

National Basketball Association Assistant Coaches' Perceptions of Family as a Source of Stress and Coping in Elite Professional Coaching

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Elite coaches operate within high-pressure environments where job demands often conflict with personal and family responsibilities. Using the Work–Home Resources model, we examined 20 National Basketball Association male assistant coaches' perceptions of family as a source of stress and as a coping mechanism within the work–home context of elite professional coaching. Semistructured interviews were conducted and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were constructed: (a) competing role demands and the erosion of presence, (b) family as a source of strain through structural and relational pressures, and (c) family as a stabilizing resource in an unstable occupational context. Participants reported emotional and logistical challenges linked to travel, unpredictable schedules, and job insecurity. While parenting and financial responsibilities intensified stress, spouses and children were also identified as sources of emotional grounding. Findings highlight the complexity of family in elite coaching and the need for organizational policies to support coach well-being.

Keywords: elite coaching, burnout, mental health, work-family interface, role conflict

Elite and professional coaches work in high-pressure environments marked by public scrutiny, irregular hours, extensive travel, employment insecurity, and performance expectations tied to wins and losses (Altfeld et al., 2015; Coy & Masterson, 2007; Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Griffin et al., 2025; Olusoga et al., 2009). These demands often extend into coaches' personal and family lives through time away from home, emotional fatigue, disrupted routines, and difficulty maintaining work-family boundaries (Graham & Dixon, 2017; Higham et al., 2023; Joncheray et al., 2019; Rumbold et al., 2023). Thus, coach stress is best understood not only as an individual psychological response to job demands but also as a relational and contextual issue shaped by the interaction between professional responsibilities and family life.

This issue is particularly salient in elite professional sport, where coaches must sustain high performance while managing unstable schedules, limited job security, and intense organizational demands. Persistent and overwhelming stress can lead to serious consequences, including burnout, which occurs when repeated or extreme stressors go unaddressed (Kelley & Baghurst, 2009; Pearson & Baghurst, 2020). In high-performance coaching, stressors such as low salary,

unrealistic performance expectations, limited control, and time away from home can precipitate harmful outcomes across multiple domains (Frey, 2007; Mazerolle et al., 2008; Olusoga et al., 2009; Pearson et al., 2020; Tekano et al., 2011). These outcomes are generally classified as psychological (e.g., exhaustion, frustration, and anxiety); physical (e.g., drug addiction, high blood pressure, and weight gain); societal/personal (e.g., juggling personal relationships and perceived poor work–life balance); and work-related (e.g., diminished professional effectiveness or role satisfaction; Griffin et al., 2025; Thelwell et al., 2008). Importantly, they often reflect cumulative pressures beyond the workplace, highlighting the need to consider how stress is shaped through work–family interactions.

The Work–Home Resources (W-HR) model (Demerouti et al., 2012) provides a useful framework for understanding these interactions. In occupational psychology, stress is broadly conceptualized as an imbalance between demands and available resources across interconnected domains such as work and home (Allen et al., 2000; Demerouti et al., 2012; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hammer et al., 2005). The W-HR model explains how demands in one domain can deplete personal resources and impair functioning in another. In contrast, resources, such as emotional or practical family support, can buffer demands and promote well-being. This framework is well-suited to examining elite coaching because it highlights the bidirectional interaction between work and home and shows how family and work resources may shape coaches' occupational stress (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Frone et al., 1992).

Stress in Elite Coaching and the National Basketball Association

Coaches in elite and professional domains face distinct job demands, including community visibility and evaluation based on wins and losses (Altfeld et al., 2015; Coy & Masterson, 2007; Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Overton, 2005; Schroeder, 2010; Van Mullem, 2015). They must also work under pressure, make quick decisions, manage

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challenges, and respond to expectations from their organization, media, and fans (Hodgson et al., 2017; Pereira & Ramos, 2015; Zillgitt, 2018). These demands often extend beyond the workplace, influencing home life through time constraints, fatigue, and emotional strain.

These stressors are especially evident in elite coaching contexts, such as professional basketball, where high-performance demands and occupational pressures create a complex stress environment. In addition to general coaching stressors, National Basketball Association (NBA) assistant coaches experience extensive travel, long and unpredictable schedules, and pressure to retain employment in a highly competitive environment (Griffin et al., 2025; Young, 2020). Research on coaches more broadly also shows that professional demands can negatively affect personal domains, including work–life balance and well-being (Higham et al., 2023; Rumbold et al., 2023).

Stress and coping among elite sport coaches have received increasing scholarly attention, including systematic reviews and empirical studies of stressors, coping, burnout, well-being, and work–family tensions across sports and coaching populations (Baldock et al., 2021, 2022; Kegelaers et al., 2021; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Loftus et al., 2022; Norris et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2021; Olusoga et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2022; Sarkar & Hilton, 2020). This literature shows that stress and burnout occur across coaching levels and that family is often salient in coaches' stress experiences, particularly through time demands, role conflict, travel, and the emotional strain of sustaining family relationships alongside high-performance work (Baldock et al., 2021, 2022; Kenttä et al., 2020; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Loftus et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022). However, less is known about how family functions simultaneously as both a source of stress and a coping resource within the specific occupational context of NBA assistant coaching. Thus, although existing research establishes the relevance of family within elite coach stress, a more detailed understanding is needed of how work–family interactions and contextualized coping strategies operate in this professional coaching environment.

