



Sport Social Work Journal

Volume 7, Issue 3
Spring 2026

“I Have No One To Talk To:” A Call for Greater Support for Head Coaches in High-Performance Sport

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Head coaches in high-performance sport environments operate under intense pressure, often facing emotional and psychological challenges that existing support structures overlook. While increasing attention has been paid to athlete mental health, the same cannot be said for coaches, whose well-being is often neglected. This commentary highlights the urgent need for tailored mental health support for head coaches and advocates for greater involvement from sport social workers in addressing this gap. Drawing from current research and recent developments in sport organizations, we present a range of stressors that coaches experience. Furthermore, we offer a set of practical recommendations, including integrating coach-focused mental health training into certification programs, creating formal support networks, and appointing dedicated mental health professionals within sports organizations. By reframing the narrative of “coaching resilience” and instead prioritizing coaches’ mental health, this article calls for a shift in how high-performance sport environments can better support head coaches. In turn, we consider that these recommendations will enhance coach well-being while optimizing team performance and fostering healthier sport cultures.

Keywords: Resilience, Coaching, Certification, Sport Social Work, Training

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Sports Social Work Journal, Volume8 (Issue1), 9 - 19.

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High-performance sport environments are characterized by extreme levels of dedication (Mallet, 2010), the pressure to win (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020), and leading/managing other individuals (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2018). Head coaches, as the leaders of these athletes and teams, are often under the most pressure, with their roles extending far beyond strategic planning, skill development, and coaching during competition. Their responsibilities extend to leading athletes, managing team dynamics, addressing performance issues, navigating public and media scrutiny, and most critically, managing their players' emotional and psychological well-being (Rathwell et al., 2014).

With such responsibilities comes enormous pressure that may (and in our experience has) led to a coach's health and well-being being placed at risk (Griffin et al., 2025). While there is a growing awareness and indeed provision around supporting athletes' mental health (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025), the mental health and well-being needs of head coaches remain largely unaddressed.

This commentary presents a case for sport social workers and related practitioners to expand their involvement in coaching and, more specifically, in the support of head coaches. We propose that enhanced support structures and mechanisms be made available to head coaches operating in high-performance environments. Furthermore, we explain why certifications should include "self-care training" and "education on pertinent topics like anxiety, stress, and burnout," and how they can be incorporated into coach education.

Relevance to Sport Social Work

The role of social work in supporting coaches can be viewed at different levels (i.e., at the micro–mezzo–macro perspective). At the macro level, the profession can advocate for policy change, resource allocation, and cultural shifts that normalize the discussion of mental health in coaching. Indeed, as alluded to, the landscape is changing, but the rate and consistency of change is uneven. Social workers can help create supportive organizational structures at the mezzo level, such as peer networks, communities of practice, wellness hubs, and dedicated personnel embedded within sport organizations. These recommendations also correlate with the sports coaching literature (Baghurst et al., 2024; Quick & Baghurst, 2025). At the micro level, social workers can provide direct counseling, psychoeducation, and therapeutic interventions to coaches experiencing stress, burnout, anxiety, or depression. This multilayered approach is a helpful way to understand how the needs of coaches in high-performance sport might be addressed at different levels.

The field of sport social work has made significant strides in advocating and providing support for athletes' well-being (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025). For example, the recently developed "Athlete Clinical Mental Health (ACMH) Certification" (Certified Clinical Sports Social Work Institute, 2025) includes a program to educate social workers about the needs of athletes who operate in competitive sports. Athletes are often provided with resources (i.e., physical, social, and emotional) to address problems such as anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. These can come in many forms, such as counselors, sport psychologists, and, more recently, sport social workers.

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Beyond individual interventions targeting athletes, the profession of social work is increasingly positioning itself to support athletic environments in more systematic ways. Schools of social work in the United States and internationally are beginning to provide specialized training, field placements, and research opportunities focused on sport and performance settings (University of Kentucky College of Social Work, n.d.; University of Central Lancashire, n.d.). These programs reflect a growing recognition that sport, including coaching, is increasingly important in areas such as health, equity, and justice. In parallel, governing bodies such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association have issued mental health best-practice guidelines (NCAA, 2021) that emphasize the responsibility of institutions to support the well-being of all stakeholders, including coaches. International organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (Reardon et al., 2019) and FIFA (World Health Organization, 2021) have also begun to highlight mental health as a universal concern in sport, not one limited to athletes alone. Positioning sport social work within this broader professional and institutional landscape underscores its potential as a vital partner in reimagining how coaches can and need to be supported.

