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## The Preferred Coaching Styles of Generation Z Athletes: A Qualitative Study

Krishna Parker, Daniel Czech, Trey Burdette, Jonathan Stewart, David Biber, Lauren Easton, Caitlyn Pecinovsky, Sarah Carson, and Tyler McDaniel  
Georgia Southern University, USA

### ABSTRACT

With over 50 million youth athletes participating in some kind of sports in the United States alone, it is important to realize the impact and benefits of playing (Weinberg and Gould, 2011). Physically, sports can help youth improve strength, endurance, weight control, and bone structure (Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992). Sport participation also benefits youths socially (Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992) and academically (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). Optimal coaching education and training is a necessity if young athletes are to learn and improve in these aforementioned areas. In order for youth to grow from their sport experience, they need guidance from coaches, parents, and other important figures. Recent research by Jones, Jo and Martin (2007) suggests that more recent generations require a new approach to learning. The purpose of the current study was to qualitatively examine the preferred coaching styles of youth soccer players from Generation Z. After interviewing 10 youth athletes (five male, five female), four main themes emerged for Generation Z's view of a "great coach." These themes reflected the desire for a coach that: 1) does not yell and remains calm, 2) is caring and encouraging, 3) has knowledge of the sport, and 4) involves the team in decision making. Future research could include implementing a mixed-methodological approach incorporating the Leadership Scale for Sport (Chelladurai, 1984). Another avenue worthy of investigation is the role that technology plays for Generation Z athletes.



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## The Preferred Coaching Styles of Generation Z Athletes: A Qualitative Study

There are approximately 50 million youth sport participants in the United States (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Such a prodigious amount of involvement is remarkable due to the benefits associated with youth sports. Youth sports provide an atmosphere that enhances physical, social, psychological, and intellectual development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk (1992) found that sports can offer health benefits such as improving strength and endurance, assisting in weight control, and improving bone structure. Keeping in mind the increasing prevalence of obesity in the United States, staying physically active could assist in maintaining the health of youth (Steinbeck, 2008). Seefeldt, Ewing and Walk (1992) also found that sports allow youth to develop sport-specific motor skills along with motor skills used in everyday life. However, youth sport enhances more than just physical attributes. Through sports, youth are provided a place outside of school to build friendships and cultivate a sense of belonging (Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992). Socially, youth athletes learn to work with others by practicing effective communication skills, displaying respectful demeanors, and understanding the importance of positive sportsmanship while competing (Côté, 2002; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Participating in sports can also lead to a greater sense of happiness by helping reduce anxiety and increase self-esteem (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Finally, positive correlations have been found between academic performance and cognitive development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Physical activity required by sports participation can help keep the young and developing mind stimulated.

### *Influence of Leadership in Youth Sport*

Although sports can provide numerous benefits to youth participants, guidance from coaches, parents, and other important figures is required for this optimal growth to be obtained. Research has shown that youth do not learn skills through participation alone; these skills must be modeled and taught to them (Theokas, Danish, Hodge, Heke, & Forneris, 2008). Most young athletes spend four to six hours participating in a sport per week during a given season (Larson, 2000). During this time, many of the coaches are looked to as influential figures. Smith and Smoll (1997) stated that “the most important factor in determining outcomes is the manner in which this important social learning situation is structured and supervised by the adults who play an increasingly active role in highly organized youth sport programs of today” (p. 17). Of these individuals, the coach has the potential to have the strongest impact due to their amount of direct involvement with youth (Smith & Smoll, 1997).

Martens (1987) characterizes an effective leader as one who: (a) provides direction through the establishment of goals, (b) builds a psychological and social environment that is conducive to achieving the team’s goals, (c) instills values, (d) motivates members of the group to pursue goals, (e) confronts members when problems arise and resolves conflict, and (f) communicates effectively. Although there has been an increase in the number of coaching education programs aimed towards instilling these characteristics in coaches, many are still not receiving instruction concerning effective leadership characteristics and qualities (Larson, 2000).



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It is possible that many coaches underestimate the influence they have on their young athletes through direct instruction and the learning environment they provide.