With only 30 teams, NBA coaching jobs are scarce and fiercely contested. Griffin et al. (2025) reported that coaches are under immense pressure to retain their jobs. Although head coaches may serve as the face of the team and set the overall vision and culture (McCullick et al., 2020), Young (2020) explained that coaches, particularly assistant coaches, are responsible for team culture, gameplay reviews, media responsibilities, meetings, player concerns, and negotiations with a player's agent. These duties provide partial but useful insight into the demands assistant coaches must balance. Combined with limited autonomy and public scrutiny, these responsibilities create stressors that are particularly salient for assistant coaches relative to other professional coaching roles.

An assistant coach may also be challenged by the power differential with the head coach (Griffin et al., 2025; Zakrajsek et al., 2019), which can heighten stress. Disagreements over coaching philosophy or tactics, for example, can create friction and affect assistant coaches' job security and team success. One collegiate basketball assistant coach describes coaching as:

One of the professions you enter knowing that there will come a day when you can be fired for not performing, or your staff can be let go because your head coach is not performing, or perhaps has done something out of character and gotten into trouble. When that happens, as an assistant coach, your life is directly impacted . . . It was completely out of my control, 100 percent. (Sutton, 2025)

This statement illustrates low perceived control, a key factor in the transactional model of stress and coping. When individuals

perceive limited control over stressors, their appraisal of demands as overwhelming increases, and their coping options may be constrained (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Linking perceived control to stress theory provides a theoretical rationale for examining how assistant coaches manage occupational stress in high-stakes, hierarchical environments.

Mechanisms for Coping With Stress

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as the “cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction” (p. 843). Contemporary perspectives extend this view by emphasizing how coping is shaped not only by individual appraisal processes but also by the availability and exchange of resources across life domains (Demerouti et al., 2012) and how these processes are embedded in occupational contexts where work–life balance and spillover are central (Kossek et al., 2011). For example, if a coach loses a key player to injury, they may appraise that loss as a threat to success, leading to anxiety or fear about the future. Coping involves strategies that help manage these thoughts and emotions (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

Social support from family and friends can also aid coping. Cohen and Wills (1985) proposed that social support functions through main and buffering effects. The main effect suggests that supportive relationships contribute to well-being and health, whereas the buffering effect suggests that support mitigates the adverse consequences of stress; within a W-HR perspective, such support is a key resource that buffers demands and facilitates functioning across work and home domains (Demerouti et al., 2012). When support matches the stressor, it can reduce its negative impact. In coaching, family members who provide targeted support, such as practical assistance with domestic responsibilities, emotional reassurance after competition-related challenges, or constructive feedback that reinforces a coach's sense of competence, can help manage occupational stress. This perspective aligns with occupational research showing that family support can mitigate work stress and facilitate adaptation (Frone et al., 1992). It also illustrates how the W-HR model frames family as a resource that mitigates work demands, supporting both occupational performance and personal well-being.

Individual coping mechanisms are also common. Pearson and Baghurst (2020) described problem-solving strategies (e.g., prioritizing, time management, and skill acquisition); emotion-focused strategies (e.g., mindfulness, reframing negative thoughts, and seeking social support); and avoidance-focused strategies (e.g., hobbies and temporary distraction; Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Levy et al., 2009). Each has distinct functions: Problem-focused coping addresses stressors directly, emotion-focused coping manages emotional responses, and avoidance-focused coping provides temporary relief. However, focusing only on individual coping may overlook the relational and structural conditions that shape stress, particularly work–family interactions (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Rumbold et al., 2023). Organizations can also implement stress-reduction strategies, which benefits stakeholders because replacing personnel can be costly and time-consuming (Dohrmann, 2011).

Since work–life balance is one of the most significant stressors for coaches (Joncheray et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2020), organizations might consider ways to enable coaches to spend more time with their families. From a W-HR perspective, such initiatives are important because they influence resource availability and the extent to which demands spill over between work and home.

Examples from other work sectors include flexible scheduling, mental health resources, family-inclusive policies, and communication and relationship-management training (Kossek et al., 2011; West et al., 2016), all of which are commonly discussed in the occupational work–family literature as strategies for mitigating spillover and conflict. Coaches’ experiences illustrate the challenges of work–life balance and burnout, supporting the relevance of such organizational approaches in sport. These programs are designed to reduce stress and foster resilience, engagement, and retention.

The Role of Family as a Contributor to and Moderator of Stress

Within the sports coaching literature, several studies have illustrated that family can be a source of stress (Graham & Dixon, 2017; Joncheray et al., 2019; Thelwell et al., 2008). Family relationships can significantly influence coaches’ stress experiences and their ability to manage the demands of their professional roles. For example, Bruening and Dixon (2007) found that family dynamics played a central role in how coaches, particularly mothers, experienced and managed work–family conflict. Supportive spouses and flexible family arrangements reduced role strain and associated stress, whereas limited support amplified fatigue, guilt, and emotional tension.

These findings reinforce the W-HR model, which highlights that demands in one domain (e.g., long working hours, travel, and job insecurity) may deplete personal resources and impair functioning in another. Conversely, resources (e.g., emotional and instrumental family support) may enhance well-being and buffer stress. The model therefore emphasizes the dual nature of family involvement, showing how family can both intensify and alleviate occupational stress.

This evidence suggests that family is a competing factor in coaches’ jobs, often producing tension and guilt (Graham & Dixon, 2017). Conversely, Norris et al. (2020) demonstrated that family members form part of coaches’ broader social support networks, offering emotional reassurance and instrumental assistance during heavy workload or competition. Research outside sport also reports the benefits of family-based social support (Pittman & Lloyd, 1988). Taken together, these findings suggest that family may simultaneously function as both a demand and a resource within a broader work–home system.

