For college student-athletes enduring multiple head coaching changes during their careers, challenges include changes in the level of competition, lifestyle pressures, identity issues, loss of support system, and changes in training environment. Student-athletes are required to build relationships with a new head coach while facing issues with loneliness, frustration, discouragement, self-doubt, and feelings of decreased self-worth. This unique case study examined the transitions of junior student-athletes at the University of Tennessee who played for three different head coaches. Themes that were constructed from challenges the student-athletes faced were: Trust, Individual and Team Strength, and Future. A tremendous amount of effort and resources is poured into coaching searches but there seems to be little for the student-athletes during transitional periods of coaching changes. These findings demonstrate that transition is not something that easily happens and may not happen at all, which leads to student-athletes transferring after any coaching change. Resources and counseling services should be made available to assist student-athletes in this transition and not make the coach the focus of the transition.

Introduction

The hiring of Derek Dooley made him the University of Tennessee’s third head football coach in three seasons after the university released former coach Phillip Fulmer of his contract at the end of the 2008 season and then operated with Lane Kiffin as head coach for one season in 2009 until he took the head coaching job at the University of Southern California. During the three-year span in which coaches and school administrators were under the microscope of media coverage and the court of public opinion, student-athletes were left to cope with drastic transitions of leadership, communication, expectations, and training.

The purpose of this study is to examine the transitions of football student-athletes who adjusted to three forms of leadership styles in three consecutive seasons with the same team. The aim of this study is not to generalize findings to all student-athletes who face coaching changes,
but rather to uncover the transitions student-athletes at Tennessee faced in a unique case of an established Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) program experiencing two consecutive coaching changes. Central to this case study was the research question: What transitions did junior football student-athletes endure while having three head coaches in three consecutive seasons at the University of Tennessee? Building from this central question, information was sought pertaining to football practice because it provided the best possible constant among all three head coaches. Researchers investigated the challenges these junior student-athletes faced at the beginning of Dooley’s first fall practice and also explored what challenges remained after a majority of the season had been completed. This study begins to shed light on an under-studied phenomenon of the challenges student-athletes face during a time when the spotlight is often on the head coach and athletic administration. The researchers review existing literature on Division I student-athlete transitions in sport, and explain how transition theory was used as the lens for this study. Results from this study are presented with an analysis and practical application for college coaches and administrators.

**Literature Review**

Student-athletes face unusual psychological challenges that are different from the pressures of other students simply because they play sports and carry the dual role of being a student and an athlete (Comeaux, 2010; Kissinger & Watson, 2009; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Student-athletes face time management concerns and an adjustment to the changing levels of contribution to their team while enduring loneliness, frustration, homesickness, discouragement, self-doubt, and feelings that no one cares (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Meeker & Stankovich, 1999; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Additionally, student-athletes face damaging psychological challenges of overt and covert racism and stereotypes placed on students with athletic scholarships (Oseguera, 2010). In fact, the psychological issues student-athletes face has warranted a call for professional counseling services to be offered in addition to the structured academic and athletic support in place for student-athletes (Kissinger & Watson, 2009). Even basic communication lines between administration and a panel of student-athletes enhances student-athlete experiences in general (Harvey, 2009).

Freshmen student-athletes already face the transition of playing for a new coach at the college level, a critical change in moving from high school competition to intercollegiate athletics (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Those student-athletes anticipate playing for the same head coach during their collegiate career, so numerous challenges arise following coaching changes including lifestyle pressures, identity issues, loss of support system, and alterations in training environment (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). Coaching changes may result in different coaching philosophies, a change in playing time for student-athletes, and the building of new relationships (Hersch, 2010).

