

## Research article

# COACHING IN NORTHERN CANADIAN COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS OF ELITE COACHES

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### ABSTRACT

This study addressed geographical uniqueness in relation to elite coaching. The study explores the complexities associated to coaching in northern Canadian communities, and how unique geographical surroundings can affect coaching success. The views of fourteen National and International elite coaches from different northern Canadian communities are included within the study. The respondents were from 9 different sport backgrounds and averaged 17.1 years of coaching experience (range: 8-30 years). Data were gathered using a structured open-ended questionnaire, a focus group, and a follow-up in-depth semi-structured interview. Content was analyzed to uncover emergent themes. Based on the respondents' views, there is indication that despite numerous adversities, rural coaches experience advantages that are unavailable in larger urban centers. Precisely, there is evidence that northern Canadian coaches acquire unique skills while responding to the demands placed on them within their unique communities. Generalizations in regards to coaching development strategies across physical locations are questioned following the findings of the current study.

**KEY WORDS:** Coaching, contextual factors, geography, adversities, advantages.

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### INTRODUCTION

Coaching success at the elite level requires numerous aspects including a competitive attitude, commitment, as well as confidence (Partington, 1988). As Schinke et al. (1995) noted a decade ago, all of these skill sets are acquired for the purpose of guiding the development of aspiring elite athletes. In addition to their interpersonal demands, elite coaches have spoken of extensive administrative responsibilities. For instance, facilities, equipment, and support personnel all play an important part in their coaching process day to day and at competitions (Martens, 1990). Despite the aforementioned commonalities in coaching tasks across elite coaches, Gauthier et al. (2004) have recently noted that there are some differences in coaching demands when geographic location is

considered. Elite coaches located in remote and rural locations, for instance, face unique challenges that differ from those experienced by elite coaches in large cities with greater population densities. The theme of contextual uniqueness is precisely what guided the current study.

The current study was conducted in northern Canada and the researchers questioned a pre-determined selected respondent group of elite coaches in regards to their experiences coaching athletes at the National and International levels. Based on their responses the current study provides insight regarding how their geographical surroundings affect their coaching success. Precisely, our study explored the challenges as well as the advantages, faced by elite coaches from regional northern Canadian communities within our outlying area of 240 miles. With northern Canadian

geography as a backdrop, this study outlines the unique skills that emerge within a small pool of elite coaches as a result of their geographical location. Through this paper, the authors indicate how the respondent group of northern elite Canadian coaches adapted their coaching approach in response to their geographical challenges. In addition, this paper overviews the context specific struggles experienced by elite coaches working in northern Canadian locations.

***Coaching research: A call for qualitative enquiry***

As research with elite coaches becomes more prevalent in the sport literature, the intricate processes that summarize their profession will be better understood. Salmela (1994), for instance, affirms that behind every successful elite athlete there is an effective coach. Initially, elite coaching experts such as Orlick (1986), Partington (1988), and Martens (1990) provided outlines of the numerous facets that meld as part of the elite coaching formula. A description of how coaches can attain success is made available by these coaching experts.

All of the above insightful researchers spurred the use of qualitative research methods. Martens (1979) emphasized the need for research into coaching effectiveness to be driven by the actual experiences of coaches. Orlick and Partington (1986) took Martens suggestion one-step further by interviewing successful international athletes to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences and their needs. These three sport researchers started a research tradition that has facilitated researcher and practitioner understanding from the life experiences of sport participants. One line of coaching research that followed the qualitative tradition spurred by Orlick and Partington (1986) and Martens (1990) was initiated by Salmela (1994), along with a number of colleagues. Both the above mentioned authors and Salmela focused solely on elite coaching expertise and traced the developmental paths of successful expert coaches. The coaches whom they interviewed were all individually selected by their National Sport Organizations as top Canadian coaches and were all elite certified coaches. Salmela's (1994) work clarified that successful elite coaches demonstrated a delicate balance among coaching attributes including a passion for their sport, strong communication skills, compassion, and a strong drive for success. Some additional personal characteristics that surfaced from Salmela's research included the ability to sell a vision, inspire excellence among elite athletes (Schinke et al., 1997) and the ability to mentor (Bloom et al., 1998). According to all of the coaches' responses, the ability to select athletes, communicate effectively

