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Factors Contributing To An Elite High School Football Program

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO AN ELITE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL
PROGRAM

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Better get busy

The main reason that I entered the professions of coaching and teaching had nothing to do with the win and loss column. While the joy of victory and the agony of defeat are certainly parts of the job, I entered coaching because I wanted to have a similar impact shaping young men in the way my coaches helped to shape me. I agree with renowned football writer, and football coach, Chris Fore, regarding the reason many people coach, "...I love the game of football, I love working with teens, I love teaching, and I had a great experience with the coach I admired. I wanted to be like the men who helped shaped me as a person" (Fore, 2014, p. 19). My experiences with coaching have led me to ask: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

My interest in the question about elite programs comes from the personal experiences that I have had since I began to coach. From the first time I donned a whistle at football practice ten years ago, I was hooked. Right after my first season of coaching football, I wanted to learn as much as I could about how to run a high school football program. In the spring of 2015, after nine years of working as an assistant, I achieved my long-time goal of becoming a head high school varsity football coach.

While I was coaching football at my previous school, the program won over eighty percent of all the games we played. During this time, the team I assisted in coaching also achieved remarkable success in the section and state tournament playoffs. By just about any standard, the program I came from was considered very successful. When I became the head football coach at another school, I brought many of the same

ideas, practices, and beliefs with me from my previous high school football program. In my first year as a head football coach, the record of the football team at 1-9 was less than successful. I set out to understand how to better lead a football program in future seasons. What this experience inspired was a curiosity about which factors allow certain high school football programs to have lasting success year in and year out, while others do not have that same level of success.

My Influence in Becoming a Football Coach

One of my two biggest influences in entering the coaching profession was about six foot three, and weighed about two hundred and sixty pounds. Even today, after he has been coaching and teaching for almost forty years, he still looks like he could jump in and play linebacker in any college football game.

I had the privilege of being coached by this man for two years as a player in high school. Like most other stereotypical football coaches he was intense, and never let you get away with anything. Unlike most other stereotypical depictions of coaches, he was caring, intuitive, and immensely dedicated to pushing every single young man's limitations. I remember a period during high school when I was experiencing depression and I did not think anyone at my school noticed. After the psychology class I had with him, he came up to me and sat me down. We talked for a long, long time about what was going on. Even though I knew I could talk to my parents, it meant a great deal to me, and it still does, that he took the time to show some concern for what was happening in the life of a student.

After my high school football team lost our final playoff game during my senior season, he told the team in the locker-room that because of his life circumstances he was never able to have children of his own. The entire team sat dejected after losing in the state tournament. With tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice our coach said, “I wanted to win this one selfishly... Not because I wanted it for me, but because I wanted it for you... In twenty years, I won’t remember the wins or the losses, but I will remember this great journey that I had with all of you... I wanted to win this one, so that I could have one more week of practice with my boys.” Even though it may sound unusual, there was a room full of big, strong, high school football players crying with our coach because we knew that he genuinely loved us and meant absolutely every word he said.

This coach routinely used to say the motto of the program was, “Caring, courage, commitment, and trust.” What was unique and impressive, is that despite his long record of success, he talked about these core values far more than winning or losing games. This coach was, and remains, one of the main reasons that I decided to become a teacher and football coach. I had the opportunity to be an assistant coach with him for nine years before going off to pursue my own football program. Before the start of every football season he addressed the team as a whole. “Our goal is to win every game. And I want to win every game... However, to win every game is not our purpose, and it is not why any of us is here. Our purpose is to come and grow together as a team and together as men.”

In my experience, the way to obtain elite levels of success comes from having a program founded upon developing young men for life after the competitive field. While a coach can have some success over a shorter period of time, elite coaches have programs

that correlate to long-term success specifically because of this focus on values such as caring, courage, commitment, and trust.

My Journey on the Coaching Ladder

Elite coaches (hereafter referred to as EC) are associated with developing or maintaining elite football programs (hereafter referred to as EP). These coaches have attained success above and beyond that of their direct competition. For the purposes of this capstone, the coaches needed to meet one of two criteria in order to be selected as an elite coach or elite program. My operational definition of an elite coach, and an elite program, will be those coaches whose all-time overall winning percentage is over 75%, or those coaches whose teams have played for or won more than three state football championships in their state classification. These categories allow me to perform a more in depth case-study of these selected elite programs with these elite coaches.

I first began coaching football in the fall of 2006 with the same high school football program in which I had been a player. After nine years with the football program, I had coached on the freshman, sophomore, junior varsity, and varsity teams; offense, defense, and special teams; a position group for all players on the football field; an offensive and defensive coordinator; and, as a lower-level head coach. In short, I worked at every level of the program, in almost every capacity except the head coach or varsity coordinator.

After my first season of coaching came to an end, I realized that the experience and rewards of coaching were even greater than I had imagined. There were times that season when I also felt the need to understand more about coaching in order to better

reach my athletes. To improve my impact with the young men of the football program, I tried to learn everything I could. Looking to develop the art of coaching further, I attended coaching clinics in various locations in the Midwest, attended high school and college football practices of other schools, bought hundreds of football coaching books, tapes, and DVD's, spent hundreds of hours watching game film, called and e-mailed coaches all across the country, and read books about topics such as motivation, organizational management, practice structure, learning, neuroscience, team-building, leadership, parenting, and biographies and autobiographies of famous coaches in many sports. With everything I did, I stopped to ask myself: "How can this information shape or mold me into a better teacher and coach?" I hoped that eventually, I would use this knowledge to run a successful high school football program of my own.

The Art of Elite Coaching

An obscure expert on organizational efficiency, Harrington Emerson probably could have been a very successful high school football coach. One of his sayings that best exemplifies his ability to do that is, "As to methods there may be a million and a few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble" (Emerson, 1912, p. 7). In the game of football, championships and games have been won with every type of offensive, defensive, or special teams strategy or tactic. Championships and games have been lost with these exact same strategies and tactics. Deeply held principles, backed up with action, are what my coach believed made for lasting success of any organization, team, or person.

With a record of 86-17 in my nine seasons as an assistant coach, the high school football program where I worked could be considered one of the top in the state of Minnesota. In addition to the overall record during this nine-year period, the football team I assisted in coaching played in a state championship game, was a state semi-finalist on four separate occasions, and a state quarterfinalist on five separate occasions. Although we did not have athletes that were the biggest, fastest, or strongest, we remained extremely competitive and successful year in and year out against quality competition.

What my experience with an “elite coach” taught me was that teaching and coaching both inspire learning. They encourage students to take what they have learned and make it their own. Coaching football and teaching are both the same, but the classroom environment tends to differentiate the two. In both teaching and coaching football there is a set of skills, fundamentals, and best practices. In both teaching and coaching football, good teaching is good teaching, but good teaching can look different for each program. Finally, in both teaching and coaching, learning is taking place.

In my opinion, elite coaches are relentless in their love, compassion, and knowledge about what players need to hear, what a player needs to do, and seeing in each person just how much potential exists. Sometimes a teacher has to fill the role of taskmaster; sometimes the role of listener. But all the time, teachers must let students know that they truly care about them. Sometimes a student needs to be pushed, sometimes a student needs extra repetitions, and sometimes a student just needs to know that an individual is caring enough to ask, “How are you doing?” An elite coach is someone who has the unique ability to push a player, and then back off. Elite high school

football coaches are those who know when to use a heavy hand, or a soft, caring pat on the back. They know when to call a player out on not working hard enough. They will share in a player's joy, and they will always be there in times of struggle. I know that I am just one of countless men who feel passionately about the impact that their football coach, and teacher, has had upon their lives.

Value of Studying Elite Football Programs

According to 2011 Harris Poll, and a subsequent Harris poll conducted in 2016, American football is the most popular, most watched athletic game in America in terms of overall television ratings (Braverman, 2011; Shannon-Missal, 2016). In 2014, *Business Insider* published an article discussing how the game of American professional football was the most profitable, revenue-generating sport in the United States, (Gaines, 2014). At the collegiate level, the NCAA annually publishes a report that lists the total number of athletic scholarships per sport across the United States. The report for the 2016-17 academic year showed that the total number of athletes receiving college football scholarships is greater than in any other sport (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2016; scholarshipstats.com, 2016). In 2016, the National Federation of High School Associations conducted an athletic participation survey which ranked all high school sports in total number of participants (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2016). The survey results found that football had the largest number of participants of all sports offered at the high school level.

There is much discussion and debate about the potential effects football has in terms of both long-term and short-term player safety. Experts have emerged on both sides

claiming differing opinions, with the current research literature unable to come to a consensus. Regardless of one's individual opinion, football is an extremely popular and prominent sport for many people. Because of this popularity, football is also poised to provide insight into the teaching practices of many disciplines.

The well-known college football coach Lou Tepper often starts his writings, or speeches with a quotation about the importance and purpose of football:

The football program should be an integral part of the education of the student athlete. Football is a tool to be used to better the lives of all people who take part in our program. Like any tool, what the football program creates is dependent upon the craftsman. Because of the popularity of football, it is a unique tool in education today. It influences the values of the coaches, administrators, players, teachers, parents, families, alumni, and fans that participate. As we work toward success let us remember that our role as teachers and our responsibility as coaches, is to use football to help all parties achieve their highest potential.

(Tepper, L., personal communication, 2006)

While I have experience working at an EP, and used many of the practices I had learned, my initial foray into the role of a high school head football coach was less than what I had envisioned. Given that I was in charge of running a high school football program, I am extremely interested in what differentiates successful programs from less successful programs. Elite coaches, who run elite programs, are extremely proficient teachers. These ECs and EPs have a large platform with which to influence the athletes participating. These EPs may utilize different methods to achieve their success, but by

using case studies to investigate them further, I am hoping to find common themes that can be used by both teachers and coaches alike to engineer positive, and lasting influence on their students, in whatever classroom they may have.

Summary

I am engaging in this capstone topic, *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* because of the impact one of my high school football coaches had upon my life. That impact has caused me to want to recreate that experience for the athletes with whom I will be fortunate enough to work. In this chapter, I introduced the journey of my coaching career and some of the unique characteristics of EC's. In the final section of this chapter, I justified the study because of the popularity of football in America today, and because of its impact on my own practice. In chapter two I will introduce the literature related to EP's.

Chapter Two Preview

Chapter two provides an overview of what literature has to say about factors that influence the development of elite high school football programs. This chapter will define what constitutes an "elite" high school football program and an "elite" high school football coach. This chapter will also study common themes and practices used by EP's and EC's. Finally, the chapter shall show how certain factors may influence the development of an EP.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

A summary of the current debate around American football.

Given the current debate about player safety in the game of football, I feel it is important to discuss aspects to inform the reader. Historically speaking, the game of football once faced elimination altogether during the time of President Teddy Roosevelt, who was an ardent fan of the game's ability to, "advance a strenuous life and teach lessons about mental and physical toughness" (Zezima, 2014). Despite his passion for the game, he realized that if he did not intervene with substantial change to improve player safety by the means of, "establishing an inter-collegiate governing body, mandating protective equipment, allowing the forward pass, and excluding locking arms for massed wedge formations" (Zezima, 2014), America could perhaps have seen the game end then and there. In today's current debate surrounding player safety, the conversation has pivoted to the issue of concussions. Dr. Bennet Omalu was credited with research discovering a neurodegenerative disorder in professional football players resulting from repeated impacts to their brain (Morrison, 2016). His findings were displayed prominently in the Hollywood film "*Concussion*" (2015). Since these findings were released, former football players of all levels have come forward to discuss their side effects associated with head injuries sustained while playing the game (Strickler, 2016). These new findings have led to a large philosophical and practical change in the way that organizing bodies at all levels of all sports try to manage and improve player safety (National Federation of State High School Coaches, 2014).

While many people are passionate about the positive effects of high school football (Tedxtalks, 2016) in terms of overall emotional and physical benefits that will serve athletes throughout their lifetime, the overall rates of participation in football are declining since the advent of Dr. Omalu's research. Other investigators are looking at the data to see what different statistical research reports show. Neurosurgeon Dr. Uzma Samadani has been a large proponent of the benefits of contact sports (Samadani, 2015; Paulsen, 2016). She has also further investigated the statistics of risks and potential injuries associated with all contact sports. The report shows that the incidence of concussion in football is not statistically more or less than it is in any other sport (Samadani, 2015). While football may have the highest total number of concussions, the statistical rate of concussions in football is not significantly higher than other sports or physical activities (Samadani, 2015; Glatter, 2015).

Physician Robert Glatter (2015), who worked with Samadani on research concerning contact sports, also found that football is statistically "less risky than skiing, snowboarding, skateboarding, equestrian, or bicycling," (para. 7). In a subsequent study by the Mayo Clinic comparing the rates of brain injury in former high school football players to those in non-football players, there was no statistically significant difference in the rate of injury between the two groups (Olson, 2016). It is noteworthy to mention that though one of the physicians credited with trumpeting the research findings of Dr. Omalu, acknowledges the danger of brain injury among past professional football players, he also allows his sons to play football. He does so because of changes made to the game in terms of equipment, practice guidelines, and return-to-play protocol (Healy, 2015).

Since the various research findings on the impact of concussions have been released, sports federations across the country have taken large steps to make the game of football safer for its participants. In Minnesota, the association of football coaches lists on their website the motto, “Keepers of the Game” (Minnesota High School Football Coaches Association). These coaches, along with many others across the country, have taken great steps in protecting player safety. Across the nation, football coaches are now required to engage in professional development training regarding reducing physical impacts in practice, reducing the impacts of concussion, teaching techniques that take the head out of tackling, establishing baseline cognition tests, and establishing return to play protocols (National Federation of State High School Coaches, 2014; Minnesota State High School Football Coaches Association 2015; Minnesota State High School League, 2016). While the game may now become safer than it has ever been, the decline of youth participation in the sport of football may ultimately prove to be the key factor in its future viability.

Introduction

The question, what makes athletic teams successful? receives a multitude of responses. While different factors may have varying degrees of influence in the development of elite success, certain elements seem to be more common than others. When I discussed the influence of elite success with fellow coaching peers, they most frequently defined *elite*, *culture*, *coaches*, and *athletes*. It is these four areas that the literature review will investigate.

This section provides an overview of the definition of “elite.” The next portion of this section discusses how the definition of elite applies to the context of coaching

athletics. Finally, another section shows how the definition of elite applies to the domain of coaching high school football.

In the culture and support section the literature review suggests how leaders of successful organizations establish an elite team culture which sets standards of behavior that allow for high levels of success. This success fits within the vision and mission established by the elite leader. The second portion of this section focuses in on how elite leaders develop leaders in their organizations. The third section discusses how elite coaches manage community support of their organization.

Coaches are a large ingredient in the success or failure of any team. Elite coaches are themselves a different type of coach because of their methods and contexts. The first portion of this section investigates some of the common methods employed by “elite” coaches in their “philosophies, views, and practices” (Miller, Lutz, & Fredenberg, 2012, p. 22). In the first section, the literature discusses how coaches build their organizations, and teams to become successful. This second section will provide an overview of two elite basketball coaches. The third portion of the section investigates five elite football coaches, and the methods used in their programs to achieve that success.

The talent that makes up an organization is critical to achieve a successful outcome. In sports coaching, this talent comprises the coaches and athletes who participate in the program or organization. This section will investigate the role of athletes’ involvement in the success of an athletic team. The first portion of this section will focus on the research about how personal and organizational athletic success is related to the athlete’s commitment to achieve for the organization, and the necessary work to obtain their goals (Coyle, 2009; Jackson, Gucciardi & Dimmock 2014; Scanlan,

Russel, Scanlan, Klunchoo & Chow, 2013). The second portion of this section will focus on an athlete's perception of what factors allow for success. The third portion of this section will focus on the concept of "deliberate practice" (Coyle, 2009). The final portion of this section investigates the environment in which development of elite athletes most often occurs.

Elite

Before investigating *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* a definition of the word "elite" is important. The word "elite" is often casually used to describe uncommon success in a given field. Many organizations and companies want to attain that level of success in their field, but it is difficult to reach. An "elite" organization, or coach, or business has surpassed the competition and usually established a new standard from which to operate (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016). While my research does not have a commonly agreed upon definition of elite or elite coaches, there are nonetheless studies which investigate the methods of "elite" coaches, organizations, and programs.

This first section will provide an overview of the definition of "elite." The next portion of this section will discuss how the definition of elite applies to the context of coaching athletics, especially high school football. It is important to understand the various definitions of "elite", how "elite" relates to the coaching context, and how "elite" pertains to the domain of coaching high school football.

Variations in the definition of elite. Google's online dictionary defines the word "elite" as "a select part of a group that is superior to the rest in terms of ability or qualities," (*Elite Definition*", n.d.). Dictionary.com defines the word elite as

“representing the most choice or select; best,” (“*Definition of Elite*”, n.d.). The people, organizations, teams, and communities that have been labeled “elite” have obtained a high level of success in their particular domain. This success that has led to being designated as “elite” derives from qualitative (Ehrmann, Jordan, & Ehrmann, 2011) or quantitative data (Ricciuti, 2009). In fact, sometimes the mere perception of “elite” status can lead a person, team, or organization to be labeled as such, even if actual merits have not been achieved, (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016). To compound the confusion about such a label, the definition of “elite” is not uniform in specific contexts or domains of performance.

In the domain of business, the definition of “elite” is also unclear. In one of the best-selling books on organizational success in business, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, Collins (2001) investigated “elite” success in the business world. The author defined great companies as those companies with “returns at least three times the market over the next fifteen years” (p. 6). Another work by Collins and Porras (1994) investigated visionary organizations which were defined as those companies having been founded before 1950, and having achieved success beyond the average level of achievement comparable to other organizations that were involved in similar industries. The final list contained eighteen companies that were considered visionary.

Elite in the domain of athletic coaching. A study held that highly successful coaches are those individuals who have a winning percentage of greater than 75% (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). This research definition forms the basis of the operational definition of elite for the research question being investigated in this

capstone. In one study, researchers performed a meta-analysis of 91 studies in sports psychology research over a three year period, and found that there were more than eight different thematic ways that the definition of “elite” had been applied (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2014).

Miller, Lutz, and Fredenburg (2012) investigated outstanding high school coaches in four different sports. Their research contacted the individual associations governing the sports of football, volleyball, boys basketball, and girls basketball. The organizations contacted supplied a list of 80 coaches from ten different states using criteria of overall win/loss record; championships won; the recipient of local, state and/or national coaching awards; and also for being known to have produced positive character development in their athletes.

Jeff Janssen, a prominent sports leadership author and consultant, has written several popular books on the topic of championship teams. His work with over twenty teams, in various sports, of various divisions at the collegiate level has allowed unique insight and access into elite athletic teams. Janssen (2014) stated that these championship teams have championship cultures. The success of these teams’ culture, Janssen argued, comes from having credible leaders, a clear and compelling vision, core values, standards of behavior, a committed and unified team, and organizational alignment in all areas. Only when all of these different components working together is the organization likely to achieve elite levels of success.

Definitions of elite in the domain of high school football. As with previous interpretations of “elite”, the major of the criteria needing to be selected as having that

designations applies in sports, to be designated “elite”, as a team to a championship, and/or overall accomplishment at a certain percentage of wins in the coach’s career.

Research about championship coaches, Fore (2014) contacted over 300 high school head football coaches that had won a state championship during the 2013 high school football season. The results showed that coaches in charge of these championship programs engaged in ten different categories of action within their program. In another study on high school football coaches, Ricciuti (2009) reserved “elite” status for those individuals having an all-time winning percentage of over 79%. In one of the first popular books written on the top high school football programs in the country, Kralik (2008) used rankings from a national USA today poll over a ten-year period to select a final list of twelve elite programs. Other research investigating “elite” high school football coaches have applied the synonymous label of “highly successful” to designate a high level of accomplishment in all-time winning percentages. One study by Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2007) applied this label of “highly successful” to those coaches who have achieved an all-time winning percentage of 76% or higher.

In the professional development world for football coaches, a new organization known as X and O Labs (xandolabs.com) has compiled data that can be used by its members. The site was started by two football coaches that wanted to research questions about football from successful coaches at all levels of play. This wide array of research conducted on many different aspects of a football program is easily accessible on their website xandolabs.com or via purchase of their various books, or book formats. In one of the organization’s research reports, the topic investigated the development of various high school football programs around the nation. The author designated the top tier of

research respondents, as those with over a 75% all-time winning percentage, and having been the head coach for two or more teams that won championships (Kuchar, 2014).