Elite coaches are required to make sacrifices that are often inherent to the role (Griffin et al., 2025; Olusoga et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2024). They also rely on families for social support, comfort, burnout prevention, and stress reduction (Ferreira et al., 2024). From a W-HR perspective, this relationship is dynamic, with family contributing to both resource depletion and replenishment depending on situational demands. Existing research has yet to fully explore NBA assistant coaches’ perceptions of family as both a source of stress and a coping mechanism within the work–home context of elite professional coaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine NBA assistant coaches’ perceptions of family as both a source of stress and a coping mechanism, highlighting the interplay between work and home resources in shaping occupational well-being.

Method

This study adopted the interpretivist paradigm (Williams, 2000). This approach was selected to capture NBA assistant coaches’ perceptions of family as both a source of stress and a coping

mechanism within the work–home context of elite professional coaching. Consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, the study assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and shaped by context, rather than discovered as a single objective truth (Crotty, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A relativist ontology further underpinned the study, acknowledging that there are multiple, context-dependent realities and that coaches’ experiences of stress and family are likely to differ according to their personal, professional, and relational circumstances (Lincoln et al., 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These assumptions informed the use of semistructured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, both of which are well aligned with interpretivist qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants

This study was part of a larger project on stress and burnout in coaching (see Griffin et al., 2025). Griffin et al. considered the holistic effects of stress and burnout in elite coaching and how coaches cope; this study specifically examined stress and coping as they pertained to family and work dynamics. The two manuscripts were developed from distinct research questions and analytic foci. Griffin et al. examined NBA assistant coaches’ broader occupational stress, burnout, and coping experiences across the coaching role. In contrast, the present study examined coaches’ perceptions of family as both a source of stress and a coping mechanism within the work–home context of elite professional coaching. Although both manuscripts drew from the same larger interview project, the present analysis was limited to data segments on family, parenting, spousal relationships, household responsibilities, financial obligations, and family-based support as they related to family life. These data were analyzed separately to address the present study’s family-specific aim and to develop themes centered on the work–home interface. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling to include NBA assistant coaches with direct experience relevant to the study. Participants were selected from the pool of assistant coaches under contract in the NBA who had completed at least one entire season (October to April) at the time of data collection. Of the approximately 90 assistant coaches in the NBA, 21 were invited to participate, with 20 accepting, representing 10 of the 30 teams. All participants were male and identified as African American ($n = 11$, 55%), White ($n = 8$, 40%), or Hispanic ($n = 1$, 5%). Participants were, on average, 43.9 years of age and had been assistant coaches in the NBA for an average of 8.6 years. Concerning education, one was a high school graduate, 11 had a bachelor’s degree, and eight had a master’s degree.

Instruments

Data were collected via video conferencing, using one-on-one semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses that reflected participants’ experiences and perceptions (Charmaz, 2014). Fourteen open-ended questions, developed from previous literature on stress, burnout, and coaching strategies in elite coaching, addressed a variety of topics. For example, questions included “You have mentioned that [stressor] is a source of stress for you. How do you cope or deal with this stress? Has anyone or anything specifically helped you develop the coping skill?” and “Can you describe your main source of support in your role as an assistant coach?” The interviewer had extensive experience as a player and coach in the NBA and followed up with probes when necessary. For example, questions such as “Can you explain that further?” and “What do you mean by that?” were used.

Procedure

Following Concordia University Chicago institutional review board approval and a pilot study with one assistant coach, 21 prospective participants known to the primary researcher were contacted via email or phone, and 20 agreed to participate. Before data collection, they completed the informed consent form electronically and returned it via email. Participants were contacted via email or phone, depending on the individual's accessibility and availability. This flexible approach was necessary to maximize response rates among busy NBA assistant coaches. Using multiple recruitment methods is well-supported in qualitative research, as it allows researchers to reach participants with differing communication preferences and schedules while maintaining the purposive nature of the sample (Robinson, 2014).

Participants received the interview questions electronically at least 48 hr in advance, and a mutually convenient time for the interview was scheduled. Interview questions were provided to participants in advance to allow for reflection and preparation, a process supported in sport-qualitative research for enhancing the depth and clarity of responses (Jones et al., 2013). All interviews were conducted virtually and audio-recorded via Zoom over a 5-month period. The interviews lasted an average of $M = 67.76$ min ($SD = 9.01$) with a range of 45–120 min. A secure transcription service professionally transcribed all interviews. Prior to transcription, all identifying information was removed or replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were not provided with transcripts for member checking due to the time-sensitive schedules of NBA assistant coaches, which made follow-up impractical and, in many cases, impossible. To ensure accuracy, the interviewer reviewed all transcripts both before and after professional transcription to confirm that participant responses were captured correctly.

Data Analysis

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, TB, upon reasonable request. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and develop interview themes using a six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity and flexibility in generating themes. Phase 1 consisted of data familiarization that involved rereading the transcriptions to gain a sense of immersion in the data. Phase 2 involved open coding using an inductive approach, which included highlighting sentences and keywords. In this stage, we selected the salient data extracts for further analysis. Examples of codes included "spouse," "wife," "kids," "money," and "conflict." Phase 3 involved pattern coding, where initial codes were grouped to identify higher-level patterns and relationships within the data (Jones et al., 2013). During this phase, several conversations within the research team took place to refine these categories. For example, codes involving children were grouped. However, it was initially unclear what unified these data extracts (e.g., the term "children" was mentioned extensively by some coaches but very briefly by others, depending on the context of the conversation), highlighting the iterative nature of pattern coding in developing meaningful themes. In the fourth phase, the research team refined and defined the themes through an iterative process. Initially, the lead researcher developed preliminary themes for the generated codes, which were then collaboratively discussed with the team to clarify ambiguities and finalize the overarching thematic structure. Phase 5 involved assigning labels to the themes, using titles that accurately reflected their meanings and conceptualizations. As an example of this process, the research team noted

and agreed that the data from the theme involving children suggested that children served as a source of supportive grounding for the coaches. Consequently, this theme was titled "children provide perspective." Additionally, this stage facilitated the identification of appropriate, relevant patterns aligned with the study's purpose. Phase 6 involved writing and presenting the findings. In this phase, the previously identified themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative to clearly communicate participants' experiences and the insights gained from the study. Data are presented under the theme headings generated throughout the process.