The type of climate and coaching style provided can also influence the experience and the ways in which youth view sport. Research indicates that a negative experience with a coach is more likely to influence the coach-athlete relationship than a positive experience (Smith & Smoll, 1997). Hedstrom and Gould (2004) suggest that by the age of twelve youth athletes make a decision on long-term sport participation. Research notes that some sport withdrawal decisions are due to the dislike of the coach (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). Therefore, coaching behaviors can be a deciding factor in a young athlete's decision in continuing with a sport. Furthermore, understanding the preferences of coaching behavior may assist in the reduction of sport withdrawal, so it is important to gain an understanding of what youth want from their sport and coaches.

## *Generational Differences*

The benefits of youth sport and effective coaches are clear. Increasing emphasis is being placed in this area as generations shift and lifestyles change. A generation pertains to a group of individuals born within the same time span who have similar life experiences and attitudes (Jones et al., 2007). Differences between generations are often the result of influential changes in the economy, technological enhancements, and other major world evolvments. People within each generation show evidence of sharing common, distinct characteristics resultant of music, experiences, crises, television, celebrities, and age (Elmore, 2002). Therefore the previous research by Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk (1992), which happens to be one of the most commonly referenced studies in youth sports research, may be viewed as outdated since it was performed on individuals from the Generation X population.

Research suggests that more recent Generations, mainly Generation Z, may require a new approach to learning than past generations (Jones et al., 2007). Today's youth and those to be born in the upcoming years have been termed Generation Z. Analyses have provided numerous estimates as to when Generation Y ended and Generation Z began, but the majority see the change to have occurred around the year 2000 (Jones et al., 2007). Members of Generation Z are said to be more technologically savvy than the previous generations (Jones et al., 2007). Their lives are encompassed by the Internet, which is their common ground for communication. Generation Z may also require increased stimulation derived solely in technology, creating a potential disinterest with traditional teaching methods (Jones et al., 2007). Their verbal skills, expressions, confidence, and other personal skills may falter due to their reliance on technologically-based communication (Jones et al., 2007). In regard to technology, Jones et al. state that youth are spending more time indoors than ever. More specifically, they state that youth spend an average of six hours a day on electronic devices such as television, video games, and the computer. Changes in the academic arena must be made due to the increasing dependence and emphasis placed on technology by Generation Z (Jones et al., 2007). Although Generation Z embraces technology, it has the potential to adversely affect areas other than



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education. More specifically, the areas of sport and healthy living could be adversely affected (Jones et al., 2007).

## *Generation Z: Changes in Youth Participation*

Research has shown that the top five reasons children participate in sport are: 1) having fun, 2) doing something they were good at, 3) staying in shape, 4) learning new or improving skills, and 5) playing as part of a team (Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992). Although this had remained relatively stable across the previous generations, Generation Z has begun to inadvertently alter its reasoning for sports participation. One of the biggest changes found with Generation Z and sport refers to their emphasis and definition of fun. Coakley (2008) noticed that many Generation Z youth athletes were no longer viewing 'fun' as the happiness derived from sport. Instead, they had begun to define it as being a better athlete, becoming more competitive, and advancing to more highly skilled levels of training.

This redefinition of fun can be associated with the rising development of professionalization in youth sport (Gould, 2006). Professionalization occurs when the youth's main focus while participating in sport is for competitive success and rewards. The athlete may focus on early sport specialization, train year-round, and place an importance on winning (Gould, 2006). Research has found that when professionalization is implemented too early in a youth's sport experience, negative outcomes can result. The outcomes may include burnout or injury (Law, Côté, & Ericsson, 2007). When youth specialize rather than sample an array of sports, they may experience decreased development of physical and life skills commonly used in many sports and general life contexts (Côté, 2006). Deemphasizing professionalization could impact the way in which youth view sport, foster the development of physical and life skills, and provide insight as to the style of coaching preferred (Danish, Nellen, & Owens, 1996; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chambers, 2006).

To keep children involved in sports and to make the sport experience one in which the participating youth experience optimal development, it is important to garner an understanding of Generation Z's desired coaching styles and preferences. Researchers noted that congruence regarding leader behaviors, the preference of athletes, and the requirements of the situation could have a positive effect on group performance and member satisfaction (Hoffman, Czech, Blazo, Zwald, Zakrajsek, Burdette, & Metzler, 2009). Understanding how members of the recent generation view optimal coaching could assist in making youth sports a more enjoyable and beneficial experience.