The literature review of elite discussed the importance of the various definitions of “elite,” how “elite” relates to the coaching context, and pertains to the domain of coaching high school football. By investigating elite in this way, the operational definition of an elite high school football program, and what factors influence that development is framed for further research and discussion.

Culture and Support

Culture is an extremely powerful agent of change in an organization. An organization's culture establishes the standard, and supports its long- and short-term success (Collins & Porras, 1994; Janssen, 2002; Janssen, 2014). Several of the findings in this section show that establishing a philosophy and culture of a team or organization is just as important as any methodological approach used in their respective domain (Fore, 2014; Janssen, 2002; Janssen, 2014; Kerr, 2015). This section discusses how leaders of successful organizations establish an elite team culture, how elite leaders develop leaders in their organizations, and how elite coaches manage community support of their organization. It is also equally important to contextualize this elite success in the domain of coaching athletic teams.

Creation of elite team culture. “Culture eats talent and skill for breakfast,” (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016). Before starting off with **how**, an organization must first focus on the **why**, or the purpose of what they are doing (Sinek, 2009). To start with what an organization will do before it answers the questions of

“why” and “what” they do is not conducive to elite success (Lencioni, 2002; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007; Sinek, 2009; Trimble, 2005). The culture created by an organization is the compass that guides the course when decisions need to be made. Culture may be one of the most underrated ingredients in the establishment, maintenance, and continued excellence sought by an organization in the quest to attain elite levels of success.

The quote “team beats talent, when talent isn’t a team” (Gordon, & Smith, 2015, p. 67) encompasses the fact that certain organizations may have overall talent levels that are qualitatively or quantitatively inferior to their competition, yet these elite organizations utilize their organization’s culture to obtain levels of success far surpassing organizations whose culture and practice are not aligned (Connors & Smith, 2009; Janssen, 2014). By ensuring that all pieces of an organization are in alignment, elite organizations experience a compound effect where the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts (Hardy, 2010; Sinek, 2009).

Investigating many different elite coaches, the literature also pointed to accountability concerning the effort put forth by everyone in the organization. The team or coach may not be more talented than another, but establishes high expectations concerning the importance of every single role (Smith, Bell, & Kilgo, 2004). The effort of each individual appears to be paramount to the success of elite organizations, (Drape, 2009; Janssen & Snyder, 2006; Krzyzewski & Phillips, 2004; Ladouceur & Hayes 2015; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007; Smith, Bell, & Kilgo, 2004). In this way, the coaches propagate the beliefs that “playing hard fixes a number of deficiencies” (Larson, B.,

personal communication, April 4, 2014) and “what you do, you do to everyone in this room,” (Saban & Curtis, 2007, p. 31) concerning the effort expected of their athletes.

Coaching and developing leaders. Many leaders spend a significant amount of hours developing methodical plans to take their company, or team, to greatness (Caruso, G., personal communication, July 18, 2013; Collins, 1994; Collins, 2001; Janssen, 2002; Janssen, 2014; Kerr 2015; Ladouceur & Hayes 2015). While the time invested in this process is significant, these coaches have realized that proceeding without such attention to detail will lead to the “boat being adrift,” (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016). Certain leaders are more successful in a place that leads to elite levels of success than are their competitors. Many times, elite coaches have pointed to a mentor as one reason of their success (Dungy & Whitaker, 2011; Meyer, 2015; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007). These coaching mentors have affected the philosophy, development, and methodology of coaches who have attained elite status. This phenomena of “leaders creating leaders” (Kerr, 2015, p. 40) was similarly found in a study on the origins of elite coaching best practices by Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin (2004), and Wise & Hammack (2011). Research, and elite practitioners, have repeatedly stated that coaching mentors are one of the self-identified origins of elite coaching knowledge in elite level coaches (Dungy & Whitaker, 2011; Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004; Meyer, 2015; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007).

One characteristic of the leader at the top of elite organizations has been labeled as “level five leadership” (Collins, 2001, p. 17). Effective leaders are able to take a vision to their subordinates and garner higher levels and standards of performance from previous leaders. What separates level five leaders from other levels of leadership is the

ability to “build enduring greatness through the paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will,” (Collins, 2001, p. 17). In this manner, the level five leader is always looking to learn more, to advance the goals of the organization, and not seek out personal success. In summary, a level five leader is a leader that “looks at their work as what they build, create, and contribute,” (Collins, 2001). Level five leaders then are looking to build an elite organization that lasts beyond their tenure (Collins & Porras, 1994; Collins, 2001).

When a team achieves a high level of success, such as winning a championship, it can easily stagnate, leading to what some call a “plateau effect,” (Sullivan & Thompson, 2013, p. 3). For leaders to take a team, that is already elite, and maintain that level of success, standard, and proficiency is often more difficult than simply obtaining success for an organization the first time around (Collins, 1994; Janssen, 2002; Janssen, 2014; Kerr, 2015; Parcells & Coplin, 1995; Saban & Curtis, 2007). Elite coaches constantly push the boundary and realize that, “When you are on top of your game, it is time to change your game” (Kerr, 2015, p. 21) and that without constant evaluation and scrutiny of their methods, they will “change or die,” (Deutschmann, 2007, p. 1). Sometimes a team can take drastic measures to ensure success in the short term, but elite coaches and elite programs take deliberate and intentional measures to build success for the long term.

The analogies of this to the cultivation of long term success, even the creation of success after a particular leader has left, have been labeled: “Clock building, not time telling,” (Collins, 1994, p. 22); “building a cathedral,” (Holtz, 1998, p. 45); “making the big time where you are,” (Westering, 2001, p. 1); “the process,” (Saban & Curtis, 2007, p. 58); watering the roots of bamboo trees for years without any visual proof of growth

(Bell, 2009, p. 2); a farmer planting for a harvest (Coyle, 2009, p. 165; Drape, 2009); “focus on the root not the fruit,” (Gordon & Smith, 2009, p. 16); and “Rowing the Boat,” (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016). By developing a long-term focus on the development of athletes, the program, and their culture, elite coaches can sustain their competitive advantage through their uncommon culture (Ivey, 2004).

A key aspect of any organization is that of the human capital of the subordinate leaders. Elite coaches seek the most talented individuals who fit into the created culture of their program. The personnel of an organization are so important that they have been called “the compass,” (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016) because they “chart the course,” (Parcells, & Copin, 1995, p. 13) while guiding and shaping the subordinates under them to work for a common goal. Elite coaches realize that it is key for the “leaders to create leaders,” (Kerr, 2015, p. 40), and “it takes a leader to raise up a leader” (Maxwell, 2007, p. 141). These practices are utilized to attain higher levels of performance while avoiding the pitfalls of a team that does not contribute to such increases in performance (Jackson & Delehanty, 2006; Lencioni, 2002). It is not that elite cultures always have more talent than other cultures, it is the fact that elite cultures find the people that best fit within their culture compared to other organizations (Janssen, 2014).

Some coaches can fall into the idea that they alone are the ones proficient enough to handle a task. This lack of delegation, from the focus on themselves, is part of the reason these coaches or organizations do not achieve elite success (Lencioni, 2002). By delegating meaningful tasks to subordinates coaches demonstrate confidence in their abilities (Parcells & Coplin, 1995), and this simultaneously builds the next level of

leaders within their organization (Kerr, 2015). Elite coaches deliberately hire subordinate coaches who are “strong where they are weak” (Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015) and emphasize character in the process (Bowden & Bowden, 2002; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007; Trimble, 2005;). Literature has also shown that elite leaders take this a step further by seeking out subordinates that will actively disagree and challenge their existing methods, and practices while staying true to the core philosophy of the program (Hill & Wooden, 2002; Krzyzewski & Phillips, 2004). These elite coaches realize that they must first get the right people into their organization, and then decide how to accomplish their goals (Sinek, 2009).

Coaches’ management of community support. Having the support of a community can make establishing an elite sports team far more possible than without that support (Ivey, 2004; List, 2015). Even elite athletes themselves have identified family, school, and community support as key ingredients to their attainment of elite success (Chan & Yuen, 2013). Parents and community members have also been shown to support the demands necessary to attain elite success when they feel that the program is a positive, talent-developing environment (Ivarsson, Stenling, Falby, Johnson, Borg, & Johansson, 2015; List, 2015). Research has also shown that while community support may not in itself be a source of elite success, that coupled with elite cultures and teams, create the sustained competitive advantage that elite coaches and elite teams have compared to other teams or organizations, (Ivey, 2004).

Communities are quick to identify with their local sports teams as they allow a common bonding point and gathering space that can transcend differences in gender, class, or race (List, 2015; Tokke, 2013). The local community also feels that they are a

part of the success of the team, and that the success of the team translates to the success of the town (Drape, 2009; List, 2015; Tabb, 2012). When the team is successful, bonding and identification can increase, while when the team fails, divisions within the community can increase (Tokke, 2013). This “success of the town” (List, 2015, p. 16) occurs with greater clarity when the elite team operates within smaller, rural towns and communities compared to larger, urban areas (White, 2011). Literature demonstrated that beyond identification benefits with the success of elite teams, that towns and communities also receive a variety of other benefits from a successful sports team (List, 2015; Tokke, 2013; White, 2011).

The literature review has provided evidence on how the establishment of an elite culture, development of future leaders for their organization, and management of community support are all factors critical to the development of an elite high school football program.

Coaches

Research in coaching has investigated several different methods and philosophies that lead to best practices. The first portion of this section will investigate some of the common methods employed by “elite” coaches in their “philosophies, views, and practices” (Miller, Lutz, & Fredenberg, 2012, [p. 24](#)). Subsequent sections discuss how elite coaches build their organizations to become successful, the concept of deep practice, elite basketball coaches, and elite football coaches.

Elite coaching methods. Of the many different elite coaches studied and researched, a common theme among them was a desire to discuss the value of putting out

a plan in writing concerning all aspects of the program (Buzzo, 2009; Caruso, G., personal communication, July 18, 2013; Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016; Stiegelmeier, J., personal communication, April 2, 2016; Trimble 2005). One of the major steps in developing an elite culture consists in establishing a mission statement, a vision, and the core values of the organization, (Buzzo, 2009; Ehrmann, Jordan, & Ehrmann, 2011; Gordon & Smith, 2015; Janssen, 2002; Janssen, 2014; Kuchar, 2014; Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015; Trimble, 2005;).

When considering the multiple parts of a football program, a coach must plan the following aspects: offensive schematics, defensive schematics, special teams schematics, two platoon or one platoon personnel organization, fundraising, practice planning, media, team building, transportation, strength and conditioning, and anything else that the various stakeholders of the organization will require (Trimble, 2005; Buzzo, 2009; Larson, B., personal communication, April 4, 2014). This plan must not cover just a plan for this season, but lay out a multiple-year course of action so that the organization's compass is prepared to monitor and adjust itself to attain higher levels of excellence (Caruso, G., personal communication, July 18, 2013; Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016; Stiegelmeier, J., personal communication, April 2, 2016).

For elite coaches, the interesting paradox of their success is that they do not specifically focus on attaining elite success (Coyle, 2009; Drape, 2009; Fore, 2014; Heath & Heath, 2010; Holtz, 1998; Krzyzewski, & Phillips, 2004; Saban, & Curtis, 2007). Instead, they focus on becoming the best they can be at that particular moment in a situation, classroom meeting, practice, game, or workout. This focus has been given the acronym "W.I.N." and means "what's important now" (Holtz, 1998; Krzyzewski &

Phillips, 2004; Saltveit, 2013). Other common phrases that are synonymous with the pursuit of excellence without the focus on the end result are “be present in the moment,” (Jackson & Delehanty, 2006, p. 4), and “the score takes care of itself,” (Walsh, Jamison, & Walsh, 2009, p. 1). By getting athletes to focus on obtaining excellence in the present moment, the foundation for long term elite success is being built every single day.

In one work by Fore (2014) on high school football programs that won state championships, a very common theme was that being a coach involved a responsibility far and beyond the diagrams of plays on the chalkboard. These high school coaches, who had achieved the winning of a state championship, said that focusing on making their players better people made them better players, and led to greater team cohesion and success (Ehrmann, Jordan & Ehrmann, 2011; Fore, 2014; Gardener, 1998; Janssen, 2014). In this way, elite coaches view personal development of an athlete’s character outside of the game, as a key piece impacting player development which directly influences the level of success the athlete has on the field, (Bowden & Bowden, 2001; Gould, Collins, Lauer & Chung, 2007; Holtz, 1998; Souza & Oslin, 2008).

These elite coaches and organizations focus on development of core values such as hard work, respect, integrity, honesty, trust, passion, pride, grit, physical and mental toughness, (Hughes, 2010; Janssen, 2014; Kerr, 2015; Skaza, 2014). By focusing on the development outside of the game, these elite coaches are looking to win the heart of their subordinates (Maxwell, 2007; Ehrmann, Jordan, & Ehrmann, 2011; Skaza, 2014; Tabb, 2012). Elite level coaches have done this through methods such as having an athlete over for dinner (Krzyszewski & Phillips, 2004; Lombard, 2007), having commitment cards where teammates hold each other accountable for individually set goals each week

(Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015), establishing a unity council (Ladouceur, & Hayes, 2015), holding team meetings where no one can talk about football (Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016), and allowing players to feel their feedback is valued through the use of providing input within the program (Janssen, 2015; Kerr, 2015; Souza, & Oslin, 2008). By getting to know each individual athlete outside of the traditional coaching context, these coaches are increasing their impact upon the athletes, and simultaneously developing further collective buy-in of all individuals.

Another common method of elite coaches is that of keeping the schematics used by their team within the game simple, while focusing far more on fundamental techniques (Drape, 2009; Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015; Larson, B., personal communication, April 4, 2014). While these coaches have achieved elite success, and have large amounts of knowledge concerning their particular domain, the focus of these programs is directed far more towards fundamental technique than on developing particular schemes such as play calls, formations, and sets employed during the course of a game (Coyle, 2009; Fore, 2014; Hill & Wooden, 2002; Hollenbeck, 2003; Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015; Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2011; Osborne, 1999; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007; Smith, Bell, & Kilgo, 2004). These elite coaches believe that by eliminating complicated schemes and replacing them with simple schemes, the athletes they are coaching will achieve higher levels of performance than by having the athlete muddle through complicated schemes.

To become better athletes who are more proficient and have high levels of success in their domain of play, it is also imperative that the coaches develop and implement best practices to provide feedback during training. Such coaches who implement best practices during training are constantly seeking out ways to improve their coaching

(Longenecker, 2010; Smith, Bell, & Kilgo, 2004). These elite coaches are adept at providing feedback as quickly as possible to the athlete, and do so in a way that is most meaningful way for a particular athlete (Longenecker, 2010; Oliver, Hardy, & Markland, 2010; Stevens-Smith & Cadorette, 2012). Elite coaches modify their communication quality, kind, and or modality (Ricciuti, 2009; Stokes, Liuselli, Reed, & Fleming, 2013; Wright, Atkins, & Jones, 2012;) for each particular athlete. The type of communication is refined to “contextualizing the needed components in specific situations” (Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2011, p. 229). Elite coaches realize that practice time and how it is utilized is a critical commodity in developing athletes to actualize their potential (Coyle, 2009; Oliver, Hardy, & Markland, 2010).

Deep practice. The book *Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born, It's Grown* (Coyle, 2009), investigates the types of practice used by highly successful individuals in their field. One notable finding was “there are certain patterns of practice that build a skill better and more quickly than others” (Coyle, 2009, p. 5). The author coined the term “deep practice” (Coyle, 2009, p. 9) to describe the quality and kind of practice that is utilized by those achieving an elite level in their particular domain. In this method of practice, the athlete is pushed to work at the edges of the current level of performance to deliberately make mistakes. The rationale put forth is that making mistakes and embracing the failure of certain skills can increase the overall level of performance.

Another factor of the deep practice phenomena is that it is brought about through high caliber coaches. These “master coaches” (Coyle, 2009, p. 161) use specific teaching methods to facilitate deep practice for their athletes. One teaching method used by elite coaches is that of a “whole-part-whole,” or “chunking” (Coyle, 2009, p. 170). In this

method, a skill is taught all at once, then broken down into individual components taught progressively, and then put together again for the entire skill set. The struggle of operating at the edges of competence then are what allow further success to occur, (Coyle, 2009).

Biology is further used to explain that this concept is found in the brain, where neurons fire to form circuits which allow skills to be developed or refined. When a new skill is learned, the neuronal circuit is clunky and inefficient. With further practice of the skill, the firing of the circuit becomes more efficient. This increase in efficiency and skill is caused as the result of neurons firing more frequently. With each increase of frequency, the cells within that circuit grow and wrap more myelin around them (Coyle, 2009).

Having more myelin around the neuron insulates the cell more, and makes subsequent firing more efficient. Coyle (2009) stated that the deep practice method of coaching with chunking allows more myelin to grow. Having more myelin on the cells within the neuronal circuit, with the use of deliberate practice methods, makes the firing of the circuit more efficient than it was.

Having a high level of understanding of the game is critical for successful coaches; however, it is not what truly makes for successful coaching. Ricciuti (2009) found that the method of communication utilized by elite coaches is equally important to their success. Many highly successful football coaches use prompt and concrete feedback to correct mistakes made in practice (Turman, 2000). The research found that the tone and volume of voice utilized by the coach were just as important as the timing, message, or word choice (Ricciuti, 2009).

Elite basketball coaches. In this section on elite coaches from sports other than football, the common theme is that of staying true to principles regardless of the exact road that will take them there. “As to methods there may be a million and a few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble” (Emerson, 1912, p. 7). While each coach listed in this section is located in different contexts, their attainment of the criterion of a 75% winning percentage, or winning or playing in three championships contests allows them to be selected as elite coaches. The discussions of staying true to their principles occurs frequently in the literature concerning their respective successes (Hill & Wooden, 2009; Krzyzewski & Phillips, 2004; Miller, Lutz, & Fredenberg, 2012; Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2011).

The career of John Wooden, former head basketball coach at University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA) includes an all-time record of 664-112, an 88 consecutive game winning streak, thirteen conference championships, ten national championships in a twelve year period, and national coach of the year six times (John Wooden, Wikipedia, 2016). His elite level of success garnered him entry into the College Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006. Coach Wooden’s teams were known for their simple schemes adapted to the personnel that he had each year. One of the more famous methods of play was his team’s use of the full court press. This is a style of defense where the defense applies pressure to the opposition’s offense along the entire width and depth of the court. Coach Wooden’s rationale behind the simplicity of this uncommonly simple defensive scheme was that the increased amount of repetitions would lead to less thinking

and playing faster (Coyle, 2009; Hill & Wooden, 2009) by focusing more on technique and fundamentals.

As a consummate teacher, Coach Wooden was always stressing fundamentals. During practice, the coaching staff would break down complex movements into component parts and deliver concise feedback. The focus for practice was on demonstration, imitation, correction, repetition. Every daily practice the athletes would work on nothing but fundamentals for fifteen to twenty minutes (Coyle, 2009; Hill & Wooden 2002). By reducing the playbook and focusing on fundamentals, Coach Wooden's teams could "shrink the change by looking for small improvements" (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 134).

Mike Krzyzewski (hereafter referred to as Coach K) is the current head basketball coach at Duke University. His current all-time record is 1043-321, and includes twelve conference championships, five national championships, and ten national coaching honors, (Mike Krzyzewski Wikipedia, 2016). His elite level of success garnered him entry into the College Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006.

One of Coach K's teams focused on tradition. Coach K speaks often about the meaning of the Duke basketball jersey: "The jersey means something...it engenders pride. It raises emotions and it brings back memories. It binds the past to the present and symbolizes Duke tradition," (Krzyzewski, & Phillips, 2004, p. 188). By focusing on "leaving the jersey in a better place" (Kerr, 2015, p. 42), the Duke players feel connected to the legacy of those players who have come before them and have a desire not to let their teammates, or the tradition down (Osborne, 1999).

Elite football coaches. In this section on elite football coaches, the focus is on elite coaches who stay true to principles regardless of the methods used to reach them. Each coach listed in this section qualifies as an elite coach as he has at least a 75% winning percentage in all games played, or has won or played in three championships contests. They have stayed true to their principles.

Nick Saban is the current head football coach at the University of Alabama. He has an overall collegiate career coaching record of 191-60-1 which includes seven conference championships, five national championships, and several coach-of-the-year-awards (Nick Saban Wikipedia, 2016). One of the principles prominently put forth in his program has been what he calls “the process” (Saban & Curtis, 2007, p. 58), which Coach Saban views as more important than the actual on-the-field result. He coaches his players to focus on making the exact moment the best they possibly can. It does not matter what the score is, where the contest is, what has happened before, or what will happen in the future. The athlete needs to have focus on the exact assignment that he is supposed to carry out at that exact moment regardless of the situation or the score.

