing the organization,” Coder 1 felt this belonged to “balance,” as consistent with Shaw and Leberman (2015). However, Coder 2 argued that, within this study, the mentions of “influencing the organization” were consistently made about the career need for authenticity. After discussion among the reviewers and rereading the transcripts and broader context surrounding the single meaning unit, we agreed that “influencing the organization” fit as a subtheme of authenticity. This organic discussion and interpretation of participant descriptions is consistent with a

qualitative descriptive approach, especially one where coding is theoretically guided (Sandelowski, 2000).

Although most themes were consistent with the previous literature (e.g., authenticity, balance, challenge), some subthemes varied, especially about their relevance to the main themes (cf. Shaw & Leberman, 2015). Thus, subthemes for authenticity included passion, relationships, and influencing the organization. Subthemes for balance included self-awareness and work–life tensions (August, 2011). Subthemes of challenge included success (winning) and learning.

Toward RQ3, we also sought to uncover trends in the data regarding coping/management strategies in reaching their career goals. Specifically with balance, we utilized previously identified themes, such as reliance on networks, reliance on spouse, work–life organizational supports, and supervisor support (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017), while being open to emergent themes as well (Miles et al., 2013). Interestingly, we found that several of the subthemes identified as ways that coaches describe their career needs were also described as active management/coping strategies. For example, when the coaches described authenticity as a career need, they discussed relationships as being essential to that authenticity. But, they also discussed how they actively prioritize and cultivate relationships as a means toward building authenticity. Thus, in many cases, the management strategy subthemes paralleled those of the career need subthemes. These are noted and discussed throughout the findings.

The final analysis step was code refinement. In this step, we first employed a peer debriefing process to help ensure the trustworthiness of the coding and thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this process, we sent portions of transcripts, coding keys, and initial thematic schemes to a peer familiar with this line of work and were provided feedback as to the accuracy of the perceived meanings and categorization of the codes into appropriate themes. Based on feedback from this process and our final codebook, we identified patterns and key excerpts from the data that serve as representative of the overall essence of what the participants collectively communicated through their interviews (Miles et al., 2013). Thus, the final process went beyond simply finding commonalities between meaning units, grouping them together, and naming them. It required making evaluative decisions about what information was most relevant to the RQs, interpreting these salient portions of the interviews at a low-inference level (e.g., description of career need vs. active management of that need), and selecting representative quotes from the interviews to support these interpretations (Sandelowski, 2000).

## Findings and Discussion

The following sections present the findings and discussion. To answer the RQs, each section outlines how the coaches' career needs emerged across career stages and gender and how the coaches actively manage their needs to achieve career goals. For each career stage, representative quotes from the coaches are included to provide insight into their full narratives.

### Early Midcareer

Following Mainiero and Gibson (2018), coaches in early midcareer have worked for at least 10–15 years. Three participants belonged to this career stage. The two male coaches in this stage highlighted the importance of authenticity to their careers, whereas the female coach emphasized challenge. Furthermore, all three coaches

explained both the struggles and active strategies toward pursuing balance in this career stage.

**Authenticity—Relationships.** Both male coaches said their priorities are to focus on others (family and athletes). They also provided multiple examples of how they actively pursued authenticity as a career need, especially in terms of relationships, as discussed below.

Both the male coaches in this career stage emphasized the importance of relationships in their career development, particularly the relationships they had with their athletes. Jeff stated, “Love is always my word for the season. I think when you can establish that in a relationship, because really that’s what the team is all about, relationships.” He continued, “We always come back to the why. Why am I coaching? Why do I really love this? It’s about the kids. It’s not about winning. It just can’t be, that’s not enough.” Throughout his interview, he reflected on authenticity as his career moved forward, being true to his goals, and having a broader focus on success. Maddox, similarly, reflected back on his early career and how he has changed. He said, “I think as I’ve gotten older, the wins aren’t quite as exciting, the losses aren’t quite as hard. The relationships with players that I make, sure that that’s the priority.” He said he did this by focusing on teaching and on ensuring the overall health of his players rather than on game outcomes. Thus, for these two coaches, pursuing authentic relationships was both a career need and a coping/management strategy toward meeting their career goals.

**Balance—Tension.** All three coaches also expressed the need for, and their active pursuit of, balance, particularly work–family balance. They expressed this need through the lens of work–family tensions. They also explained how self-awareness and intentional planning are utilized as their management strategies for meeting this need.

Coaches in the early midcareer stage expressed the constant challenge of work–family tensions. For example, Maddox described the constant tension of work invading family time. He said,

I think I focus so much on our team during the season that I think often times if we’re [family] just spending time together, I’m still probably focusing on something that’s baseball related. I think that not trying to find undisturbed time just for the two of us to connect and spend time together is a major issue and I would say that that probably causes a lot of tension.

Michelle also highlighted the tension between work and nonwork when she expressed sources of guilt between both domains. She said,

Every day. Every minute of every day I experience tension. I constantly feel like I’m not being the mother I’ve wanted to be. And I constantly feel I’m failing the team a little bit in terms of handing over my heart and everything I can do. Like if one of my kids is sick and I can’t go get him because I’m in the middle of teaching a class. But if I go, I feel bad that I’m not here [at work] because I don’t want my personal life to somehow represent my lack of drive, or ambition.