The influence of coaches on student-athletes has been widely researched (see Aghazadeh & Kyei, 2009; Chelladurai, 1984; Coakley, 2004; Galipeau & Trudel, 2004; Gardner et al., 1996; Gearing, 1999; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Meeker & Stankovich, 1999; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Westre & Weiss, 1991). Coaching changes in college football are common, but when they occur the emphasis is placed on the coach and administration as the student-athletes often are overlooked (Gearing, 1999; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Westre & Weiss, 1991). There were 23 football coaching changes at the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS).
level between the 2009 and 2010 seasons (CFP Staff, 2010). In a five-year period between the end of the 2005 season and start of the 2010 season, 98 head football coaches changed jobs at the Division I FBS level with a high of 24 changes prior to the 2007 season and a low of 11 changes prior to 2006 (CFP Staff, 2008, 2009, 2010; James, 2005, 2006, 2008). While coaching changes are commonplace, consecutive changes are not. Rice University was the only other Division I FBS school aside from Tennessee between 2000 and 2010 that endured head coaching changes in consecutive seasons; Rice changed coaches prior to the 2006 and 2007 seasons and therefore also had three head coaches during a three-year span (CFP Staff, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c, n.d.d, 2008, 2009, 2010; James, 2006, 2007, 2008). What makes Tennessee’s case unique is the university’s history of coaching longevity prior to the consecutive changes. Fulmer’s tenure as head coach at Tennessee lasted 17 seasons. Prior to that, Johnny Majors held the Tennessee head coaching position for 16 seasons. The stability of the football program at Tennessee further justifies the case study approach to exploring the experiences of the student-athletes during consecutive coaching changes considering such a factor of stability may have initially drawn the players to Tennessee.

Amid all the challenges student-athletes face, emphasis is placed on the coaches because they control a large part of a student-athlete’s socialization through decision-making, scheduling, and overall training and health (Coakley, 2004; Comeaux, 2010; Gearing, 1999; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Westre & Weiss, 1991). Controlling of actions, both on and off the field, can be a means to protect the student-athletes from outside influences that may impact their success in their particular sport (Yannick, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). During the season, it is not uncommon for a football player’s daily routine to begin at daybreak for training, classes, tutoring, practice, rehabilitation, and meetings. However, when the source of that control changes (e.g., a coaching change), the student-athlete is faced with psychological transitions in which they may have little time to adjust to a new source of power. Adjustment to a coach’s style of leadership is considered among the most important influences for increased team unity and task cohesion for student-athletes, and results in the areas of training, performance, and personal issues (Aghazadeh & Kyei, 2009; Coakley, 2004; Gardner et al., 1996). Conversely, athletes experience burnout when they feel they “have no power to make decisions about important things in their lives” (Coakley, 2004, p. 8). Therefore, an involuntary change in head coaches removes power from the athlete and disrupts the socialization and culture of the team.

A team’s culture, language, norms, and values are unique behavior that is “established and enforced by coaches and administrators” (Loughran & Etzel, 2008, ¶ 4). Consistency in leadership style is critical as longevity of a coach’s tenure develops quality relationships with student-athletes (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Therefore, coaching changes only enhance these burdens due to inconsistent leadership style and control coaches have on teams, team unity, and motivating the team toward goal accomplishment as athletic culture and time demands often present themselves as the most important adjustments for the student-athlete population (Aghazadeh & Kyei, 2009; Chelladurai, 1984; Jolly, 2008). While social pressures that once prevented student-athletes from seeking counseling has lifted somewhat, time demands remain a reason why student-athletes do not seek professional counseling to deal with their challenges (Watson, 2006). Additionally, the simple lack of preparation of some student-athletes regarding major life challenges may keep them hesitant to seek counseling, and any psychological consequence of those challenges may not appear until the possibility of failure is present (Kleiber et al., 1987; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). Thus, the changing of a head coach in consecutive seasons, particularly for upperclassmen...
who often are able to keep their athlete role separate from their student role, may be perceived as facing failure of goals such as a professional football career or extraordinary college football success (Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002).

