

Exploring the Process of Becoming an Interscholastic Female Athletic Director:  
A Reflective Narrative Inquiry Approach

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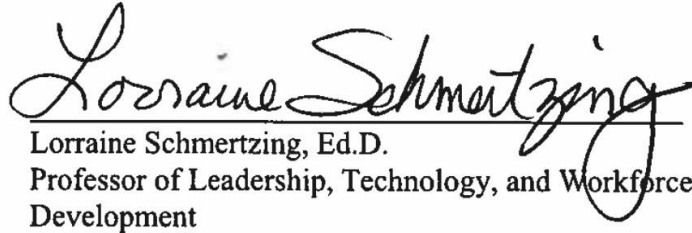
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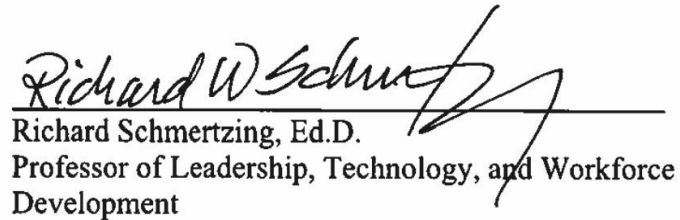
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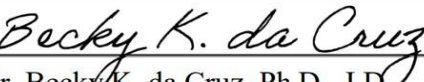
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## ABSTRACT

In my qualitative study, a modified reflective narrative inquiry approach was used to gather data about the experiences, interactions, and values that influenced female interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) along their professional pathways. Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) guided my conceptual framework. Personal experiences, relevant literature, and theory contributed to my conceptual framework. By asking collaborators to reconstruct their professional journeys and reflect on the meaning of the experiences and interactions they had along the way, I was able to provide increased understanding of how six female interscholastic ADs navigated their professional pathway. The literature did not do enough to address the role, value, and trajectory of women as interscholastic ADs. My research adds reflective narratives of current female ADs to address the lack of depth and strengthen the literature that shows value in having women represented in the field. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) guided my narrative inquiry research design. Using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series, I worked to gather stories from six women currently serving as athletic directors at the high school level in Georgia. I transcribed and coded using MAXQDA. I mined the data to discover patterns in it, which helped me construct four themes across collaborators that related to leadership opportunities early in their careers, mentorship and opportunity, reshaping leadership, and work life balance. Through connecting analysis, I was able to craft reflective narratives to share how the meaning they took away from various life experiences influenced later experiences along the pathway to becoming an AD.

*Keywords:* interscholastic female athletic director, career pathway, boundaryless career theory, reflective narratives

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible wife, Becca Aiken. Your unwavering support, strength, and love have carried me through this journey. Throughout the course of this dissertation, you brought two beautiful children into the world, kept our lives running, and made sure family always came first. Anytime I had late nights at work working an athletic event or coaching a game, you always found time to bring the kids to visit me at work, reminding me why I was doing all of this in the first place. You are the heart of our family, the glue that holds it all together, and the best partner I could ever hope for. Your drive and encouragement guided me to this moment. Without you, none of this would have been possible. This is as much yours as it is mine.

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Title IX of the education amendments of 1972 is widely recognized as the legislation that opened the door to help females gain equality within athletics (Office for Civil Rights, 2015). Title IX is an Educational Amendment passed in the United States (U.S.) to “ensure no person, on the basis of sex, can be excluded from participation, excluded from the benefits, or subjected to discrimination in any educational program or activity that received federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015, p. 4). Due to a lack of historical employment data on high school athletic leadership positions, I included data from the collegiate level to help frame the status quo women currently face in this career path. Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found that prior to the passage of Title IX, women represented only a fraction of athletes in high school and college sports, accounting for just 15% of all collegiate athletes. In the 50 years since passing Title IX, the number of female athletes has significantly increased. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) demographic database, women accounted for 44% of all collegiate athletes in the 2021-22 school year (NCAA, 2022). The participation rates are similar at the high school level with females representing 42% of interscholastic athletes for the 2022-23 school year (NFHS, 2023). Analyzing collegiate athletic departments prior to Title IX, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found women had fewer sports in which to participate, lower quality facilities, and inadequate resources to participate at the same standard as their male counterparts. Over time, the