Trustworthiness

This study draws upon Tracy's (2010) markers of quality research as guiding principles rather than fixed criteria, consistent with an interpretivist and reflexive approach to qualitative inquiry. First, the topic is worthy, as all coaches have families to consider, and there remain opportunities for further exploration. Second, the research encompasses a substantial portion of the sample population. Sincerity is demonstrated through the comprehensive presentation of research methods and the transparency of the research team's engagement with the data. The volume of quotations enables a rich, detailed description of participants' perspectives, thereby enhancing credibility. Rather than applying these markers as a checklist, they were engaged with reflexively throughout the research process, allowing for flexibility in how rigor was conceptualized and enacted. This approach aligns with reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes researcher subjectivity, transparency, and the coconstruction of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Finally, careful consideration was given to ensuring that the research aims were addressed through methods congruent with the study's stated philosophical position.

Positionality

The research team consisted of an NBA assistant coach, a professor in sports coaching, and an assistant professor in sports coaching with expertise in qualitative research. To maintain reflexivity and minimize potential bias, the team engaged in ongoing discussions and collaborative reflection throughout the study. For example, the researcher who was also an assistant coach at the time of data collection was challenged to question potential biases and assumptions about the data based on their own experiences in the role. These discussions functioned similarly to the notion of a critical friend, where team members provide constructive feedback and challenge interpretations to enhance reflexivity (Cousin, 2009).

Results

Three primary themes were developed from the data: (a) competing role demands and the erosion of presence, (b) family as a source of strain through structural and relational pressures, and (c) family as a stabilizing resource in an unstable occupational context. Each is presented along with the corresponding subthemes that further illustrate and elaborate on the overarching themes. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of participants, places, and organizations, and simple grammatical corrections have been made for clarity.

Theme 1: Competing Role Demands and the Erosion of Presence

Participants described a persistent tension between the demands of their coaching roles and their desire to be physically and emotionally present for their families. These accounts consistently

highlighted that stress arose primarily from occupational demands rather than general life stress.

Rather than reflecting a simple issue of work–life balance, these accounts illustrated an ongoing negotiation between competing role demands, where time, attention, and energy were continually allocated at a perceived cost to one domain or the other. This dynamic often led to feelings of guilt, frustration, and a sense of compromised presence in family life, due to the high demands and unpredictability of coaching responsibilities. Two subthemes were constructed: (a) allocating time for family and (b) job expectations and uncertainty.

Subtheme 1: Allocating Time for Family

Time management was a significant issue for participants, who struggled to balance the time spent with their families against the demands of their coaching roles. John found it particularly challenging: “My biggest stress, without question, is around the balance of my family and my job. And that’s been a long-time stressor from the very beginnings of working in basketball and continues almost game by game and trip by trip through my career.” Wayne said balancing family and coaching was “90% of my stress.”

Participants described a recurring tension between the demands of their coaching roles and their desire to be present for their families. Sendry illustrated this strain:

I can either, I don’t know, watch an extra game or take my kids to the park. And those are the only two things I can do because the day is full of a million other things [work-related]. That becomes a stressful experience.

Similarly, Art reflected on the emotional cost of being away from his children during key moments: “... especially when they were younger, there was always guilt and stress about not being around for their different activities, holidays, sicknesses, and needs; so, there’s always stress with that.” Marlon shared how he struggled to find time to spend with his wife:

So finding that time is difficult, and you’re looking two or three weeks ahead on the schedule, just trying to find a night where you might be able to have a nice dinner together or something like that.”

Subtheme 2: Job Expectations and Uncertainty

Participants expressed how the unpredictability of coaching careers interacted with family life, creating stress as they negotiated how work demands affected their roles as partners and parents. Sendry reflected on this tension of spending time with family, which takes away time from doing his job:

And usually I actually choose to take my kids to the park, but that then creates stress because then I’m saying, “Well, how will that be viewed? Was that acceptable? Is that going to impact my long-term job future?” ... This job is not conducive to marriage or being a father. It just isn’t. So that is a big one that I grapple with all the time.

This statement illustrates the bidirectional influence between work and family: His decision to spend time with family creates stress amid job expectations, highlighting spillover between the two domains.

Graham similarly highlighted the ways occupational instability constrained family planning, noting, “That transitioned into not knowing where [daughter] should go to school ... because we

don’t know if we’re going to make it another year here.” His account demonstrates how occupational uncertainty intersects with family planning, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between work responsibilities and family priorities.

Collectively, these accounts highlight that stress arises not only from professional obligations but also from the reciprocal interaction between professional obligations and family roles. Coaches must continually navigate how work expectations influence family life and how family needs influence decisions about their work, exemplifying the dynamic work–family interface.