with them, engage in stringent goal-setting, and maintain a standard of relentless attention to detail, is what culminated in success at the National and International levels. Therefore, successful coaching at the elite level is comprised of a wide number of technical and tactical skills. To arrive at a conclusion that coaching skills ought to be presented without a reconciliation of contextual factors, however, would be an over simplification. In an attempt to resolve coaching context, Côté et al. (1995) established a Coaching Model from a study with 17 experienced and nationally recognized elite Canadian coaches. According to Côté and colleagues, elite coaching includes three components; organization, training, and competition, which all affect each other reciprocally. The factors that emerge as affecting this process are each coach's inter personal characteristics, which have already been discussed, the athlete's personal characteristics, and central to the immediate paper, the contextual factors in which training and competition happen. The contextual factors Côté alluded to range from variable working conditions to uncontrollable subjective official judging. Working conditions, such as facilities, support staff personnel, and environment, can vary depending on geographical location. Dissimilarity in elite coaching working conditions can be associated to geographical location. A variety of geographical environments can offer a wide range of attributes, either positively or negatively affecting the elite coaching process.

***Geographical context***

Although Côté and colleagues' (1995) do acknowledge the influence of contextual factors, their study generalized these factors across elite coaching contexts without considering geographical location. Though such generalizations are a possibility, it may also be possible that the "contextual factors" affecting the coaching process include geographical location and associated community differences.

The immediate study was conducted in northern Ontario, Canada. Among numerous northern locations, the chosen area covers the northern region of one Canadian province. This area was selected for the current project based on its unique geographical characteristics. Northern Ontario's land covers nearly 89% of the province, but only represents a mere 7.4% of its provincial population (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines). Northern Ontario's population density is 1.0 person per square kilometer, in comparison to its southern Ontario counterpart at 104.3 persons per square kilometer (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines). These statistics indicate that much of northern Ontario, Canada is uninhabited wilderness and less

populated rural areas and community settings. Thus, a northern Ontario coaching experience could be quite different from one in a larger urban center. The current project is a preliminary attempt to identify and understand whether and how contextual factors within elite coaching differ as a result of geographical location.

More specifically the immediate study served three purposes. The first purpose was exploratory. Through examination of the experiences of coaches, we explored differences between northern elite Canadian coaches and those from more urban areas. Second, we identified adversities faced by northern Canadian area coaches and how do they cope with these obstacles. Third, we sought to uncover the perceived benefits to coaching in northern Canadian communities.

## METHODS

### *Researchers as data instruments*

Several researchers, including Martens (1987) and Streat and Roberts (1992) previously questioned the findings within sport research due to the responsiveness concerns of assumed researcher objectivity and contextual familiarity. In short, researchers' interpretations of their respondents lived experiences sometimes differ from what their respondents inferred (Schinke and de Costa, 2000). As duly noted by Higgins and Schinke (2004) recently, there is a difference between knowing of and knowing from lived experiences. Within this study, the principal researcher has been involved with numerous sports in Canada, not only as an athlete, but also as a developmental coach. The second researcher has an extensive elite sport background. His experiences range from being an international athlete and coach, to a consultant within elite sporting contexts. The third researcher has extensive athletic experience at the elite level. She has spent most of her sport career in a northern Canadian setting, part of it as a university athletic director, and part as a coach. It was with their combined experiences that the research team approached this study and its respondent group of northern Canadian elite coaches.

### *The respondents*

A purposive convenience sampling method was used within the current study. All of the coaches were elite, domestic, and international coaches. The term elite coach was adopted from Schinke et al. (1995) work on the career stages of elite Canadian coaches. Elite coaches are those whose athletes compete either nationally or internationally. The elite coaches were approached to participate in this research project during two separate national coaching

certification courses held within our northern Canada location. The coaches were attending National Coaching Certification Program Level Four courses, meaning that they were completing the formal national prerequisites necessary for national elite status and coaching Canadian athletes at major games. These coaching courses include sport specific tasks that are taught by subject specialists and sport specific mentor coaches (Gowan, 1992).

Three criteria were used for respondent eligibility. First, each respondent had to be a current coach working at the national elite level or above, meaning at a minimum they coach at the varsity level or represent their province at national competitions. Second, all coaches had to be currently coaching in a northern Canadian setting. Third, all respondents had to fall within the definitional boundary of level IV candidacy. The coaches who fit these criteria and were interested in participating in the project were asked to sign an ethics consent form. A total of 14 coaches agreed to participate. The respondents were from 9 different sport backgrounds, Equestrian (2), Cross Country Skiing (5) Track and Field (1), Swimming (1), Volleyball (1), Basketball (1), Curling (1), Soccer (1), and Hockey (1). The respondent group consisted of 5 female coaches and 9 male coaches. The coaches averaged 17.1 years of coaching experience (range: 8-30). Their average time spent coaching per week was 23.2 hours (range: 6-47.5) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Respondent overview.