Psychological transitions are not limited to one area of sport. Much of the research conducted on athletic transitions has focused on athletic retirement, when student-athletes and professional athletes experience challenges such as a sense of loss, a period of personal growth, adaptation, and lack of post-sport planning (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Lally, 2007; Lavallee, 2006; Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Student-athletes are aware of life after sport, particularly when triggered to plan for such a transition (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004). Transitional challenges for athletic retirement may mirror transitions faced by student-athletes during coaching changes, only with a much different timeline. The transitional period retiring athletes face may last from six months to a year as they leave the playing field and adjust to life outside the locker room or under the guidance of coaches (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 1997). Student-athletes who experience coaching changes, however, must face similar psychological transitions with less time to adjust.

The Tennessee case is an example of a short transitioning period student-athletes faced while preparing to play for different coaches. Tennessee officials announced a contract buyout with Fulmer on Nov. 3, 2008, and hired Kiffin on Dec. 1, 2008, a span of 28 days student-athletes faced without knowing their next head coach (University of Tennessee Athletics, 2008a, 2008b). Tennessee began practice under Kiffin on March 10, 2009, which gave student-athletes 100 days to adjust to their new head coach (University of Tennessee Athletics, 2009). Kiffin resigned on Jan. 12, 2010, to take a job at a different school, and Tennessee hired Dooley on Jan. 15, 2010, just three days later (University of Tennessee Athletics, 2010a, 2010b). Tennessee began spring practice with Dooley as head coach on March 18, 2010, which gave student-athletes 62 days to adjust to their new head coach (University of Tennessee Athletics, 2010c).

Accelerating the time period of adaptation places greater stress on athletes who are younger, less mature, and have little to no preparation for enduring such a change in coaching staffs as opposed to the longer adjustment period and anticipation, in some cases, for retiring athletes (Schlossberg, 1981). The abbreviated transition period of student-athletes is the focus of this study.

Theoretical Framework

This case was explored using transition theory as the central framework, which states that individuals manage transitions differently depending upon their resources and deficits (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Transition theory holds that an individual may react differently to different types of changes (Schlossberg, 1981). During transition, an individual’s level of adaptation may move from being preoccupied with the transition to integrating it and embracing the change into his or her life (Schlossberg, 1981). Transition theory was used as a lens to examine how student-athletes coped with consecutive head coaching changes with respect to Schlossberg’s transition processes of moving in, moving through, and moving out of situations (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Moving in is a process of leaving one context behind and entering into a new one, either by choice or involuntarily. Moving through is the adjustment period an individual faces when managing the
day-to-day actions during transition. Moving out is the final stage of transition, when the individual looks to a future beyond the transitional period.

Role changes are an important aspect in determining the impact of a transition based on the situation, and individuals can experience gains or losses in their roles (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). A role gain in this case would result in greater responsibility on the team or increased playing time, whereas a role loss would result in less playing time or even removal from the team. Additionally, expected duration of the transition affects the ease or difficulty of assimilating the transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Permanent change is perceived differently from temporary change, and more stress and negativity is connected with uncertainty (Schlossberg, 1981). In the Tennessee case, both coaching changes initially were perceived to be permanent. The first coaching change, from Fulmer to Kiffin, however, was temporary. The temporary coaching change may have influenced perceptions of the second change, presenting student-athletes with doubts and fears of commitment – both the new coach’s commitment to the program and the student-athletes’ commitment to the new coach – as well as concurrent stress from all factors surrounding the change. Finally, the individual’s assessment of the transition influences the outcome, as seen in the student-athletes’ role loss versus role gain.

**Design and Methods**

Case study was selected as the methodology because of the interest in insight, discovery, and interpretation of a unique case rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 2009). This study is defined as an intrinsic case because of seeking a better understanding of a particular case rather than theory building or representation of other cases (Stake, 1994). The case was the four junior student-athletes who competed three full seasons at Tennessee – the 2008 season under Fulmer, the 2009 season under Kiffin, and the 2010 season under Dooley. Criterion sampling excluded student-athletes who redshirted, transferred into or out of the program during the 2008, 2009, or 2010 seasons, and non-scholarship student-athletes. Eligible student-athletes were identified through the football team’s roster and confirmed with the athletic media relations staff. Permission was granted from Dooley to speak with the four student-athletes, and the student-athletes consented to participate. Each student-athlete was allowed to select a pseudonym as a means to protect their identity and association with comments.