Theme 2: Family as a Source of Strain Through Structural and Relational Pressures

While family was often discussed as a meaningful aspect of coaches’ lives, it also emerged as a significant source of stress shaped by both structural demands and relational dynamics. Financial uncertainty, extended time away, and the demands placed on spouses and children contributed to tensions within the family unit. These pressures interacted with the occupational realities of elite coaching, creating compounded stress that extended across domains. In addition, they were exacerbated by the occupational realities of elite coaching, including travel, long hours, and job insecurity. This theme was divided into four subthemes: (a) finances and fear for the future, (b) time away on the road, (c) work–spouse tension, and (d) parenting and intrafamily conflict.

Subtheme 1: Finances and Fear for the Future

Although there may be the assumption that all NBA coaches are well-paid, coaches reported that financial stressors and job insecurity created worry about the future. Blake admitted that he was well-paid in his role as an assistant, but because of the salary attached to his role, he felt his job was continually at risk, as there is “a lot of backstabbing, to try to advance, to try to keep the job, you forget about that. That’s a lot of stress.” The stress Blake describes is inherently occupational, reflecting both career instability and competitive pressures within professional coaching. Graham noted that moving to the NBA was a pay cut for him and his wife.

I guess it was the financial stress of actually entering the NBA was the first thing ... and basically giving up a successful business, and going to the NBA, taking a pay cut, and then finally having Heather and the kids move to Memphis. It was the stress of losing money on the house, the stress of Heather losing her tenure job, which she had, which also provided a very good pension in Los Angeles.

Some coaches had played professionally and earned significant income before coaching, while others noted that they had invested their money wisely and saved for the future. However, not all had, and Graham admitted experiencing stress due to being “broke in the NBA and basically negative most days ... just negative in the accounts.” This financial stress was experienced not only individually but also influenced family stability and household decision-making, illustrating the interplay between occupational uncertainty and family well-being. This stress manifested in ways that shaped family planning and the emotional climate at home. According to Todd:

So the financial part is stressful, more so from a family standpoint than just myself, I would say. And it might even be different if I had been in the league or whatever for X amount of years, and I had a ton of money saved up, and it was

great. But this is only my second year, so it's still like, "Well, how are we going to get out of this situation? Or how are we going to make the most out of it?"

Subtheme 2: Time Away on the Road

Time away and the feeling of being unable to help were among the most discussed stressors among participants. For example, Tom described struggling with "the family stress of not being there all the time for them. And then dealing with They become teenagers, and they think they're grown, and she has to deal with that. So then that comes, it falls upon me. And there's not much I can do a lot of times because I'm not there." John shared how he struggled to be present for events when traveling so often:

I have a wife and three kids, seven, five, and one. And like I said, the job is seven days a week, and I forgot to mention earlier, there's a ton of travel in the job, in the off-season and the season. So you're probably on the road six months out of the year, and then even when you're home, you're in the office every single day. So you're constantly thinking about, "Hey, I got to get home to . . . I want to bring one of my kids to school, or I hope I can make it to one of their events if they have a soccer game, right?" Or, "Hey, I just came back from an eight-day road trip. I want to see my kids tonight, but I've got to work late."

Subtheme 3: Work–Spouse Tension

Participants frequently described how the demands of coaching interfered with their spousal relationships, leading to conflict, stress, and a decline in emotional and practical support at home. Tom noted the challenges of shared household responsibilities, stating that, "she's running a household, and she does things that I would want to do differently. And then that becomes a drawn-out discussion that I really don't want to have, and she doesn't want to have."

Adam elaborated on the isolation and pressure often experienced by spouses, noting how occupational demands could create tension and conflict within the marriage:

And then your wife, I mean, the wife's life is not easy because they stay alone, they stay on their own for a lot of time, they have to deal with daily issues, but sometimes when we are really into our season, it's hard to find that quality time, right? For a couple's life or family life.

Adam's reflection highlights that the limited shared time and competing priorities often led to frustration and disagreements, creating conflict over household responsibilities and family obligations, and illustrating how work demands spill over into marital tension. Marlon offered a particularly detailed reflection on the ongoing strain on spouse relationships created by the unpredictable and demanding nature of coaching work:

I think, for me, one of the biggest ones is that I'm constantly having to ask my wife for more. It's always There's always something coming next. We always think there's going to be a break when I can give her some downtime, or cover off for her, or something like that, and that never really seems to come in the way we expect it to. And so, she's obviously at home, without me, a lot of the time. And so, she has a lot more stress on her plate, and that just creates more stress in the household, because she doesn't have as much support from me as I'd like to provide. And then there's stress around the time

we get to spend together, like "What's the quantity that you get to spend together, but also, how good is the quality?" If I get to stay home after we've arrived from a late-night flight the next day, the quality of the time we might get to spend together We might have a couple of hours together, but I've got three or four hours sleep, and I'm not really listening to her as well as I could be, or interacting with her as well as I could be, and maybe not as attentive to helping out as I could be, because you're lacking some sleep at that point. So that's certainly quantity of time you'd spend together, and quality of time.

Subtheme 4: Parenting and Intrafamily Conflict

Parenting from afar created intrafamily conflict. This subtheme was the most discussed by participants. Cole described how the family dynamic is "tricky" because of being unable to "love on them and not being able to discipline them." Tyson struggled with his son because he was not available to help solve problems:

He's worse here in terms of his relationship with his mom, with my wife. And you could feel what was going on, right? You could feel it; feel it from him and feel it from her. It was long, long phone calls, where one was saying everything about the other, and you could feel that being so far away, there was not too much you could do because the next day they're together in the same home, and you aren't.