	<b>Sport Coached</b>	<b>Years of Coaching Experience</b>	<b>Numbers of Hours Per Week</b>
<b>R1</b>	Curling	30	N/A
<b>R2</b>	Swimming	9	47.5
<b>R3</b>	Track and Field	23	17.5
<b>R4</b>	XC Skiing	8	6
<b>R5</b>	XC Skiing	23	9
<b>R6</b>	Equestrian	30	10
<b>R7</b>	Volleyball	10	25
<b>R8</b>	Basketball	10	15
<b>R9</b>	Equestrian	25	40
<b>R10</b>	Soccer	20	35
<b>R11</b>	XC Skiing	8	45
<b>R12</b>	XC Skiing	N/A	40
<b>R13</b>	Hockey	20	8
<b>R14</b>	XC Skiing	6	4

### *Pre-collection expert review*

The study was initially reviewed by four well established elite coaches working in Northern Canada. The coaches possessed on average 26.75 years of coaching experience (range: 10-45). Two of the coaches were individual sport coaches, and two were team sport coaches. The four coaches revised a

preliminary version of the structured open-ended questionnaire in order to ensure a proper beginning to the study. The expert coaches helped us refine the initial topic matter surrounding the strengths and weaknesses in a northern Canadian setting. Furthermore, they provided us with a broader understanding of the context in which our respondents operate. The reviewers commented on the terminology, structure, and relevance of our preliminary structured questions. For example, one reviewer commented on the ordering of certain questions and recommended changes. Following the review, the document was modified accordingly. In addition to an improved flow of the document, this evaluative process, based on the review of the expert coaches, resulted in the elimination of questions due to irrelevance and the refinement of others to improve their clarity.

### ***Data collection***

As indicated by Streat and Roberts (1992), within applied sport research, especially with elite populations, flawless data collection methods and understanding do not exist. Multiple data sets were used for the data collection of this study, with the aforementioned structured questionnaire serving as the point of entry. This ensured that we were representing the experience of elite coaching in northern Canadian locations. In terms of representation, Schinke and de Costa (2000) noted that it is important that in-depth research is undertaken within and across methods of data collection. Our respondents answered a structured open-ended questionnaire. Those attending a specialized course on elite coach leadership were invited to participate in a focus group and those within proximity responded to a follow-up semi-structured interview. The multiple data collection methods used within our study allowed us to pursue the experiences of our elite northern Canadian coaches, with the earlier questions directing subsequent elicitation. Fourteen coaches contributed to the study, eleven of them responded to the questionnaire, seven of them attended the focus group, and eight of them were interviewed with a semi-structured interview guide. Higgins (2004) duly noted that all elite coaches are faced with extensive and demanding obligations. Time constraints are compounded for those removed from urban settings because location often limits their accessibility (Gauthier et al., 2004). For these reasons the fluidity of participants', and therefore participation from one national coaching certification task to the next, varied among respondents.

### ***The structured open-ended questionnaire***

We deductively assumed that there would be unique challenges and advantages to coaching in a northern Canadian community. Through the inductive data collection methods proposed by Patton (1987), specific questions were formulated and then refined in order to obtain a general understanding of the demands and strategies of elite coaching in northern Canadian settings. For example, the structured questionnaire included such topics as unique coaching skills acquired in northern Canadian communities, advantages of coaching in a northern Canadian setting, disadvantages of coaching in a northern Canadian setting, coaching self-concept, as well as recommendations to aspiring northern Canadian elite coaches. These subject areas allowed us to probe on a deeper level through the in-depth qualitative methods that followed the focus group and the semi-structured interview. The nine page questionnaire document contained 18 questions, including sub-questions. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

### ***The focus group***

The focus group discussion lasted 75 minutes. The discussion was both video and audio recorded. The video recorder was situated with all the respondents and the researcher in view. The audio recorder was placed in the center of the discussion circle and the taped audio content was used for transcription. This ensured that each statement was properly associated to the corresponding coach. During the second stage of data collection we followed up on the information obtained during the earlier structured questionnaire. When new topics or more specific themes emerged during the structured questionnaire, the focus group allowed us to follow up at the group level with the coaches to ensure representation. The researcher's responsibility during the focus group was to facilitate discussion. He asked questions and elicited the shared experience among the group. For example, one coach mentioned that when coaching in a northern Canadian community you tend to develop "thick skin". This had not been mentioned by any other coach, but during the group discussion this theme led to a unanimous agreement across respondents. In addition, the focus group allowed the respondent group to differentiate common themes from topics isolated to one respondent. Initial findings were verified by deepening previous discussion topics and by comparing newly emerging themes brought forward by focus group respondents, as suggested by Frey and Fontanna (1991) and Rubin and Rubin (1995).