The coaches indicated that their need for balance was constantly before them in the relentless tension between work and family.

**Balance—Awareness.** Even with the constant tension, early midcareer head coaches, regardless of gender, articulated the understood demands of the profession. There was a sense of acceptance that their jobs are “24/7,” with intense scheduling and travel. This acceptance included both themselves and their families being “okay” with their career choice. Maddox noted,

The day in, day out stress and schedule of this job has definitely made it tougher on my family. I haven’t done enough probably in the last three years just to take them out to lunch or have dinner enough where we’ll be spending just more quality face to face time. You know, but they understand.

Michelle said, “It’s hard too, because if you ask me what is my favorite thing in my life I would say my children. Absolutely. Holding them at night and reading them to bed is the best five minutes of my day. But it’s five minutes of my day.” She said she recognized the time demands the coaching position required of her and how these demands have limited family interactions.

Jeff did not emphasize tension between work and family in his current career stage, but said he struggled tremendously with it as an assistant coach. He explained he learned from his past challenges as an assistant and the lack of harmony he had between work and family, something he now makes an effort to pursue and to help his assistants with. Specifically, he mentioned visualizing “how I want to be” and active planning as management strategies toward achieving balance. He said,

Under my philosophy I want my assistant coaches to want to be here. I want them to love it. I want them to be excited to come to work every day. I don’t crush them in getting out and recruiting. That’s a big part of their job, but we’ll sit down. We’ll look at the summer, and all the tournaments. The first thing we do is say, “What do you have going on, personally?” There’s always weddings; I don’t want you to miss those weddings.

All three coaches said they struggle with balance and mentioned ways that they actively manage their career needs toward that balance. At this early career stage, their demanding careers clearly seem to take priority over other life domains.

**Challenge—Success.** Although all three coaches in this stage mentioned challenge as a need, the female coach, Michelle, emphasized this need at this point in her career, whereas the male coaches more strongly emphasized authenticity (as described above). The coaches expressed the career need of challenge in terms of success, which included winning conferences and championships.

Male and female coaches at this stage expressed the priority of winning differently. Michelle described her current need for both challenge and success, stating,

I feel I’m in that point in your career where you just put everything you have into being successful and just rise into the top six spots of those coaches that are circling the cage. Or you become like a million other programs out there that are just mediocre, and you take a step back. And I just feel from a personal standpoint, there’s no second place. You’re first or last. And so for me right now it’s unfortunate. I wish I could just bottle my ovaries, and have kids in 20 years, and just pour everything I can into my coaching career now.

Michelle also spoke of the importance of her family, but her clear priority was in winning a national championship and securing a spot among the coaching elite. She expressed that her pursuit of success was within a narrow window of time, feeling pressure to win now.

The male coaches also mentioned the need to be successful, emphasizing the process of winning. Maddox said, “I’m much more process-oriented. I’m still results-oriented. I think it’s hard

not to be if you want to win, you want keep doing this.” He went on to say, “I just really tried to narrow my focus down and my goals are to maximize what we do every practice and every game. And focus much more so on development of players.” Jeff added,

Really since I got here, in my mid 30s, early 40s I started to understand what I loved about coaching. It wasn't the winning. I love winning, I don't like losing, but I've found that when the goal isn't winning championships, you tend to win more because you're not stressed about the winning. You ultimately will play better and coach better. When you make it more about creating the best culture you can create, it's way more fulfilling, and ultimately you do win more.

All three coaches suggested that they needed and liked the challenge of their careers. Their pursuit of that need, however, clearly differed by person and, perhaps, by gender.

**Discussion of the early midcareer stage.** The KCM of career needs posits that, while the need for authenticity, balance, and challenge will be present at any one time in a person's career, they tend to vary by career stage. Mainiero and Gibson (2018) found that, in early midcareer, men placed a greater emphasis on challenge, followed by authenticity and balance; women prioritized balance, followed by authenticity and challenge. In this study, the men prioritized authenticity, and the sole female reported prioritizing challenge. Although drawing definitive conclusions from a small subsample is difficult, we do offer some observations and analysis.

Each participant mentioned authenticity, but the theme seemed more salient for the two male coaches. They reported being focused strongly on relationships and process. This finding is interesting because much of the research on the KCM suggests women in midcareer prioritize relationships and make career decisions because of those relationships, whereas men strongly pursue challenge. That priority of career goals was not the same for coaches.

The challenge career need of the KCM represents an individual's pursuit of growth and development, then demonstrating that growth in career advancement (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Although Dabbs and Pastore (2017) found that challenge is a priority for all college coaches, this study suggests the pressure for meeting that challenge with proven success is perceived by women in early midcareer as time bound and “now or never.” The strong comments by Michelle about both success and balance suggest that she feels she must prove herself and pour herself fully into her career at the same time that she is in her “baby years.” Although the male coaches both mentioned tensions between work and family, and wanting to be successful, they did not feel this level of pressure in the same way. Both the male and female coaches expressed the time and demand difficulties of the profession on family life, but only the female expressed feelings of guilt and judgment.