The athletes are indoctrinated that right now, and only right now is what they need to focus upon. In this way, an athlete’s focus is shrunk to allow them to exhibit maximum performance effort on a singular moment (Coyle, 2009; Heath & Heath, 2010). In one title game for Saban’s football team where the outcome was already well in hand, the starting quarterback and center experienced a miscommunication in the snap count. Instead of letting it go or looking at the scoreboard, the two players got into a shoving match with each other on national television because they each felt the other lost focus and gave a mediocre effort. While Saban did not want this type of behavior to occur on

the field, that moment shows just how important every member of the team views total and complete focus at all times.

While the process has allowed the Alabama football program to achieve elite levels of success, what is remarkable for Coach Saban is the continued ability to stay in the elite category of college football teams. “The process” is continuously going on and one lapse of focus has the potential to disrupt the efforts it took to achieve that success. Coach Saban says, “A champion never relaxes, he simply focuses on the next step” (Saban, & Curtis, 2007, p. 68). In this manner, no matter the opponent, the Alabama football team is always playing against itself in order to become the best team that it is capable of becoming.

Tom Osborne, the former head football coach at the University of Nebraska, had a successful college career including an all-time coaching record of 255-49-3, thirteen conference championships, three national championships, and sixteen coaching awards. His level of success brought him entry into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1999 (Tom Osborne Wikipedia, 2016). One of the unique things about Coach Osborne’s Nebraska program was that he emphasized a term called “servant leadership” (Hunter, 1998; Osborne, 1999). This term has now caught on with other authors using the synonym “mentor leader” and taking the idea to the mainstream (Dungy & Whitaker, 2011). In teams that emphasize this type of leadership, players came to believe that others’ needs are as important as your own, that an individual must sacrifice personal goals for the good of the team, and that leaders must serve the team’s needs before their own in order to be successful.

Chip Kelly is the current head football coach of the San Francisco 49ers. Coach Kelly recently moved to the NFL after serving in the collegiate ranks for several years at the University of Oregon. While at the University of Oregon, his overall college career coaching record was 46-7, which includes three conference championships, and more than eight coach-of-the-year awards (Chip Kelly Wikipedia, 2016). His innovative, and sometimes called unorthodox, offensive philosophy has distinguished his teams. He utilizes methods to challenge the status quo of football. Opposing coaches have been known to state that his style of play is not “real football” to which Coach Kelly responded, “Give me the rules and I will play by them, we all play on the same field, and we each have eleven athletes out there” (as cited in Saltveit, 2013, p. 76). Using a very fast tempo, Coach Kelly’s teams seek to emulate his motto of “Fast, Hard, and Finish” (as cited in Saltveit, 2013, p. 14) because those are the three areas that can be controlled by every individual within the organization.

The long term athletic development philosophy of “the process” (Saban & Curtis, 2007, p. 58) or “watering the bamboo” (Bell, 2009, p. 1) is utilized by Coach Kelly to create the unique offensive identity with which his teams are associated. He allows a significant investment of time to achieve this outcome. In one of his post-game press conferences, Kelly stated, “Everyone wants microwave results, but no one wants to eat at a microwave restaurant” (Saltveit, 2014, p. 65). Kelly is also a large proponent of the emerging field of sport science in that he wants to utilize “what gets results vs what has always been done” (Saltveit, 2013, p. 25).

John Gagliardi is the former head football coach at St. John’s University in Minnesota. Coach Gagliardi is the all-time winningest head football coach at any level.

His career as a head coach includes an overall career record of 489-138-11, twenty-seven conference championships, four national championships, and multiple coaching awards. His level of success garnered him entry into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2006 (John Gagliardi Wikipedia, 2016). One thing that separates Coach Gagliardi from his competition is what he did not do in his program.

Many football programs use all sorts of drills to build toughness but are not directly applicable to playing an actual game of football. The St. John's football players were also known to use unorthodox methods such as scrimmaging for an entire practice with less contact than other teams, engaging in warmups with the team lying on their backs and looking up and talking about what they liked best about the day, cancelling practice because of bad mosquitoes or gnats, and playing tag as a form of conditioning (Collison, 2001; Murphy, 2002).

What distinguished Coach Gagliardi's program was not only what they did do, but what they did not do. The "Johnnies" had a laser like "hedgehog focus" (Collins, 2001, p. 91; Hoch, 1997) on the areas where they wanted to excel, but also eliminated the items which they could not control. These areas included what their team could not be the best at, factors outside their influence, decisions that did not put personnel in best positions to succeed, or foregoing standard football practice dogma if it did not make them better in actually playing a game of football (Collison, 2001; Murphy, 2002).

Bob Ladouceur, former head football coach at De La Salle high school in California, has an overall head coaching record of 399-25-3, which includes a 151 consecutive game winning streak, nineteen league championships, five state championships, five top rankings in the USA Today high school football poll, eleven

national championships, and three coach of the year awards (Bob Ladouceur, Wikipedia, 2016). His program has had several books written and movies made about his teams' elite levels of success (Hayes, 2005; Ladouceur, & Hayes, 2015). One differentiator of his De La Salle program is what Coach Ladouceur coined "perfect effect" (Ladouceur, & Hayes, 2015, p. 80). His focus is on developing young men to become selfless, caring, and committed to each other and the demands of being a member of the De La Salle program. "There is a direct correlation between how much they care about each other and how well they play together... Teach kids there is more to life than high school football" (Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015, p. 28). Coach Ladouceur demands a lot of his athletes, but his focus is on what the athletes take with them after they leave his program. This focus of playing beyond the scoreboard (Hillier, 2002), appears to be a differentiating factor in the elite success of the De La Salle football program.

These elite coaches seek out opportunities for deep practice, provide prompt and tailored feedback, while also focusing on fundamentals and the long-term growth of skills. By utilizing these methods, elite football coaches contribute significantly to the development of an elite athletics program.

Athlete

The human talent, or capital, which constitutes an organization or team is certainly an influential part of its success. In the coaching context, this talent resides in the athletes who make up the program or organization. This section will investigate the role of athletes' involvement in the success of an athletic team. The investigation focuses on how personal and organizational athletic success is related to the athlete's commitment to achieve for the organization, the necessary work to obtain their goals, the

perception of the athlete on what factors allow for success, and the influence of the environment on the development of athletes. It is important to understand the influence that individual commitment, athlete perception, deliberate practice, and environmental influence have upon the development of individual athletes in respective sports.

Commitment. An important ingredient to the success of athletic teams is the commitment of individuals to the team. In William Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, a main character comments on the importance of commitment, "For he who today sheds blood with me shall be my brother" (as cited in Kerr, 2015, p. 33). The commitment of peers to a particular cause influences athletes on a team.

Patrick, Ryan, Alfred-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, and Eccles (1999) investigated the role of commitment related to developing talent in adolescent athletes. They found that "peers typically played a positive role in the continued involvement of talented adolescents in their talent activities" (Patrick, Ryan, Alfred-Liro, Fredericks, Hruda & Eccles, 1999, p. 741). The more committed individuals spread commitment to others within the group. Having a more committed group will then lead to more team cohesion and desire to achieve common goals. Jackson, Gucciardi, and Dimmock (2014) completed a study which found that higher levels of commitment by individuals on the team lead to higher levels of team cohesion and satisfaction compared to teams that had lower levels of commitment.

One of the most successful of all sports organizations as measured by all-time winning percentages, are the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. This team has won more than 80% of all their contests since the organization was created. An important ingredient used by this team to attain commitment is to speak frequently about the legacy

of the organization. Older and more established players communicate with younger players to “enhance the jersey and pass it on to a better state than when they received it” (Kerr, 2013, p. 42). By engaging in this enculturation process, the younger players become more directed to play with purpose because of their investment in the legacy of the All Blacks.

In another study, the All Blacks were again investigated according to what factors influenced commitment to the organization. The study revealed four themes of commitment: “desire to excel, team tradition, elite team membership, and being worthy of membership” (Scanlan, Russel, Scanlan, Klunchoo, & Chow, 2013, p. 525). The All Black studies clearly illustrate the importance of members’ commitment to their elite level of success.

Perception. The perception of an athlete related to the potential success of training, methods, and demands is an important ingredient in the development of elite football programs. High school football coaches spend a great deal of time with their athletes. They have the potential to influence the development of these young men. Coaches often discuss this as one of the reasons that they chose the profession of coaching (Bowden & Bowden, 2001; Fore, 2014; Holtz, 1998; Janssen, 2015; Krzyzewski & Phillips, 2004; Ladouceur & Hayes, 2015; Osborne, 1999; Parcells & Coplin, 1995; Schembechler & Bacon, 2007; Smith, Bell & Kilgore, 2004; Trimble, 2005; Walsh, Jamison & Walsh, 2009). Athletes’ perception of the impact the coach has upon their lives is also important. Skaza (2012), who has completed research on high school football coaches, has found that interactions with a coach are perceived by athletes to have impact upon the social, academic, and civic development of the young men.

Successful leaders know that the perception of their methods and leadership is critical to their success. While the methods and decisions made are ultimately the responsibility of the head coach, the perception among the athletes as having a voice in the decision-making process is very important to overall success of the program. Coaches of elite programs are adept at utilizing the perception of athletes in order to accomplish more success than they could achieve while neglecting those perceptions (Kerr, 2013).

The best coaches know how to get their athletes to perceive that their methods are productive to the success of the individual athlete and the entire team (Bartholomaus, 2012; Ricciuti, 2009; Stein, 2009). The decisions made by the head coach can be perceived by the athletes as being aimed in a democratic process or an autocratic process. In the autocratic process, the leader or head coach is the one making all decisions without the input of the subordinates. The democratic process is one where the athletes and the head coach work together in order to decide upon the best course of action.

At the collegiate level, Gardner researched the athletes' perception of team cohesion and motivational climate. He asked athletes whether their coach focused on mastery of skills or upon the performance result. His research found that the perception of team cohesion and team motivational climate was affected by the identified focus of the coach (Gardner, 1998). Gardner (1998) and Stein (2009) also found that athletes who identified their coaches as mastery-oriented had better team cohesion and better motivation compared to the athletes that identified their coaches as performance oriented. Subsequent studies have encountered similar findings on motivational climate (Purdy & Jones 2011; Stein, 2009), athlete engagement (Purdy & Jones, 2011; Souza & Oslin, 2008), athlete perception of coaching behaviors and feedback strategy (Stein, 2009;

Turman, 2000;), and communication methods (Stokes, Luiselli, Reed & Fleming, 2013) as all affecting the perception of team climate.

In a case study of one high school football team, the researcher looked at how athletes' overall satisfaction of playing the sport was affected by the particular perception of democratic or autocratic coaching behaviors used by the coaches that season (Bartholomaus, 2012). The findings from the study indicated that the coaching behaviors at the beginning of the season were perceived as more democratic in nature and this "increased the overall satisfaction the athletes had in playing their sport" (Bartholomaus, 2012, p. 2). Janssen (2015) has also found that the more the coach engages athletes in the democratic process of establishing standards of behavior before the season begins, the more committed athletes are to the team's success.

Environmental influence on development. When a performer achieves elite status in a particular domain, such as sports, the environment has usually contributed to the success of that performer. Coyle (2009) identified that certain areas are "hotbeds" of talent when systems are set up to identify, cultivate, and advance the level of talent in a given area. Real world evidence of this cultivation to achieve success are the "futsal" system of Brazilian soccer players, Caribbean baseball players, and the artisan guild system in the Renaissance (Coyle, 2009). These "hotbeds" of talent exist when organized environmental systems influence the development of talent in a specific domain.

The environment does play a role in influencing the development of talent. In one case study (Chan & Yeun, 2013), several elite athletes in Hong Kong were interviewed on the perceived impact of their development. The interviewees did not consider themselves to be inherently more gifted than anyone else, but that "coaching

opportunities, family influences, and school factors” (Chan & Yeun, 2013) heavily influenced their attainment of elite success. This suggests that athletes realize that a portion of their success does come from surrounding environmental influences. A 2012 study of elite soccer players in Sweden found that having a high-quality talent development environment allowed athletes to experience not only further performance enhancement, but also enhancement of their well-being compared to athletes that are from lower quality talent development environments (Ivarsson, Stenling, Fallby, Johnson, Borg & Johansson, 2015). Elite coaches use the commitment level of athletes, the perception of athletes, and the environment to ensure that athletic development of their elite program is aligned to allow them a competitive advantage over their competition.

Summary

Chapter two reviewed the definition of elite, and how the categories of culture, coaches, and athletes influence the development of an elite high school football program. The elite section discussed the importance of the various definitions of “elite”, how “elite” relates to coaching, and how coaching can provide the context of “elite” as it pertains to high school football.

The culture section discussed how leaders of successful companies establish an elite culture, develop future leaders for their organization, and manage community support.

The research investigated how elite coaches’ methods influence their team's success, and how elite coaches in basketball and football build programs that allow elite levels of success.

Finally, the section on athletes investigated how individual commitment, athlete perception, deliberate practice, and environmental influence help the development of individual athletes in their respective sports. Understanding how athletes perceive their talent development also reveals insight on elite football programs.

Each of these variables is an important piece of the puzzle to understanding what makes an elite high school football program. The importance of these variables will influence the in-depth surveys undertaken in this capstone to answer the question *What factors contribute to the development of an elite high school football program?*

Chapter Three Preview

Chapter Three will discuss the case study survey method used to answer the question *What factors contribute to the development of an elite high school football program?* Through the use of interviews, a qualitative and quantitative case study survey of elite high, and non-elite high school football programs was investigated. The research took place in the upper Midwest area of the United States.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, the research paradigm and methods used, along with their justification for doing so, shall be discussed. After this, a listing of the communities, and background of the various elite, and non-elite, high school football coaches who participated in the case study will be presented. Finally, this section will discuss the survey questions used in the interview process, a description of the data analysis methods, and a statement regarding the safety of participants during the study.

Research Paradigm and Methods

This research study operates using the pragmatic worldview to find solutions to real world problems. This research theory also includes a transformative approach in that it “involves the community of interest in the research process” (Creswell, 2014, p. 73). While relying heavily on qualitative data, the study will also be using a mixed methods approach which merges “qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 15). The methods, “explore the views and perspectives of the participants involved in the research question” (Creswell, 2014, p. 15). Simply stated, the researcher is using a mixed approach, with far more emphasis on qualitative than quantitative analysis.

By getting the perspectives of the practitioners, the research question about what factors contribute to an elite high school football program garners further insights than it would through standard observational data.

The qualitative methods consist of interviews with elite and non-elite high school football coaches. Quantitative approaches will include survey research of the elite football coach sample population.

Expansion of the interview research. When the researcher originally set out to answer the research question “*What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*”, the intent of the study was to investigate three to five elite coaches to gain evidence for what these potential factors might be. After a meeting with the capstone committee, the members agreed that it would be more fruitful to expand the focus of the thesis research. This expanding focus included the addition of coaches that were non-elite according to the operational definition of elite high school football coaches outlined previously. Another change to the research was the expansion of several other questions into the interview that were not previously there. By expanding the original focus of the research in these ways, a more comprehensive set of data could be obtained to better identify potential factors that contribute to an elite high school football program.

Benefits of the interview method. Running a high school football program is a challenge. This challenge extends to details of logistics, strategic and tactical planning, establishing a mission and purpose, motivating a group of people, and getting the individuals to come together for the good of the whole team. Those in charge of high school football programs must be very intentional about the choices they make to ensure the greatest possible success for their organization. When these decisions do not lead to success, quality coaches must reflect on how to improve their decisions for the next

season. Football coaches, or anyone in charge of an organization, must integrate both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure maximum productivity and efficiency.

This qualitative method, as Creswell (2014) says, helped, “the researcher... establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 19). The interview questions allowed the participants to express, in their own words, their perspective on why they achieved specific results in their high school football programs.

By facilitating interviews in this fashion, the researcher encouraged more personal and in-depth responses than pre-defined responses such as a list of questions would have generated. Coding the qualitative and quantitative data from the individual interviews to indicate thematic responses, “allow[ed] the integration...to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding” (Creswell, 2014, p. 151; Mills, 2011, 131) of the research question, *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

In utilizing both qualitative and quantitative analysis the researcher looked to investigate the connection between coach and team, provide analysis of coaching as a teaching activity, and demonstrate the positive benefits the game of football has beyond the actual field of play.

Potential pitfalls of the research method employed. Though there are many benefits to the mixed methods approach using qualitative and quantitative data, there are also certain limiting factors. It is prudent to mention that the researcher is himself a football coach with ten years of coaching experience. He is an advocate for the game and, therefore, has a perspective that is not entirely unbiased. During the individual

interviews, the researcher has taken the roles of an active participant observer, active observer, and passive observer (Mills, 2011, p.74-75). While using questions prescribed for each coach, certain responses from specific coaches on questions may have elicited different types of discussion when compared to other coaches interviewed for this research. The researcher hopes that by incorporating both positive and negative aspects of the coaches' experience, the information surrounding their effectiveness will broaden the analysis of the research question, *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

Settings and Participants

This section describes the demographic information of each of the communities in which the elite programs are located. The settings included in this study are the communities where the coaches in the study do their work. Information includes the number of athletes in the program, the socio-economic status of the student body, the duration that the coaching staff has been together, the school's athletic classification within the state, the program's tradition of success, and the total population of the school.

The coaches included have been assigned a specific color, and are matched with the corresponding color for the program they are responsible for. The five elite coaches participating in the study were assigned the colors of red, blue, yellow, purple, and orange. The four non-elite coaches participating in the study were assigned the colors of brown, silver, green, and tan. While the non-elite coaches have been designated as being high quality coaches from fellow football contacts, their status as head coach, or overall win-loss record do not meet the operational definition of elite for this research. Coach

information includes current or retired status, length of time as the head coach, team accomplishments at the state title level, state semi-final level, and section title level areas of responsibility within the football program, former positions or focus held in coaching their football team, and current role within the school where they work.

Of the coaches being interviewed for this case-study, some were previously known to the researcher in a professional capacity, while others were known only by their reputation as high school football coaches. This shared professional capacity included one or more of the following criteria:

- *Working with this coach at a football program in some capacity;

- *Exchanging information at coaching clinics;

- *Exchanging coaching strategies, program improvement, or tactical knowledge either electronically, or over the phone, or in person.

The number of years that the researcher knew each coach has been placed in parenthesis after the color assigned each coach. For example, Coach Blue (15), Coach Tan (8), Coach Brown (6), Coach Silver (4), Coach Red (3), and Coach Green (2). The remainder of coaches in this study were not previously known to the researcher in a personal or professional capacity before engaging in the case-study research. The coaches known to the researcher by reputation only included Coach Purple, Coach Orange, and Coach Yellow.

Coach and program blue. A Midwestern suburban parochial school whose football program has over 150 athletes in grades 9-12. The community at this school has

a high socio-economic status. The school plays within the second largest classification for football in their state and has had a long tradition of success in high school football. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 1000.

Coach Blue is a retired head coach from this suburban parochial school. He was the head coach for approximately thirteen years at this program, and has thirty-three years of football coaching experience in all. Before being named head coach at this program, he spent thirteen seasons as offensive coordinator, and three seasons before this as a position coach at this same school. During his tenure as head coach, his teams played for two state titles, were state semi-finalists on four occasions, section title winners seven times, and conference champions on eight occasions. In terms of staffing, the majority of his twenty-member coaching staff worked together for more than ten seasons during his thirteen-year tenure at the school. Coaching responsibilities were primarily focused on the special teams phase of the game. He is currently an assistant at the program where he was the head coach. Coach Blue is a teacher within the school, and has more than 30 years of teaching experience at the school where he was the head football coach.

Coach and program yellow. A rural Midwestern public school whose football program had over 50 athletes in grades 9-12 during his tenure. The community at this school has a mid-level rural socio-economic status. The school plays within the fifth largest classification for football in their state. The school population is registered by the state high school league as approximately 300 students.

Coach Yellow is the head football coach at this rural public school. He has been the head coach for nineteen years at this program, and has twenty-seven years of total

football coaching experience. Before being named head coach, he was an assistant in this program for eight seasons. During his nineteen-year tenure as head coach, his programs have won seven state titles, ten section titles, and fourteen conference championships. In terms of staffing, the majority of his six-member coaching staff has worked together for over fifteen seasons during his nineteen-year tenure at the school. His primary coaching responsibilities are as offensive coordinator, and on the offensive line. Coach Yellow is a teacher in the school where he is the head football coach.