The growing field of sport social work is uniquely positioned to help address this gap. However, we recognize a need for collaboration due to the complexity of the domain (i.e., in an intersection between social work, sport, and coaching). Social workers are professionals trained to intervene at the intersection of individuals and systems (Oliver, 2013). Hartman-Shea et al. (2011) concluded that the roles of social workers include “counseling professionals, facilitators of communication, and resource agents” (p.143). Moreover, those who foray into the sporting arena in support of athletes can play an equally pivotal role in providing coaches with the necessary support to maintain their mental and emotional health. The skills and frameworks employed by social workers (e.g., trauma-informed care and cognitive therapies) are well-suited to the challenges head coaches face. These challenges include organizational isolation, public scrutiny, and the immense pressure to perform, which can lead to mental health issues like burnout (DeFreese et al., 2022; Hjälm et al., 2006), anxiety (Lundkvist et al., 2014), and depression (Griffin et al., 2025; Pearson & Baghurst, 2020).

Unfortunately, sports coaches, particularly head coaches, do not receive the same levels of support as athletes. Head coaches face similar stressors, yet are frequently tasked with dealing with and overcoming issues independently. This is a significant concern with existing approaches and systems that do not support head coaches when working in high-performance sport environments. This sentiment is perhaps best expressed by Griffin et al. (2025), who stated, “Organizations should also create opportunities for the coach to spend time with family to improve their work-life balance, which has been reported as one of the most significant stressors for collegiate coaches” (p. 2).

From an ethical perspective, we suggest that coaches’ mental health and well-being needs should be treated with the same urgency and gravity as those of the athletes they serve. High-performance sport environments are often synonymous with individuals needing high levels of character, resilience, grit, and confidence (Lorenz et al., 2013). However, these desirable characteristics are also problematic as they can lead to burnout and other issues over time when the pressure becomes too much, or the individual does not have the resources necessary to cope with it (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020). Therefore, we suggest that the stigma around emotional vulnerability in coaching needs to be challenged. Coaches also deserve access to resources that

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help them manage the pressures of their roles and enable them to practice ethically, sustainably, and at a high level over time.

The Problems for Head Coaches

While elite sports competitions/leagues (e.g., National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Ice Hockey League (NHL), National Football League (NFL), and Premier League (UK Soccer)) present some of the most high-pressure environments for head coaches, it is important to recognize that the stressors they face are not exclusive to these leagues. Indeed, collegiate, school, and club-level head coaches are equally likely to deal with consistent “noise” from stakeholders such as sponsors, owners, fans, parents, and recruiters (Baghurst & Parish, 2022). High-performance teams across all sports, regardless of the level of competition, are subject to a variety of similar (and yet also different) expectations, such as performance outcomes that drive job security, public image, and revenue (Altfeld et al., 2015; Van Mullem, 2015). These pressures result in environments where head coaches’ mental and emotional health is viewed as secondary to winning.

Head coaches in these environments have a unique set of responsibilities. Unlike athletes, they are responsible for managing not only the team’s performance but also its culture, interpersonal dynamics, and often the personal issues of the athletes they lead. These multiple responsibilities often place coaches in what could be conceived as a “vulnerable” position, where their own emotional and mental health is routinely overlooked and certainly not checked by others in their professional sphere. Indeed, it could be argued that the head coach is responsible for everyone else working for them.

Who, then, is responsible for the head coach’s well-being? Head coaches have no “natural” support system from above. For example, owners of clubs and franchises can and frequently do make decisions about hiring and firing the head coach (Frick, 2018), so why would a head coach want to confide in owners, general managers, or athletic directors? We acknowledge that spouses and perhaps social connections will offer support, yet these are complex and are as likely to be a stressor as a form of support (Baghurst et al., 2025).

In recent literature on stress in coaching, Griffin et al. (2025) reported the stressors and coping mechanisms of assistant NBA coaches. They found that coaches experienced high levels of stress, feared failure, and that families had the potential to moderate stress levels, though they did not always do so. Additionally, head coaches from minority backgrounds face compounded stressors. Studies have shown that minority coaches often experience additional scrutiny and bias, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and mental fatigue (Cunningham, 2021; Robinson, 2023).

Although Griffin and colleagues studied assistant coaches at the professional level, it is reasonable to assume that head coaching roles are even more demanding (or at least have different demands) due to the lack of “upward” support systems (Myers et al., 2006). Head coaches are frequently isolated in the upper echelons of leadership with limited avenues for receiving emotional support or sharing their own struggles. As William Shakespeare (n.d.) stated, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (Henry IV, Part 2). This hierarchical isolation makes it even more crucial for support systems to be available to head coaches, whether through internal organizational structures or possibly external interventions. These challenges are

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multifaceted and complex, intersecting several disciplines (e.g., psychology, coaching, and social work). However, it further highlights the need for targeted support structures for head coaches in high-performance sport.