The KCM describes balance as “life's holy grail,” striving to make work and nonwork a coherent whole (Sullivan, Forret, Carraher, & Mainiero, 2009, p. 301). In this study, all the coaches in early midcareer discussed the tensions between work and family, and the need for balance. Several of them offered coping strategies, yet all three coaches discussed how the career took precedence and that sacrifice was necessary in coaching. This finding is not surprising; in fact, it simply adds to a growing literature base regarding the greedy and gendered nature of coaching as a profession (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Leberman & Palmer, 2009; Robbins, Gilbert, & Clifton, 2015). At this career stage, balance seems unrealistic, especially for women.

## Midcareer

The coaches in midcareer have worked for at least 15–25 years and represent half of the sample ( $n = 15$ ). The 10 male and five female coaches described authenticity, balance, and challenge differently than the coaches in early midcareer. Although winning and reaching career milestones was still important, these coaches emphasized authenticity more than early midcareer coaches. Furthermore, active management of balance was more salient for these coaches than the early midcoaches.

**Challenge—Success.** Although less salient, all of the coaches at this career stage mentioned the need for continued challenge. Two male coaches mentioned this as the desire for lifelong learning. For example, Mitch said, “I consider myself a life-long learner. I'm probably more and more holistic in my coaching every year.” Drew spoke about his intentional learning, noting, “I read more than I did when I was younger. I'm looking for some guidance, encouragement, motivation, inspiration. So, always trying to learn.” Other coaches discussed challenge in terms of success.

For both the male and female coaches' careers, success appeared to still be a very important component of challenge. Six coaches, four males and two females, mentioned milestone championship goals. For example, James said, “I want to win a national championship here,” and Hal said, “I would like to win a conference championship and make the NCAA tournament.” Likewise, Kathy wanted to continue building the program and climbing the coaching ladder, whereas Lauren wanted to be the first female volleyball coach to win a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I National Championship. For these coaches, success was defined by significant wins and championships, something the coaches were still working for and providing them with excitement at work.

A noticeable shift in tone among these coaches, however, was the tone surrounding their discussion of success. That is, this group of coaches was already successful at their midcareer point. Many of them had won one or multiple conference championships, and several had won single or multiple national championships. Most all of them were consistently successful season to season. So, they described the challenge for success in terms of a “formula” for basic success. Consider the following statements from the coaches:

If you asked me that ten years ago, I would say I'm going to be the best coach I can be, I'm going to be at the best program I can be. But now, if softball ends tomorrow, I can be proud of the fact that it worked like we did it, and we did really well at what we did. Now, it is about being the very best coach I can be this year. (Denise)

My role is to, obviously, win championships. Our slogan around here is develop champions. I guess, if I look at it, I'm supposed to win. But, win the right way. (Jeff)

Yes, I want to win titles, but if you really think about it, the goal is the effect you have on young people growing up, and what kind of role you play in their lives. (Milo)

I think big picture goals would be to stay at a university that I've invested in and I love so much. I want to continue to prove myself as a leader and a coach and a mentor to young men and be a point of pride for this department and the men's lacrosse family. (Nolan)

Thus, while not taking success for granted, the coaches spoke about winning as a “given.” That is, they said that “it is a given that

you have to win” to remain employed. But these coaches felt comfortable with being successful at that part of the job. They were much more driven by career needs related to authenticity.

**Authenticity—Passion.** Authenticity was expressed as passion, relationships, and influencing the organization. Typically, passion was seen as a need and an aspect of who they were as people, whereas relationships and influencing the organization were viewed more so as ways of achieving authenticity in their work.

Coaches in midcareer spoke more about passion for their sport and work than coaches in early midcareer. This does not necessarily suggest they were more passionate than early midcareer coaches; rather, four coaches, three males and one female, at the midcareer stage discussed passion more frequently. For example, Milo said, “I have more passion than I’ve ever had. I don’t view my job as a job, because I enjoy the sport, so I never really think about it in that sense.” Likewise, Jacob expressed a love for coaching because “it is a way to give back.” Larissa stated, “I think when you’re passionate about what you do it’s who you are.” Clearly, these coaches are passionate about their work, which provides a high level of fulfillment and a platform for them to express their authentic self.

**Authenticity—Relationships.** Having strong relationships with the athletes, coaching staff, and administration was a critical piece of the coaches’ career development. For example, Drew expressed the importance of relationships. He emphasized, “I try to leave a positive impact on my players. Just make a difference in their lives. Help them reach their potential and make sure when I meet them at 30, that they come and hug my neck.” Similarly, Caleb said, “Longevity, success, and running a successful program that helps people develop to their full potential as people, students and football players is really the name of the game.” For these coaches, developing lasting and meaningful relationships with their athletes was their primary goal.

All five of the female coaches in midcareer also spoke enthusiastically about the importance of relationships to their careers. For example, Larissa said, “It’s really about using volleyball as a vehicle to grow young women into true adults that are going go out, that they’ve learned through this process.” She continued, “I love winning, but when I know I’ve made a difference in their lives, I feel like, especially at this level, it’s more about the student athlete.” Denise supported the same notion and believed in focusing on the people in her program. She said, “The people. That’s the biggest difference. I think winning is a byproduct of the people, and now I get that, and that took a long time.” Both the men and women coaches in this midcareer stage sought authenticity in their coaching by emphasizing developing strong relationships.