Coach and program purple. A parochial school located in a middle-sized city in the Midwest whose football program has approximately 45 athletes in grades 9-12. The community at this school has a socio-economic status of middle to upper class. The school plays within the fourth largest classification for football in their state. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 400.

Coach Purple is the head coach for this parochial school. He has been the head coach for twelve years at this program, has twenty-one total years of coaching experience, and is an alumnus of the same program. Before being named head coach, he was also the defensive coordinator for approximately eight years. His teams have played for four state titles, won three state titles, were section title winners eight times, and conference champions on six occasions. In terms of staffing, the majority of his twelve-member coaching staff worked together for more than eight seasons during his twelve-year tenure at the school. Coaching responsibilities are primarily focused on the defensive phase of the game. Coach Purple works in the administration within the school.

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Coach and program orange. A Midwestern blue-collar suburban parochial school whose football program has approximately 56 athletes in grades 9-12. The community at this school has a working class socio-economic status. The school plays within the fourth largest classification for football in their state. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 400.

Coach Orange is the head football coach at this Midwestern suburban parochial school. He has been the head coach of this program for twenty-three years, with forty-three years of total football coaching experience. Coach Orange had twenty previous years of experience as a head football coach at another high school program in a different state. During his twenty-three-year tenure, his program has won five state titles, played for an additional state title, six section championships, and fifteen conference championships. In terms of staffing, the majority of his eight-member coaching staff worked together for more than seven seasons during his twenty-three-year tenure at the school. His coaching responsibilities are as offensive coordinator, primarily focused on the offensive side of the game. Coach Orange is a retired teacher and administrator of the school where he coaches.

Coach and program red. This public school is located in a rural area of the Midwest. The school has approximately 75 athletes in grades 9-12 program of their football program. The community is known as having a blue collar socio-economic status. The school plays within their state's third largest classification. The school population as registered by the state high school league is approximately 500 students.

Coach Red is the current head coach at this rural public school. He has been the head coach of this program for seventeen years, and has thirty total years of football coaching experience. Before being named head coach, he was an assistant in this program for thirteen years. During his tenure, his program has won three state titles, played for an additional three state titles, and has won seven conference championships. In terms of staffing, the majority of his fifteen-member coaching staff worked together for more than seventeen seasons during his seventeen-year tenure at the school. His coaching responsibilities are as offensive coordinator, and on the offensive line. Coach Red is a current teacher of the school where he coaches.

Coach and program green. A Midwestern suburban parochial school whose football program had over 100 athletes in grades 9-12 during his tenure. The community at this school has an upper middle class to high socio-economic status. The school currently plays within their state's third largest classification. The school population as registered by the state high school league is approximately 500 students.

Coach Green was the head football coach at his program for thirteen years, has thirty-nine total years of football coaching experience, and is an alumnus of this same program. Before being named head coach, he was an assistant for twenty-six years at this same program. During his thirteen-year tenure, his program won two conference championships, and played in the section finals in each of his last two years as head coach. In terms of staffing, the majority of his eleven-member coaching staff worked together for more than ten seasons during his thirteen-year tenure at the school. After retiring he has continued to serve a variety of assistant football coaching roles for the

school where he was formerly in charge of the football program. His primary coaching responsibilities were as offensive coordinator, or on the offensive side of the ball. Coach Green was a teacher at the school where he coached.

Coach and program tan. A Midwestern suburban parochial school whose football program has over 150 athletes in grades 9-12. The community at this school has a high socio-economic status. The school plays within the second largest classification for football in their state and has had a long tradition of success in high school football. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 1000.

Coach Tan is the current coach at this Midwestern suburban parochial school. He is currently in his second year as the head coach at this school, has thirteen total years of football coaching experience, and is an alumnus of this same program. Coach Tan does have a previous year as a head coach at another program in another state. Before being named as head coach, he was the defensive coordinator for five seasons, and an assistant coach for one season at the same program where he is currently the head football coach. While the staff is in its second year under his tenure, there was some turnover from year one to this current year for the twenty-member coaching staff. His primary coaching responsibilities are focused on the defensive phase of the game. Coach Tan is a teacher within the school he coaches.

Coach and program silver. A Midwestern suburban parochial school whose football program has over 35 athletes in grades 9-12. The community at this school has a high socio-economic status. The school plays within the third largest classification for

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football in their state. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 600.

Coach Silver is the current coach at this Midwestern suburban parochial school. He is currently in his third year as the head coach, and has twelve total years of football coaching experience. Before being named head coach, he was the defensive coordinator for three seasons. During his tenure, his teams have played in one section final game. While the staff is in its second year under his tenure, there was some turnover from year one to this current year for the eleven-member coaching staff. His primary coaching responsibilities are focused on the defensive phase of the game. Coach Silver is a teacher and head track coach within the school.

Coach and program brown. A rural Midwestern public school whose football program had over 50 athletes in grades 9-12 during his tenure. The community at this school has a mid-level rural socio-economic status. The school plays within the fourth largest classification for football. The school population is registered by the state high school league as over 350 students.

Coach Brown was the head football coach at this program for nine years, with nineteen years of total football coaching experience, and twelve years of experience as a head football coach. Coach Brown does have four previous years of experience as a head coach in the same state. Before being named head coach, he was an assistant, and previously a head coach at another school for four seasons. During his nine-year tenure, his program won one conference championship, and one section final. In terms of staffing, the majority of his six-member coaching staff worked together for more than

three seasons during his nine-year tenure at the school. His primary coaching responsibilities were as offensive coordinator, or on the offensive side of the ball. Since resigning his position as head coach, he has joined the staff as an assistant at another football program where he was previously an assistant. Coach Brown is a teacher in the district where he was once the head football coach.

Data Tools

The data collection will include scripted interviews which ask questions concerning qualitative and quantitative data. The researcher created qualitative and quantitative ways to track how many times answers with specific themes arose among the four case studies. Open-ended questions were posed to the elite, and non-elite coaches, and will provide additional insights and suggest further ways to investigate the research question: *What factors contribute to the development of an elite high school football program?*”

Interviews. Personal interviews determined how elite, and non-elite coaches viewed the influence of the potential factors involved in the success of their high school football program. The open-ended questions allowed coaches to reflect on the process of their success. Interviews with each coach were conducted over the phone, face to face, or via electronic communication. When necessary, the coaching respondents were contacted after their initial interviews to seek further clarification, or obtain additional information on responses to the interview questions. The interview responses were transcribed by the researcher during the interview, along with any additional clarifications needed after this initial meeting. The interview questions asked below were developed by the author in

collaboration with fellow football coaching peers. All participants in the study were asked the same questions, in the same order, and no additional questions were asked outside of those contained in the complete list of interview questions. Appendix A contains the complete list of questions asked during the interviews. A partial list of questions asked in the interview were:

- 1) Why do you coach high school football?
- 2) What role does the head football coach play in developing an elite high school football program?
- 3) What role do assistant coaches play in developing an elite high school football program?
- 4) What roles do athletes play in developing an elite high school football program?
- 5) What role does the community play in developing an elite high school football program?
- 6) What do you think are the biggest factors for your program's success?
- 7) In rank order format, what are the three most important areas to develop an elite high school football program?
- 8) What is your philosophy on offense, defense, and special teams?

Data Analysis. The data compiled from the interviews of the programs was used to find a frequency of answers to each question, as well as themes that show commonality and difference among the various elite and non-elite high school football programs.

Responses were transcribed by the researcher during the interview process, and coaches were sent these responses to ensure accuracy and authenticity. When asked to do so by the participants, certain responses, or portions of responses were omitted in the findings

of the research study. The responses illustrate the degree to which elite high school football coaches believed the various factors contribute to an elite high school football program.

Safety of Participants

The coaches in this research were included after approval by the Hamline University School of Education Human Subject Committee (hereafter referred to as HSC), and following their personal agreement. The safety of the participants follows the HSC guidelines for the safety of participants, the professional code of conduct for the Minnesota State Football Coaches Association, and the guidelines of the various schools where the coaches work. Specific measures were put in place to ensure the safety, anonymity, and autonomy of the participants. All participants signed a letter of consent to take part in the research. The consent form included an explanation of the research, how the research would be conducted, and a waiver for the interview. For research identification, the coaches and programs have been numbered so that these coaches correspond with the number of the community in which they participate.

In the materials provided to participants, coaches were informed that the results of this data would be published and stored in electronic format, at Hamline University's Bush Library. The letter explained the anonymity of the participants. All information during the research was stored on the personal computer of the researcher, and all coaches were informed that they had the option to have responses omitted for publication during the interview process.

Summary

The theoretical framework, research paradigm, and justification of research methods were discussed. The potential coaches, and corresponding communities of the participant list were identified and described. The research is comprised of a mixed methods approach that while relying heavily on qualitative data, will also use quantitative data from the various interview responses.

Chapter Four Preview

Chapter Four will discuss the results of the study in relation to the research question: *What factors contribute to the development of an elite high school football program?* The chapter includes the interview findings from the interviews facilitated with elite, and non-elite high school football coaches. Lastly, the chapter concludes with the coaches' interviews and perspectives on what factors contribute most to an elite high school football program.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

The question of the study asked: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The purpose of the study was to identify these factors by comparing the responses of five elite high school football coaches, and four non-elite high school football coaches. Research was conducted using a mixed methods approach via a series of case study interviews with these high school football coaches. Coaches who participated in the study completed interviews on more than thirty questions about potential factors that could contribute to elite success at the high school level. The questions given in the interview were categorized as: Head Coach demographic information and experience, assistant coaches, personnel use, philosophy and schematic approach, practice structure, community interaction, perceptions of elite success, and challenges faced. This chapter will discuss some of the common themes in the responses across all question categories, compare the thematic responses given to each question category, and compare the responses given to individual questions by the elite and non-elite high school football coaches who participated in the study. For a complete list of questions used in the interview process, please refer to Appendix A.

Themes across questions

Before embarking upon a discussion of the various responses among elite and non-elite high school football coaches, it is prudent to discuss the general themes found in responses across all questions asked in the interviews. These thematic responses appeared so often in the responses that their frequency alone is noteworthy and helps to provide further insight into the research question *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* This section will discuss the themes of mentorship beyond the game, establishing organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and maintaining a simple focus. While the specific responses to each question and category will be compared and contrasted between the elite and non-elite coaching groups in subsequent sections, the following sub-sections will focus on themes that emerged in the responses across all questions regardless of categorization for the specific coach and program.

Mentorship beyond the game. Urban Meyer, the head football coach at Ohio State, is a very successful, and some would say elite coach, as he has garnered national championships at two different schools. In his most recent book on leadership, he discusses the reason for his success being different than perhaps some believe it to be. In his book, Meyer (2015) states that his uncommon success as a coach is because of his uncommon definition of leadership:

A true leader is someone who is going someplace and taking people with him, a catalyst for elite performance who enables people to achieve things they wouldn't achieve on their own. A leader is someone who earns trust, sets a clear standard, and then equips and inspires people to meet that standard. (Meyer, 2015, p. 2)

While it is noteworthy that such a highly successful head football coach thus defined leadership, the responses in this research study clearly support Coach Meyer's desire to assist others in helping them become better people. This is a primary goal that inspires these coaches to do what they do. Every single coach in the study mentioned that they desire to make an impact beyond the field of play. The reason these men enter the profession of coaching may have the tangential benefits of competition, but the primary focus is clearly helping the athletes in their charge become better fathers, husbands, brothers, men, and members of society. These respondents wish to have the same lifelong impact on the development of future generations as their coaches had upon them. This desire to coach and mentor players means giving lessons that will last long beyond the time they actually play the game. Other coaches expressed this as giving back, developing authentic relationships with players, and mentoring the whole person as also found in the work of Ehrmann et al. (2011), Gongwer (2014), Hillier (2002), Holtz (1998), Kerr (2015), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Meyer (2015), and Trimble (2005).

Establishing organizational and cultural alignment. "Leaders create culture. Culture drives behavior. Behavior produces results" (Meyer, 2015, p. 61). The respondents in this research study articulated many times the importance of establishing a culture. To establish this culture, they realize that many hours must be spent in developing a philosophy, mission statement, and core values that authentically reflect the beliefs of the coach and what he hopes to accomplish with his program. One football coach stated the importance of culture to his success as being so important that "I micromanage two things, our defense and our culture..." (Ferguson, J., personal communication, March 30, 2017). This sentiment is also found in the writings of Buzzo

(2009), Hill & Wooden (2002), Jackson (2016), Jackson & Delahanty (2006), Kerr (2015), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Maxwell (2007), Trimble (2005), Walsh et al. (2009), and Wooden & Jamison (2005). When a coach is true to himself, the other facets of the organization have resonance in the players' experience because the intentions and the behavior of the coach are aligned.

While establishing a culture is important, so is the necessity of alignment. By ensuring that all facets of their programs are working together, and toward a common goal, these coaches realize the critical importance of organizational alignment to their success. By clearly articulating alignment these coaches achieve elite performance. As Meyer says, "In order to achieve elite performance, alignment is essential. When a team is aligned, everyone understands and is fully committed to the team's purpose, culture, and strategy" (Meyer, 2015, p. 147). The supportive evidence of the importance of alignment is also found in the literature of Buzzo (2009), Connors & Smith (2011), Gordon & Smith (2015), Hill & Wooden (2002), Jackson (2016), Jackson & Delahanty (2006), Janssen (2002), Janssen (2014), Kerr (2015), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Kuchar (2014), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), and Trimble (2005).

Staffing. The New Zealand All-Blacks rugby team expresses the importance of leaders creating leaders (Kerr, 2015) as part of explaining their elite levels of success. Respondents in this study also realize that their leadership needs the support and alignment of their subordinate assistant coaches. The assistant coaches are not just in charge of their particular group of athletes, but they are critical to establishing meaningful and authentic relationships with their players, and also as another source echoing the

culture and values of the head coach. By finding the best people to fit within the desired organizational culture of their football programs, complement their skill set, and push the organization forward, the participants are allowing their organizations to experience greater levels of success than would happen without these high caliber assistant coaches. The head coaches select these assistant coaches to challenge and push the organization to improve while still maintaining alignment with the values, mission, and purpose of the organizations' core, as established by the head coach. Indeed, this practice and importance of selecting quality assistant coaches is found in the literature by Bowden & Bowden (2002), Hill & Wooden (2002), Janssen (2002), Janssen (2014), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Ladoucuier & Hayes (2015), Meyer (2015), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005).

Simple Focus. “Schemes don’t win games; effort does” (Ash, C., personal communication, February 23, 2017). Elite coaches, while having a large amount of subject-matter knowledge, have teams that are remarkably simple. With the experience that these practitioners have in utilizing various schematic approaches, it appears that a contributing factor to their success is a primary and intense focus on fundamentals, execution and effort. The coaches participating in this study realize the importance and delicate balance of scheme and execution, as made in the statement of an eight-time state champion high school football coach, “There is a danger in too much scheme, but there is also a danger in too little scheme... We look to play faster and execute better” (Ferguson, J., personal communication, March 30, 2017). By allocating intensive time to teach, communicate and practice fundamentals, these coaches show results echoed in the literature of Collins (2001), Coyle (2009), Fore (2014), Hayes (2005), Hill & Wooden

(2002), Hollenbeck (2003), Jackson & Delehanty (2006), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Kuchar (2014), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Nash et al. (2011), Saban & Curtis (2007), Saltveit (2013), and Turman (2000).

A part of this approach to having a simple focus is having a system. By having a system, these coaches realize that their schemes are like a toolbox in that they only need specific plays or tools to accomplish certain objectives. By maintaining a limited number of plays or schemes, these systems, while being smaller than others, allow for a larger focus on their execution. This sentiment is stated as, "...Good leaders have a plan. Exceptional leaders have a system" (Meyer, 2015, p. 9). By having a clearly defined system with each part performing a specific purpose, the toolbox utilized by the coaches become more effective, efficient, and guides their teams to more on-the-field-success.

Head coach background information

This section will discuss the responses given to various interview questions that establish demographic information, experience in coaching football, and background information related to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* Questions asked in this section obtained information on educational degrees, previous football playing experience, reason for coaching high school football, total football coaching experience, job of the head football coach, areas directly supervised by the head coach, and the perceived role of the head football coach in developing an elite high school football program. When themes or trends appear in responses among elite, and non-elite high school football coaches these will be noted.

While this section is directed at contextualizing the background information for each coach, it is apparent that the themes of mentorship beyond the game, organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and maintaining a simple focus occur in the responses from each coach.

Highest educational degree attained. This question was asked to obtain information on whether having a certain level of education correlated with a coach's achieving a certain level of on-the-field success. Non-elite coaches all had a bachelor's degree. Three elite coaches held master's degrees; one held a bachelor's degree, and one elite coach held a high school degree. While attaining a certain degree may give more subject matter expertise in their area of focus, it does not appear that having a higher degree correlates to the attainment of elite status in high school football programs. The researcher had expected that attainment of advanced degrees would manifest more frequently in the elite category of coaches, but the data does not prove this assumption to be accurate.

Description of football playing experiences. This question was asked to observe whether there may be a correlation between a coach's personal highest level of play, and the on-the-field success of their program. While the non-elite coaches tended to describe their experiences as either a list of team or personal accomplishments, and positions played, the elite coaches took a slightly different tack. They described some of the same information about personal or team accomplishments, but several of them remarked on the impact a previous coach had upon them. For example, "I played for a legendary coach...he understood the psychology of football so well" (Coach Red, personal

communication, 2016), and, "...[I played for] a great coaching staff. It has had a huge impact upon me" (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). It was interesting to note that one coach responded with a negative impact that one of his college coaches had on him: "In college I was turned off by the techniques that were deliberately violent or unsafely targeted opposing players" (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). It is clear based upon these responses that the theme of mentorship beyond the game appears repeatedly.

In terms of playing experience, three of five elite coaches played at the collegiate level compared to three out of four non-elite coaches played at the collegiate level. It does not appear that having a certain level of personal football playing experience affects the attainment of elite or non-elite status in high school football programs. The researcher had expected that the elite coaches would all have had experience at the collegiate level. So, this finding was surprising, given the underlying assumption that playing at a higher level of competition means that a player has more domain knowledge, and thereby can teach others this knowledge more effectively than those without it. The findings of this research may prove this underlying assumption inaccurate.

Rationale for coaching high school football. When asked the question about why these men coach high school football, the responses for each group were very similar. The responses centered around three common themes that all coaches responded to. These themes were mentorship of players, teaching lifelong lessons in a unique way, and giving back.

The theme of mentoring or development was answered with responses such as, “Not about wins and losses. It is about developing young men to the best of their abilities...” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). “I have more fun in the seasons where the relationships are better, regardless of the win record” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). And, “Those men had a large impact on my life and I want to do that as well” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016). Non-elite coaches responded in similar ways, “I want to reach out and mentor young men...” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). “To develop the whole person is extremely gratifying and the main reason I coach” (Coach Green, personal communication, 2016). My coaching aims to “influence kids and help [them] realize goals, dreams...and help raise [them] to become better men” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016).

The elite coaches truly seem to view their football field as a classroom, not just for their season but for the rest of their players’ lives. “Teach what you can teach through football...that which is not often taught in schools today” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016), and, “I am convinced that it is a unique sport in developing boys into young men” (Coach Orange, personal communication, 2016).

Sportsmanship was another way to identify lifelong lessons, “Football is a unique sport in developing boys into men...Sportsmanship is learned through the controlled physical and emotional aspects of this game” (Coach Orange, personal communication, 2017). One retired head coach summarized the specific ways that football teaches life-lessons compared to other sports in the following way, “[Football] teaches life lessons such as teamwork, integrity, pride, unity, cooperative learning, brotherhood. It teaches

individual skills, accountability, work ethic, discipline, study habits” (Coach Green, personal communication, 2016).

The coaches in both groups were very influenced by coaches in their own playing experience. This positive influence in giving back to the next generation of football players was conveyed in such responses as, “Those men [have] had a large impact on my life and I want to do that as well” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016), and, “It is a way for me to give back” (Coach Yellow, personal communication, 2016). Non-elite coaches also responded in a similar way, “[The coaches I had were] looking to make a positive life-long impact on the players they coached...and [I am also] looking to give back...” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). This methodical development of leaders, or of “leaders creating leaders” (Kerr, 2015, p. 40) also frequently appears in the literature of Collins (1994), Collins (2001), Dungy & Whitaker (2011), Hunter (1998), Irwin et al. (2004), Janssen (2014), Kerr (2015), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Maxwell (2007), and Wise & Hammack (2011).