Title IX legislation influenced academic organization decision makers to help female athletes gain representation in the number of sports offered, provided improved facilities, opened more scholarship opportunities, and supported publicity of their events. However, as female sport offerings grew and the number of women participating significantly increased from 1972 - 2014, Acosta and Carpenter noted an area that did not follow the same increasing trajectory was women leaders within the hierarchy of athletic leadership departments. Analyzing a comprehensive database of hiring practices for collegiate athletic directors, Lapchick (2021) found women only accounted for 14% of Division I athletic directors. According to employment data from 2022, men accounted for 78% of all AD positions, high school and college level, in the U.S. while women only made up 22% of ADs (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022a). Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found that in the immediate 42 years after Title IX, the number of women coaches at the college level significantly dropped from 90% prior to 1972 to 43.4% in 2014. Kane and LaVoi (2018) conducted a similar nationwide survey of all Division I and Division III athletic directors and senior women administrators to investigate the number of women working as an NCCA head coach in 2018. They did include Division II because they wanted to see the comparison between the highest and lowest level of college athletics. Their investigation found the percentage of women employed as a head coach at the NCAA Division I and Division III level was 43% in 2018. Four years earlier, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) noted that as male coaches began to see female sports as lucrative job opportunities, they began to compete with female coaches for these coveted positions. They found males began to dominate the role of head coach for both male and female sports and the number of female athletic leaders began to dwindle. In 2022, men made up

67% of all high school coaches (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022c). A closer look at the data revealed that men held 60% of head coaching positions in girls' sports and an overwhelming 98% in boys' sports. With the decline in women working as head coaches, the applicant pool for aspiring women to become athletic department leaders began to skew to male candidates. The longitudinal study conducted by Acosta and Carpenter (2014) expanded on Cunningham et al.'s (2003) findings, which showed that as male athletic directors increasingly hired other men for roles such as assistant and associate athletic directors and head coaches, women began to view athletic leadership as a male-dominated career path. Building on this, Katz et al. (2018) identified the lack of female athletic directors as a barrier for women, which limited opportunities to build meaningful professional networks, further hindering their advancement in athletic leadership. In 2003, Whisenant reported the issue was not isolated only to higher education athletics as the prominence for gender inequity in high school athletic leadership faced similar challenges. In a national research assessment of the state's athletic director association, he found 2,275 women were employed as athletic directors or less than 15% of high school athletic directors. Twenty years later, the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) reported 1,820 women served as high school athletic directors and the percentage of female athletic directors declined to 14% (Chapman, 2022). In 2019, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported 3,402,733 females played sports or accounted for 48% of all high school athletes in the U.S. (NFHS, 2019). In 1971, the year before Title IX was enacted, only 294,015 girls participated in high school sports nationwide (NFHS, 2022). In the same year, approximately 3.7 million boys played high school sports meaning girls made

up less than 8% of all high school athletes at the time (NFHS, 2022). Although participation numbers for women in high school athletics rose significantly since the passing of Title IX, additional research is needed to shine light upon why women have not seen similar growth in leadership roles. Previous studies from Catalyst (2020), Morillo (2017), Acosta and Carpenter (2014), Whisenant and Mullane (2007), and Whisenant (2003) claimed that women struggled to gain equality in the workplace. I posit the struggle continues to be a major problem for high school athletics and women as they navigate their professional pathway. From my own personal experiences and observations as an associate athletic director and high school varsity coach, I recognized the disparity between girls participating in sports as athletes and women ascending the career ladder to become athletic department leaders. The problem addressed in my study focuses on the lack of literature on what values and experiences helped current females persist to the role of athletic director. This is an issue when females represent half of the athletes participating at every level of athletics, but only a small percentage of women, 14%, navigated this career pathway (Chapman, 2022).

Throughout this chapter, I will establish the problem that was addressed by exploring the recollection of memories my collaborators shared as significant moments throughout their journey to becoming an interscholastic athletic director. It was originally my intention to explore the *lived experiences*, unreflected upon moments as they actually occurred (Seidman, 2013), of women who successfully navigated the pathway to becoming an interscholastic athletic director. Lived experiences are a representation of “human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence the perception of knowledge” (*Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research*, 2008, p. 489). Lived