**Authenticity—Influence.** The head coaches felt they could make change within their department and community. Half of the coaches at this stage discussed using their careers to influence their organization, surrounding community, or the growth of the sport overall. Lauren noted, “I’ve had a great career, and I feel like I really want to give back and make it better for other females to stay [in coaching] and motivate them.” Denise spoke about how proud she was for raising over \$300,000 for kids fighting cancer. She said, “I am proud of the big picture stuff.” Hal also said, “I feel like the older I’ve gotten, I don’t want to say it’s less about the wins, I do become more concerned about making sure we leave everything in a better place.” Thus, beyond winning or influencing their athletes, many participants at the midcareer were driven to utilize their influence for more big-picture goals as an essential need for authenticity.

**Balance—Tension.** In the midcareer stage, balance meant acknowledging family as a critical piece of their career success. Nine coaches at this stage expressed less tension between work and family compared with earlier in their career, based on better management of both work and nonwork domains. However, tension was still present.

Not surprisingly, the coaches reported tensions between work and family. Although the tensions between work and family manifest in many ways, among midcareer coaches, the primary tension was lack of time. For example, Miles said,

In order to run a badass soccer program and in order to help build badass people, that requires a lot of time and effort. And that time and effort can take me away, both physically and psychologically, from my family. And that pull . . . that stretch and pull I feel more now than I ever have.

He explained that the impact of his mother’s recent death and watching his children “grow up fast” compelled him to make more time for family, even though his work demands never diminished.

Denise felt similarly when preparing for her season: “I find myself watching film, at night and in the off hours, especially in season, and that takes time. That time costs doing something at home.” Troy shared his struggles prioritizing both work and family equally, saying, “I try and prioritize as best I can, depending on [my schedule] . . . But there’s times when it’s just hard to make it all work.” Larissa said, “Being a great coach, and a great mom, and a great wife, and a great everything else that you’re supposed to be it’s just hard. It’s really, really, really hard.”

Both that male and female coaches mentioned time conflict at this midcareer stage. The sheer magnitude of their jobs demanded significant time, which they said most often came at the expense of family. This left them feeling stressed or strained in trying to balance it all.

**Balance—Awareness.** Like coaches at early midcareer, self-awareness emerged for both the male and female coaches. As noted above, the coaches acknowledged that balance was not easy in this profession. However, six coaches mentioned garnering “a better perspective” toward balancing work and nonwork. Caleb shared his perspective and the responsibility he feels:

I think as you get older, you get a little wiser. You sort of level off a little bit, and your decisions are more long term than short term. You’re responsible for 10 coaches, their families and goals and 90 players. [In this new job], the thing that’s on my mind is getting my wife transitioned . . . She has moved here for the first time by herself, since our kids are now grown.

In spite of the difficulty, the coaches at this stage strove for balance. The coaches felt more secure in their positions and in their ability to regularly win. Thus, they granted time for family and toward more balance. The male coaches mentioned strategies of integrating work and family, having quality time together, and prioritizing family. For example, Nolan expressed how integrating work and family helped him to stay connected with family. He said, “I want to make sure that I balance the importance of not missing moments. In fact, my boys learned to ride their bikes in the indoor facility here. I try to make them part of it all.” Drew recognized the demands of work and expressed that he had to maximize limited quality time. He said, “I believe it is the quality of that time, it is not necessarily the quantity. So, I just think it is important that when you do have time, that you make it quality time.” Mitch also shared how these tensions influenced his approach to parts of his work,

saying, “I mean there are times when I feel like I should travel for recruiting, but I feel guilty doing it. So, I tend to actually not travel, frankly, as much as I probably should because of that guilt. I love my family, and I want to be around them.” At this stage, balance was a critical need and one they actively managed.

The female coaches geared their strategies toward succeeding at both work *and* family. Larissa discussed intentionality toward being fully present at work and at home, giving her all to both. When thinking back to earlier days in her career, Larissa stated, “Ten years ago I would’ve never gone home early. But now I’m like, ‘What is important?’ Yes, this work is important, but my family is also important.” She believed, “Although the profession is demanding and is taxing on our time, and it’s taxing on our energy, you can do both successfully at a high level.” Mary viewed being a working mom as a way to be a positive example for her children. She said,

I have a son and a daughter and I’m teaching both of them that women can be successful and have a family and try to do it all. Sometimes I don’t know if I do a very good job of it, but I know that they’re seeing that mommy has an important job and you can try to do it all.

For both the men and women, achieving a sense of balance between work and nonwork was a challenge. But, as the above responses indicate, the women in particular were embracing the challenge and felt it provided them with an opportunity to be a family and industry example.

**Discussion of midcareer.** Mainiero and Gibson (2018) found midcareer men placed greater emphasis on challenge, followed by authenticity and balance. Women prioritized balance, followed by authenticity and challenge. In this study, the participants reported experiencing the need for challenge, both in learning and in competition. Yet, most reported reaching a plateau with winning and could do so routinely. Thus, their challenge needs focused on regional or national championships, or major career milestones. Instead of winning, these coaches spoke of career needs related to relationships and giving back (i.e., authenticity and long-term impact), which is different than midcareer employees in nonsport careers (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018).