Triangulation was achieved through interviews, document analysis, and observation to establish trustworthiness. Two sessions of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four junior student-athletes. Initial interviews were conducted in August 2010 during fall practice prior to the football season to gain insight from the student-athletes before competition. Interview protocol included 11 questions and included opinion and value questions such as “What are your thoughts on …”; feeling questions such as “Explain how you feel when …”; and knowledge questions such as “What does it mean when …” (Merriam, 2009). Follow-up interviews began in October 2010 after the season’s seventh game and finished one week prior to the end of the season in November 2010. An interval between interviews allowed for acclimation to the practice routine and new coach’s expectations during fall practice and part of the season. Second-round interview protocol included seven questions. One semi-structured interview was conducted with the head strength coach because of the rapport built with student-athletes during summer workouts and fall preseason camp. One observation of fall practice was conducted on Aug. 10, 2010, which was the team’s first fall scrimmage with Dooley as head coach. Document
analysis was conducted from local newspaper articles for quoted material about student-athletes addressing the coaching changes. News articles from the Knoxville News Sentinel were collected between Aug. 3 and Aug. 28, the time that coincided with the fall practice period. Seventy-two articles were examined for player quotations regarding Dooley being the new head coach.

Open coding was used to identify themes from the semi-structured interview transcripts and the document analysis. Open coding, or identifying unanticipated themes that emerge, also allowed for identification of themes which were not initially anticipated (Merriam, 2009). When each interview and published news article was coded, the data pieces identified in coding and notes were grouped by theme.

**Results**

Junior student-athletes dealt with concerns of trust, team and individual strength, and future while playing for their third head coach in three consecutive seasons at the University of Tennessee. The three constructed themes are presented in the following sections in relation to the moving in, moving through, and moving out stages of transition. The four junior student-athletes were still coping psychologically with a second coaching change after having gone through a coaching change the previous season. As the football season progressed, much of the mental transitions the student-athletes initially faced continued to exist while the procedural adjustments such as practice alterations and expectations from the coach were not of concern.

**Trust (Moving In)**

Document analysis of the Knoxville News Sentinel from August 28, 2010, told a story of a senior recalling when he signed as a freshman in Tennessee’s No. 2-ranked recruiting class and an assistant coach told him that most of the cohort would not be together the whole time. “I’m thinking, ‘We’re the No. 2 class in the nation, we’re gonna be here.’ But I look around and there’s only a couple of us.” John, a junior that participated in this study, explained that several student-athletes contemplated leaving the program after the second coaching change because of psychological adjustments.

I think the biggest adjustment for me was just mentally. I feel like you started building something and just buying into it and it was kind of swept out from under your feet and you had to start all over again. So mentally, it was really tough because everybody was like, ‘Do we want to leave? Do we want to stay?’ It definitely hurt mentally because we all felt like we were getting somewhere, and then we had to start all over again.

John revealed that several student-athletes considered transferring rather than establishing trust with another coaching staff, despite the fact that building trust would have been a concern if the student-athlete transferred to a different football program.

Joe, who had little playing time with Fulmer and Kiffin as head coach, also considered transferring. He said despite having such seniority on the team, lack of trust with the new staff resulted in thoughts of leaving the program. Promises from the previous two coaches had gone unfulfilled for Joe, yet he chose to remain at Tennessee and tried to re-identify himself as a
starter at his position. His trust in the new coaching staff increased as the season progressed, showing signs of role gain and embracing a permanent change.

It was tough because going into the season, you go in trusting coaches and then you’re getting a new coaching staff and it’s hard to trust them. It’s like, who do I trust now? But now, as the season goes along, you get to know them.