## *Purpose and Theoretical Framework*

The current research was framed in the humanistic model. The humanistic model emphasizes studying the participant as a "whole" in order to gain a rich and in-depth description of the individual's experience (Hill, 2001). Thus, the researcher showed respect and unconditional positive regard to the participant through empathy, genuineness, and nonjudgmental caring. Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher was able to enhance the



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research process and obtain valid data by viewing each participant as unique, paying close attention to the tone of language used, asking questions and listening, and using interpretive skills (Hill, 2001).

The purpose of the study was to qualitatively examine the preferred coaching styles of youth soccer players from Generation Z. The study could provide insight as to the preferred coaching styles held by Generation Z, indicate the gender preferences related to coaching style, and provide direction for coaches as to how to keep their youth athletes engaged and interested in the sport. It was hoped that the current investigation would provide insight into the coaching preferences held by youth soccer players so as to allow coaches, sport psychology consultants, and parents to work effectively with their children to promote youth sports and decrease both burnout and professionalization.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants included 10 Generation Z athletes (five male, and five female) ages 9 and 10 years old. They were selected from a soccer club located in the eastern region of North Carolina. Each participant had at least one year of experience in youth soccer at both a recreational level and advanced recreational level. Purposeful sampling was used and participants were chosen through personal contacts that the researcher had with the soccer club. The sample size of 10 athletes was deemed acceptable based on saturation, which is the point at which additional information from one more interview or participants adds no new meaning to the themes and study at hand (Patton, 2002).

### *Procedure*

After attaining IRB approval, the participants and their parents were contacted and scheduled for interviews. All interviews were face-to-face and located in a classroom at the participants' respective school for privacy and confidentiality purposes. In order to ensure confidentiality, each transcription of the interviews was coded in order to eliminate potential identification of the participants. Also, any files that contained participant information were stored in a locked drawer at the Southern Performance Clinic at Georgia Southern University. Prior to the start of the interview, parents were asked to give parental consent for their child to participate in the interview.

### *Interview Protocol*

A semi-structured interview was used in order to collect data from the participants. The interview protocol was modeled after Martens (1987) and Hoffman et al. (2009). The following introductory statement was read to each participant:



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“The study that we are performing is looking at the ways in which young athletes your age describe all the qualities of a great coach. I know that you have just finished playing soccer under the direction of a coach but I don’t want you to think of them right now. I want you to imagine the type of coach that you would really enjoy playing for and try to answer the following questions in the best way that you can.”

The ensuing questions were then asked:

1. Describe a great coach from your opinion.
2. Describe how a great coach acts towards his/her players.
3. Describe how a great coach would act in a stressful situation. What about a situation that is not stressful?
4. Describe a how a great coach would talk to you.
5. Describe how a great coach can motivate you to be the best that you can be.
6. Describe how a great coach would make important team-related decisions.

Further probing questions were asked in order to clarify, elaborate, and attain a deeper understanding of each athlete’s experiences (Patton, 2002). An example of a probing question was:

I heard you mention \_\_\_\_\_; can you tell me more about that?  
What did you mean when you said \_\_\_\_\_?

In order to effectively present this method of open-ended questions and further probing, the researcher followed the guidelines outlined by Dale (1996) to gain clear and accurate descriptions of the participant’s experience. It was imperative that the researcher view each participant as an equal, ask probing questions introduced by the participant, avoid asking “why” questions, and attempt to stay at the participant’s level of experience (p. 314).

## Data Analysis

Côté (1993) suggests that there is no one correct way of analyzing qualitative data. That being said, it was essential that a detailed description of the procedures, decision criteria, and data manipulation be provided that helped lead to the final results of the study. Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, and Hayes (2001) and Patton (2002) developed a methodological approach for a qualitative analysis that was adopted for this study as outlined below:

1. Approaching the interviews
  - a. *Transcribing the interview*
  - b. *Obtaining a grasp of the interview*
2. Focusing the data
  - a. *Bracketing the data*
3. Phenomenological reduction
  - a. *Eliminating irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data*
  - b. *Verifying the elimination of the data*



4. Releasing meanings
  - a. *Forming categories*
  - b. *Identifying the themes*
  - c. *Describing the themes*

## Results

All of the participants in the study were current participants on a challenge soccer team and had at least one year of experience at this level. After conducting, transcribing, and analyzing the interviews, four major themes emerged: 1) the coach does not yell and remains calm, 2) the coach is caring and encouraging, 3) the coach has knowledge of sport, and 4) the coach involves the team in decision making. In the following section, specific quotes from participants are used to demonstrate the notion of a “great coach” from the perspective of Generation Z athletes. Figure 1 provides a depiction of the interrelatedness of the four themes that describe the preferred leadership styles of the Generation Z soccer players in this study.