Similar to Shaw and Leberman’s (2015) sample of CEOs who directly oversaw sport organizations, head coaches can make change within their department and community. This subtheme extends the KCM (Shaw & Leberman, 2015) and was more present for the female coaches than the male coaches. Research on job crafting may help explain the shift toward an emphasis on authentic career needs among midcareer coaches (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013). Job crafting highlights how employees adjust their level of engagement with their work in terms of tasks, relationships, and cognitions to keep work meaningful. Employees craft tasks by adding or dropping job responsibilities or changing how much attention they give to certain tasks. Relational job crafting focuses on adjusting how, when, and with whom employees interact to accomplish their jobs. Cognitive job crafting involves changing the way they perceive the various tasks within their employment scope (Berg et al., 2013).

By altering these job boundaries, employees continue to engage in meaningful work as their careers progress. Some research even posits that the career stage can influence the type of job crafting in which employees engage (Fried, Grant, Levi, Hadani, & Slowik, 2007). From this perspective, the emphasis on authenticity as a strong career need for midcareer college coaches may highlight how their need for meaningful work has shifted from

a focus on winning to one centered on developing relationships and impacting communities (i.e., a blend of relational and task job crafting). At this career stage, these coaches may derive less meaning from team wins and losses. Therefore, they have crafted their jobs to highlight other aspects of coaching as a way to maintain a high level of meaning. This insight may be especially useful for administrators in athletic departments, as this shift toward authenticity as a career need was felt by both the women and men, both indicating an adjustment in priorities toward relationships and giving back. Interestingly, even though these coaches emphasized a greater need and priority for authenticity, they appeared to be equally, if not more, successful in terms of winning.

Finally, balance was also mentioned at this stage. Although literature on work–family conflict suggests conflict can come from strain, behavior, or time (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000), the primary source of negative connections for these coaches was time. Time strain between work and family did not diminish in midcareer, and some reported the strain to be at its worst. Growing older, realizing time is limited, additional caretaking responsibilities, and the nature of the profession may all contribute to this. Head coaches are central figures in the lives of athletes (Comeaux, 2015) and are responsible for the decisions both their athletes and staff make (Humphreys et al., 2016). This can consume a lot of time, causing a strain on balance. At this stage, the coaches focused on tactics for blending both work and nonwork domains. The women, in particular, reported that, although they faced many challenges and tensions, they were balancing more successfully than at earlier career stages.

For women, this finding contrasts earlier work in sport management with samples of younger coaches with younger children (all aged less than 10 years and most aged less than 5 years), and at earlier career stages (Bruening & Dixon, 2007, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). In Bruening and Dixon’s work, younger coaching mothers mentioned the tremendous difficulty of balancing both domains and coping strategies of building extensive support networks to help them balance it all. In their midcareer, however, coaches seem to find more balance, which is partly due to less direct childcare, but also due to more perspective about wanting both work and family to be important. Recent work outside of sport acknowledges the role of perspective at midcareer (e.g., Darcy et al., 2012). Evidence also suggests that balance is difficult at any career stage, but those in midcareer have found successful strategies for balancing time demands and have more peace about giving time to family, which lessens the guilt felt at earlier career stages (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Darcy et al., 2012).

Thus, this study indicates that the balance career need and the strategies toward attaining it differ by gender and career stage. As Darcy et al. (2012) suggested, there is a continued need to understand the differences in needs across career stages and design work–life policies that fit those particular needs rather than relying on a “one-size-fits-all” perspective.

### Late Midcareer

Coaches in late midcareer have worked for over 25 years and have spent, on average, 28 years in the coaching profession. The coaches (three males and five females) at this stage reported valuing authenticity above all other career needs. Like the midcareer coaches, these coaches reported having “figured out” how to consistently win; thus their focus is on challenging themselves toward bigger picture goals and toward investments that will fill

their need for authenticity. The need for balance was definitely the least salient need at this stage.

**Challenge—Success.** In terms of challenge, the coaches expressed that they needed new challenges in their work. Some were related to winning and career milestones, but other areas of success, such as graduating athletes and growing/learning, were also important.

Looking ahead, Ben said he continues to seek championship-level success. He said, “If I can, another 12 to 15 years, if we’re constantly in the conversation for winning or competing for conference titles and consistently one of the top 10 teams in the country, I’ll be pretty happy.” Likewise, Brittany discussed wanting to get her team back to where it once was: “I’m really trying to improve this team and get it back up to where I’d like it to be because it’s not where I want it to be right now.”

For four of the five female coaches in late midcareer, success was communicated in a different way. For example, Heidi spoke to success in terms of alumni support: “to know that they want to come back and see you, I mean, that’s the reason I do it.” This is different than Heidi in early career, as she said, “As a young coach I might’ve been a little crazy because I feel like as a young coach I was trying to prove that I was a good coach, I was trying to prove things. It was so important to me to be the best coach.” Amanda emphasized that the success she strives for is in the classroom: “I think that importantly it’s always going to be ensure the kids graduate at 100% and make sure they’re prepared for what’s next.” Jamie spoke about success in terms of the process of athletes coming into their own as individuals, which she highlighted when she said,

You have wonderful fun moments of wins that are great but it’s actually the relationships. It’s watching them go through the four years, and then it’s getting them to graduate and go on and make their own decisions as they head into their professional life. I know it sounds sometimes cliché these days, but it’s really the process. The outcomes are fun, but as you grow in a career over time, the process really does trump the outcomes.