The coaches exchanged reflections, often leading to new and more elaborate experiential details. Throughout this process, the researcher asked probing questions and sought additional

details. At all times, the facilitation ensured that the discussion stayed focused on the emergent aspects of elite coaching in northern Canadian communities.

### ***The follow-up semi-structured interview***

At the third stage of collection, a follow-up semi-structured interview guideline was formulated based on Patton's (1987) interview guidelines criteria. The follow-up semi-structured interview outline was evolved from earlier questioning, meaning the questionnaire and focus group data previously collected. The semi-structured interviews, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995), allowed for the introduction of topics and specific probing questions. For example, the primary researcher introduced the topic of disadvantages of coaching in a rural setting by saying "Based on what has been shared among the group, it seems that rural athletes have fewer competition opportunities." The researcher then probed that statement by asking "Is this true in your experience, and if so, does it affect athletic development?" The intention of the follow-up interview was to solidify the findings gleaned through earlier structured questionnaire and focus group data collection strategies.

The follow-up interviews brought forth more specific in-depth information loosely falling within the following topics: (1) unique coaching skills acquired in northern Canadian communities, (2) advantages of coaching in a northern Canadian setting, (3) disadvantages of coaching in a northern Canadian setting, (4) coaching self-concept, and (5) recommendations to aspiring northern Canadian elite coaches. A total of eight interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in person when possible, but due to respondent location, three interviews were conducted over the telephone. The follow-up interviews lasted 45 minutes on average.

### ***Data analysis***

The analysis produced 480 meaning units, with 120 meaning units (amounting to 25 % of total data collected) falling within the boundaries of the current study. A meaning unit according to Tesch (1990) is a segment of text that contains a single idea relating to a specific topic (see Table 2).

The meaning units varied in length from 1 to 15 lines. Throughout the ongoing data collection-data analysis cycle, the data was analyzed according to the three steps suggested by Côté and Salmela (1994). Initially, we transcribed the information verbatim, followed by a brief review of the entire document. The first step to the analysis was to create tags, segmenting the document into "meaning units". Each meaning unit was labeled according to its respective method of collection; structured open-ended questionnaire (SOEQ), focus group (FG), and

a follow-up semi-structured interview (FSSI). Second, once completely "tagged", categories were developed to group generic higher and lower order meaning units. The categories were developed and modified with the consensus of the three researchers. Therefore, as the research project progressed from beginning to end, the emergent themes continually evolved. The third and final step was to carefully analyse the specific content of each meaning unit within the categories. Following each analysis steps, specific questions suggested by Côté and Salmela (1994) were asked in order to ensure that the data was properly tagged categorized and analyzed.

**Table 2.** Meaning units.

Categories	Meaning Units	
	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b><i>A: Environmental</i></b>		
Community	14 MU's	
Social Support		
Athlete's	11 MU's	
Perceived		
Toughness		
Community	13 MU's	
Recognition		
Travel Distance		11 MU's
and Safety		
Resources:		17 MU's
Personnel and		
Monetary		
Athlete Retention		13 MU's
and Recruitment		
Lack of		12 MU's
Competition		
Facilities and		8 MU's
Equipment		
Availability		
<b><i>B: Learned</i></b>		
Adaptation to	21 MU's	
geography		
<b><i>Sub-Total</i></b>	59 MU'S	61 MU's
<b><i>Total</i></b>	120 MU's (25% of MU's used within the boundaries of the current project)	

### ***Trustworthiness of the analysis***

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study different criteria could have been assessed. As Manning (1997) states; "trustworthiness was conceived as a parallel to the empiricist concepts of the internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (p.95)." We ensured the quality and rigor of the project by evaluating the trustworthiness of the project according to the work of Guba (1980). We considered the aspects of credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability throughout the data analysis.

Credibility according to Guba (1980) is assessed by examining researcher interpretation. The credibility of the researchers' interpretations was assessed in two ways. We conducted regular research meetings to ensure research team agreement throughout the data interpretation. Furthermore, an internal audit was conducted by allowing each respondent to review the data before any final results were reported. We forwarded the results via electronic mail to all the respondents for review and authentication. The respondents were given a two week opportunity to express their recommendations or acknowledgments regarding the data's accuracy and representation.