experiences are moments of “experience that we live through before we take a reflective view of it” (van Manen, 2014, p. 42). Throughout the interview process, my collaborators were asked to reconstruct their experiences along the pathway to athletic leadership. Lived experiences are “what we experience as it happens, but we can only get at what we experience after it happens through a narrative reconstruction of that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 18). I was hopeful that throughout the three interviews, I would be able to tap into their episodic memory and gather textually reconstructed experiences as if I were right next to them when it occurred. My intention was to gather rich, thick descriptions that would have allowed me to analyze how their experiences influenced future experiences and their view of the world. I understood lived experiences as formative moments that someone went through, but had yet to reflect on the influence of how that past experience shaped their life. However, after reviewing my data, I found the information gathered was not deep enough to produce the narratives I envisioned. For example, I planned to write narratives full of experiences such as, when a coach continually made sure one of my collaborators had food before practices, new cleats, and stopped to ask about how their day went. I then planned to explore the reflected upon meaning of how the influence of a supportive youth athletic coach acting like a father figure had on the personal motivation to enter that career field and continue leading by example like the positive memories they recalled from that experience. After completing the interviews and looking at the transcripts, I realized that I did not gather enough details. I was unable to get my collaborators to describe the experiences like they actually happened. The majority of my data is reflective instead of active where collaborators would have been describing the details as if I were standing next to them while it

happened. I shifted the direction of my study to explore what current women in leadership roles took away from their experiences. The following section establishes why the lack of women in leadership roles is a problem.

### **Explanation of the Problem**

Interscholastic athletic participation for P-12 schools in the United States (U.S.) has grown to over 8 million students (NFHS, 2019). Yet, since passing Title IX, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found that up to a decade ago the number of women athletic directors, head coaches, and assistant coaches actually declined. Prior to Title IX, women served as the head coach for over 90% of all women's collegiate teams (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Six years after Title IX, women had already seen a decline in the number of coaches leading women's teams. By 1978, women only represented 58.2% of head coaches for women's teams. After reviewing gender hiring practices at the NCAA level, Lapchick (2021) found that in the 50 years since passing Title IX, the number of women employed as the head or assistant coach for an NCAA women's team continued to decline. An annual gender report, produced by Lapchick (2021), pointed out that women only accounted as the head coach of 41.2% of women's teams and only 50% of assistant coaches for women's teams. In the 2023-24 school year, women represented 45.3% of head coaches for women's teams, a slight increase from previous years (LaVoi & Boucher, 2023). Lapchick (2021) found in the highest level of Division I college athletics, the football bowl subdivision (FBS), women only accounted for 14% of the athletic directors. There are multiple facets of the problem created by the lack of female leadership in athletics that need explanation. In upcoming sections I will address: the impact of representation, sense of belonging, and a lack of depth in the study of

interscholastic athletic directors. The unique qualitative insights gained from my study add to the literature on what values and experiences allowed current women in AD roles to persist throughout their leadership pathway. Increasing the literature for this underrepresented population, women in leadership roles within high school athletics, is intended to be useful to help aspiring women traverse this career path. The following section illuminates how career choices for females are impacted by the lack of representation of women in athletic leadership roles.

### ***Representation***

The problem of unbalanced gender representation in interscholastic athletic director (AD) roles is important to continue discussing, as participation of females in high school athletics has grown from 7% to 48% of the total athlete population over the last 30 years (NFHS, 2019). With fewer women than men in leadership positions, female student athletes have fewer women role models to demonstrate the ability to lead an athletic department. This is meaningful as Abele and Spruk (2009) noted self-efficacy can influence the confidence someone has to perform a chosen career. Without seeing women in leadership roles, female student athletes lack female role models. This could potentially influence their belief in their own abilities to execute an athletic leadership position. To further explore the impact on self-efficacy on career selection, Lent and Brown (2013) developed the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) model. Within their model, self-efficacy refers to an individual's perceived ability to navigate an occupational path. Using the SCCT model, Wendling and Sagas (2020) surveyed 1,020 student-athletes to determine the impact self-efficacy plays on future career choices. Analyzing the 684 completed surveys, they found the relationship between self-efficacy and career

goals influenced career choices. They theorized the lack of women in athletic leadership positions led women to not perceive athletic leadership as a viable career thus diminishing the future applicant pool for these limited positions. According to the NCAA (2022) demographic database for the 2020-2021 academic year, women only accounted for 24% of the ADs. This lack of women working in an AD position is important if you consider Bandura's (1997) theories of self-efficacy on which he posits gender-related efficacy for females was hampered less by their actual abilities and more by the link to perceived stereotypical male occupations (Bandura, 1997).