In these ways, beyond winning, the coaches defined and sought success in the coaching role.

**Challenge—Learning.** Four coaches at this stage valued being the best, but they also emphasized constant learning. For example, at this stage in her career, Heidi discussed how she “would enrich my coaching career by learning or making sure that I had all the knowledge that I needed to write the perfect workout.” Mac strived to be able to continue to grow “into what I would call a master coach or teacher. Someone who’s got perspective, experience in a wealth of areas. That’s always trying to learn and get better at my craft.” For them, part of the current challenge is continuing to grow by expanding their knowledge base. By focusing on learning and developing, they created personal challenges that went beyond winning championships.

**Authenticity—Passion.** Consistent with the notion of learning to be a holistic coach, the participants said that their real desire was to passionately pursue areas of lasting impact. As with the participants in other stages, these areas included building relationships and influencing the organization.

The coaches in this career stage reported a renewed passion for their work and their career. For example, Jordan said, “I love what I do. I can’t imagine being in an office and not being able to be out on the field, coaching kids. I don’t feel like I work a day.” Brittany echoed the same, considering her career as “my dream job.” Jaime

reflected on how she’s changed over the course of her career when she said,

It’s so much better now. I wish I knew the things I know now. You’re better with patience, you’re better with time. You don’t have to do it all today. You’re better at writing notes and keeping in contact with people and reaching out. Now it’s just different, the wisdom, the maturity. I thought that I was getting to a point where you get towards the end of your career, but now retirement’s not an option. I don’t want to stand still.

The coaches reported that they had a sense that they were successful in influencing young people, they enjoyed that, and they wanted to do more, especially now that they had relatively more time to commit to the elements of coaching that were most important to them.

**Authenticity—Relationships.** All coaches at this stage spoke enthusiastically about the value and impact of building relationships with their athletes over the years. For example, Jackie expressed how the relationships with her players filled a huge need for her over time. She said, “There’s a lot of pride and a lot of energy from all of my players.” Heidi echoed this when she spoke about alumni weekend and how important it was to her. She said, “Four of our former athletes are here for the weekend, they came in on deck, they brought their husbands and their families. That’s the connection, is to know that they want to come back and see you, I mean, that’s the reason I do it.” She expressed how those relationships have changed her: “I think I’ve become a better coach because I’ve become a better person, and it connects you with your athletes.” Similarly, Jordan discussed how he valued the long-term impact of coaching when he said,

I would say the impact, saving a kid from going down a path that they shouldn’t go down is why I do it. I’m competitive, yeah, but to have an impact on these kids, just to see them succeed, to get their degree. I’ve had kids come in, first-generation college graduates with 3.5–3.6 GPA and the parents are in tears.

In this way, the coaches in their late midcareer valued the relationships with their athletes and found a strong sense of authenticity via these connections.

**Authenticity—Influence.** The female coaches at this career stage especially expressed a desire to get involved in other activities that make a difference. Jamie, an empty nester, said she has been able to diversify her coaching, noting,

I do a lot with the Polka Dot Mama Foundation with melanoma and I’m branching off into a mental health advocacy role for student athletes because I’ve been so touched personally and professionally. As you get older it is sort of a #mefree. You can use the word “me” because you’re free from guilt. You’re not apologizing for everything.

As another example, Heidi was not only passionate about giving back on her own, but also about instilling in her team a sense of community service. She started a program for her team called “Give Back a Day.” She said of this idea, “It’s a day where we encourage them [student-athletes] to donate 24 hours of their time to community service.” She feels this mutually benefits the athletes and her. Interestingly, the male coaches at this stage did not speak about outside activities or interests, focusing instead on building authentic relationships within their team.

**Balance—Awareness.** During the late midcareer stage, balance seemed less salient to coaches. They spoke about balance in terms of something they have achieved, rather than something they actively managed, like in earlier career stages. At least five coaches used terms like “figured it out” to describe their current status with balance. Compared with earlier career stages, this stage struggled less with the tensions surrounding work and family. Instead, they communicated the benefit of blending both domains and sharing the joys that come with the coaching role.

This subtheme emerged for each coach at this career stage. These coaches reported that they spent enough time coaching to have perspective when it comes to balancing work and nonwork. Jamie, for example, reflected on the role her family has played in her career, saying, “Part of those moments really, the big piece is that it’s not only you’re being successful professionally by making it to the place that everyone strives to, those championship games, but [because] your family is sitting there cheering you and can be a part of the whole experience.” Likewise, Ben expressed the importance of having family involved in his work. He said, “Having kids is awesome, just having them there at games, and when they run on the field after all of our games over the years, and we hug it out.” Jackie found it possible to blend work and family really well, “especially if your kids are interested in the sport that you’re coaching.” She went on to say, “I think it’s just finding that balance and figuring out where’s your line. How much can you miss before you’re like ‘Okay, that’s too much’ and how do you balance it all?” Ben, reflecting on his expression for balance, which contrasted from his approach as a younger coach, was made clear when he said,

I think it’s every day, you have to ask the question, what’s the priority, which comes first? I’ve been coaching 28 years. Honestly, the first half of my career, my family was second. That’s my wife, that’s my kids. I’m not proud of that, but that’s the way it was. I was unbelievably driven, there were things I wanted to get done in the sport. For example, our daughter was being born and my wife went into labor, and I took her to the hospital and dropped her off because I had to go get a recruit. I wasn’t there when my daughter was actually born. I made some conscious decisions, halfway through my career to put my family first. I don’t know if it was guilt or just realizing the clock was ticking, but my family comes first now.