There was a slight difference in the two groups about the place, and importance of win-loss records and the importance of competition. While it is obviously necessary for a coach to achieve a certain level of success to continue coaching, the overall value each group placed upon winning did differ. While the elite coaches acknowledged the fun of coaching, they also emphasized that a deeper meaning comes from mentorship, teaching lifelong lessons, and giving back. These are more important than the result of competition on the field of play. Non-elite responses did have direct reference to competition or winning. The difference between the two groups is articulated clearly in the following

response from an elite coach: “Competition is positive as long as it is kept in its proper place within the purpose of coaching” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016).

This importance of the game beyond the field was made very clear, too, when upon being asked about the number of titles won, and overall win-loss record, the elite coaches often had to consult another source because they did not keep track of that statistical information. It was noteworthy to report that the coach with the most number of state titles won, captured the essence of this distinction in his response, “I want to make clear the record and titles [are] not as important to me as the relationships that we have with student athletes” (Coach Yellow, personal communication, 2017). By spending so much time articulating the focus of their purpose, or the why before the what, these coaches reflect the literature findings of Buzzo (2009), Lencioni (2002), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005). It is somewhat counterintuitive that the winningest coaches speak very little about winning on the field of play, but devote so much time to explicitly mentor their players to win the greater game of life. This focus off winning, and onto mentorship and/or cultural alignment with this larger focus, appears to be a contributing factor for these elite coaches to obtain the on-the-field success that their program has achieved.

Previous football coaching roles and experience. This question was asked to determine if certain experiences working as an assistant football coach contributed to coaches attaining certain level of on-the-field success in their program. The responses in this section had straight-forward variations, but also lead to further insights on potential factors that could contribute to coaches attaining elite or non-elite status. Elite coaches

are practitioners who have thought deeply about the art of coaching, and have refined their ideas and thinking over multiple seasons into the beliefs that shape how they conduct their football program. Coaches that wish to attain successful teams, or elite status, take steps to further develop the foundation of their program, athletes, and assistant coaches.

The elite coaches also have more football coaching experience than the non-elite coaches. An interesting finding in these responses is that all the elite coaches had been at their program, regardless of role, for more than twenty years. Digging further into the responses, four out of five of these elite football coaches served as an assistant in the program for a minimum of eight years before being named head coach. Three out of four non-elite coaches, on the other hand, mentioned experience in multiple programs. This finding suggests that to attain elite status in coaching high school football, these head coaches have had a long-term exposure and understanding of the program within a community in which they are members. This longevity in a single program appears to be strongly associated with a factor that contributes to an elite high school football program, and was mentioned in the literature by Westering (2001). These responses also indicate that staffing continuity is not important just for an individual program, but also an important ingredient for an individual hoping to one day lead an elite high school program themselves. Because of these responses, the researcher believes that staffing continuity for the individual coaches is an important ingredient in the development of an elite high school football program.

For total head football coaching experience, the elite coaches have a longer duration of experience compared to the non-elite football coaches. Non-elite coaches stated that their head football coaching experience ranged from two to thirteen years. Elite football coaches had a range of twelve to twenty-three years as head coach of their current programs. In the non-elite group of coaches, two of the respondents had been head coaches at a school other than their current program. A noteworthy finding was that only one elite football coach had been a head coach at another location besides his current program. These responses show that by adopting a perspective of “making the big time where they are” (Westering, 2001) relates to the important theme of organizational and cultural alignment and cohesion in their own practice. This finding, while expected by the researcher, again shows that a contributing factor to developing an elite high school football program is maintaining a presence in their respective communities for an extended duration of time. It appears that unless a football coach has long-standing ties to one school community, it is very difficult to build the foundation necessary to attain elite status in a high school football program. Therefore, this continuity of a coach within a given community is a potentially important factor in the development of an elite high school football program.

Role of head football coach other than football. This question was asked to determine whether or not coaches’ jobs in the building outside of football were a contributing factor to obtaining elite or non-elite status. There was no observed correlation between or among groups about specific roles or assignments other than football in their respective communities. All the non-elite coaches were teachers in the building where they coached, or were the head football coach. In terms of the elite

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coaches, three currently are teachers in their school; one is a retired administrator and teacher, and the final coach is a current administrator in the school where he is the head football coach. By being prominent figures in their school community, these coaches are further able to build upon the organizational and cultural alignment established in their football programs. The researcher had speculated that the coaches would maintain teaching or administrative roles within their school community, and the data confirms this assumption. These responses indicate that having a teaching or administrative role within the building is a potential factor contributing to the development of an elite high school football program.

Areas of the football team directly supervised by the head coach. This question was asked to identify whether coaches' direct supervision of a particular position in their program contributed to attainment of elite or non-elite status. In addition to being the head football coach, three of the elite coaches are offensive coordinators, and are responsible for coaching the offensive line. All non-elite coaches responded to this question with a big picture viewpoint of their program. All respondents maintained a direct involvement responsible for a specific area of the team, in addition to their duties as head football coach. One non-elite coach responded about the overarching responsibility of the direct supervision of their duties as, "I am involved in every aspect of the football program" (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017).

It was noteworthy that four of the five elite coaches were offensive coordinators at one point or another in their coaching history. The fact these same coaches were directly responsible for coaching the offensive line appears to be a contributing factor to

the on-field-success of their program. The researcher was surprised to see such a strong correlation of direct responsibility in the elite coaches in these two areas, and as such they need to be strongly considered to be a contributing factor to the attainment of an elite high school football program. By directly supervising these two aspects on the offensive area of their football program, these coaches are displaying the prominence of the simple focus theme found throughout the responses in the interview process, and must be considered a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Role of the head coach in developing an elite high school football program.

This question was asked to determine if there was a difference in the perception of elite and non-elite coach's understanding of their role to achieving elite status. Both groups of coaches believed that the head coach plays a very critical role in developing an elite high school football program. There was an overall sentiment in these responses that fit into two subcategories related to the larger theme of organizational and cultural alignment. These subcategories are being the role model or point person for the organization, and providing a guiding vision for the overall direction of the program.

As one elite coach said, "...the buck stops with the head coach. He is the role model and the example" (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). The second theme about the guiding vision was stated by two non-elite coaches in the following ways, "...[The] leader is in charge and directs every aspect of the ship" (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016), and, "Responsible for all that happens, or fails to happen. The primary role is to develop a winning culture and attitude that permeates the

program” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). These statements reflect the findings in the literature of Collins & Porras (1994), Fore (2014), Janssen (2014), Kerr (2014), Lencioni (2002), Maxwell (2007), Sinek (2009), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005).

The researcher has expected that the elite coaches would express perceptions of a different quality or kind when compared to non-elite coaches. While the expected responses may address aspects of other themes found across all questions, the intent in the responses of both coaching groups appears to show the importance of organizational and cultural alignment as a contributing factor to the attainment of elite status in a high school football program.

Assistant Coaches

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on assistant coaches that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* Questions in this section for elite and non-elite coaches focused on the number of football coaches at each level in their program, the number of assistant coaches employed by the school or district of the football program, the perceived role of assistant coaches in developing an elite high school football program, the tenure and continuity of the coaching staff, and the assistant coaches’ use of the off-season to develop themselves further as coaches.

Number of football coaches in your program. This question was asked to determine whether elite football programs have a larger quantity of assistant coaches when compared to non-elite programs. Three elite programs, and three non-elite

programs had more than ten assistant coaches for their ninth-to-twelfth grade football program. Two elite coaches, and one non-elite coach had six coaches or less in their ninth-to-twelfth grade football program. Since the coaches work at different sized schools, with different numbers of coaches, there is not an observed correlation between the number of assistant coaches and the status in either group. The overall number of assistant coaches in a football program does not appear to be a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

While not every coach mentioned the number of assistant coaches at the middle-school level, it is noteworthy to mention that of the seven responses, all but two of the coaches responded at having a minimum of four coaches at this level. This number of coaches at the middle school level shows just how important coaches in both groups view their middle-school football programs.

One elite coach mentioned the importance of coaches at the lower levels in terms of his success, “Lower levels should have more coaches as it is harder...those JV [junior varsity] guys need to feel as valued as the varsity guys” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). In fact, this coach believes this so much that he makes all varsity players and coaches attend all the games that the junior varsity squad play in their season. The importance of having high caliber coaches at those levels was stated in the response of this coach, because at those levels, “it is more about having fun, developing kids, and making them want to come back out” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016).

Number of assistant football coaches in the building or district. This question was asked to determine whether or not elite programs have a larger amount of assistant

coaches in the building or district when compared to non-elite programs. The rationale for this question is that the researcher suspects that elite football programs will have a larger number of assistant coaches in their building, or district. While there was not a specific correlation in terms of the overall number of coaches, both groups strongly believed a larger number of coaches in their school contributed to becoming an elite high school football program. Responses that show this perceived importance were, “This number continues to drop, and it is not good” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016), “The higher, the better” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). One non-elite coach went so far as to say:

One other assistant works in the building, which is part of the reason we are not an elite program. I consider this to be a huge part of becoming an elite program. You get numbers with personality and people in the building. If it is just one or two people in the building you cannot build up numbers, or accountability. (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016)

This shows that while having more coaches working in the building can contribute to creating elite teams, that there is not a clear correlation between these factors in this sample of respondents.

Role assistant coaches play in developing an elite high school football program. This question was asked in order to observe a potential correlation of elite football coaches’ responses to the question of assistant coaches when compared to non-elite programs. All the coaches believed that assistants play a large role in the development of an elite high school football program. One theme that coaches in both

groups mentioned was the ability of an assistant to form a relationship with their players. This importance of having an authentic relationship was displayed in comments such as, “Every kid is going to be tied in with a relationship to one coach” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016). A second, but related theme was that of development. This development could take the form of schematic, technical, and off-the field life lessons that come about because the assistant coach has developed a quality relationship with players. One elite coach phrased the importance of the player-coach relationship in developing athletes as:

They must be able to build relationships with kids... When coaches fail it is because they did not get to know kids. It is up to assistants to commit to develop kids and not write them off. Every coach must buy into coaching every kid, at every level... The crop will come to harvest; the time for each kid will be different. (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016)

One elite coach went further in discussing the development of the athletes in terms of an assistant coach’s role: “[It is] not about them. It is about the kids” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). This emphasis on the long-term development of players was found in the writings of Bell (2009), Collins (1994), Coyle (2009), Drape (2009), Gordon & Smith (2009), Holtz (1998), Saban & Curtis (2007). This focus on development is analogous to the theme of mentorship beyond the game, and is considered to be a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Another common theme in the responses was the ability of assistant coaches to deliver the same message as the head coach. This ability to emphasize a head coach’s

message was considered a critical task of the assistant coaches. Coaches gave the responses, “Must believe in the vision. And do as you believe,” (Coach Yellow, personal communication, 2017). And as, “Being on the same page” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). This focus on alignment between head and assistant coaches was reflected in the literature several times, as found in Janssen (2002), Janssen (2014), Lencioni (2002), Maxwell (2007), Meyer (2015), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005). This ability of assistant coaches to deliver a consistent message echoes the themes of staffing continuity, and organizational and cultural alignment. These themes then are considered to be contributing factors in the development of an elite high school football program.

Two non-elite coaches specifically mentioned that they looked for assistant coaches that had a desire to someday also be a head high school football coach themselves. The elite coaches explicitly mentioned the importance of assistant coaches to the development of an elite high school football program with the responses, “It cannot be done without good assistants” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016), and, “...so critical is their role...” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). This critical role of quality assistants to the program has been stated in the literature by Bowden & Bowden (2002), Hill & Wooden (2002), Krzyzewski & Phillips, (2004), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005).

Another variance in the responses was the degree of importance the groups placed upon an assistant coach’s ability to share and articulate the overall culture and mission of the football program. A non-elite coach stated, “I try and give my assistants as much

ownership as they have earned and can handle... The head coach cannot be all places at all times” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016).

While it is clear that coaches in both groups see this as an important variable in their success, the coaches in both groups talked about assistant coaches’ roles with the common themes of relationship building, developing the whole person, and continuity of message. Given these responses, the researcher was surprised not to see more of difference in the responses of the coaches of each group.

Description of staff continuity. This question was asked to determine whether having a long tenured staff is related to on-the-field success. The thinking on this question is that elite coaches will have a staff that has a longer tenure when compared to the staffs of the non-elite programs. Coaches that are successful over time have an ability to maintain a degree of continuity within their program. It did not come as a surprise that in the responses, elite coaches had staffs that had been together for a minimum of seven years, with three of them having much of their current staff together more than twelve years. Non-elite coaches had less tenure on their coaching staff. This continuity of assistant coaches appears to be a key factor that contributes to the development of an elite high school football program.

One elite coach mentioned that one way in which he develops his coaching staff to further their perceived voice and thereby continuity in the program, is by giving them the expectations of the program, and then allowing his assistants to develop the methods used to attain those expectations. When asked about why he feels this has led to increased staff cohesion, he stated, “The rigid way falls apart because assistants do not buy in as

much” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). By trusting their assistants to accomplish their particular task or objective, these coaches attain higher levels of success compared to those leaders who do not, as stated in the research by Lencioni (2002), Kerr (2015), and Parcells & Copin (1995). The responses show that while continuity is an important variable, the method of allowing latitude for assistants to accomplish a goal is perhaps noteworthy, for these elite coaches have been able to achieve uncommon continuity compared to their non-elite peers.

Coaches use of the off-season to improve themselves as coaches. This question was asked to determine how coaches in elite and non-elite programs use the off-season to improve. The thinking behind this question is that coaches at elite programs may use the off-season in a different way than non-elite coaches.

There is a popular maxim that simply states one either gets better or gets worse. No one stays the same. While the quote could apply to athletes, it also has applications for organizational leadership, personal improvement, inter-personal communication, or coaching. In the responses given during the interviews, coaches in both groups fully embrace the idea of continuous improvement, as stated in, “The expectation I have is that all coaches develop themselves to become better in what they do” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). The coaches in both groups clearly see the off-season not as a time to sit back and wait until the next season, but to utilize the off-season for reflection and work “We are pretty active and not idle” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016).

There was some uniformity in the responses given between the two groups. Both groups of coaches responded that they utilize evaluations with the head coach, coach to player evaluations, run statistical analysis, attend clinics, visit with other coaches and coaching staffs, read professional publications, and undertake independent study to improve their coaching acumen. All are consistent in using the off-season as an opportunity to learn further and develop themselves individually and collectively as a staff.

This same sentiment of scrutinizing study and development for an advantage was echoed by another elite coach, “We are always looking for ways to get better at any little thing” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016). The elite coaches responded that their desired outcomes for their efforts of off-season learning and development must occur each year regardless of their win-loss record, “We constantly are trying to get better in any area of growth and build on our strengths...Have to work just as hard after a state title year as a 2-13 year” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2016). This focus of constant, consistent improvement and avoiding a plateau in their level of performance, as directed by the leader of an organization was echoed in research by Collins & Porras (1994), Collins (2001), Coyle (2009), Heath & Heath (2010), Longenecker (2010), Parcells & Coplin (1995), Saban & Curtis (2007), Smith et al. (2004), and Sullivan & Thompson (2013).

It is clear from these responses that the elite coaches explicitly seek to maximize coaching effectiveness by structuring their own development to avoid becoming complacent despite their on-field success in previous football seasons. While the

researcher had expected there to be a larger difference in the responses of the two groups, the responses given do not show a significant variability.

Personnel and their use

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on the use of personnel that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The questions focus on the number of athletes in the football program, justification for utilization of a one or two platoon system, the perceived role of athletes in developing an elite high school football program, as well as the use of the off-season to improve personnel development in athletic and non-athletic ways.

Number of athletes in the program. The researcher asked this question thinking that elite programs have higher numbers of athletes involved in their program when compared to non-elite programs. Programs occur at different sized schools, with corresponding number of athletes playing football. Because of this variability there is no observed correlation between or among groups for elite or non-elite coaches. While these programs may have larger numbers compared to their opponents against whom they compete against each year, this study did not investigate this particular phenomenon. This is somewhat surprising because conventional wisdom would hold that elite programs would have higher levels of participation than non-elite programs. This might certainly prove to be the case overall if the sample size of both elite and non-elite programs were increased.

Rationale for use of a one platoon or two platoon system. The practice of one platooning, or two platooning concerns the use of personnel that are on the field for a

football play during a competition event. While only eleven players are allowed on the field at any one time during a football game, one platooning refers to utilizing the top eleven to fifteen athletes and playing them on both sides of the football for most of the competition event. Two platooning refers to the practice of utilizing twenty to thirty football players, with players rarely playing both offense and defense during the competition event. The practice of how to utilize personnel is something that coaches in both elite and non-elite coaches grapple with for different reasons, and the researcher asked this question in order to see if there was an observable difference between the two groups of coaches.

One elite coach utilized the one platoon method because, “We still believe in putting the best eleven out there is the way to go” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). Another elite coach stated his reason for using the one platoon method as, “When you look at platooning, you can limit talent on your team by not being on the field” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016). Several coaches in both groups talked about how they one platoon, but with a caveat that if they had more athletes participating in their football program, they would like to two platoon.

One reason to two platoon was based on the theme of developing players: “Coaches cannot give up on kids, and platooning allows this cultivation and development to occur” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). The reasons for two platooning in terms of longevity over the course of the season was expressed as “To save the wear and tear of our best players, it was imperative that we two-platoon. It developed depth and encouraged kids” (Coach Green, personal communication, 2016). Coach Blue

communicated, “When you two-platoon, you are more rested. The kids do not wear down or get injured as much as one platooning” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Increased participation of a larger number of athletes via two platooning was mentioned by several non-elite coaches: “I think that when there are twenty-two spots that kids can work for, they will see they have a better chance of playing” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016), and, “...kids feel they have the opportunity to play if they put in the work and show commitment...” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017).

The researcher was surprised that there was such a mix of responses to the practice of platooning. Coaches in both groups hold widely variable philosophies about this practice, and the responses do not show a clear pattern between or among the two groups of coaches.

Role of athletes in developing an elite high school football program. The talent and ability of personnel available to any organization play a role in its success. The degree that talent affects the potential success is where opinions differed among teams that reach different levels of achievement. The responses of the coaches clearly show that they perceive this to be a very important factor contributing to the attainment of an elite high school football program, but the reasoning behind that belief was varied.

A primary theme that emerged was that having talented athletes contributes to on-the-field success. One elite coach summarized the advantage of talent in this way, “A well-coached team, with equal coaching acumen, loses to a well-coached team with better athletes most of the time” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). While coaching acumen is important, elite coaches believe that coaching can only take athletes so far.

These coaches know that the physical talent or abilities of their athletes' factors into the final win-loss record of any team: "You need the athletes. Being a great coach is good, but you need players to make plays" (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017).

Another theme that emerged about player ability regarded enforcing the expectations, attitudes, and beliefs of the program. All the non-elite coaches discussed the critical cultural role that players have. One coach, with almost forty years of high school football coaching, stated, "They have to buy all in... helping develop and model to younger players the expectations of the program" (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017). While players pass along the tradition of behaviors to younger players for future years, coaches also believe in enforcing cultural norms for a current season. "Players' collective belief in what the program stands for... dictates their willingness to enforce the team standards and expectations amongst peers. Coaches need to set the tone and culture, but players enforce the standards" (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2016).

Regarding the beliefs of the program, several elite coaches mentioned that athletes needed to make a commitment not just to themselves, but also to the entire team. One elite coach stated the importance of athletes possessing this genuine belief as, "They play the largest role.... If they do not believe in each other, you have no chance" (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016). These responses of the coaches regarding commitment echo the sentiment reflected in the literature of Chan & Yuen (2013), Coyle (2009), Jackson et al. (2014), Jansen (2014), and Scanlan, et al. (2013).