Joe displayed how the initial reaction to a coaching change was emotional and left him questioning his trust. Joe’s fresh start, however, was a role gain when he discovered Dooley’s expectations of him in practice and games and began to work hard to fulfill those expectations of a new role.

*Individual and Team Strength (Moving Through)*

Michael was a junior student-athlete who had a significant playing role under the Kiffin coaching staff and initially appeared prepared to adjust to Dooley’s expectations in practice and games. Reflecting on how he adjusted to the three coaches and their expectations revealed a message of loyalty and team cohesiveness as Michael approached the conclusion of fall practice in Dooley’s first season. “I feel like I’m more dedicated now. I feel like now I’m more loyal to my teammates. We all stick together because, as we know, sometimes coaches aren’t permanent.” Timing appeared to be good for Michael due to his increased role with the team. “With my preparation, now I feel more accountable to my teammates and I feel like if I miss something then I’m hurting the team.”

Michael said he felt dedicated because of the bond teammates created having gone through two coaching changes. Michael said he understood that the new coach expected him to be a leader for the younger players on the team and mentor them because they were watching his work ethic. Yet Michael said the trust he had built with the two previous coaches was gone, again forcing him and others to begin anew.

When you’re a freshman, you come in promised some things as a signee and that’s that, coach is gone. All of the promises are gone. So then you’re like, man. It makes things that much harder. The next coaching staff comes in and you have to prove yourself to them. They get a feeling about you, and then bam, they’re gone. Now you have to prove yourself all over again, complying to their ways. It’s very tough, man. It’s stressful. You’ve got to be very strong mentally to adjust to the different coaches, with your playing style and just your attitude.

Michael’s concerns stemmed from his inconsistency in playing time under the previous coaches. As a freshman under Fulmer, Michael did not play in any games. He participated in all 12 games as a sophomore under Kiffin. As the season under Dooley progressed, however, Michael’s playing time significantly decreased.

Michael admitted as the season passed that adjusting to the expectations of Dooley’s staff was more challenging than adjustments to previous coaches. “This year, it’s been tougher to get used to things because you’re kind of set in your ways. It’s harder to get on the field because you don’t know what this coach likes compared to what the other coach liked.” Michael’s frustrations spilled over into his actions. At the conclusion of game-week practices, Michael was the first
student-athlete off the practice field and into the locker room for reasons undisclosed. Michael vocalized his frustration about his role loss under Dooley’s coaching staff and did not show signs of adapting under the moving through stage of the transition model.

I got on the field doing what I was supposed to do last year with the other coaching staff, so why am I not getting on the field doing the same exact thing? So it’s like you’ve got to change everything you learned. I can’t adjust to that. … Once I felt like I met the expectations of a great, hall of fame coach like (his position coach under Kiffin), I don’t feel like I need to change my playing style because that’s what made him happy. It should make everyone happy, but obviously it don’t.

Michael was asked if he planned on changing his approach to earn greater amounts of playing time. “No. I don’t. … So I’m going to keep doing what I’m doing.” Michael’s response placed him in the moving out stage of transition theory. At the conclusion of the regular season and prior to Tennessee’s bowl game preparations, Michael stopped participating in team functions.

**Future (Moving Out)**

The immediate influence the experience may have on the student-athletes was their potential for playing in the NFL and adjusting to numerous coaching styles over the course of a professional football career. Turnover rate among NFL head coaches is high with coaches averaging 3.6 seasons with one NFL team (Rubinstein, 2011). Therefore a high probability exists that college football players moving on to the NFL will be required to play for multiple coaches, not accounting for the possibility of changing teams. One junior student-athlete, Daniel, connected the experience he and the others have endured with what could be future experiences in professional football.

I think as far as the NFL’s standpoint, I think it’s very helpful. You’ve gotten three different game plans. You’ve had to learn three different offenses or defenses. So not only are you very knowledgeable about various types of offenses and defenses, you’re also able to learn those faster. So that’s pretty much the process you go through every year in the NFL.