Similar to the other coaches at this stage, Ben has found ways to prioritize his family, which did not happen early in his career.

Finally, Amanda commented on the perspective she has found, as well as the priority of taking care of herself. She said,

I do schedule differently. Knowing, having a better feel for what the high school game schedules are. Probably within the last 10 years I’ve more realized that I have to take some time for myself and do some of my own things and they’ll be okay if I’m not at the house with them every minute. So, I think that’s the change in me realizing, maybe taking a step back, and saying I need to care for myself. And when you’ve given that advice to some other people, you have to definitely sit down and reflect upon that yourself.

**Discussion of late midcareer.** Mainiero and Gibson (2018) reported that, at late midcareer, men placed greater emphasis on challenge followed by balance and authenticity, while women prioritized challenge, followed by authenticity and balance. In our study, challenge remained a salient need in terms of career milestones and making an impact, but that challenge need was

intertwined with the need for authenticity. In this study, the coaches expressed being true to themselves (authenticity), not only by continued pursuit of success on the field, but also pouring themselves into relationships and making a difference beyond sport. Sheldon and Kasser (2001) found that, as individuals aged, they strove more toward authentic self-expression and had less of a sense of guilt or internal pressure.

At the late midcareer stage, the coaches expressed having more time to devote to relationships and authenticity. Compared with earlier stages, this could be due to the age of the coaches’ children, ranging from 12 to 30 years old. Half of the coaches in this stage have transitioned to the “empty nest” phase, which is commonly when children have left the home (Mitchell & Wister, 2015). An “empty nest” can “provide more freedom, leisure time, and less daily emotional challenge and stress for parents” (Mitchell & Wister, 2015, p. 262). In addition, during these years, employees increasingly look for meaningful work and are mainly concerned with the welfare of the people in their lives. Having a sense of purpose (lives have meaning, sense of direction, and goals) can be important for maintaining health (Mitchell & Wister, 2015; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001), so coaches prioritizing authenticity is not surprising.

For coaches in late midcareer, they also rely more on their staff (recruiting, answering e-mails) and have figured out daily efficiencies in tasks through planning and organization, or as Jackie put it, “working smarter.” These coaches are finally at a place where they can blend sport itself, relationships, and other pursuits, which is an exciting outlook for younger coaches.

The interviews make it clear that the coaches value balance. Across participants in this stage, the balanced perspective emerges in consistent ways. The late midcareer participants discussed the perspective they have gained on balance, a renewed sense of the importance of their families, and a sense that they have achieved more balance.

As discussed at the midcareer stage, this is a striking contrast to the women in early career stages in other studies of coaches and sport professionals (Dabbs et al., 2016; Dabbs & Pastore, 2017). This finding is really important because it gives hope to coaches (especially coaching mothers) embroiled in work–family conflict early in their careers. For coaches, these findings provide a sense that balance is possible as they grow in their career (see also Darcy et al., 2012). For coaches and organizations, these findings provide insight that families are not a detraction from career success, but are integral to coaches’ authentic selves and career longevity. These findings also indicate that, for women in particular, the career window is broader than the institutionalized cultures would lead us to believe (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008). The “must win now” culture that is prevalent in high-performance college sport likely pushes successful coaches out of their careers before they reach their peak (cf. Humphreys et al., 2016). A long-term perspective in the early midcareer may actually have huge long-term benefits.

## Overall Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we set out to accomplish three main goals: (a) to leverage Mainiero and Gibson’s (2018) characterizations of midcareer substages to explore and describe the nuances of the midcareer experience among successful elite college coaches, (b) to explore the salient differences in career needs between men and women, and (c) to describe the coping or management strategies that coaches utilize to fulfill their career needs toward active engagement and longevity in their careers. As seen in the results and discussion above, each of these goals has been fulfilled,

with a discussion of each relative to the existing literature in career development and in sport management. Noting the limitations of a small sample, we now turn toward a broader discussion of the implications for building theory and informing practice.

First, in reference to the overall results and discussion of this study, it is clear that most coaches in their midcareer followed an alpha career pattern (see Table 3). Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) originally found men to consistently follow the alpha career pattern, valuing challenge in early career, *authenticity in midcareer*, and then balance. Although the findings from Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) were originally characterized for men, the findings from this study support the trend for both the men and women college coaches, and across the entire midcareer. Interestingly, this may provide continued insight into the masculine influences of sport culture on the work–life interface (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Shaw & Leberman, 2015). As highlighted throughout the above results, however, there are important nuances within each midcareer substage, and each substage of the midcareer has its own strategies, which differed based on a number of factors, including the age of children, individual and organizational resources, and coach gender.