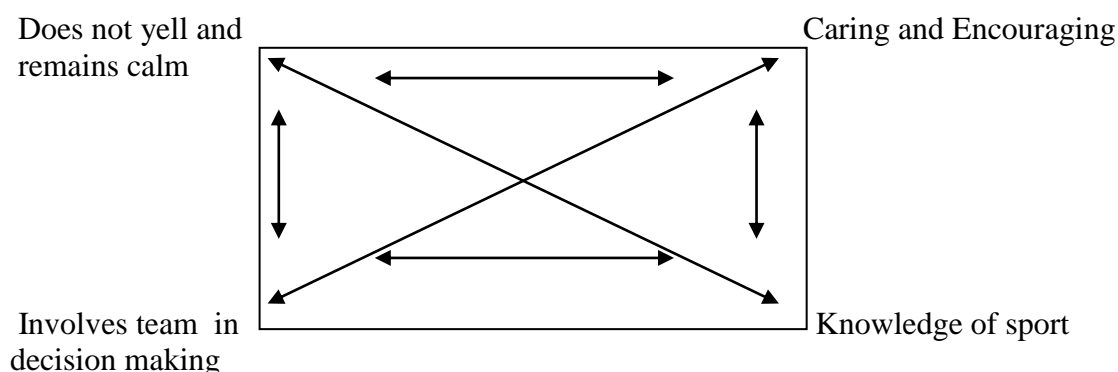


Figure 1. Model of interrelatedness of themes in preferred leadership styles of Generation Z.

### *Theme #1: Does Not Yell and Remains Calm*

Each of the participants discussed ways in which they preferred their coach to communicate with them. Most participants preferred a coach that did not yell and remained calm when communicating.

“They would not freak out. Like them just yelling a lot.” When asked why she did not like the coach yelling, she responded: “Just cause, they sound angry. Loud, lot of yelling. Like sometimes you don’t even know what they are saying.” (Participant 1)

This characteristic of a great coach was depicted by other participants as well:

“Ok, so doesn’t yell at you. Like, always yelling in the games. He doesn’t yell at us, like meanly. Not like’s he mad at us. Like, keep yelling your name in the game. Just don’t like it.” (Participant 5)



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Participant 7 emphasized “not yelling” when asked about how he would like a great coach to talk with him specifically:

“I like my coach to be like a medium tone so we can all hear. But if it’s real loud like he’s yelling at us, and he’s mad cause we are losing, I don’t really like coaches like that.”

Later in the interview, Participant 7 mentioned the idea of “not yelling” when commenting on how a coach could best motivate him:

“He wouldn’t just yell at us to make us motivated. Yelling isn’t the way to motivate me, cause last year in Southwest at the championship game the coaches had to yell at their kids to get them motivated. At first, in that game we were already motivated, we were always motivated and always ready to play. I just liked how our coach didn’t yell. Cause their team, their team was frustrated and their coaches were yelling a lot.”

In conjunction with expressing the desire for a coach not to yell, many of the participants emphasized that they would like the coach to remain calm. Calm was described by the players as “not yelling” but also encompassed a relaxed and positive interactive state between the coach and the player:

“Like he tells us to walk with him somewhere, like he usually does, and he just tells us all our mistakes that we will work on at practice. And like, he don’t yell so all the parents can hear him, so he just talks calm. I don’t want him to yell at me and stuff. I just want him to speak calm and nice to me and like tell me my mistakes that I need to work on.”  
(Participant 6)

Participant 8 referenced the coach staying calm in his description of a stressful situation. He felt the coach should stay focused and not use yelling as the way to communicate:

“I would want the coach to be like talking to us and don’t start yelling. He would just talk to us really calm and say... ‘B, you need to play better defense’ but not like yelling. He would just be calm and just do what their supposed to do. Just telling you how to do stuff. Like in the game on corner kicks and stuff.”

Participant 10 agreed with the importance of the coach staying calm in a stressful situation. He added that he wanted the coach to forget the stressful state and treat the situation as any other:

“He doesn’t like yell all the time. He doesn’t yell at us if we miss a shot or do something else wrong. He’s positive. He’s not yelling and stressing out, cause he’s thinking of it like practice. He forgets that it’s like a game. He’s calm and he knows his players’ strengths and weaknesses and where they have to be to score and how many goals they need.”