Confirmability can be defined as the considerable efforts devoted to ensure that research results truly represent the respondents' views. By exploring multiple methods of collection, the respondents were given numerous opportunities to express their personal views and to clarify any inaccuracies. The respondent had the opportunity to voice any concerns and opinions with regards to either the focus group or the in-depth semi-structured interview. Further, the aforementioned internal audit allowed the respondents to review the data analysis before results were finalized.

Dependability is examined by ensuring that consistent results can be obtained more than once (Guba, 1980). The review of the questionnaire by experienced coaches ensured that what we were initially asking truly represented the experiences that comprise coaching in northern Canadian communities. Further, by considering three different data sources we increased the likelihood of proper representation. The data collection-data analysis cycle, as well as the peer consensus of the data's interpretation, allowed for a trustworthy analysis that ensured minimal information going unnoticed or being misinterpreted.

Due to the specificity associated with geographic location, the findings herein may not be directly transferable to all other northern locations in other provinces, or northern locations in other countries. However, what this study does provide is insight into one province's northern region. Its physically constrained insights indicate that the demands faced by elite coaches are not necessarily the same across geographical locations.

### **Limitations**

Stake (1995) defines data source triangulation as, "...an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances (p.113)." The current project does triangulate by using multiple data collection methods and sources, as well as multiple researchers. Due to the demanding schedules of

coaches, most of whom are also parents and professionals outside of sport, not all coaches were able to participate in all three of the collection sets. In a Canadian context, a full-time coaching profession rarely occurs. Therefore the triangulation did not occur at the level of every respondent. Instead, representation was sought at the group level through multiple data sets. However, such uncontrollable factors, we believe, do not undermine the relevance of the immediate study.

## **RESULTS**

### **Advantages**

From the data analysis, numerous themes emerged within two general deducted categories. The two categories are (1) the advantages of coaching in a northern Canadian community and (2) the disadvantages of coaching in northern Canadian communities. The themes that emerged within the advantages of coaching in a northern community were: (1) community social support, (2) athlete's perceived toughness, (3) community exposure, and (4) adaptation to geography. The four themes will be discussed in turn.

Community social support: The elite coaches emphasized their appreciation of small northern Canadian communities. They expressed that it was advantageous to have a tightly knit community where everybody involved within their sport was willing to lend a helping hand. The advantages related to northern Canadian community social support ranged from public attitude and outlook, to the cooperative involvement of all involved within their sport. As one coach stated:

- *"Northern (province) people and kids are great. They have a more relaxed philosophy towards life and are very quick to thank the coach for coaching their kids. There often is a great community spirit to support your work... Parents are used to helping out doing whatever is needed."* (Respondent 4-SOEQ)

Further, the coaches felt that their community's welcoming characteristics worked to their advantage when it came to attracting prospective athletes and associate coaches. Our elite coaches felt that they could use community uniqueness and more involved and encouraging social support as an attractive alternative to urban anonymity experienced by aspiring elite coaches. In essence, our coaches acknowledged that coaching in a northern Canadian community offered a supportive environment that served as a motivational influence for both aspiring elite athletes and coaches.

Athlete perceived toughness: Often being faced with adverse training conditions and numerous obstacles, such as a lack of facilities and inadequate

training equipment, the coaches felt that their athletes developed a resilient self-perception. Northern Canadian trials and tribulations fostered a sense of “toughness” within the athletes that allowed them to respond positively during game-day challenges, as explained by this coach:

- “...the training situations that we have to go through are incredible. We’ve had (a person) come up here who was recruiting... she (the athlete) was running in the hallways, running up and down linoleum hallways and stairs. We train in 2 months of nice weather and the rest is iffy. They’ve (the athletes) learned to adapt and when the weather is really bad at a competition it does not phase them...” (Respondent 3- FSSI)

Some of the coaches suggested that “perceived toughness” could also be a characteristic acquired through the small community lifestyle. Precisely, it was suggested that the great majority of northern Canadian trained athletes, especially those from hard working blue collar families, carry their vicariously learned work habits over onto the sport playing field.

- “...I think that our athletes tend to be more hardy. It’s a characteristic or an intangible that other programs or areas often highlight being something they recognize in our athletes. I’m not really sure where that comes from... maybe it’s bred somehow into our blue collar work ethic...” (Respondent 13-FSSI)

Despite the subjectivity of the above mentioned category, our coaches felt that a self-perception of “toughness” allowed the athletes to overcome any sense of inferiority when competing in larger venues.