Tom described the back-and-forth pull of needing to be at home to help with family issues while being required to work often far away and for long periods. He explained:

So you hear two sides of the story, and then you're trying to decipher which side is really the real side. You know what I mean? You don't know how to take a side without getting in trouble with somebody, meaning my wife. That's stress. That's tough, man, because that's probably the worst part of my coping mechanism. That's hard for me to cope with because it's hard for me to communicate a lot of times with my wife about it, because she's super stressed out dealing with those kids. You know what I mean? So it becomes a fight. "I need you here." Obviously, I've got to work. So it becomes a combative conversation. So that's one of those things that I haven't mastered or figured out. I would love to try to figure that out, to be honest, not try, but to figure that out, but it's difficult to be honest with you, because as a man, you always look like you should be in control of the house, but I'm only there five months out of the year.

Theme 3: Family as a Stabilizing Resource in an Unstable Occupational Context

Despite the challenges described, participants consistently identified family as a critical source of emotional support and stability within an otherwise volatile professional environment. Family relationships provided reassurance, perspective, and a sense of grounding, helping coaches manage occupational stress and maintain focus. These findings highlight the dual role of family within the broader work–home system, functioning as a resource that can buffer occupational demands and support well-being.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that their spouse served as a means of reducing stress, acting as an anchor point in what they described as an often chaotic work environment. Wayne said he could "Talk to her about anything. She builds me up when I need it," and "She reassures me that we're okay. She allows

me to be great at what I do because she's great at what she does, which is holding it down." When sharing who offered him the most support, Ryan said, "Definitely, my wife. That's a pretty clear-cut one for me. She's the one I talk to about everything; she's the one I bounce all the ideas off of." Sendry stated that his wife was "The first person I speak to" after a hard day, and "She's usually pretty positive. 'It's going to be okay, honey, and you're going to be all right.' You need to hear that from somebody. So that's my starting point: family." All of these examples illustrate that family support serves as a buffer specifically against work-related stressors in coaching.

Antonio expressed the comfort of doing his job with the support of a significant other. "Thankfully, I have my wife now, so I don't have to do this alone . . . you get a little bit of comfort knowing that you're not going through this alone, that there's another half to you." This was reiterated by Mario, who explained in detail the challenges of his job and how his wife understood and supported him:

You've got to have a great support family, like your wife and kids. They have to understand our job, because our job is so different. Your wife at home has to be able to understand that you're going to be traveling 70% of the time. You're going to miss the kids' basketball games. You won't be able to take the kids to school after a game. You're tired. "I've got to get some sleep." Do you know what I mean by that? That can be stressful, too, if you don't have somebody at home who understands exactly your job. I mean, support first is my wife . . . It's just having somebody who understands your job.

Not all participants had children, but those who did reported that, while children could be a stressor, they also helped the coach maintain perspective beyond their sport. For example, Fabian said, "We found her coming to games was actually helpful . . . even the drive home together is our time to connect." Wayne stated, "You can never have a bad day when you walk in the room with your kids." Jon found his son to be a "Great source of support. And even though he doesn't know he's doing it, he is doing it just by understanding Dad's schedule." In each case, children provide emotional resources that mitigate the occupational stress associated with intensive coaching responsibilities.

Discussion

We examined NBA assistant coaches' perceptions of family as both a source of stress and a coping mechanism, with particular attention to how work and family domains interact dynamically rather than independently. Grounded in the W-HR model (Demerouti et al., 2012), the present findings advance a more integrated conceptualization in which family simultaneously operates as both a demand and a resource within a dynamic system of resource loss and gain across domains, rather than occupying a single, static role.

The present findings extend prior research on elite coach stress by moving beyond identifying family as a stressor or support factor and examining how family operated simultaneously as both a demand and a resource within coaches' work-home systems. Previous studies have shown that family is implicated in coaches' stress through time demands, travel, role conflict, and relational strain while also providing emotional support and perspective (Baldock et al., 2021, 2022; Kenttä et al., 2020; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Loftus et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022).

Building on this work, the present study shows that among NBA assistant coaches, family-related stress and coping were not separate processes. Rather, family responsibilities, spousal relationships, parenting demands, financial concerns, and family support shifted across context, alternately depleting and replenishing resources. In this way, the findings illustrate how the interplay of work and family demands creates complex, bidirectional influences on coaches' well-being. Specifically, the "NBA lifestyle" appears to create a distinctive occupational context in which extensive travel, job insecurity, limited control, and expectations of constant availability require coaches to continually renegotiate personal and family resources.

Theme 1: Competing Role Demands and the Erosion of Presence

Coaches experienced an acute tension when striving to balance family responsibilities with the demands of their professional roles, which aligns with previous research (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Griffin et al., 2025). The findings suggest that, for these practitioners, "balance" is a misnomer; instead, they navigate a state of chronic role overflow in which professional obligations habitually cannibalize home-life resources. From a W-HR perspective, these findings reflect the model's demand component, in which excessive work demands (e.g., time, travel, and unpredictability) deplete personal resources and constrain engagement in the family domain. This aligns with Joncheray et al.'s (2019) contention that stress arises not from a lack of willingness to be present, but from structural constraints inherent in elite sport.

Moreover, the emotional cost of missing family milestones reflects a deeper struggle with role conflict, a phenomenon well-documented in sport psychology (Graham & Dixon, 2017). The data suggest that "presence" is not merely physical but emotional; the cognitive load of game preparation and the volatility of the NBA schedule result in a "psychological absence" even when the coach is physically at home. Coaches' narratives highlighted the strain of sustaining intimate relationships amid the profession's prolonged absences and unpredictable schedules. These stressors were not limited to time-based absence but also reflected strain-based conflict, including emotional exhaustion and relational tension (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Within the W-HR framework, these experiences represent secondary strain outcomes resulting from ongoing resource depletion across domains. The pervasive fear that prioritizing family might be perceived as a lack of professional commitment highlights the precarious nature of coaching employment, an observation supported by Griffin et al. (2025), who noted the intense competition and lack of security inherent in NBA coaching roles.