The KCM as a theoretical framework is gaining more prominence among sport management scholars (Dabbs et al., 2016; Dabbs & Pastore, 2017; Shaw & Leberman, 2015). This study contributes to the KCM model by providing insight and nuance into the lived experience of male and female head college coaches, who represent a distinct profession and particular subculture essential to the delivery of sport (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Dixon & Warner, 2010). The findings from this study, while limited in scope, at least initially suggest that characterizing the midcareer as a single career stage paints an incomplete picture of people’s work needs and motivations. Instead, this study’s findings support the use of subcategories to characterize the midcareer. These midcareer subcategories are not merely semantic nuance. Rather, as the findings from this study showcase, they give depth and insight into the ways people engage with the work domain at various points in their career. That is, Mainiero and Gibson’s (2018) framework was based solely on quantitative (survey) feedback. This study puts meaning, interpretation, and lived experiences behind that framework to help understand what coaches are experiencing and the reasons for shifting career needs, and at least initially, hints at how to help midcareer professionals maximize career longevity. Especially in sport, head college coaches’ approach toward authenticity, balance, and challenge differs during the midcareer substages. If sport managers need to keep coaches

engaged, productive, successful, and thriving through the midcareer, understanding the various subcategories is a useful first step.

Second, even this limited data suggest that career needs are not something that simply “happen to people.” The participants in this study actively managed the aspects of their career that would continue to fulfill and engage them with meaningful work (see also Berg et al., 2013). While some found challenge embedded in authentic pursuits (e.g., using their coaching platform to raise money for cancer research), others actively emphasized relationships and long-term personal and organizational investments, and found joy in the success of players returning to the program years later. Some prioritized family by focusing on quality time, scheduling practice around family activities, and taking steps to leave work at specific times to ensure family stability.

The KCM model and our expanded findings based on that model suggest that each of these approaches might be right for an employee if it allows them to find meaning, fulfillment, and productivity in their life and career. As managers seek to meet employees where they are in their careers, both the organization and the employee will benefit. As a number of scholars have argued, organizations can no longer rely on “one-size-fits-all” models of human resource management and career development (Berg et al., 2013; Cabrera, 2009; Darcy et al., 2012; Dixon & Warner, 2010; Fried et al., 2007; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007, 2008; Shaw & Leberman, 2015). Especially at the executive level, organizations must shift to these more nuanced understandings of career experiences, needs, and management strategies in today’s workforce to keep experienced employees satisfied and productive over the course of their extended careers (Lyons et al., 2015; Mitchell & Wister, 2015; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; Thrasher et al., 2015). Because findings suggest tailored human resource strategies and tactics, sweeping practical implications are not provided here. However, several examples of specific management tactics based on each substage have been provided in the discussion of that stage.

Although this study’s findings begin to unpack the nuances of the midcareer substages, the value of the rich explanation of participant experiences only builds a framework for additional study both in and out of sport. Thus, the full contribution of the framework will not be realized within this study, but more so with application of the midcareer framework to the management of careers and, more broadly, to tailored human resource management strategies and practices. For example, scholars especially interested in exploring the work and nonwork balance portion of the KCM could pick a specific midcareer subcategory and examine the employee needs of that subcategory in more detail. In addition,

**Table 3 Alpha Career Pattern of Midcareer Coaches**

Career stage	Authenticity*	Balance	Challenge
Early midcareer	2 male coaches Focused on relationships and the process.	Career took precedent and is a necessary sacrifice.	1 female coach Results oriented and focused on winning.
Midcareer	10 male coaches 5 female coaches Focused on relationships and giving back; most salient.	Created tactics for blending both domains.	Continued need for challenge; less salient.
Late midcareer	3 male coaches 5 female coaches Focused on making a lasting impact; most salient.	Least salient career need.	Felt comfortable with formula for winning consistently.

\*Authenticity as the most salient career need across the midcareer stage. While balance and challenge are present in coaches’ lives, for the majority, they follow an alpha career pattern, focused on authenticity in midcareer, followed by balance and challenge.

scholars might approach the nuances of the midcareer as it applies to other organizational behavior constructs, such as motivation, organizational commitment, engagement, citizenship behaviors, work satisfaction, or others. As significant differences between midcareer subcategories emerge, not only will scholars have a deeper insight into the value of understanding the needs of employees within various career stages, but also, those working in sport will better know how to connect with their employees. Moreover, although this study focused on the needs of midcareer coaches, further research should highlight the various career needs of early career employees, specifically to see if substages among early or late career employees exist, similar to the midcareer substages.

Finally, scholars should approach this expanded theoretical framework as it applies to other careers, especially those outside of sport. As Chalip (2006) argued, one of the ways to build the value of sport management research is to generate sport-focused (in addition to derivative) models that can become the basis of understanding human behavior and management not only in sport, but also in other contexts. This is an example of such model complementarity—it begins in mainstream management, builds in structure and nuance in sport settings, and creates expansions of theory; then, the next step is to test that theory in other contexts to understand the nature of distinct sport elements and those that are more broadly applicable. In doing so, we build knowledge that is not only “demonstrably pertinent to sport and its management,” but also enhances the significance of sport in the public sphere (Chalip, 2006, p. 4).

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