While non-elite coaches focus on the commitment to the program culture, elite coaches expand this commitment further to the level of genuine care and concern for each other. This explicit esprit de corps mentioned by the elite coaches, while hard to measure, none the less has genuine effects on the outcomes of the competition in which these programs participate. Perhaps the fact that the elite coaches' level of commitment pushes athletes beyond the program and into authentic and meaningful relationships is itself a contributing factor in contributing to an elite high school football program. The responses from these elite coaches on program culture is synonymous with the theme of organizational and cultural alignment, and is therefore considered to be a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Use of the off-season to improve athletes and non-athletic development. This question was asked to determine how coaches in both groups seek to use the off-season to develop their athletes further for the upcoming season of competition. The researcher believes that the responses will show a difference between the two groups. While utilizing the off-season as a time to develop their coaching staff, coaches in both elite and non-elite groups see the importance of developing their players as well. Coaches in both groups emphasized themes of non-athletic, and athletic development of their athletes in the off-season.

A primary thread in the responses of the coaches was that of non-athletic development in the off-season. Several head coaches discussed the academic aspect of developing their athletes: "The head coach does grade checks twice per semester" (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016). Another coach facilitated this academic growth

by arranging additional assistance when needed: “We make sure that they are doing well academically. If they are struggling, we use our strong students to tutor them, and we have daily study hall to make sure they are taking care of business” (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017). Another aspect of non-athletic development was the use of service projects, or character development to allow their players to develop as better people or further bonding of the team (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2016; Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). One elite coach clearly articulated his belief in the primary importance of non-athletic development over other kinds of development:

Non-athletic development is the most important job as coaches...We have them grow as people and men. Developing them as players is of secondary importance.... Tell teachers you want to know how the guys are acting. Enforce high expectations, challenge them to become better in all that they do....they represent the school everywhere they go... it is important for kids to know you are there. (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016)

With such responses on the importance of developing athletes as people, it is no surprise that similar findings appear frequently in the literature of very successful coaches as found in Bowden & Bowden (2001), Ehrmann, et al. (2011), Fore (2014), Gardener (1998), Gould et al. (2007), Hillier (2002), Holtz (1998), Hughes (2010), Janssen (2014), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Lombard (2007), Maxwell (2007), Souza & Oslin (2008), Skaza (2014), Tabb (2012).

Athletic development sub-themes that appeared included playing other sports, and participating in the program’s strength and conditioning activities. The strength and

conditioning programs include lifting weights, speed, plyometric training, conditioning, and agility work. Coaches in both groups see the importance of developing multiple-sport athletes. In today's climate of athletes specializing in only one sport, seeing every single respondent discuss the importance of playing multiple sports was enlightening.

The reasons for athletes participating in more than one sport did have subtle variability. One reason to share athletes was due to the size of a school or to benefit the rest of the athletics department "We believe in sharing athletes to help all athletic programs... We want three-sport athletes. We feel they are better football players, and better people" (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). The theme of becoming better from playing multiple sports was stated by an elite coach as, "They are better young men, and better teammates if they stay busy and compete in as many sports as possible" (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017).

Despite the belief of the researcher that there would be a difference in the responses of the coaches from the two groups, the data does not support this assumption. While both groups see this as a critical period to develop their athletes, in both athletic and non-athletic ways, neither group has aggregated responses which are significantly different from the other.

Philosophy and schematic approaches

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on the philosophy of schematic, and tactical approaches that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* These approaches are further simplified into the phases of offense, defense, and special teams. While a more thorough

explanation of each phase of the game will be given in the corresponding sub-section, a simplified explanation follows. “Special teams” is the phase of the game when one team relinquishes possession of the football to the other team, or gains possession of the football from the other team. “Offense” is the phase of the game when one team is attempting to score points on the opposing team. “Defense” is the phase of the game when one team is attempting to stop the opposing team from scoring points. In all phases of the game, the large focus on fundamentals over scheme, or the theme of a simple focus on execution, leads elite coaches to attain higher levels of on-the-field success, as stated in the literature by Coyle (2009), Drape (2009), Fore (2014), Heath & Heath (2010), Hill & Wooden (2001), Hollenbeck (2003), Jackson & Delehanty (2006), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Lencioni (2002), Nash et al. (2011), Osborne (1999), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), and Smith et al. (2004).

Special Teams. Special teams involve kicking of the football. Such plays that involve special teams are kick-off, kick-return, punt, punt-return, punt-block, field goal, field goal block, point after attempt, and point after attempt block. This phase of the game occurs in “one out of every four phases of an average football game” (Adamle, personal communication, 2016). The coaches’ responses about special teams involve the process for the selection of personnel for special teams, personal philosophy on special teams, and perception of special-team schematics at elite high school football programs. The questions in this sub-section were asked in order to determine whether or not the responses vary in quality or kind between the elite and non-elite groups. The responses for all of the questions indicate that elite coaches’ methods in the special-teams portion of

their programs exhibit the theme of maintaining a simple focus in scheme and utilization of personnel.

Selection of personnel for special teams players. Both elite and non-elite coaches talked about mixing in non-starters on special-teams. For the selection of personnel, three elite coaches mentioned speed, while coaches in both groups also mentioned that they would put into the game players who were not starters on offense or defense.

Two non-elite coaches mentioned the use of special teams as, “An area where I could hide a kid and reward [him] for [his] participation, loyalty and dedication to the program” (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017), and, “We typically try to put as many non-starters on special teams as possible, especially seniors who have been loyal to the program” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). An elite coach stated a similar philosophy in his response as, “Be creative with ways to use kids who may not play as much elsewhere” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Only one coach mentioned having a different philosophy on special teams. “If guys need a blow, they take it on offense or defense. We learned the hard way. If there is an opportunity to get kids in we may take a look there, but we put our best eleven out there” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017).

The varying opinions on the formation of the special teams may be influenced by the overall size of the football team. In terms of selecting personnel for special teams, the responses of non-elite coaches were far more specific and frequent in their mentioning of getting athletes on to the field when compared to the responses of elite coaches. The fact that elite coaches may be more prone to select their best athletes to be placed upon

special teams may give them an advantage in this phase of the game compared to those programs who select personnel based upon merit or loyalty.

Special teams philosophy. This question was asked in order to determine how the different groups of coaches approach their philosophy in this particular phase of the game. There was a large amount of consistency in elite and non-elite coaches concerning special teams. Four coaches interviewed stated that the starting position of the opposition after the play is resolved is very important to the on-field success of their offense or defense. Three coaches surveyed talked about how this is also an under-coached area of high school football. An elite coach was the only respondent who explicitly mentioned the need to practice this phase of the game as much as offense or defense:

[We] must spend time practicing this portion of the game...These plays are all game changers...Need to spend the time on them if [we] want to be good. We want to steal points and field position from the other team with special teams. (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016)

Given the uniformity in the perceived importance of field position, as a place to secure an advantage due to being under coached, it was surprising that only one of the responses to this question addressed utilizing this advantage in their program. The researcher does not find it surprising that the one variation in the responses came from an elite coach. Perhaps a part of the reason this particular coach has had such on-the-field success is because of this uncommon approach.

Special teams schemes in an elite high school football program. While coaches in both elite and non-elite groups mentioned the importance of special teams, the

perception of special-team schemes at elite programs was wide ranging. Non-elite responses included, “You have to adjust to your players” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016), and, “...put the best players on special teams” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016). Elite coaches’ responses tended to answer that elite programs take this phase of the game very seriously. “Show it is a priority by practicing it...realize and practice these key situations” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Another elite coach ranked the importance of special teams by discussing the three phases of a football game in this manner: “Number one, win the kicking game, number two, play lights out on [defense], number three get what we can on offense. Games are decided this way” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017). These responses were interesting to note because while all coaches list this portion of the game of football as of such high importance, coaches in both groups do not always select the same caliber of player for this phase of the game as they would for their offense or defense. It can therefore be inferred that since elite coaches had a larger amount and frequency of the responses indicating the importance of special teams, that this approach could be considered a potential contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Offense. Offense is the phase of the game of football when the team has possession of the football and is trying to score points on the opposing team’s defensive unit. Responses in this section on offense involve offense use and philosophy, experience in utilizing their current offensive system, and the perception of offensive schematics at elite high school football programs. The questions in this sub-section were asked to determine whether or not the responses vary in quality or kind between the elite and non-

elite groups. The responses for all of the questions indicate that elite coaches' deeds in the offensive portion of their programs exhibit the theme of maintaining a simple focus.

Offense and offensive philosophy. This question was asked in order to determine whether or not the elite and non-elite coaches hold different philosophies in the offensive portion of their football programs. When asked about the offensive philosophy of elite and non-elite coaches three out of the five elite coaches stated that they ran schemes known as being "option". This option philosophy involves the offensive team waiting to see the reaction of the defensive team, and then picking a phase of that play that takes advantage of that reaction by attacking a different area. All elite coaches responded that their schemes, even if they were not option-based, had as a fundamental belief that the schematic plays selected should make the defense honor certain things. Three of the four non-elite coaches either run option, or utilize option concepts to take advantage of defensive reactions. Employing an option scheme is practice-and-skill-intensive because it involves placing the decisions into the hands of the players. By using such schemes, the coaches are forced to stay simple in their schemes and, indirectly, show trust with their players' ability to utilize the techniques being taught to them.

Both elite coaches, and non-elite coaches believed in offensive systems that were adjustable to the incoming personnel of that year. When asked about offensive philosophy, three of the four non-elite coaches, along with four out of the five elite coaches responded that their philosophy is to run the football. All but one of the coaches discussed using the run to set up the passing game, and the necessity of having an offense that can run the football on the opposing defense. Of the coaches being interviewed for

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this study, all but two of them talked about having the quarterback under center to run their offense. One elite coach responded with his belief that, “[The] key to football is all about execution no matter the scheme” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). This focus on execution in sports finds a corresponding mention in the literature regarding “deliberate practice” (Coyle, 2009), and also the corresponding theme of a simple focus in the research study.

Experience in current offensive scheme utilized. This question was asked to determine if elite coaches utilized a particular offense occurred with higher frequency when compared to non-elite peers. Coaches have spent considerable time developing, implementing, and adjusting their schemes to the players that come through their football programs. The longer a practitioner studies and implements these schematics, the reasoning follows that these coaches become more efficient and effective in utilizing them. In the responses, all elite schools ran their schemes for a minimum of twelve years, while non-elite coaches used their offensive system from one to thirteen years. These results show that themes of organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and a simple focus are prevalent in the offensive schematics that elite high school football coaches use.

Responses between the two groups were different in that non-elite coaches responded with the name of their system or schematics on the offensive side of the ball. While elite coaches also labeled their offensive scheme or system in terms of the number of years ran, they explained some of the reasons why they ran the systems for so long. “We run the option because I know it, believe in it, and I can teach it” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017), and, “Scheme ran at the school since the 1950’s. Have

had great success and it became an identity of the program” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Based upon these responses, it is clear that elite coaches select these offensive systems because they believe in them, and also because these schemes become a foundational identity of their programs. These results show that themes of organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and a simple focus are very prevalent in the offensive systems used for elite high school football coaches

Perceptions of an offensive scheme at an elite high school football program.

When asked about offensive schemes used in elite high school football programs, non-elite coaches tended to mention two main themes in their responses. The first theme, as discussed in previous offensive schematics, was to run the football. A second theme that emerged in non-elite responses, but also appeared prominently in the elite coaches’ responses, was that of being detail oriented and executing their plans, “...matching/tweaking your scheme to your kids and executing at a very high level while minimizing mistakes” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). This detail-oriented approach appears to be synonymous with the focus on execution versus schematic variation.

When elite coaches responded to the question about what constitutes an offensive scheme at an elite high school football program, the answers reflected the themes of discipline, execution, and fundamentals. “Scheme that fits the personnel. Scheme that is fundamentally sound... Elite programs have a system and stick with it year after year. It takes time but becomes an identity of the program” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). While these coaches echoed the sentiments of non-elite coaches,

their responses also differed in quality from those of non-elite coaches. The elite coaches responded more about having a philosophy and belief in a particular offensive system, compared to non-elite coaches. “You just need to run something that everyone believes in... You need to have something you hang your hat on... Elite programs commit to running an offense. When that happens, they get better” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017). These responses from the elite coaches clearly articulate, to a more explicit level than their non-elite peers, the necessity of having a simple focus on an offensive system. With both their words and deeds, elite coaches have built their organizations and staff to rally around a simple focus on execution versus schematic variation.

Defense. The defensive phase of the game of football occurs when one team is trying to defend their end zone from the other team’s attempts at scoring points. Responses on defense involve defensive use and philosophy, experience in utilizing their current defensive system, and the perception of defensive schematics at elite high school football programs. The questions in this sub-section were asked to determine whether the responses varied in quality or kind between the elite and non-elite groups. The responses for all the questions indicate that elite coaches’ deeds in the defensive portion of their programs exhibit the theme of maintaining a simple focus on execution.

Defense and defensive philosophy. These questions were asked in order to determine if the structure of a defensive scheme, or philosophy, had a fundamental difference between the elite and non-elite coaching groups. Both groups of coaches talked about certain key aspects of an effective defense. While there was some similarity

in responses, elite coaches' responses mentioned scheme after their philosophic response compared to non-elite coaches. These elite coaches' responses also had a slightly different focus compared to the responses of the non-elite coaches.

While there are a large variety of defensive schemes employed by high school football programs, each coach's choice can be a matter of selection for particular players, or personal preference, or perceived schemes deemed most advantageous to stopping the opponents' offense. These schemes generally fall into categories of a four-man front defensive structure which utilizes four defensive linemen at the line of scrimmage, or a three-man front defensive structure which utilizes three defensive linemen at the line of scrimmage. In terms of responses, non-elite coaches' responses to their base defensive structure showed some variety. One non-elite coach used a four-man front structure; two utilized a three-man structure, and one coach utilized both structures. Three of the elite coaches used a four-man front structure, while two of the elite coaches utilized a three-man defensive front structure. It appears that the three-man structure, or four-man structure does not correlate between elite and non-elite coaches. Individual coaches from each group chose one or the other base defense structure. Championships have been won with a variety of defensive schemes, and while certain schemes may be in vogue at certain times, it appears that one structure does not appear with a larger frequency than another in the two groups.

Two non-elite coaches gave responses that mentioned how developing simple tasks for athletes to execute is important. "It does not matter how you align your 11 players; it is effort and playing fast" (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016), and,

“Sound and simple are key terms for our defense” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). These coaches’ responses indicate that it is not the methods that are important, but the principles behind them that give a defense success. The responses again indicate the importance of a simple focus on execution.

Elite coaches, while voicing this same sentiment in response to the question, tended to have a format that was first about philosophy or belief in a system, then about utilizing players in good spots, and an underlying theme about proper fundamentals. An elite coach’s response concerning having a belief in a system was, “Stop the run, take the ball away, and be aggressive and attack...I run it because I know it, I believe in it, and I can teach it...When things go wrong, I know how to fix it” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017). Another elite coach’s response regarding the theme of utilizing personnel correctly was stated as:

Use proper techniques, be aggressive, penetrate and get after the other team. Aggressive and sound, and use personnel in the right way...Plan should be to take away the other team’s strength...Put kids in best spots they can be. Good schemes do not ask kids to do things they cannot do. (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016)

In defining philosophy, the underlying theme, as expressed by all elite coaches was “...stress fundamentals, discipline...” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). While both groups indicated the importance of a simple focus in their answers to on-the-field success with the defensive portions of their program, it is noteworthy to mention that while non-elite coaches mentioned this secondarily in their response to the questions, elite coaches answered with this simple focus first in their responses. Perhaps

this explicit focus execution first is an indicator that simply the order of responses given to this question on defensive football could be a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Experience in current defensive scheme. This question was asked in order to determine whether there was a difference in the amount of time a current defensive scheme was used between elite and non-elite coaches. As with offensive schematics, coaches have spent considerable time developing, implementing, and adjusting their schemes to the players that come through their football programs. The thinking is that the longer a coach or team utilizes a system, the more efficient and effective it becomes. In the responses, all elite schools ran their schemes for a minimum of six years, with two of the elite coaches running their scheme for fifteen years or more. The responses of the non-elite coaches was a minimum of five years. It appears that the amount of time spent utilizing a specific defensive system may contribute to the success of a coach's teams on defense, but there is not enough distinction in the responses to strongly correlate this variable with on-the-field success. This finding seems noteworthy given the very stark contrast to the utilization of a scheme on the offensive side of the football seems to indicate greater on-the-field success than the does the utilization of a specific defensive system. Whereas experience in a particular offensive scheme seems to lead to greater levels of on-the-field success, the amount of time in a particular defensive scheme does not have the same level of correlation to on-the-field success.

Perceptions of a defensive scheme at an elite high school football program. This question was asked in order to determine whether or not the two groups of coaches held

different perceptions of defensive football at elite high school football programs when compared to each other. When asked about their opinion on what constitutes a defensive system at an elite high school program, there were distinctions between the responses of the two groups of coaches. Non-elite coaches tended to answer based upon stopping or adjusting to certain things the opponents' offensive units were trying to accomplish. Elite coaches' responses, discussed having a defensive system, executing schematic assignments, trusting teammates, and defensive fundamentals, (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). One elite coach responded, "An elite defense is more important than an elite offense" (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). These responses again reflect the sentiment of "deliberate practice" (Coyle, 2009).

Both groups of coaches did mention the importance of simplicity in their defensive scheme. "It is about execution and minimizing mistakes" (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). Elite coaches' responses reflecting this sentiment of simplicity of defensive schematics were, "Teach assignments. Coach them daily. Repetition" (Coach Orange, personal communication, 2017), and, "Stick with philosophy and do not waiver. Get to the football" These two groups also gave similar responses regarding the ability of an elite defensive scheme to perform the following tasks:

Regardless of scheme, elite defenses do the following: They align quickly and correctly. They understand keys, and lock on them. They defeat blocks and pursue the ball correctly, and they tackle well. The coaches understand how their position group fits into the overall scheme, and the defensive coordinator has the ability to adjust when

needed. Elite defenses take away what the opponent does best, and is able to adjust to what the offense does next. (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016)

Based upon the responses given between the two groups, each group realizes that elite defenses display the common traits of simplicity, fundamentals, and execution. It is the actual implementation of these traits that appears to differentiate on-the-field success for the defensive units of elite and non-elite coaches. Again, the theme of a simple focus on fundamentals and execution is quite prominent in the responses of elite coaches and appears to be a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Practice Structure

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on the structure of daily, and weekly practice plans that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The responses detail the individual micro level of daily practices, and the larger macro level of a weekly practice schedule progression. While having many similarities, there was variability in the use of weekends, and athletic enhancement. This lack of variability leads to the conclusion that elite leaders focus on the key areas of practice that attain higher levels of performance and avoid what does not lead to increased performance, as stated in the literature by Coyle (2009), Heath & Heath (2010), Jackson & Delehanty (2006), and Lencioni (2002), and in the emergent theme of maintaining a simple focus on fundamentals and execution.

Overview of daily and weekly practice schedule progression. These questions were asked to determine if the structure of a practice was different between elite and non-

elite football coaches. The responses regarding the structure of a week-long timeline, and of a day-by-day practice had little if any observable differences between elite and non-elite coaches. The lack of variability between how the two groups structure practice leads the researcher to conclude that it is not the structure, but the expectations and implementation of the plans that are different between the two groups, as reflected in the literature of Colison (2001), Coyle (2009), Heath & Heath (2010), Janssen, (2014), Miller et al. (2012), Oliver et al. (2010); Saban & Curtis (2007), Saltveit (2013), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005). Because of the belief of the researcher that the difference is in the enforcement of standards, and not the actual structure of practice, the inferred findings from the responses appear to be significantly related to the head coaches' ability to maintain clear and consistent alignment in their organizational culture. These standards of practice behavior appear to be a potential contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Overall, both groups' week-by-week plans, as broken down day-by-day, are quite similar. Mondays are the day where the teams introduce the game-plan for the week, have a brief on-the-field practice for about an hour, and complete an athletic enhancement session. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are very similar workdays where the game-plan is practiced and implemented in a progression of individual, group, unit, and team levels. Elite coaches, with a smaller number of athletes, may sometimes use one of the practice days on Tuesday or Wednesday to focus on offense, and the other day on defense. Thursdays are a day where the final review of all phases of the game-plan occurs. Many schools will have a team meal after practice on this day as well. Fridays are the days

when the games are played. There is variability among the coaches about utilizing Saturday as a film day to review the previous night's contest with their athletes.

Scheduled activities on Saturday and Sunday were quite variable. For the use of Saturday practice or film sessions, the coaches showed no correlation between or among groups. There is also variability on how the coaches use Saturday as a day for athletic enhancement after the film review. The coaches will then complete game-planning individually, and as an entire coaching staff for the upcoming opponent, on Saturday and Sunday. Approximately half of the coaches interviewed hold coaches' meetings on Sunday, and half do not hold any scheduled coaching staff meetings on Sunday.