Community exposure: Numerous factors to be mentioned indicate that within a small community, athletes are highly recognized for their efforts. Elite coaches and athletes have less competition and are the main event within their community. Therefore, they receive an abundance of coverage.

- “You’ve got media here that realize that local sport is important. Certainly in the last few years especially... they’ve put a lot of attention on local athletes, especially those who are doing well in larger venues, like at the provincial, national or international level. Because we are in a smaller market, we get more attention than certainly somebody from (more urbanized regions).” (Respondent 3- FSSI)

As well, when athletes and coaches achieve success within their sport in spite of their challenges, it is often acknowledged as an extraordinary feat. Such acknowledgement appears to be due to the inferiority of physical training resources.

Adaptation to geography: The coaches felt that they developed and acquired skills, beyond what is typical, due to their unique environment. It was

suggested that this personal coaching skill was essential to their professional adaptation and subsequently their coaching success. Adaptation to geography is discussed by expanding on the aspects related to this skill.

With a wide number of disadvantages stemming from northern Canadian elite coaching, the respondents tended to develop an adaptable coaching style. For instance, they become accustomed to modifying their training sessions in accordance to what is made available to them.

- “I believe I have developed the ability to be flexible and to quickly substitute workouts because of our unpredictable weather and difficult training conditions. A fairly high percentage of our workouts are changed or adapted on-site.” (Respondent 3-SOEQ)

As the coaches learned to adapt, they become more creative, which allowed for a constant interest and progression within their athletes.

- “Because of difficult winter conditions, I’ve become very creative in keeping workouts fun and different, for example snowshoe running and running on ice in spikes.” (Respondent 3 - SOEQ)

Once again, the coaches must work within the confines of what they have in order to develop resilient northern Canadian athletes. They must modify their training sessions and create innovative ways to help their athletes consistently improve.

The northern Canadian coaches expressed that they were often faced with numerous hardships. For example, they regularly struggled with recruitment and retention regularly. They also struggled with limited financial resources, facilities, and equipment. In the face of these struggles, the coaches felt that they developed a resiliency beyond what is typical. As one respondent expressed, when coaching in a northern Canadian community you tend to develop “thick skin”. It is this “thick skin” that helps them to manage and bounce back from hardships.

- “...I’ve lost kids that no one else recruited. I’ve talked to kids for two years that no one else was talking to...at least I could have lost him to coach so and so from that school... Having thick skin, I think is huge...” (Respondent 8-FG)

Despite being faced with numerous challenges, northern Canadian coaches manage to stay persistent and optimistic due to their resilient personalities. The above mentioned advantages clearly indicate that a northern Canadian coaching experience can be highly beneficial despite their northern Canadian contextual challenges.

### **Disadvantages**

Despite the advantages of coaching in northern Canadian communities, several disadvantages were

also delineated. They are (1) travel distance, (2) lack of resources, (3) athlete retention and recruitment, (4) lack of competition, as well as (5) facilities and equipment availability.

*Travel distance:* Being at a considerable distance from any major urban center can create numerous disadvantages. Nearly all the coaches mentioned travel distance as a significant challenge. Coaching in a northern Canadian community means traveling widespread distances, which equates to spending extensive hours on the road. Physical remoteness reciprocally affects other personal aspects of the coach's life, such as time away from work and time away from family and friends.

- "...time for the coach to attend races is much greater than if one lived in (urban city). It is a 2 day drive to an event in (urban city). This means that you lose more work days and your vacation days are entirely devoted to traveling to and from events with the team which can lead to family conflict. (Respondent 4- SOEQ)

Adding to the challenges caused by distance, northern Canadian coaches are faced with increased travel cost and, therefore, they have to cut their expenses elsewhere. This sometimes means making the sacrifice of having outdated equipment and substandard facilities.

- "Over half of my budget is travel, if we travel more that means we get less equipment and that means we get less money for assistant coaches. (Respondent 2-FSSI)

Travel distance is the most evident adversity to coaching in a northern Canadian community and unfortunately there is no solution. Coaches simply learn to accept and cope with their physical remoteness in comparison to their urban competitors.