Daniel’s ability to relate his college experience with how it can help him in the future shows how he was prepared to use the experience to his advantage. Daniel was able to move through the transition and apply lessons to other areas of his life.

Michael, despite his frustrations with a role loss, took positive aspects from his transitional experience. Michael said once a decision is made to bring a new coach into the program, the student-athlete must adapt. Adapting to the transition in leadership will help in other areas of life, according to Michael. “That’s how I feel it’s going to help me later in life and give me a chance to improve later in life as a husband, as a father, just as a person. You’ve just got to make the best of things.” Rather than relating to a potential NFL career, Michael spoke of how enduring the consecutive changes in leadership, despite his difficulties along the transition stages, will help him on a personal level as he entered the moving out stage. Joe also related the experience to his future outside of football, but in terms of a professional career.
You’ve got to meet new people and get to know new people, adjust to different cultures, and get to know the environment around you. That’s how it’s going to be in the workplace one day when we get older in the future. It’s just helping us learn different people and different styles, and learn about ourselves – how do we adjust to change and how often change will come?

Discussing his future and how it relates to his experiences during the transition shows that Joe also began entrance into the moving out stage. Joe planned to remain at Tennessee for his senior season but took the experience as a positive way to think about his life beyond football.

Discussion and Conclusion

A tremendous amount of effort and resources is poured into coaching searches each offseason as turnover in the profession at the Division I FBS level is common. Resources also are used in recruiting student-athletes in terms of in-person evaluations, on-campus visits, and scouting. Those initial investments to lure student-athletes to campus are commonplace with budgets ranging into the millions of dollars (Trendafilova, Hardin, & Kim, 2010). However, there seems to be little or no consideration for the on-campus student-athletes and the transitions they face during coaching changes. Coaches influence student-athletes’ decision-making, scheduling, and overall training and health (Coakley, 2004; Comeaux, 2010; Gearing, 1999; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Westre & Weiss, 1991), but when new head coaches take over they often have the autonomy to make wholesale changes to the support staff and the established culture of their new teams. Therefore, when a coach is replaced, the student-athlete is left trying to adapt to new influence from a stranger attempting to fill a void that may very well be larger than the new coach comprehends.

This study revealed that trust, strength, and future are among the issues student-athletes faced during consecutive coaching transitions, much of which would not be a surprise to incoming coaches and their staffs. A team’s culture is often dictated by the coaching staff (Coakley, 2004), and that was reinforced in this study when the participants indicated trust was difficult to build with new coaches, particularly after the second coaching change. Building trust for the student-athletes was during the moving in stage of transition theory, where an individual leaves one context behind and enters into a new one by choice or involuntarily (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). The moving in stage was involuntary for the Tennessee student-athletes – and in most coaching change situations – thus leaving the student-athletes feeling powerless and disrupting the socialization and culture of the team (Coakley, 2004). Psychological challenges such as this should be addressed through professional counseling and made available through athletic department resources since many of the team’s upperclassmen are faced with potential failure of professional goals (Kissinger & Watson, 2009; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002).

Coaches must make an effort to build a trusting foundation early with returning student-athletes, and bonding among teammates may help foster a greater comfort for what the future holds. To get the most out of the student-athlete, there must be an investment from the coaching staff to the student-athletes on and off the field of play during such a critical time in their college careers. This moving in stage of trust development is when the new staff should be most cognizant of the fragile state of the returning student-athletes and consider instilling professional counseling help for the upperclassmen as suggested. The introductory phase is similar to that of a
freshman when promises made during the recruitment process may not hold true once the recruit is enrolled in school and playing on the team. Additionally, freshmen may assume a program will remain intact as it was when they initially signed a contract (scholarship) to play at a university, but a head coaching change shifts the ground on which the student-athlete stands even to the point of considering a transfer.