While the struggles of head coaches can appear to be an individual issue, they are systemic. When coaches experience burnout, anxiety, or depression, the effects extend beyond the individual to athletes, support staff, and the broader organization. Coaches who are unsupported may struggle to maintain healthy team cultures, manage conflict effectively, or model sustainable practices of well-being. For example, Guerrero-Calderón et al. (2021) found that professional soccer coaches at risk of losing their jobs increased their athletes' training intensities. Rausch and colleagues (2025) noted that coaches may pass the pressure they experience directly to their athletes.

Conversely, when coaches receive adequate support, it can positively impact the health of athletes, the strength of organizational cohesion, and the ethical nature of the environment (Adiloğulları et al., 2025). This connection highlights why addressing coaches' needs should be considered both a moral imperative and a practical strategy for sustaining excellence in high-performance sport.

What Support Exists for Head Coaches?

Existing coaching literature prioritizes the visible aspects of coaching, such as leadership, strategy, and performance, while not attending to the less visible, but equally significant, emotional and psychological labor. The pressure to always be available, composed, and result-oriented leaves little room for coaches to address their own mental health needs. Simply put, failing to attend to coaches' mental and emotional well-being is at best problematic and harmful to both the coaches themselves, the teams they lead, and the organization for which they work (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020).

The recent developments of dedicated mental health services represent a significant and positive step forward. Notably, the Boston Celtics recently (2025) advertised a position for a "Director of Mind Health & Wellness." The job description included developing and curating resources for on-demand access to mental health and mental skills content for players, coaches, and staff (NBA, 2025). In Australia, the Australian Institute of Sport has launched a "Coach Wellbeing Hub," aimed at supporting and empowering high-performance coaches; it helps them manage personal wellbeing by providing support, knowledge, and development opportunities to navigate their personal and professional lives (Davoren, 2025). Similarly, the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) has taken proactive steps by forming an external Mental Health Taskforce. This initiative was designed to support Team USA athletes and the coaches, officials, and administrators who serve them by addressing mental health concerns and promoting sustained, holistic well-being throughout the athlete's journey (USOPC, 2020).

In some sporting spaces, especially at the higher echelons of sport, the landscape is starting to shift, which is encouraging. However, the examples shared are situated in leagues with significant financial resources. For coaches working as professionals in "lower leagues" (yet still highly competitive), there remains a notable lack of structured, professional mental health services specifically designed for them. While coaches may have access to peer support networks or coach developers, these are often informal, inconsistent in quality, and not always

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effective. While it is acknowledged that peer support or even mentorship can be helpful for coaches (Loughead & Hardy, 2005), these rely heavily on their personal connections and are not a reliable or sustainable source of care. Furthermore, while valuable, coach developers are not trained mental health professionals; they can signpost coaches toward resources but cannot intervene in clinical or complex mental health situations (Quick & Baghurst, 2025).

Ferreira et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review highlighting the benefits of social support and networks for coaches, which include improved performance and a higher quality of life. However, in many cases, coaches are expected to, or make an inaccurate assumption, that they should “tough it out” or lead by example, to display resilience for the team to follow (Aronen et al., 2021). This is especially true when their team is on a losing streak, has been hit by several injuries, fans are calling for the coach to be fired, and players are upset that they are not receiving enough playing time. However, even when their team is winning, unrealistic expectations exist. For example, in the docuseries “Untold: Swamp Kings,” Urban Meyer, the former head football coach at the University of Florida, spoke about how he felt after winning the National Championship in 2008. “We won two national championships out of the three years. This was an expectation now, an expectation we have to win it next year, and then we have to win it the year after... Anything less than winning a national title, you’re a failure.” (Lemoncelli, 2023).

This “resilience at all costs” is not a badge of honor. Operating in this fashion is not always sustainable and can be, at times, damaging for coaches. The psychological toll of consistently managing their own well-being and the needs of their athletes can quickly become overwhelming (Baghurst, 2024). In a recent example of this, collegiate basketball head coach Josh Schertz described the traumatic experiences of coaching through years of health issues (Moore, 2025). His coaching was severely affected, including sleeping through games, forgetfulness, confusion, skipping office hours, and being unable to drive.