Participant 6 also expressed that he wanted the coach to stay calm and for the coach to not overact with yelling:



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“I don’t want him to like yell at us. So I would like him to like be kind of patient if we don’t, if we mess up one time, like he shouldn’t just go all off and stuff. But like he should just let it go.”

## *Theme #2: Caring and Encouraging*

The second theme that derived from the interviews was for a coach to be caring and encouraging. A caring coach was presented as someone who showed that they cared for the athlete by being helpful in their skill building and showing an overall interest in the athlete. Participant 1 described the preference for this type of person:

“Like kindly. Like that they care. Like doesn’t like always yell at me because I done something wrong or anything. And I like Coach J and I like playing for him cause he’s nice and all that. Like when I get hurt. Usually some coaches don’t really know that your hurt and well... actually some coaches don’t care that your hurt and Coach J usually like subs me in with another player or something if I’m hurt or anything like that.”

Later in the interview, Participant 1 and Participant 10 discussed the coach’s ability to assist her and expressed that her coach cared about her through helpful actions:

“Helpful. Like if they mix up a move or something they’ll just help them fix it. Or if like you missed a day of practice they would go over with you what they did the day that you missed. They would help you fix it by going over the moves and stuff.” (Participant 1)  
“Probably see what I do wrong in games he could probably take to practice and tell me and show me what needs to be done so I can become better at what I do and my position.” (Participant 10)

Participant 8 also expressed how he liked the coach to show he cared through instruction and concern for them. He described a great coach with the following statement:

“By teaching us how and what to improve. How... by if we do something wrong. Overall he would just be a good coach. I like coaches who talk to us a lot. Like after the game, like how you would do, like how you did and stuff or if you played a great game or you needed to improve. Like he would tell us if we had trouble with dribbling. Like how to dribble better. Like if I play midfield and I needed a break he might tell me then something to do. Like if I had like three or four mistakes he would just talk to me and he’d tell me how I could fix what I was messing up out there.”

Participant 7 felt the coach could be helpful by persistently giving the team instruction:

“My coach he would tell us like what we need to do at practice and how we do it first and then we would try to work on it. If we did it wrong he’ll tell us again and help us understand it more. And if we did that right then we would work on our differences.”



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The second portion of the theme detailed the participants' descriptions of an encouraging coach. The participants provided numerous descriptions of ways in which a coach could motivate them to play their best. The participants described encouragement as positive feedback and consistent motivation by the coach. Participant 1 expressed this in the following statement:

“Like he'd say, ‘you can do it.’ No matter if we lost the ball, or it went into the goal and we missed it, or it went in between our legs they wouldn't get really mad and to try our best.”

Participant 10 also wanted the coach to encourage them to do their best:

“Before games he doesn't worry about how good the team is that we are facing and he doesn't really try to stress us out of how many goals we need to score. And like if we're about or if we lost we get kicked out of the season, so he wouldn't like say that he would tell us to try our best.”

Participant 3 desired a coach who continually encouraged the players and included the importance of not putting them down. She commented:

“ Like, doesn't just like keep asking you, like...like just asks you, asks you like what your problem is and what position do you want to be in. They just give you the choices, not really staying on you about how you are playing bad. Just encourage me. Say nice things and don't put you down, respectful.”

When Participant 8 was asked what a great coach could do to motivate him he responded:

“Encouraging. Like an encouraging voice to me, like encouraging. He would keep on saying...he would say: ‘B remember, keep practicing whatever.’ Like every time I mess up or like every two times I'd want him to keep on encouraging and tell me to do my best.”

At the end of the interview, Participant 8 again noted the desire for the coach to be encouraging:

“Encourage is like thinking you can do something. Think you can do something and you keep on trying. So if you make mistakes you keep on trying and never give up till you keep on doing that. And the coach, well my coach that I'm thinking of would be encouraging us, full of courage.”

Participant 9 expressed a combination of caring and encouraging in his description of how a coach could best motivate him in a game:

“He would just, just say like keep doing your best, don't let, if we are winning by so much don't just let them score. Keep going and would just keep telling us through the game to just don't wait for the guy to get to you, come out a little bit then run back and



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get your position. If I did something right he would probably just go, he'd probably just say keep doing that and you will succeed or something and then if I was doing something wrong he would just say when you do that just do the opposite of what you're doing and just try your hardest."