There were three areas where the responses were different, but this variability related more within each group than as a comparison between the two groups. One area of difference was the use of weekends as days for practice, film review, lifting or staff meetings. About half of all respondents do decide to watch film from the previous night's contest on Saturday morning, while the other half save this work until Monday afternoons. A second theme of variability in responses comes in what day on the weekend, namely Saturday or Sunday, that the staff meets to discuss the specifics regarding their game-plan for their upcoming opponent. About half of the respondents have their staff meeting on Saturday only, and the other half of the respondents have their staff complete individual work on Saturday, followed by a collaborative game-planning session on Sunday. This finding is somewhat surprising to the researcher given that the assumption going into these questions was that elite programs worked for more sessions than non-elite programs. It does not appear from the responses that the use of time by the

staff and players on the weekend, or a larger frequency of days on the weekend to work with players contributes to the development of an elite high school football program.

The third area of variability was regarding the area of athletic enhancement such as weight-lifting, speed-work, or stretching. This is the one area where it does appear that the responses showed a difference between elite and non-elite coaches. While almost all football coaches engage in this process during the off-season, the importance of athletic enhancement in-season does differ. Three elite coaches engage in athletic enhancement three times per week, while only two non-elite coaches mentioned that they perform athletic enhancements twice per week, once on Monday afternoon, and then again on Saturday morning. While subtle, it does appear that making time for additional periods of athletic enhancement could be a contributing factor to the on-the-field success of these elite coaches.

Community Interaction

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on the dynamics of football programs and community interaction that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* These questions were asked in order to determine whether there was an observed difference in terms of community interaction between elite and non-elite high school football programs. The relationship between a community and a high school football program can exhibit positive and negative aspects, depending upon the dynamic being investigated. Responses in this section on community reaction focus on previous on and off-the-field traditions of success, the demographics of

the community where the football program is located, and the perceived role of the community in developing an elite high school football program. The themes which appear most prominently in the responses of the coaches are that of organizational and cultural alignment, as well as a clear connection to mentorship beyond the game. Certain factors regarding community interaction seem to contribute to the development of an elite high school football program, while others seem to have a negligible impact.

Previous tradition of success. This question was asked to determine whether or not elite programs are based upon a tradition of success before becoming elite. At times, this can mean that simply having previous on-the-field success can contribute to having future on-the-field success regardless of a program currently being designated with elite or non-elite status. In setting out on this research, the researcher had expected that elite programs would have a historical tradition of on-the-field success, but the responses were quite mixed with both elite and non-elite coaches having, or not having such success in the win-loss record of their program or community before their appointment as head football coaches. The responses of the two groups of coaches did show variability in previous successful traditions in their high school football programs.

Non-elite coaches' responses showed that two respondents did not have much on-the-field success before their appointment as head coach. One had success that came in cycles but was not consistent year to year over an extended period, and one coach's program had a storied tradition in their football program regarding on-field-success.

Elite coaches tended to enhance the program's tradition of success and elite status, to what it currently is, even if in the past there was success. While the programs

may have had very successful on-the-field records, the responses and research of previous win-loss records reveals that often this success was not at the level experienced under the elite coaches interviewed for this research. In this way, these elite coaches established a new standard from which to operate their organization, as found in Ehrmann et al. (2011), Fleck, P., personal communication, April 1, 2016; Gould et al. (2007), Kuchar (2014), and Ricciuti (2009).

These elite coaches clearly articulated the importance of this tradition to their on-the-field success. “Do not want to let their brothers down” (Coach Yellow, personal communication, 2017). The sentiments and organizational standards of honoring those who wore the jersey before become a source of strength and pride for a team, as reflected in the literature of Kerr (2015), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), and Osborne (1999).

Another elite coach talked about how the intentional traditions he created after being named head coach led to the development of brotherhood and team camaraderie, “We have an old wooden box with the word *Together* on it...the box travels with us wherever we go, and seniors talk about what motivates us. As [a] year goes on there is a lot of fuel” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). One elite coach discussed the importance of previous players deciding to continue playing football in college. “I love the fact that our guys keep going on to play when they are done here as it tells our staff that we must be doing something right...That speaks to how much our kids like to play and how they truly feel about playing football” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017). These responses of the two groups show that elite coaches are very explicit in thematic responses relating to mentorship beyond the game, and maintaining

organizational and cultural alignment with their program. By leveraging these themes in their community, it does appear to be a potential factor contributing to the development of an elite high school football program.

While the responses of these elite coaches recognize that this tradition of success does contribute to their success on and off the field, it is also clear that having this level of accomplishment can also cause that level of success to become more difficult to sustain over an extended period of time, “It is harder to continually be an elite team year in and year out, than it is to be there for a season or two” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). The research by Collins (1994), Collins (2001), Kerr (2015), and Sullivan & Thompson (2013), also states the importance of this difficulty in sustaining elite success over longer periods of time without allowing the organization to become stagnant. Based upon the responses of the elite coaches, it appears that they believe the tradition at their program does contribute to the development of an elite high school football program. This belief on the importance of tradition could stem from the fact that sustaining such an uncommon level of success is not achieved without the foresight to simply focus on the themes of mentorship beyond the game and organizational and cultural alignment.

Community demographics. This question was asked to observe if demographic patterns emerged between elite and non-elite high school football programs. Non-elite coaches’ demographics included three schools that are parochial. Statistically speaking, parochial schools on average have a higher socio-economic status and lower multi-cultural student population compared to public schools in the same area. One of the non-

elite coaches, who worked at a rural public high school, had a school population where sixty percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

For the elite schools, three were parochial schools, and two were public schools. The locations of elite schools were two in rural areas, one in a middle-sized city, one in an affluent suburb, another in a blue-collar suburb. One elite coach's response shows that he may feel that the location and demographics of his school's rural, blue-collar community directly contributed to his program's on-the-field success, "There are not a lot of jobs here anymore. We have tough, hard-nosed kids that are not terribly well off. They are fighters, they hit very hard... When we have been good, we have been unbelievably physical" (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017).

Given the amount of socio-economic affluence of parochial schools compared to public schools, the researcher had considered demographics to be a potential factor contributing to the development of an elite football program. While this may indeed be the case, the number of parochial schools represented in this study potentially skews results when compared to the demographics of other communities and football programs. The community geography may contribute to the development of an elite high school football program, but the urban, suburban, or rural location could potentially skew the results when compared to the community geography of other communities and high school football programs. Given the responses it does not appear that the demographics of a community affect the development of an elite high school football program.

Role of the community in developing an elite high school football program.

This question was asked to determine if communities with elite high school football

programs support their athletes in a different manner than communities with non-elite high school football programs. Conventional thinking would be that community support of a football program would be larger where it has attained elite status. The responses about the role of the community in developing an elite high school football program presented the two themes of how community support can be positively channeled to allow for the football program and community to develop further, and success having both positive and negative aspects related to both mentorship beyond the game and maintenance of organizational and cultural alignment.

One non-elite coach mentioned the positive potential an elite high school football program could have on the community:

I think that if you have an elite football program then football can be the lifeblood that fuels all other sports in that community. Other sport parents come to football games. This does not [always] apply for other sports. Football is the largest gatherer of any school sport. An elite high school football program just will probably always draw more fans than an elite program in another sport. (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016)

Another elite coach talked about how he feels the community assists the head coach in developing an elite high school football program. He stated, “Youth groups do a good job, get [the] kids to have fun and stay with it... family support to buy into our program” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). The positive aspects of community support mentioned previously, reflect the findings by Chan & Yuen (2013), Drape (2009), Ivarsson, et al. (2015), Ivey (2004), List (2015), Tabb (2012) Tokke

(2013), and White (2011). These responses also indicate that these elite coaches are far more focused on getting the community to buy into the culture of their football program to ensure future alignment once these athletes reach the high school level.

Regarding the potential drawbacks of community support, one non-elite coach stated, “Community is very much invested in the program... With that level of success however, there are great pressures to succeed” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). Elite coaches talked more about the paradox of support with success on the field, and the dangers of success and expectations, “Fans take the success seriously but this can be positive and negative... Important to get the majority to buy in... Community needs to support kids and want the program to be successful” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Two coaches said it either did not matter, or did not matter until you start winning consistently “Once you start winning, everyone loves a winner and then you will get all kinds of support... Winning becomes the rallying point for the community, but it doesn’t start out that way... when things are rolling people cannot get enough...” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017).

By ensuring mentorship beyond the game with their community, families, and athletes, perhaps these coaches are facilitating greater buy-in toward their goal of alignment of the various stakeholders and culture necessary to develop an elite high school football program. While coaches acknowledge having the support of the community directed in a positive way, is helpful to a degree, these coaches also acknowledge that unrealistic expectations, or improperly applied community support, can become a hindrance to the development of an elite high school football program.

Perceptions of elite success

This section will discuss what coaches consider creates elite success as they respond to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* This series of questions was asked to observe if elite and non-elite coaches' answers on the perception of elite success are notably different between the two groups. The responses here focus on primary factors for influencing program success, the top three critical areas necessary for success of a high school football program, other factors assisting success, and the identification of factors for distinguishing on-the-field success among high school football programs. The responses in this section of questions display multiple instances of the overall themes of mentorship beyond the game, organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and a simple focus.

Most influential factors for a program's success. This question was asked to observe potential variance between the two groups of coaches on what single factor is the most important reason for their on-the-field success. A predominant theme that emerged dealt with the collective buy-in, or commitment, of the various stakeholders. The importance of that commitment to the program was mentioned multiple times by coaches in both elite and non-elite groups. Every elite coach mentioned the necessity of receiving the commitment and support of the school administration, while none of the non-elite coaches mentioned administrative support as a factor to their success. Two elite coaches responded that a key factor to their success was receiving the commitment of both the athletes and their families, "People – parents and kids that care. People that want something better. Kids that want something better and something more" (Coach Red,

personal communication, 2017), and, "...support of families of athletes bought in..." (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). It is no surprise that the literature reflects this collective commitment as found in Janssen (2014), Lencioni (2002), List (2015), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Trimble (2005). This emphasis on commitment of the administration, and community show that elite coaches see this as a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program, while non-elite coaches do not consider this support to be as important to the development an elite high school football program.

Another theme mentioned was the specific commitment of athletes to the program. Non-elite coaches' responses about how the commitment of athletes was facilitated included, "...the fact that we all, coaches and players, truly cared for one another" (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017), and, "I always try to use pronouns of *we* and *our*, not I or me" (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). By emphasizing the critical importance of perception and communication of organizational commitment, these coaches are utilizing similar methods mentioned in the literature of Bartholomaus (2012), Gardner (1998), Jackson et al. (2014), Meyer (2015), Patrick et al. (1999), Purdy & Jones (2011), Ricciuti (2009), Scanlan et al. (2013), Skaza (2012), Souza & Oslin (2008), Stein (2009), Stokes et al. (2013), and Turman (2009). Elite coaches' responses about facilitating commitment with athletes included, "Being consistent and fair...All kids need to be valued, and this worth cannot be different for different players"(Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016), and, "...believing in making sure seniors realize this is their year and their program" (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). Responses from the coaches in both groups show the theme of

mentorship beyond the game as an important ingredient to the development of an elite high school football program.

Coaches, in both the elite, and non-elite groups, responded about the importance of receiving the collective support of their coaching staff: “Really good assistant coaches that bought into what I was doing” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016).

Another elite coach stressed that his staff is always looking for “constant and continuous improvement” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). This same sentiment of commitment also needs to exist among members of the assistant coaching staff, “A good coaching staff that trusts each other” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016).

Coaches in both groups indicate that staffing is a key ingredient to the development of an elite high school football program.

When asked about what factors contribute to their success, the researcher anticipated that a previous tradition of success would be mentioned multiple times by coaches in the elite group. But the responses show that only one elite coach mentions the previous tradition of another coach, while only one non-elite coach responded, “...a strong tradition of success... Strong culture created by the head coaches before me” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). The fact that only one coach from each group explicitly mentioned the previous culture or tradition suggests that each coach aims to focus on immediate program tasks.

Three critical areas to developing an elite high school football program. This question was asked to determine if there was an observed difference between elite and non-elite coaches when asked to list the three most important areas in developing an elite

high school football program. The responses to the question showed a distinct difference in the responses of the two groups. Non-elite coaches' responses focused on specific examples which included community, administration, team chemistry, or coaching staff continuity. Coaches in the elite group discussed, often in detail, the importance of having a mission, vision, plan, and identity that is individualized to the head coach and what he desires for his program. One coach stressed the importance of the mission in terms of his philosophy, and the difference it made in his program as:

You must have a mission and it needs to be well laid out and detailed. You need to have a mission as it gives you a purpose, which gives you a reason to do what you do ...After a bad year we wrote down our plan for us to win a title in five years and if we couldn't, we would step down because we were not the correct staff for the job. We won the state title the next year. All were on the same page, and all believed we could do it...Once you have a mission...establish a philosophy in every aspect of what you will do...be a hell of a salesmen and take that vision, and philosophies and sell to kids and make them believe. (Coach Red, personal communication, 2017)

This focus on organizational alignment, again, is mentioned prominently in the literature findings of Buzzo (2009), Connors & Smith (2009), Ehrmann et al.. (2011), Gordon & Smith (2015), Janssen (2014), Kuchar (2014), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Meyer (2015), and Trimble (2005). The stark difference in the responses of the two coaching groups show that elite coaches clearly believe the theme of organizational and cultural alignment to be a critical ingredient in the development of an elite high school football program.

Another elite coach echoed this same sentiment on the importance of philosophy, but also emphasized the fortitude to stick to the plan developed: “Having a sound philosophy on all phases...not panicking or giving in to whims, don’t listen to criticisms” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Similar responses about having a philosophy and sticking to it from elite coaches were, “You need a core base on what you are all about,” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017), and, “Have a solid plan...Coach it in detail at every contact with kids,” (Coach Orange, personal communication, 2017). By maintaining their programs’ principles and core beliefs, the responses reflect the same findings in the literature of Hill & Wooden (2009), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Miller et al. (2012), and Nash et al. (2011). By maintaining such a deliberate focus on the larger importance of developing athletes beyond the playing field, and an attention to detail concerning organizational and cultural alignment, these elite coaches can achieve higher levels of on-the-field success when compared to their non-elite peers.

Other areas in developing an elite high school football program. This question was asked to see if there was a difference between the two groups of coaches when responding about other important factors necessary to developing an elite high school football program. After being asked about the primary reasons for the on-the-field success of their program, each coach had the opportunity to respond to other factors that were important to their success. Both elite and non-elite coaches mentioned some of the same elements of primary importance to on-field success. Examples of this were, “Biggest thing is buy in and belief in what they are doing. Tradition becomes a part of all of this” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016), and “Self-evaluation each year by

all...The head coach must be visible and very involved, needs to do most of the work” (Coach Blue personal, communication, 2016). By being in alignment, the elite coaches experience a multiplying effect where the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts or roles, as is found in the literature of Drape (2009), Hardy (2010), Janssen & Snyder (2006), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Meyer (2015), Schembechler & Bacon, (2007), Sinek (2009), and Smith et al. (2004). While coaches in each group believe these other ingredients are important, elite coaches seem to view as primary importance what certain non-elite coaches mentioned as being of secondary importance.

Factors distinguishing on-the-field-success. This question was asked to determine observed variations in responses about on-the-field success between elite and non-elite coaches. When asked about elements that distinguish on-the-field success from one program to another, all elite coaches mentioned either staffing, or relationships with their players. One elite coach mentioned that the staff complements each other and knows how to fix problems “On the field a staff that fits and works off of each other...having similar ideas and answers, communicating the same thing to kids in the same way” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016). One elite coach mentioned staff as an important building block: “I look at them and see consistency in staff” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). Another elite coach mentioned staff continuity in his response, but also mentioned about how his staff works with potential athletes. “Coaching staff continuity...and how they deal with kids and each other. A staff that is committed to the kids, not [winning] at all costs. Kids and relationships are first” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016).

Only one non-elite coach mentioned staff continuity, but the response mentioned that having this continuity allows the program to develop the more important team culture “Well-articulated and developed team culture. Experienced and bonded coaching staffs” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). This cultural alignment has been mentioned previously, but continues to appear prominently in the literature of Drape (2009), Hardy (2010), Janssen & Snyder (2006), Krzyzewski & Phillips (2004), Ladouceur & Hayes (2015), Meyer (2015), Schembechler & Bacon (2007), Sinek (2009), and Smith et al. (2004). The theme of staffing was mentioned more prominently in the responses of elite coaches compared to the responses of their non-elite peers. With these responses it becomes apparent that elite football coaches believe that staffing continuity is a significant factor in the development of an elite high school football program.

While elite coaches mentioned relationships with players as an element that can distinguish success through responses such as, “Having kids and their parents know that you truly care about them as individuals” (Coach Orange, personal communication, 2017) other elite coaches spoke about having athletes who play the game with an uncommon intensity: “They all play the game hard. They play whoever is on that field as if it was their last play” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). Three non-elite coaches’ responses echoed the response about competition and the response to the inevitable unpredictability of the game as, “the biggest thing in football is about adversity and how people respond or overcome that adversity” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016). The responses between the elite coaches, and non-elite coaches did differ in the focus of that competition, and the reason for their intensity. While most elite coaches talked about their athletes playing for their teammates, only one non-elite

coach gave a similar message in his response of: "...and [they showed] love, they fight for one another" (Coach Green, personal communication, 2017). By focusing on the theme of mentorship beyond the game, these elite coaches mention the factor of authentic relationships as a contributing factor to the development of an elite high school football program.

Challenges faced

This section will discuss the subcategory of questions on the challenges faced by coaches that relate to the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The questions in this section were asked in order to determine potential areas of improvement that coaches in both groups have reflected upon during their careers. Responses in this section will discuss the largest challenges faced as a coach, as well as perspective and adjustments related to the current debate surrounding concussions. While there was not necessarily a large observed difference in the responses, knowing the areas of challenge and growth of the coaches in both groups does provide information into potential contributing factors to the development of an elite high school football program.

Largest challenges faced as a coach. This question was asked in order to hear the variable responses given by all coaches in both groups. Staffing was mentioned repeatedly in the responses of both groups of coaches. Three out of the five coaches in the elite group mentioned issues with staff retention and continuity as being some of their biggest challenges, while two non-elite coaches also mentioned the same. One elite coach said that finding the correct coach to fill an opening on the staff was challenging, "Staff

guys getting older or leaving. We have had to replace some great coaches over the years...when someone leaves it is not all that easy to replace” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016).

While the focus mentioned staff continuity over several years, there were also responses on getting the assistant coaching staff that they would like to have, or having more assistant football coaches in their building, “It is about relationships, so without coaches in the building it is difficult to build those relationships with kids” (Coach Silver, personal communication, 2016). The responses again highlight the importance of the theme of staffing, as being an important, but very challenging factor contributing to the development of an elite high school football program.

Another theme that emerged from the responses of both groups, had to do with keeping the number of athletes up. This response was mentioned by three elite coaches, and two non-elite coaches. Having more athletes come out for football creates more competition, but also the necessary depth to ensure that a team can still be successful when injuries arise in the program. The issue of injuries and concussions not only garner justifiable media attention from various media outlets, but has also reduced the number of participants in football because of concern over the long-term effects that concussions may have upon athletes. Responses expressing this sentiment were, “Decreased numbers due to concussions” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017), and, “...negativity in the world on football and it is a battle for the ‘football is unsafe’ mentality...Participation and numbers being down is a challenge.” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017).

In the responses, the researcher had expected more mention of administrative support or parent concerns. The responses concerning parent support were only mentioned by non-elite coaches. These responses focused on the discrepancy between the amount of time a student plays and his parents' "unreal expectations of their child's ability" (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). While the responses of potential support concerns were mentioned by coaches in both groups, it did not occur with the frequency that the researcher had expected. One response by a non-elite coach is worth mentioning, as in my discussions with many coaches, this sentiment comes up time and again: "I am a father, husband, teacher, and coach, and finding that balance while being the best at all can be a challenge" (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). These responses show that getting stakeholders such as the community and parents to accept the theme of organizational and cultural alignment are seen by coaches in both groups as potential contributing factors to the development of an elite high school football program.