Summer workouts and fall practice took student-athletes into the moving through stage of transition theory as they adjusted to routines and became open to accepting the new staff’s changes. Moving through is the adjustment period an individual faces when managing the day-to-day actions during the transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). The offensive line coach began coercing the unit into taking pride in the position, the strength coach participated in workouts with the student-athletes to develop rapport, and student-athletes gained trust in the coaches when actions backed words. The strength coach stated that coaching changes are like changing family members considering the distance some student-athletes travel to attend college and the influence head coaches have over student-athlete decision-making in athletics, academics, and general life situations. Therefore, such a comparison reinforces the high-level of behavioral change student-athletes face when coaching changes occur. Refusal to change behaviors was evident in Michael’s experience of the moving through stage when he was not receptive of new requirements and expectations on the playing field. Different coaching philosophies, changes in field personnel, and new relationships come with coaching changes (Hersch, 2010), and student-athletes handle those changes in different ways (Schlossberg, 1981). Additionally, an involuntary change in head coaches takes power from the student-athlete and disrupts socialization and team culture (Coakley, 2004). All student-athletes face unusual challenges that are enhanced during coaching changes (Aghazadeh & Kyei, 2009; Chelladurai, 1984; Coakley, 2004; Galipeau & Trudel, 2004; Gardner et al., 1996; Gearing, 1999; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Meeker & Stankovich, 1999; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Westre & Weiss, 1991). Some of those challenges were seen in the example of Michael and his inability to adapt to changing culture, language, norms, and values enforced by the new coaches (Loughran & Etzel, 2008).

Student-athletes transitioned into the moving out stage as the season progressed and they looked to the future, both positively and negatively. In moving out, the individual looks to the future outside of the transitional period (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Role changes (e.g., gains and losses) determine the impact of a transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Joe experienced a role gain through increased trust by the new coaching staff as well as increased playing time on the field. Daniel also experienced a role gain through the process, referencing the three seasons of transition as an advantage for preparing him for professional football. Yet coaching changes decrease a football player’s draft stock no matter whether a coach is forced out or leaves on his own terms (Hersch, 2010). John pointed that remaining with the program was a role gain because it made the team a closer unit when the student-athletes needed it most.

Michael, however, experienced role loss as he separated himself from the team at the end of the season. His decreased playing time and inability to trust the new staff presented him with a psychological challenge that he was unable to overcome to remain with the team. Michael demonstrated his awareness of life after sport as he referenced how the three seasons will help him personally plan for his future, similar to athletes facing retirement (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004). The transitional period for retiring athletes lasts from six months to a year, and
ultimately Michael’s transition period for adjusting to his third head coach in three seasons followed a similar timeline as opposed to the abbreviated timeline required of student-athletes during coaching changes (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 1997).

Student-athletes progressed through multiple transition stages at different speeds and saw different outcomes. Transition time during a coaching change is shorter than transitions during athlete retirement, yet the one student-athlete who took longer with his transition in this case, Michael, had more difficulty and ultimately refused to accept change. Each student-athlete coped with positive and negative repercussions from the head coaching change, which warrants further study and attention from athletic administration.

Resources are continuously being made available for coaches both in the recruiting process and during coaching changes. It would seem plausible that an investment be made to keep student-athletes in the program and highly functional during coaching changes. Providing counseling and other resources to aid student-athletes would be minor in comparison to the investments already made in academic counseling, psychological well-being, training, and athletic rehabilitation (Dzikus, Waller, & Hardin, 2011; Pitney, 2006). Counseling student-athletes during coaching changes would be optimal during the late spring and summer months which is the fragile time for student-athletes in the moving in and moving through stages of transition. Ample time and resources are put into the academic counseling of student-athletes during the school year when the focus is on grades. Scott et al. (2008), however, found that student-athletes perform better academically outside the season of competition and are therefore more open to educational influences of others. Counseling support during a fragile state of a program that has undergone a coaching change (e.g., during spring and summer months) should be treated with the same importance and planning as in-season academic support. Counseling can be conducted in multiple platforms such as formal counseling from academic and psychological counselors on staff at the university or informal counseling in terms of peer groups within the team.