## *Theme #3: Knowledge of Sport*

The third theme that emerged from the data was that a great coach would be knowledgeable of the sport. Knowledge of the sport encompassed the ideas of knowing the game of soccer (rules, plays, organization) and also having experience playing the sport. Participant 10 made this evident by saying:

"Has experience, like knows the game. He knows all the rules and he knows how he can help his team get better. Knows what they need to work on. He participates with us like in scrimmages and stuff."

Participant 2 also indicated that emphasis should be placed on the coach having experience in soccer by stating, "Someone who has played soccer before and they are good at it."

Participant 9 briefly mentioned in his description of a great coach: "Well, he would be athletic. Like he can run really fast and he knows soccer. He knows the positions and knows drills to teach us." Participant 8 elaborated on the idea of the coach knowing and having played soccer and did not like an unknowledgeable or unorganized coach:

"He's coached before so he knows what to do, knows how to play, experience in sports....so... like he would know what to do and stuff. Like I had a coach one time that wasn't really.... Like there was this really good team but they had a lot of players sign up and I was little and they had another team that wasn't really that good and I got on the team on that and that coach wasn't really into it. He wasn't really that good. He just didn't know what was going on. I want a coach to like always tell us when practices are and help us get better."

## *Theme #4: Involves Team in Decision Making*

During the last portion of the interview, all participants were asked how a great coach would make team decisions. The overall theme that emerged was the desire to have a coach who would consider their opinions or preferences while making decisions regarding the preparation for competition and during competition. Many of the participants defined this as having the opportunity to voice their preferences in practice or game situations and as to what particular position they desired to play. Participant 1 noted:

"I kind of like the coach to talk to the team because some places where the coach puts them they're not really comfortable so they don't really understand the whole process of the position."



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Participant 9 agreed with the coach allowing their input on what position they would like to play:

“Well he should probably, well at first he should ask us where we would like to play and he should let us try that position out and if we weren’t that good at it then just pick another position.”

Participant 6 also illustrated this idea and added that he wanted the coach to consider which players they worked alongside the best:

“Well I like him to talk to us about stuff because if we don’t know what we’re doing. Like if he says that, like one of our best players, which all of them are awesome, but like one of our good players like if he separates them and we really need him or her then we probably won’t be as good without him or her. So I like him to talk about it with us before he makes that change.”

Participant 10 emphasized that the desire for the coach to listen to what they had to say and also allow them time to speak in the game:

“He could probably listen to his players and not go off, like what he knows and most of the time what he knows an he’d let some or most of the players choose, like what needs to be done if they know what ... so like at half time if we are losing he would let us have like a couple or two minutes to say what we think and then he’d tell us, so he’s not like just telling us what needs to be done all the time.”

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the preferred leadership styles of Generation Z athletes. A qualitative analysis of 10 soccer players from the Generation Z population revealed four common themes regarding coaching preferences: 1) one who does not yell and remains calm, 2) one who is caring and encouraging, 3) one who has knowledge of the sport, and 4) one who involves the team in decision making.

Due to the benefits offered by youth sports, it is important to understand the preferences of coaching styles among the new generation in order to keep youth active. Generation Z is currently comprised of young members with the eldest being 10 years old. Although we know little about their characteristics, we can examine past generations and the issues they experienced, and search for issues that could be prevalent among Generation Z. The results of this study offer insight regarding the coaching preferences held by a few members of Generation Z. This information could provide methods in which we can and need to adapt in order to enhance the youth sport environment.

Stewart and Taylor (2000) found coaching issues as one of the top three reasons that female athletes chose to quit a sport. Furthermore, they reported that their favorite coaches were



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“fun, nice, listened to and understood players, fair, encouraging to individuals, knowledgeable, and pushed the team to do their best” (p. 370). Their least favorite coaches were described as, “mean-rude, unfair, not encouraging, having yelled at players, having poor coaching skills, not nice, negative, and too strict” (p. 371). Garcia (1994) came to similar conclusions in assessing the gender differences among youth while learning fundamental skills. He noted that neither gender liked coaches who yelled at players, exhibited poor coaching skills, were not nice, were overly negative, or too strict. Frey, Czech, Kent, and Johnson (2006) explored experiences of female athletes with coaches. Females felt that an ideal coach should be a “good leader, teacher, friend, and motivator.” Each of these studies coincides with the themes found within this study.