*Resources:* Coming from northern Canadian communities, the resources are not as abundant, both monetary and personnel. In terms of finance, it becomes very difficult to attract big sponsorships from local businesses in order to obtain the necessary financial support. In terms of personnel, several coaches emphasized the fact of having a smaller pool of qualified coaches affects the developmental stages of athletes within their sport. Without the proper coaching at the grassroots levels, it is inevitable that it will affect the number of elite athletes who emerge down the road. Speaking to this latter type of resources, one coach shared his views:

- "The common denominator coming back has always been resources and availability of coaching development. I think looking at the coaching development side of it, I coach women's soccer, we are so far behind...because they start at an early age, they have resources,

*they have qualified coaching early, they are leaps ahead of us..." (Respondent 10-FG)*

As well, having a small personnel resource base, it becomes difficult to get specific assistance in certain specialized areas, both technical and tactical. One coach stated:

- "Often it is hard to find someone who can help you with certain aspects of training a team, for example a sport psychologist." (Respondent 1-SOEQ)

Insufficient resources, of any kind, can significantly influence a coach's effectiveness. A lack of personnel and financial support, then, tends to put northern Canadian sport organizations and their elite coaches at a disadvantage.

*Athlete retention and recruitment:* Two further disadvantages discussed were the challenges associated with recruiting athletes from elsewhere, and retaining talented locally produced athletes. Some coaches felt that it was very difficult to attract prospective athletes. They faced challenges when it came to convincing athletes that a northern Canadian community has its advantages and is the "right" choice.

- "The big problem is recruiting. There's a big bias toward my city, my university, the size of my school...My program is an issue as well; if you win a National championship then people are knocking at your door to get in to your program. They can be selective, it's not you recruiting them, it becomes the other way around, they recruit you." (Respondent 8- FG)

It was also expressed that it would be difficult to retain local athletes opting toward a more urban area. It was believed by coaches that some young individuals felt that they needed to move on to bigger and better things in order to achieve their athletic goals. Others simply moved on to pursue academics in more urban communities, as this coach stated:

- "...we lose many top junior "prospects" at 17-18 years of age as they move away to go to post-secondary schools- just as they're coming into their prime as junior curlers." (Respondent 1-SOEQ)

As one coach summarized, there seems to be a limited flow to northern Canadian communities, with many urban athletes staying in their own regions, and many northern athletes moving on to urban locations.

*Lack of competition:* A smaller community also means a smaller pool of athletes to compete against. With less competitive athletes living in their regions, there are decreased chances of training daily with suitable competitors.

- "...if the teams that I'm coaching were in (a more regional location), we could attend a



*junior competition every weekend...The experience, the strategy aspects, the tactics are the big things. We just don't compete against as many quality teams. (Respondent 1- FSSI)*

With dismay, many of the coaches mentioned that there is no obvious solution. As difficult as it is to travel to find adequate competition, it is just as difficult, if not more, to get competitive opponents from larger centers to travel to northern Canadian communities. Without suitable level competitive opponents, the athletes and teams trained by our coaches tend to suffer in regards to their cumulative competition experience.

**Facilities and equipment availability:** Another noted disadvantage was access to appropriate facilities and equipment. Smaller communities do not have the same revenue and therefore it affects their expenses. They do not have sufficient monetary resources to have the most efficient training equipment, let alone a facility, at all.

- *“Winter training, our indoor training facilities are horrible, we have no indoor track.” (Respondent 3- SOEQ)*

One coach even raised the point of having a hard time quickly replacing damaged equipment. Equipment that would usually be easily and quickly available in an urban area, could take weeks to deliver out to a northern Canadian community. When equipment needs to be replaced, the coaches need to think of a quick alternative as they wait for the replacement piece

- *“... Helping athletes get good equipment is also a challenge because you often have to ship it in... If you break equipment mid-season or close to a race you can't just drive down the street and select a replacement...” (Respondent 4- SOEQ)*

Equipment accessibility and an adequate training facility may considerably improve an athlete's development. Without these attributes northern Canadian athletes could lag behind their urban competitors.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate the importance of geographical location in relation to the coaching process of northern Canadian elite coaches. The findings provided us with an outline of the numerous facets to coaching in this unique Canadian region. We have discovered that northern Canadian elite coaches gain exclusive skills in the process of overcoming the countless adversities associated to their environmental surroundings. Skills such as adaptation to their environments, creativity within their training sessions, and resiliency while overcoming disappointments must

be overcome. Furthermore, the study confirmed that our northern Canadian elite coaches felt that the uniqueness of their coaching location also provided them with numerous rewards that would not otherwise be available within a larger urban area, such as community social support and media exposure. In general, our study supports the numerous aspects outlined in the previous literature by Orlick (1986), Partington (1988), and Salmela (1994), such as the skills needed to coach at the elite level of competition and the factors affecting their success. Further, the study puts forward a new ideology that could affect the way we approach, not only northern Canadian elite coaching development, but also regional coaching on a global scale.