This study suggests that the work-family dynamic for elite sport professionals is not simply a matter of time management but a continual negotiation of competing demands that redistribute and deplete personal resources across domains. This challenges the traditional notion of compartmentalizing professional and personal roles, emphasizing the need for organizational structures that acknowledge and surface coaches' holistic identities (Mazzerolle et al., 2008). The tension between job expectations and familial responsibilities reinforces previous calls for systemic interventions within professional sport to support coaches' well-being, such as flexible scheduling, family-inclusive policies, or more comprehensive psychosocial support systems (Ferreira et al., 2024).

Both Griffin et al. (2025) and Baghurst et al. (2024) called for greater organizational support for coaches. Structured initiatives

might include designated family travel opportunities during select road trips, access to counseling or mental wellness services for coaches and spouses, and protected family days built into the competitive calendar. Human resource departments could also host workshops on communication and relationship management, provide flexible scheduling for key family events, and offer on-site childcare or family hospitality spaces during home games. Leadership modeling of family-supportive behavior, coupled with the appointment of a designated staff advocate (e.g., coach welfare officer or athletic consul; Baghurst et al., 2024), would further ensure consistency and accountability.

These actions align with prior evidence that organizational facilitation of family involvement mitigates work–family conflict and enhances occupational health in high-performance sport (Ferreira et al., 2024; Mazerolle et al., 2008). In addition, they align with the W-HR model by not only reducing demands but also actively increasing resource availability across domains, thereby improving both well-being and performance outcomes.

Theme 2: Family as a Source of Strain Through Structural and Relational Pressures

Participants described how their family lives also became a significant source of stress. From a W-HR perspective, this theme illustrates that family itself can function as a source of demand, particularly when combined with unstable employment conditions and financial uncertainty. The interpretation of these accounts suggests that family-related stress is often an extension of the “precarious” nature of professional coaching; the coach’s anxiety is amplified by the knowledge that their career volatility directly dictates the geographic and financial stability of their dependents. These accounts reinforce the finding by Griffin et al. (2025) that job insecurity is a chronic and pervasive burden for assistant coaches, particularly when family stability is at risk.

This study suggests that framing the role of family as purely “restorative” is problematic and offers an incomplete account of events, as the findings demonstrate that family simultaneously contributes to resource depletion under certain conditions. Instead, the data reveal that family responsibilities and financial obligations can amplify occupational strain. This reflects the interpenetration of work and family domains, wherein structural uncertainty in one sphere generates emotional and relational turbulence in the other (Worley & Shelton, 2020).

Relational strain also emerged as a byproduct of “resource theft,” where the extreme energy required for NBA performance leaves the coach with a “relational deficit” at home. This manifests as an inability to engage in parenting or spousal support, findings that align with Graham and Dixon’s (2017) identification of the erosion of family relationships as a byproduct of the relentless demands of elite coaching. Within the W-HR framework, these accounts reflect how work-generated demands spill over into the family domain, increasing relational strain and further depleting emotional resources. From a relational perspective, being physically and at times emotionally unavailable shows how the time demands of elite sport can weaken the mutual support and connection that families rely on.

The findings on family-related stress reveal that for NBA assistant coaches, family is not only a potential buffer to workplace stress but also a stressor in its own right. The dual demands of fulfilling high-performance professional expectations while simultaneously maintaining functional and supportive family roles created a complex, emotionally taxing dynamic. These findings

reinforce the W-HR model’s core assumption that work and family domains are interdependent systems in which demands in one domain amplify pressures in the other and are consistent with Thelwell et al.’s (2008) work on sport-related stressors and role strain in elite coaching environments. Given the complexity of the findings, it is reasonable to suggest that the theme is highly context-specific. For instance, the competing demands of coaching and family life create temporal “pinch points,” such as playoffs, rivalry games, graduations, or birthdays, where scheduling conflicts become particularly acute. These periods represent “critical resource junctures” in which failing to meet family demands can lead to long-term relational resource loss.

Theme 3: Family as a Stabilizing Resource in Unstable Occupational Context

Social support can function through main and buffering effects, thereby aiding coping with stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Within the W-HR model, these effects can be conceptualized as resource gains, where emotional and relational support replenishes depleted resources and buffers the impact of ongoing demands. In the present study, despite the strain family life can impose on coaches, many participants highlighted their spouses and children as central sources of emotional grounding, stability, and stress relief. A lack of social support is a significant contributor to burnout among coaches (Ha et al., 2021). The interpretation of these results suggests that spouses often act as “resource gatekeepers,” managing the home domain so the coach can focus entirely on work while also providing the emotional “ballast” needed to survive the volatility of the NBA season. This type of emotional support is particularly critical in high-performance environments, as it enables recovery, perspective-taking, and sustained functioning under pressure. Social support networks (Norris et al., 2020), but especially spousal relationships (Ferreira et al., 2024), can serve as buffers against occupational burnout in elite sport.

Children were also recognized as playing a powerful, yet sometimes subtle, role in helping coaches maintain perspective. Coaches’ interactions with their children, even brief ones, function as meaningful resources, reinforcing the W-HR model’s proposition that resources in one domain can offset demands in another. Functionally, children provide a “cognitive break” from the high-stakes coaching environment, forcing a shift in focus that facilitates psychological detachment from work. Findings highlight how children can be a source of emotional resilience, offering a sense of meaning that extends beyond professional outcomes. In the context of elite sport, where coaches’ identities are often closely tied to their performances, these intimate connections offer a rare space for emotional authenticity and relational grounding. Such moments suggest that family time, even when brief, can act as a quiet yet powerful shield against the all-consuming culture of high-performance sport.