## *Theme #1: Remains Calm and Does Not Yell*

While three of the major findings of the current study (not yell, encouraging, and knowledge of sport) were found within the previously mentioned studies, it should be noted that each of the participants in the current study mentioned that they wanted the coach to be “nice.” The majority of the participants described this term in further detail as “not yelling,” which was then selected as the vocabulary to use for the theme. The participants of this study emphasized that they did not want a coach to yell. They preferred the coach pull them to the side and explain their mistakes. They wanted the coach to consistently remain calm throughout all stressful and non-stressful situations. Due to the high frequency of the theme, it is important to consider why yelling was viewed as such a negative issue by every one of the participants. Based on the descriptions provided by the participants, it appears that many had an issue with the loud noise of yelling. One of the participants commented that there was so much yelling that they did not know what the coach was saying. Participants also conveyed the idea that many times yelling sounded angry. Kenow and Williams (1992) examined the relationship of anxiety, self-confidence, and evaluation with coaching behaviors. They found that athletes perceived many coaching behaviors differently and more negatively than did the coach. While many coaches may not intend to portray anger via yelling, it may be internalized as such by youth, thus negatively impacting their experience. Smith and Smoll (1997) comment that a negative experience with a coach is likely to have a greater impact on the coach-athlete relationship; therefore, hindering the positive youth sport environment. Youth who become upset by a gesture made by the coach are less likely to be engaged and less willing to learn the sport (Dworkin & Larson, 2006).

## *Theme #2: Caring and Encouraging*

In line with previous research, the Generation Z athletes in this study desire a coach who exudes positive interactions and feedback. Martin, Jackson, Richardson, and Weiller (1999) found that early and late adolescents rated positive feedback as their main preference in a coach. Overall, they found that athletes preferred a coach who created a positive atmosphere and was able to provide effective instructions. Horn (2002) found that coaches who continually provided positive and instructional feedback after both performance success and performance errors had a stronger positive impact on the athlete’s intrinsic motivation and overall sport experience. Expressing positive interactions and feedback with players is consistent with the current study’s regarding the desire for a coach to be caring and encouraging. The participants expressed the



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desire for a coach who motivated them and expressed caring attributes. They described these coaching qualities as someone who was willing to assist them with skills, effectively explain their mistakes, and motivate the team to play their best. This finding could be connected with building rapport, enhancing relationships, and youth mentorship fields. The coaches who have these qualities are more likely to develop positive relationships with their players. Under their direction, players can learn in a comfortable environment without worrying about making mistakes. They can be confident that their coach will assist and encourage them to succeed.

## *Theme #3: Knowledgeable in the Sport*

While many youth in this study wanted their coach to possess positive personality characteristics, the participants also showed a desire for their coach to have knowledge of their particular sport. The participants in this study felt that it is important that their coach knew the game and had experience playing the sport. Martin and colleagues (1999) compared the preferences in coach qualities between youth players and their parents. Both males and females rated the coach's ability and participation in sport as the second most important quality they wanted in a coach. Frey and colleagues (2006) found that athletes perceived a good coach as someone who was respected by their players. The participants explained that in order to earn that respect, the coach must have sufficient knowledge in the sport and also be able to perform the skills required by the sport.

Dworkin and Larson (2006) found similar results when they examined adolescents' negative experiences while participating in organized youth activities. One of the major categories found in that study pertained to the potential for adult leaders to have a negative influence on adolescents. Similar to the current study, a prominent theme among the participants was unknowledgeable or poor leaders who lacked training and exposure to coaching situations. They described these individuals as "someone who was inexperienced in either the activity or in serving as a leader for the activity." One of the commonly discussed issues regarding poor leaders is the large number of volunteers that serve as coaches in youth sports. Although volunteers contribute heavily to youth sports, Carnegie (1990) comments that many of them have little or no training. While it may appear that providing an uneducated coach is better than no coach at all, this in turn may become a detriment to the youth athlete's experience. Barnett, Smoll, and Smith (1992) integrated a coaching effectiveness training program to assess the impact of trained coaches on athletes. Athletes that played for the coaches that underwent the treatment program showed more positive attitudes, higher levels of self-esteem and enjoyment in the sport, along with lower levels of sport withdrawal. Previously mentioned research and the current study indicate the extent to which youth are impacted by a coach's knowledge or experience in sport. Young athletes who are not provided with a stimulating environment may seek other outlets for entertainment. For Generation Z, such outlets may include electronics as suggested by Elmore (2002) who notes that youth are showing evidence of spending more time indoors devoting their attention to television, video games, and the computer. While technology provides numerous benefits, it's restrictive, indoor nature poses a problem due to the resultant decrease in physical activity by those who partake. Steinbeck (2008) suggests that one of the main contributing factors to obesity is a decrease in physical activity. Wang and Lobstein (2006)