New coaches should be charged with identifying student-athletes who may be having difficulties adjusting to the transition of new leadership and recommend counseling for those individuals. By leaving the practice field early on most weekdays for undisclosed reasons, Michael showed signs that he was no longer invested in the success of the team. However, the investment is reciprocal as coaches must maintain their investment in student-athletes no matter their ability to help on the field. Coaches have the ability to influence emotional development of student-athletes (Mueller, 2009). A lack thereof results in a wasted scholarship by season’s end as the student-athlete is no longer putting forth the best effort for the coaches or team and the coaches are no longer putting their best effort into the student-athlete. Such exchange is wasteful for the university in terms of the scholarship and resources.

Involvement from the coaching staff is critical during the initial stages of transition to build trust and maintain cohesiveness among the returning student-athletes (Hersch, 2010). While coaches need not to falsely promote student-athletes into more prominent playing roles just to keep them, fostering individual strength and team cohesiveness among student-athletes as well as with coaches would impact the transitional period. An example of how new coaches can help promote trust-building among the team is one-on-one meetings with returning student-athletes to not only discuss football but to foster deeper relationships. Other more personal ways a coach can build trust with returning student-athletes may include introducing the team to the coach’s family or sharing passions and information with the student-athletes, empowering the student-athletes and creating a bond between player and coach.
In addition to establishing trust, new coaches must address student-athletes’ concerns with building team and individual strength as well as the student-athletes’ concerns for their own future. These areas can be addressed through peer mentor programs established within the team, placing returning student-athletes in leadership roles within the team as counselors to freshmen and transfer student-athletes and thus empowering them as leaders among the team (Comeaux, 2010). Comeaux (2010) found that mentoring as an intervention strategy positively influences academic and future goals. Thus, a mentor program during transitions of student-athletes enduring coaching changes can benefit by creating three- or four-person fox holes throughout the team that allow student-athletes to endure the change in groups rather than individually. This was displayed informally in Tennessee’s case as upperclassmen often encouraged younger student-athletes to remain loyal to the team despite the coaching transitions. Harvey (2009) studied African-American student-athletes at the junior college level and determined that enhancing experiences of student-athletes who feel like outsiders can include the establishment of student-athlete panels to interact with the athletic department and student services. Establishment of a similar panel for student-athletes during a coaching change could enhance communication between administration and student-athlete representatives within the team to keep them involved in the coaching search process and give them a voice for concerns. Additionally, coaches and administration can be proactive in citing how enduring the coaching transition can become a positive quality for the student-athletes by preparing them for change in their personal lives, in their future careers, and potentially in professional football. Positive qualities of a coaching change can both build hope for the student-athletes’ future and create a point of team-building among the returning student-athletes.

These findings demonstrate that transition is a process that does not easily happen and may not happen at all (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Meeker & Stankovich, 1999). Student-athletes acknowledged having difficulty with psychological transitions during the initial stages of adjusting to a new coach, but also as the season drew to a close. Anticipation of such difficulties leads to student-athletes transferring after any coaching change. Although transferring does not allow the student-athlete to avoid facing transition, it does allow the student-athlete to have better control of the transition through choices (e.g., choice of division of play, school, and coach) rather than losing control (e.g., having no voice in the selection process of a school’s new head coach). Therefore, to maintain an investment in the student-athlete, resources and counseling services should be made available to assist student-athletes during the transition of coaching changes and not merely make the coach the focus of the transition.

This research is limited in that it examined one university’s situation when its major college football program experienced two head coaching changes in consecutive years. This study also is limited in that it examined just one sport that has only male participants. No effort was made to determine cultural influences on transitions, which may have shaped the student-athletes’ experiences. Future research would add to the literature by examining the transitions student-athletes face during coaching changes with the ability to generalize, as this study was only focused on one university. More research also should be conducted with regards to other sports and how gender and cultural differences shape transition challenges during head coaching changes, particularly in non-revenue sports.
References