Coaching at the elite level can be challenging at times. There are certain attributes that are needed in order to succeed in this profession. Several researchers have successfully identified coaching attributes within a generic elite coaching context. Martens (1990) recognized that all successful elite coaches develop the ability to be great teachers, leaders, as well as motivators. Furthermore, as outlined by Salmela (1994), specific emerging personal characteristics lead to eventual success. Successful elite coaches with these generic attributes can respond effectively to the numerous elite coaching demands. Our respondent group of northern Canadian elite coaches demonstrated a strong intensity and desire towards reaching personal success which has also been mentioned by Salmela (1994). In addition, our coaches demonstrated above average leadership skills not only towards their individual team or athletes, but within their entire local sport community. These leadership skills, as delineated by Schinke et al. (1997), were then imparted to their athletes by selling their vision and inspiring them to pursue athletic excellence. Furthermore, elite coaching qualitative research traditions introduced by Orlick and Partington (1986), which reveal the lived experience of successful elite coaches and athletes, allowed the researchers to provide a truthful and accurate representation of elite coaching in a northern Canadian community.

The current study also supports the acknowledgement given to contextual factors and their contribution within the coaching process indicated by Côté et al. (1995). There exists without a doubt certain unpredictable and variables that affect coaching procedures within an elite coaching context. Some contextual factors may be generically considered across coaching cases. However, our findings suggest that contextual factors can be elaborated one step further by mentioning environmental specificity within this peripheral factor. Further emphasizing the variables within

each individual geographical environment may make a significant contribution to elite coaching development. As mentioned previously, we are endlessly influenced by our working conditions, and therefore the challenges and advantages affecting the coaching process differ remarkably from one geographical location to the next. In essence, each coaching scenario should be individually evaluated based on individual geographical demands.

Using this suggestion could in turn lead to modifications within our approach to guiding aspiring elite coaches from various remote and rural locations. Coaching development programs in rural and remote communities should look at the coaching needs within specific environmental contexts. Creating an awareness of contextual specificity could better prepare aspiring elite coaches for the demands to be placed on them within a unique environment. Aspiring elite coaches should also focus on developing the necessary attributes needed to properly respond to rural and remote elite coaching adversities in order to further improve their rates of success, despite their physical isolation. The findings within the study also raise additional elite coaching research questions. Additional research should be conducted in order to explore if there exists any commonalities within the developmental stages of northern Canadian elite coaches. It may be possible that most northern Canadian elite coaches have previously been northern Canadian elite athletes and therefore are better prepared as coaches to respond to their unique environmental surroundings. Furthermore, our findings suggest that if context specificity affects coaching demands and process, it may also affect elite athlete development and outcome. In addition, this research topic should be expanded by exploring the experiences of elite coaches from various international rural and remote locations. The results could further emphasize the importance of context specificity, from a global perspective, affecting the elite coaching profession. To summarize, our study has not only contributed to the current literature on elite coaching, it has also produced research possibilities that can further the area of elite coaching and athlete development.

## CONCLUSION

There is much to conclude from the immediate study. First, there is indication that geography influences upon the elite coach's planning behaviours. In relation to daily training, in northern Canada for instance, coaches are often compelled to develop training plans that overcome weather and terrain challenges. Second, there is also competition planning to consider. Precisely, geographical proximity affects athletes' amassed experiences, as

well as their level of experience in competition tactics. Combined, these two facets alone indicate that coaching researchers interested in applied understanding would be best served by a reconciliation of geography.

In addition, coaching researchers and applied trainers interested in formalized coaching certification delivery can also benefit from the inclusion of geography. For example, coaches in northern and remote locations ought to learn personal and athlete adaptation skills that are unique in some ways from those working in larger urban centers. The nuances associated with geographical uniqueness gained through focus groups for instance, can lead to better suited and more meaningful coaching education programs.

In closing, the conclusions considered affirm the importance of regional location as a contextual consideration for coaches and sport scientists. Through a refined understanding of coach and athlete functioning in relation to their geography, sport science and sport application will flourish.

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## KEY POINTS

- The study explores the complexities associated with coaching in northern Canadian communities and how unique geographical surroundings can affect coaching success.
- From the respondents' views, there is indication that northern Canadian elite coaches are subject to numerous adversities.
- Despite numerous adversities, northern Canadian elite coaches experience advantages that are unavailable in larger urban centers.
- Including context specificity within the elite coaching literature could help to better understand this profession.

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