Outside of his home, he kept almost everyone in the dark. Schertz confided in his athletic director, the school president and DeBusk, but he let no one else around the program know how sick he was, and he never missed a practice. “When you’re coaching a team, the last thing you want to do is have the players thinking about or worrying about anything other than what they need to do to play well and to be successful,” he says. “Nobody plays well distracted. And the last thing you want to do as a coach is be a distraction to your own team... I put a lot of it on myself, because I wasn’t able to be for them how I should have been,” Schertz says.

The Call for Support

The purpose of this commentary is to advocate that we can and must do better for head coaches. While significant progress has been made in addressing the mental health needs of athletes, head coaches remain an overlooked population. The rapidly developing field of sport social work is essential in bridging this gap, providing coaches with the support and resources they need to perform their roles effectively and sustainably. This is not a criticism of organizations focused on athlete well-being, but rather a call to expand the scope of support to include coaches facing ongoing challenges.

Quick and Baghurst (2025) shared their experiences as coach developers and highlighted problems shared by the coaches they worked with. These included pressure to win, appeasing

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management, and micro politics. Worryingly so, these issues are often faced in silence and with perceived limited options. Many coaches have shared their concerns about the toll their roles have taken on their mental, physical, and emotional health (e.g., balancing family obligations, lack of sleep, weight gain, poor diet, depression). Some coaches are often reluctant to seek help due to fears of being perceived as weak or unable to handle the job demands. This stigma can prevent coaches from accessing the support they need, and it perpetuates a cycle of isolation and distress, resulting in coaches leaving their roles (Slowiak et al., 2025). As we have outlined, sports coaching is an emotionally and psychologically demanding profession that requires not just technical expertise but also an offering of social support when needed. It exists for athletes; it can also exist for coaches. To address the issues that we have explained, we propose that a collaborative approach is required.

Practical Recommendations

To begin, sports organizations must engage in honest self-reflection. The first (critical) step is determining how supported head coaches feel and what kind of help they need. Bringing in an unbiased, external sport social worker to facilitate these conversations could provide valuable insights into the emotional needs of coaches and the gaps in existing support structures (Quick & Baghurst, 2025).

Second, creating organized communities of practice, where head coaches can share experiences and provide mutual support, would also be a positive step forward. We propose that establishing these networks, where few currently exist, would allow coaches to discuss their unique pressures and provide an avenue for emotional connection and solution-focused conversations. For example, Baghurst (2025) shared the story of a coach who received support from another coach once they overcame the hurdle of seeing them as a competitor but as a colleague going through similar challenges.

Third, creating formalized mental health policies for coaches, with dedicated resources for their psychological well-being, would institutionalize support and ensure that coaches' mental health is prioritized. In their recent study, Griffin et al. (2025) noted the lack of organizational support for coaches' mental health in professional sports, when it was readily available for athletes. Baghurst et al. (2024) proposed the inclusion of an "Athletic Consul" in sports organizations. This individual would be responsible for supporting all coaches, but specifically head coaches, in serving as a conduit of information and being a mentor and advisor.

Finally, we contend that there is a gap in the existing provision for coaches and head coaches. We urge those responsible for developing coaching certification and training programs to include support for coaches' own mental health, not just training on how to support athletes' mental health. As a start, these could focus on aspects such as strategies for emotional regulation (Davis & Davis, 2016), stress management (Olusoga et al., 2009), and resilience-building (Booth & Neill, 2017). Significantly, these proposed topics are merely the start of a long process. Further discussions and collaboration are needed between coaches, organizations, academics, and those in the sport social work field. Embedding this training into coach education frameworks would equip coaches with the tools they need to manage the demands of their roles healthily and sustainably.

Conclusion

Head coaches in high-performance sport face unique levels of pressure and emotional strain. While there is a growing suite of support mechanisms for athletes, the same does not exist for coaches. Therefore, we suggest there is scope for integrating sport social workers into coaching environments, creating structured support systems, and reframing the narrative around resilience. This is as much a practical problem as it is an ethical one. This would ensure that coaches are better supported and equipped in their roles. Enacting the recommendations outlined in this commentary would not only result in improving coaches' well-being but also lead to the likelihood of enhanced coach and athlete performances and organizational stability.

The implications of this work extend beyond coaches themselves. Athletic directors, policy makers, governing bodies, and schools of social work all play a role in shaping environments where coaches operate. Put simply, it is more effective to address problems (e.g., policies, procedures, and organizations) rather than treat symptoms (e.g., burnout, depression, etc.). With their training in systems thinking, advocacy, and mental health care, social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between individual needs and institutional structures. Therefore, supporting head coaches is an ethical obligation and an opportunity to foster sustainable leadership, enhance athlete welfare, and promote healthier sporting cultures globally.

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