This theme’s distinguishing feature is how family support was not idealized but framed as pragmatic and situational. The value of family was not in solving the coach’s problems but in simply being present and understanding the realities of the profession. This underscores the importance of organizational and psychosocial support structures that consider the family unit, supporting not only the coach but also those who support the coach (Ferreira et al., 2024; Griffin et al., 2025). Baghurst (2025) encouraged coaches to consider involving their families in the workplace rather than separating the two. By integrating the family into the professional ecosystem, organizations can transform the family from a competing demand into a collaborative resource.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, limitations lead to opportunities for future research. Although approximately 30% of assistant coaches in the NBA participated, responses may not reflect the full range of perspectives. Future research should compare these findings with those of NBA head coaches and coaches in other professional sports.

Second, the data were collected by a researcher who was also employed as an assistant coach in the NBA. While we view this as a strength that facilitated high-level “insider” access and rapport, it may have introduced limitations beyond confidentiality concerns. Specifically, participants may have been influenced by social desirability bias, feeling reluctant to express critical or sensitive views regarding coaching practices, performance, or organizational matters. Although all participants agreed to have their interviews audio-recorded, the researcher’s dual role could have affected the candor of responses. To address this, future studies might utilize independent interviewers to triangulate these findings.

Third, we recorded audio but not video, which may have limited the interpretation of nonverbal cues or emotional nuances. Video-recorded interviews and focus groups may be valuable avenues for future research. Last, this study investigated the perspectives of male coaches, and their applicability to female coaches at elite levels should be considered with care. For example, Pearson et al. (2020) reported that female collegiate swimming coaches experienced higher stress levels, and the types of stress they experienced differed from those of their male counterparts. Future research should consider investigating the role of family in stress across various demographics. Future work in this area should aim to include a broader demographic of coaches, including head coaches and female coaches, to better understand the diverse experiences of stress and coping strategies across gender and leadership roles. Finally, examining the influence of family dynamics and coaches’ spouses’ experiences directly may provide valuable insights into external factors contributing to stress and burnout in elite sports.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

This study provides a novel empirical investigation into how NBA assistant coaches perceive family as both a source of stress and a coping mechanism, highlighting the complex, bidirectional interplay between work and home resources in shaping occupational well-being within the unique ecosystem of professional basketball. The findings revealed that maintaining a work–family balance is a persistent and complex challenge in elite coaching. As Joncheray et al. (2019) noted, stressors associated with family life cannot be eliminated; instead, they must be strategically managed.

Participants described the strain of prolonged absences and the emotional toll of trying to be present in family life while being physically unavailable for much of the year. Despite these challenges, coaches employed a range of personal strategies to navigate the demands of their professional and familial roles. They acknowledged the immense value of their families as both emotional support systems and sources of perspective, using individualized coping strategies to mitigate stress. Notably, the coach–family dynamic emerged not as a binary of support versus stress but as a fluid relationship shaped by timing, context, and communication.

The original contribution of this paper to the sport psychology literature is twofold. First, it extends the W-HR model to the highly specialized and precarious role of the NBA assistant coach, a

population often overshadowed by head coaches but facing unique stressors such as extreme travel-related “erosion of presence” and limited autonomous control. Second, the study moves beyond traditional “work–life balance” narratives by demonstrating how family demands (e.g., parenting from afar and financial insecurity) can simultaneously deplete resources while family support (e.g., spouse “grounding”) replenishes them, offering a more nuanced, dynamic understanding of stress and coping.

Practically, we suggest several multilevel interventions. These recommendations are consistent with organizational stress management literature in sport and work psychology, which has long emphasized that stress should not be treated solely as an individual problem to be addressed through education, resilience, or coping skills alone. Rather, effective stress management also requires attention to the organizational conditions that create, sustain, or intensify stress, including workload, role expectations, scheduling demands, job control, and access to resources (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008; Rumbold et al., 2018; Rumbold & Didymus, 2021). Therefore, coaches should engage in “resource forecasting” by identifying high-pressure periods (e.g., playoffs or the trade deadline) and specific “pinch points” to set clear expectations with family members in advance. Furthermore, given the reported strain of “parenting from afar,” coaches could benefit from technology-integrated communication workshops to maintain emotional presence while on the road.

However, consistent with the W-HR model, responsibility should not fall solely on individual coaches, as resource availability is shaped by organizational structures. Individual-level strategies should be paired with organization-level efforts that reduce preventable demands and increase coaches’ capacity to manage unavoidable ones. Therefore, NBA teams and sports organizations must transition from acknowledging these pressures to institutionalizing “contextual resources.” Actionable strategies include: (a) travel stipends and “family road trip” programs that allow families to accompany coaches during extended trips to mitigate isolation, (b) formalized “spouse support networks” to reduce the loneliness reported by partners, and (c) financial wellness programs that address the specific stressors of job insecurity and contract-based living. Human resource departments should implement family onboarding programs for new hires to manage expectations and offer psychological support services that treat the family unit, rather than just the individual employee, as the client. These efforts would enhance coaches’ well-being, reduce burnout and staff turnover, and ultimately benefit both the individual and the organization (Baghurst et al., 2024; Mazerolle et al., 2008; Richardson & Rothstein, 2008; Rumbold et al., 2018; Rumbold & Didymus, 2021).

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