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found that childhood and adolescence are critical periods for the development of obesity, which has the potential to carry over into adulthood. Since youth athletic participation seems to hinge on the coach's knowledge and is such a desired characteristic held by Generation Z youth athletes, it is important to address this theme and educate coaches so they can proficiently coach and educate their own athletes.

## *Theme #4: Involved the Team in the Decision-Making Process*

The fourth theme expressed by participants was the preference for a coach who involved the players in the decision making process regarding the team. The participants emphasized wanting the opportunity to provide input on their played positions and the ability to voice concerns during the game. Martin et al. (1999) found that young athletes, along with their parents, wanted a coach who allowed them the opportunity to assist in the decision making process. Themes such as these provoke questions relating to the type of coaching behavior (autocratic, democratic) desired by youth athletes. Chelladurai and Saleh (1978) found that males had a stronger preference for an autocratic coach than did females. Sherman, Fuller, and Speed (2000) found only a marginal gender difference regarding coaching behavior and noted that male and female participants preferred a democratic coaching style. Based on the transcripts and derived themes provided by the participants, it seems that males expressed a greater preference for the democratic style of coaching. The male participants were more passionate about not wanting the coach to yell; they desired the ability to give suggestions in particular practice or game situations. Being aware of athletes' concerns and taking them into consideration helps establish a strong coach-athlete relationship (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007). By utilizing this democratic style of coaching, a stronger coach-athlete connection could be created, potentially enhancing team cohesion and motivation.

## *Limitations*

There were several limitations to this study. First, the study was limited to athletes from one sport club in the eastern region of North Carolina and only reflects the coaching preferences held by 10 participants. A sample size of 10 can be enough if long and in-depth interviews are conducted, lasting over 90 minutes in duration, or multiple interviews with each participant. The sample size should be balanced by the amount of data per participant. Also, the duration of the interviews was not consistent over the course of the study. Older individuals could have provided more insight as to the desires, wants, and preferences of Generation Z. It is also not guaranteed that the youthful participants were capable of in-depth interviews due to their limited vocabulary. Therefore, it may have been difficult for them to fully explain their preferred types of leadership styles. In addition, the participants were told not to think of their current or past coach, which will most likely result in them thinking of their current or past coach. This potential leading and bias should be accounted for in future studies. Lastly, soccer players may have had different experiences with coaches than those who play in individual sports or sports that involve varying levels of contact.



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## *Future Implications*

Future research could expand on this study and implement a mixed-methodological approach. Many researchers who examine leadership styles utilize the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS), which is a 40-item questionnaire that examines athlete's preferences in leadership styles. The LSS was developed by Chelladuari (1984), who focused on understanding the required, preferred, and actual behaviors of coaches. It would be beneficial to compare the preferences of Generation Z athletes to the actual behaviors exhibited by their coaches. This could allow for a more balanced and interactive environment. Another avenue worth examining could be the role technology plays in the life of Generation Z and its influence on their participation in sport. Because technology is expected to play such a paramount role in the lives of Generation Z, it could be helpful to examine its benefits in regard to sport, physical activity, and health as a whole.

Based on the data and themes derived from this study, it is evident that coaches need to be aware of their athletes' preferences and concerns. Many times coaches focus predominantly on personal endeavors and ignore the opinions of their players. It is important that coaches recognize that each athlete is different regarding coaching preferences and history. Coaches should consider adapting their coaching styles to the desires of their players. The participants in this study preferred an environment in which they could feel comfortable but still allowed the opportunity to grow in their respective sport. It appears that Generation Z may prefer a democratic coaching style consisting of positive interactions and feedback. By understanding the coaching preferences of Generation Z, we can begin to become aware of and utilize young athlete's desires and create a positive youth sport environment.



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