Adjustments for player safety due to concussions. This question was asked in order to determine what actions are being taken by all of the coaches participating in this study due to the developing debate surrounding the safety and viability of football at all levels of play. Responses could lead to insights on how coaches are approaching this next evolution of the game of football in their methods and practices. The coaches taking part in this study had a great deal to say about this question. This game has assumed a very prominent role in the lives of these coaches, and the depth of the responses to the fear of how concussions can damage players concerns them a great deal. Both elite and non-elite coaches provided very detailed responses to the question about the current concern for the long-term viability of football.

One theme that emerged in the responses concerned the changing societal shift about some portions of the game of football that are inherent in it, such as aggression, physical play, and sacrifice. Several coaches echoed this thematic response, but one coach summarized his feelings as:

People out there can be against what the game teaches players about being selfless and sacrificing for others... Sometimes people see aggression as undesirable, but football is an outlet for this because it teaches [student athletes] to use this aggression in the proper, disciplined way. (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016)

Another theme that emerged in the responses has also gained the attention of the media. The responses overwhelmingly felt that the clear majority of media coverage about football was very negative. “We do not really see positive stories about high school football, or really football in general” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). Another coach felt that the media attention surrounding the safety of football, while being necessary, was also singling out football compared to other sports and what the statistics actually say about the rates of concussions. “In hockey the rate of concussions are the same, and they let them fight. No one talks about concussion issues in other sports” (Coach Red, personal communication, 2016).

A final theme of the responses concerned the adjustment of techniques or practices to respond to the published reports, and public perception surrounding the safety of football. It became clear that all coaches interviewed in this study have made significant changes to the way that they approach teaching and coaching their football teams. A theme in the adjustment of practices of these coaches showed that both groups

have become dedicated to purchasing better equipment and teaching fundamental football techniques that improve player safety. “We teach things differently for safety” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017).

One elite coach thinks that despite evolving information concerning player safety in football, coaches must continue to evaluate what they do to always improve athlete safety: “People must adjust practice, techniques. Find better and safer ways to reduce contact, collisions, and increase player safety” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016). Other responses also exhibited a desire to adjust certain rules of the game itself, and their corresponding enforcement, to ensure further improvements to player safety. “Rules need to be discouraged or changed to allow big hits just for big hits. Refs need to buy in to stop dangerous plays” (Coach Blue, personal communication, 2016).

It was no surprise to the researcher that all coaches’ responses agreed with the seriousness surrounding the issue of concussions. Coaches took the developing information surrounding player safety as critical because “If we do not take this approach, there is a real chance that the game could cease to exist in my opinion” (Coach Tan, personal communication, 2017). Multiple coaches in both groups mentioned that medical procedures for ensuring the healing of players are very important. “Concussions are real, and they take time to recover from...The game is safer now than it was before with the return to play protocol” (Coach Brown, personal communication, 2016). There were also multiple coaches that think the rule changes to let trained medical personnel monitor and adjust athletes recovering from concussions, or concussion like symptoms, is very productive as it removes a potential gray area when a coach would have to make a

decision. “It is good with the medical personnel that they took [the] decision to play [away] from the coach and [put it] in the role of the medical professional” (Coach Purple, personal communication, 2017). It is clear from the responses to this question that all coaches take this issue very seriously, and consider it an important factor in the viability of football and a contributing factor in establishing or maintaining an elite high school football program.

Summary

The fourth chapter explained the responses given by coaches to the question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The chapter gave thematic answers and responses from the participants to the various categories of questions in the interview process. This chapter discussed some of the common themes in the responses across all question categories, compared the thematic responses given to each question category, and compared the responses given to individual questions by the elite and non-elite high school football coaches who participated in the study. Themes of mentorship beyond the game, staffing, organizational and cultural alignment, and a simple focus appear repeatedly in the responses given to the various questions asked in this research study. While all participants responded to the questions in the interview, the responses show that the response themes between elite and non-elite high school football coaches can have variations which could influence the success attained by the various high school football programs.

Section 5 Preview

Chapter five is the conclusion to the capstone. It looks at major findings, study limitations along with the recommendations; suggestions for future research about factors contributing to elite high school athletic programs. Finally, I include a reflection on the capstone writing process and its relationship to my coaching as a teaching activity.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

The capstone study was designed to begin to gather evidence for the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?* The thesis began with a self-reflection about the impact that two of my high school football coaches had upon me, and how this impact had affected my own philosophy and practices as I journeyed from assistant to head high school football coach. These early coaches' effect on me lead me to reflect on my deeply held beliefs about what it means to be a successful coach, who builds authentic and lasting relationships on and off the field of play with my players. The responses obtained in the interview research centered around the four main themes of mentorship beyond the game, establishing organizational and cultural alignment, and maintaining a simple focus. All are contributing factors to developing an elite high school football program.

First, this section will revisit this self-reflection. Second, the section will provide a brief discussion on major findings, and surprises from the capstone research. Third, the

section will then share insight on how the research results will impact my practice as a teacher and coach using the four major thematic findings from the response themes. Fourth, the section will discuss possible limitations of the study, and ideas for future research on potential contributing factors to an elite high school football program. Finally, the concluding chapter will provide final thoughts on the participants, and rationale for the degree of depth provided in the capstone research project.

Reflection of the Capstone Process

Writing this capstone has been a process filled with insights and challenges at each step. I want to graciously thank the many coaches that participated in this research study. Aside from the initial interviews, there were many times when I followed up with additional phone calls or electronic messages to clarify responses. I wanted to ensure the highest level of authenticity to the coaches' words and meaning.

Asking so many questions of the various coaches, I hope has produced pertinent data which begins to provide evidence for the factors that contribute to the development of an elite high school football program.

In my own school, our athletic director is currently working to change our culture of vocabulary. One instance in the change of our vocabulary is for coaches to be called "teachers." This thesis may focus on coaches, but coaches and teachers both inspire learning in their students regardless of the classroom in which these lessons occur. Although I am clearly very passionate about the topic, I also wanted to provide this level of depth to assist other teachers who are looking to develop better success in their domain

of practice by creating genuine and authentic relationships with those students in their charge.

While asking more than thirty-five questions in an interview assisted me in obtaining a large amount of data, I also wanted to provide individual and aggregate findings of the responses to further uncover contributing factors to developing an elite high school football program. To reveal a bit more, I wanted to complete research on why I struggled as a head high school football coach so that when the opportunity presents itself again, I can use the information from this research to understand what it takes to develop an elite high school football program. All the coaches in this study are extremely competitive on and off the field of play; however, their primary desire in coaching is to positively affect young men long after their time playing high school football is over. It is my hope that the depth provided in this capstone enhances understanding for both large scale thematic, and small scale specific examples of: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

Literature Review Full Circle

Above the Line. During the capstone research, a coach who participated in this research study recommended the book *Above the Line* by Urban Meyer (2015). Following an accomplished college football coach was very useful in connecting themes to factors which may contribute to an elite high school football program. Aside from this direct connection to football, this book while discussing each of the thematic responses thoroughly, gave a nuanced guide on how this coach implemented cultural and organizational alignment methods in his own practice.

Meyer (2015) discusses how his approaches to coaching and leadership have contributed to his college football team's uncommon level of on-the-field success. Meyer's philosophy and methods reflect the thematic responses of mentorship, organizational and cultural alignment. This text articulates that part of the reason for his team's success is his desire to provide mentorship beyond the game to all his players. The coaches participating in this study also express this primary desire to have the same lifelong impact on the development of future generations as their coaches had upon them.

In developing organizational and cultural alignment, Coach Meyer mentions, "Leaders create culture. Culture drives behavior. Behavior produces results" (Meyer, 2015, p. 61). The coaches participating in this study provide evidence on the importance of culture. While establishing organizational culture is important, so is the necessity of alignment. By working to have all facets of their programs aligned toward a common goal, these coaches realize the critical importance of organizational alignment to their success.

Legacy. Immediately before I began the capstone process, I had read *Legacy* by James Kerr (2015), and was very intrigued by the insights he gained from his one season as a participant observer with the New Zealand All Blacks. While this book on an elite athletic organization was very helpful in the formative stages of the capstone, it became even more beneficial as the capstone progressed. The various response themes from the interviews continued to echo similar sentiments as expressed by Kerr (2015). The number of citations attributed to Kerr (2015) in this capstone shows how many times I revisited

Kerr's book when looking to answer the research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

Kerr (2015) discussed that the New Zealand All-Blacks rugby team. The New Zealand All-Blacks rugby team expresses the importance of leaders creating leaders (Kerr, 2015). As with other heads of elite organizations, the coaches of the All Blacks make staffing, and player selections so that these key personnel challenge and push the organization to improve, while still maintaining alignment with the values, mission, and purpose of the team's core, as established by the head coach. The responses from the football coaches participating in my research study strongly correlate with Kerr's findings. Kerr (2015) finds that the staff of the All Blacks made decisions that cultivate alignment with that of the organization. The themes of organizational and cultural alignment seems to be directly furthered in elite organizations by selecting personnel who believe in the system at each level of the organization.

Simple Focus. While many people desire to obtain elite status in their field, very few do. The research responses seem to indicate that the formula for such elite success is far simpler than it may originally appear. Both Kerr (2015) and Meyer (2015) have indicated that the elite athletic organizations they participate in have a simple focus on fundamentals and execution. While this focus applies to on-the-field methods, the responses of elite leaders in multiple domains clearly speak to the simple focus these leaders also place upon mentorship beyond the game, organizational and cultural alignment, and staffing.

Major Findings and Surprises

The responses obtained in the interview research demonstrated that the responses of elite football coaches centered around the four main themes of mentorship beyond the game, establishing organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and maintaining a simple focus. All are contributing factors to developing an elite high school football program. While I have described the reasons for this in the different responses to the different question categories, I would like to use this section to briefly describe some of the surprises as a researcher that I had while reviewing the data from the capstone research process.

One area of surprise was the lack of differences between the two groups of coaches to certain categories, or specific questions in general. Although I still feel the distinction between the two categories of coaches is viable, there were times when there were more similarities than differences. The largest surprises I had as a researcher were in the areas of practice plans, schematics, and what was ranked as primary or secondary importance.

A specific area of a striking amount of similarities was in the practice plans of the two coaching groups. While the two practice plans are almost identical in structure or activities emphasized, there is a competitive difference between the results of the two groups of coaches. This difference in on-the-field success leads me to believe that the standards of practice, or standards of culture, are different between the programs of elite and non-elite high school football coaches.

Another area of surprise was that of schematics. While the data clearly support running an offensive scheme for a longer tenure tends to be more prominent in elite programs, this corresponding utilization of a defensive scheme was not present in elite programs. This higher incidence of change in defensive schematics could be due to changing athletes, or desire by these coaches to change the way they approach their opponent's offensive schemes. Perhaps it is not specific methods, but specific principles of defense that lead to high levels of on-the-field success for elite high school football programs.

A final area of surprise was when the coaches were asked to list specific areas of importance that lead to success, or lead to a differentiation between elite and non-elite high school football programs. In many instances, the answers given to these questions were almost identical between the two groups. The interesting area of difference, however, was what elite coaches mention first in their responses came later in the non-elite coaches' responses. Non-elite coaches' responses focused on specific examples which included community, administration, team chemistry, or coaching staff continuity. Coaches in the elite group discussed, often in detail, the importance of having a mission, vision, plan, and identity that is individualized to the head coach and what he desires his program to be. In this way, perhaps, it is not specifically the answer given in the response, but the fact that elite coaches may allocate extra focus or attention to areas that non-elite coaches mention later in their responses. Perhaps this subtle shift in the emphasis of alignment in the elite coaches' responses, shows a contributing factor to areas of primary importance in developing an elite high school football program.

Impact Upon my Practice

As a teacher, and as a coach, I have gained information that will directly affect my practice. Throughout my coursework in teaching, I was intrigued to hear, with ever increasing frequency, about good coaches being good teachers, and that to improve as teachers, instructors can benefit from assuming the relationship of a coach with their students. While I previously felt this to be sound advice, having the research responses provide important evidence to confirm my beliefs in coaching and teaching. Now, I feel it important once more to mention that four important thematic findings from the research responses: mentorship beyond the game, establishing organizational and cultural alignment, staffing, and maintaining a simple focus. Each of these four thematic findings will directly impact my practice as both a teacher and coach.

Mentorship Beyond the Game. As part of an exercise recommended by Ehrmann et al. (2011), and Gongwer (2014) I wrote my own personal mission statement for my purpose in coaching. The statement that I developed was, “I coach to turn young boys, that turn into uncommon men, through the demonstration of love, passion, commitment, and trust.” Each of these values is a core pillar of what I consider to be my purpose in coaching. In my own experience, even though I had coaches who were hard on me, when I knew their high expectations demanded more from me because of our authentic and meaningful relationship, I more often than not rose to the challenge. This mentorship showed me that while growth is not always linear, and is often uncomfortable, authentic caring can bring out the best in personal and athletic performance. By truly getting to know students and athletes on a personal level, coaches

make it very clear that their priority is focused on making student athletes better people. To improve performance, one must follow the adage, “the student does not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Organizational and Cultural Alignment and Staffing. I have a desire to be a head football coach again. Upon reflection, I strongly feel that part of my lack of success was in part because I did not give these two items the attention that they clearly deserve. In my one off-season as head coach I articulated to everyone the importance of staff cohesion and culture. In fact, to start each of my staff meetings we began with explicit definitions of our core values, and how we would all speak the language to define them, and equally important, use the same methods to implement them. While I did not have a second off-season to develop a program or a staff, this failure of culture was something that I own whole-heartedly and will always make explicit in future opportunities.

I put these two themes together because I believe that they both influence and complement one another. When I was a head coach, I did not focus on cohesion and alignment as much as I should have. In my first season, I made certain staffing decisions based upon previous coaching positions at a higher level of coaching, and did not understand the significance of having alignment in all that we did. While I did not have a second off-season to develop a program or a staff, when I become a high school head football coach again, I will spend considerable time and effort developing the culture and cohesion in the assistant coaches that I select to help me lead the organization. Having a qualified staff is good, but if this staff is not aligned with the core values of the organization, then dissonance occurs and the organization will not be as successful as it

would otherwise be with this alignment. This failure of organizational and cultural alignment was something that I own whole-heartedly as the head of the program I oversaw. After having a less than desirable season, I am firm in my belief that by focusing on authentic alignment and staffing to support this alignment, I will be more successful in future leadership endeavors. Indeed, the thematic responses show these two areas to be extremely important factors contributing to the development of an elite high school football program.

Simple Focus. As can be clearly seen from the sheer length of this capstone, I often favor depth over breadth in teaching and coaching. When I began coaching high school football, to prove myself to my fellow coaching peers, I learned everything I could about different schematic methods. As a young coach, I figured that the answer to any successful organization was simply working harder, or knowing more schemes than the opposing coaches. The longer I coach, and the longer I teach, I find that it does not come down to what I know, but what my students know, and more importantly what they can execute. To state simply in coaching parlance, less is more. The data provided from these responses clearly show that while each of the coaches has extensive domain knowledge, their clear and explicit focus on keeping their lessons and systems simple, along with their attention to fundamentals and execution all allow students and athletes to reach uncommon levels of success.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provided a great deal of data to provide evidence for factors that contribute to an elite high school football program, there were certainly areas that could

be improved for future research. One area that would be prudent to undertake in future research would be to increase the sample size of both elite and non-elite groups to see if the differences manifest when the two groups are compared side by side.

Aside from increasing the sample size of the study, future studies could also compare public schools and parochial school categories, as multiple parochial schools participated in this study. A related theme would be to increase the size of rural, suburban, and non-elite football coaches. Demographic improvements could also include comparing elite high school football programs at schools of similar student populations.

If I were to complete this study again, specific areas that I would be interested in investigating would be the areas of tenure, areas of growth, and increasing numerical data. Firstly, to compare elite coaches based upon the length of time they have been head coach. I am curious if certain differences would emerge between the different tenured cohorts who have all attained elite status. Secondly, one elite coach who participated in this capstone research study, suggested that an interesting insight into this capstone research study could be to ask the coaches about some of their biggest failures made being the head coach of their program. Thirdly, another opportunity to improve the study could come from interviews that give rank order choice, or forced choice responses. Perhaps by having pre-selected choices to the interview questions, larger or more significant differences might emerge between elite and non-elite coaches.

Final Thoughts

For the purposes of this research study, to compare and contrast the responses of high school football coaches, I categorized two groups of high school football coaches.

One group was categorized as elite coaches. Based upon their previous accomplishments and on-the-field success, it is apparent that their teams achieved uncommon levels of success. The other group of coaches were categorized as non-elite coaches. I want to take a moment to clearly state that while the capstone research categorizes the two groups of coaches, I consider all the coaches participating in this capstone research to be excellent coaches, despite their actual win or loss records. All the participants in the study entered the profession of coaching for the betterment of the athletes under their charge, and while the winning percentages may be different, I need to commend them on the immeasurable and lasting influence they have had on the lives of their players. I want to spend one more moment offering each of these participants a thank you, not just for participating in this capstone research, but for all the hard work they put into making their football players better people.

While the subject matter in the thesis is both personal and interesting to me, one reason I set out upon this topic of investigation was to provide useful information to myself, and my fellow coaching peers which can be incorporated directly into their own practice. The capstone is over 150 pages long, but I felt that it was necessary to provide this level of supportive detail to do justice to the topics being investigated. It is my hope that this capstone can provide multi-faceted insights for young coaches starting out, established coaches looking to uncover further best practices, and elite coaches in providing confirmation or rationale for their existing practice. As stated previously, I have been greatly impacted by two of my previous football coaches, and I hope that this capstone thesis assists the next generation of coaches and athletes, because I firmly believe that leaders create leaders (Kerr, 2015).

Summary

This section began with a reflection of the capstone research process, and then revisited important sources from the literature review. Next, the section provided a brief discussion of major findings, and surprises from the capstone research. The section then gave insight on how the research results would impact my practice as a teacher and coach using the four major thematic findings from the response themes. Then, the section discussed possible limitations of the study, and ideas for future research on potential contributing factors to an elite high school football program. Lastly, I provided final thoughts on the participants, and rationale for the degree of depth provided in the capstone research project. The research conducted and the presentation of the results begin to provide evidence to the capstone research question: *What factors contribute to an elite high school football program?*

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions on factors contributing to an elite high school football program

1. What is your highest educational degree attained?
2. Please describe your high school and college football playing experience.
3. Why do you coach high school football?
4. How many total years have you coached football? Please describe the schools where you have coached at and what your responsibilities were there.
5. How long have you been the head coach at this program?
6. How many total years have you been a head football coach?
7. What is the role, or job duties of the head football coach within your building other than football?
8. What areas of the football team does the head football coach directly supervise?
9. What role does the head football coach play in developing an elite high school football program?
10. How many football coaches does your program have? At what levels?
11. How many of your assistant football coaches work in the building? How many are employed within your school or school district?
12. What role do assistant coaches play in developing an elite high school football program?
13. How long has the majority of your staff been together?
14. How many athletes are in your program? At what levels?
15. Do you two platoon or one platoon? Why do you hold that philosophy?

16. How do you select personnel for special teams players? Special teams such as punt, punt-return, kick-off, kick-off return, field goal, point-after attempt, and field goal block teams.
17. What is your philosophy as a coach on special teams?
18. What is your opinion on what constitutes a special teams scheme in an elite high school football program?
19. What role do athletes play in developing an elite high school football program?
20. How would you characterize your offense and offensive philosophy? What are your base plays?
21. How long have you personally run the offensive scheme your school is currently operating?
22. What is your opinion on what constitutes an offensive scheme at an elite high school football program?
23. How would you characterize your defense and defensive philosophy? What is your base defense?
24. How long have you personally run the defensive scheme?
25. What is your opinion on what constitutes a defensive scheme at an elite high school football program?
26. Please describe a week of practice schedules.
27. Please outline a typical week's day by day progression in your program.
28. Explain the program's previous tradition of success?
29. What are the demographics of the school community?

30. What role does the community play in developing an elite high school football program?
31. What does your staff do in the off-season to improve themselves professionally as coaches?
32. What do your athletes do in the off-season to improve themselves? Do you improve athletes in areas besides athletic enhancement and how is this done in your program?
33. What do you think are the biggest factors for your program's success?
34. What are the three most important areas to developing an elite high school football program?
35. What are other areas that you think are important in developing an elite high school football program?
36. What are the three main elements that distinguish football programs in term of on-the-field-success?
37. What are some of the biggest challenges that you have faced as a coach over the years?
38. What are your opinions on the concussion debate about football? How have you altered or adjusted practices or techniques or equipment in order to better protect your athletes?
39. What other high school football coaches should I speak with who are in charge of elite football programs?