A little over 20 years ago, Whisenant (2003) reviewed demographic data from the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association and found males were the overwhelming leaders accounting for 87% of all athletic directors out of the 7,041 schools that reported demographic data. Almost 17 years ago, Whisenant and Mullane (2007) reviewed annual survey data from the National Directory of High School Coaches and found that 83% of athletic directors and 70% of principals were male. In the year 2022, males still account for the majority of power positions at the high school level as men accounted for 66% of principals at the high school level (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022a) and 78% of athletic directors at every level (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022b). The lack of women representing athletic leadership roles is a problem when you consider Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found male athletic directors statistically hired more male coaches than female coaches leading to homologous reproduction. Kanter (1977) explained homologous reproduction as guarding power by empowering individuals that look, sound, act, and replicate behaviors similar to their own. This is a problem as males account for the majority of interscholastic athletic leadership positions and have shown

they statistically hire more male coaches, thus further limiting the opportunities for women to get into athletic leadership positions. If more women were able to navigate the professional pathway to becoming an athletic director, it would increase the potential for more women to receive opportunities in various athletic roles, thus increasing the pipeline for future women to become athletic administrators. Reviewing survey data from over 13,000 schools, Mello and Broughman (1996) reported gender stereotyping influenced career choices. According to Mello and Broughman, not observing someone of your same gender in specific career fields could influence future career choices due to the lack of gender specific role models. Reviewing literature, Grappendorf and Burton (2017) identified gender stereotyping as one of the potential explanations for the underrepresentation of female interscholastic ADs. Applying this reasoning to the positions of athletic director, head coach, or assistant coach provides a tentative explanation for why so few women navigate the professional pathway to athletic leadership roles. Investigating the problem of how men have been able to guard power in leadership positions, as Kanter (1977) explained, empowering individuals like themselves could be useful to learning more about why more women are not currently employed in athletic leadership roles. With 3,402,733 women athletes participating in interscholastic athletics during the 2018-19 school year, it was important to me as a man to explore the lack of women in athletic leadership positions (NFHS, 2019). The following section explores the possibility that the underrepresentation of women in athletic administration in P-12 schools may contribute to female athletes feeling a sense of not belonging to this career path.

### *Sense of Belonging*

According to the national federation of state high school associations (NFHS), the number of female athletes participating in sports has seen continued annual growth every year since the enactment of Title IX in 1972 (NFHS, 2023). As the number of females participating in sports continues to increase, additional research is needed to further understand the lack of women in athletic leadership. For the 2022-23 school year, the NFHS (2023) reported female athletes represented 45% of all high school athletes nationwide while female athletic directors represented only 14% of all interscholastic athletic directors (Chapman, 2022). These statistics mean female athletes had much less of an opportunity to visualize women in power than men, which could inspire a belief they do not belong in this career field. Interviewing 20 women working as assistant and associate athletic directors at the intercollegiate level about their career goals and expectations within the field of college athletic administration, Hancock and Hums (2016) constructed themes from the data they gathered by analyzing the transcripts. They concluded these women sought job positions that matched their perceived abilities, but among those abilities they did not include the skills to become an athletic director. The results from their study not only highlight the issue of women lacking role models in athletic leadership positions, but also pointed out the importance the women noted when they spoke of the “connections” needed to make it through the process of actually getting the job, which they also didn’t believe they had. This problem could be contributing to qualified women not believing they possess the skills needed or have the support required to be or become a successful athletic director. The results from Hancock and Hums study

showed how women not having a *sense of belonging* in athletic administration diminished their consideration of entering the applicant pool of qualified women.

Hancock (2012) did similar research when she interviewed 15 women who were working as assistant and associate athletic directors at the time of the study to investigate their career experiences while working as a senior women administrator at the college level. Hancock (2012) reported 75% of the women in the study perceived career barriers like self-efficacy, gender, and personality characteristics as obstacles they had to overcome to advance beyond the senior women administrator position. Those same women went on to describe how this shaped their career expectations. The findings of both studies by Hancock (2012) and Hancock and Hums (2016) indicated qualified women need to be proactive in overcoming perceived career barriers by anticipating obstacles they might encounter along the professional pathway to becoming an athletic director. In addition to the problems addressed here, the literature also lacks sufficient attention to the value of having more women in these roles.

### ***Lack of Current Literature***

There is a need for increased understanding due to lack of existing literature on how women navigated the professional pathway to becoming an interscholastic athletic director (AD). During my preliminary research, I found the majority of resources were 10 or more years old, yet so much has happened in the last decade to highlight the issue of gender underrepresentation in leadership roles. Relevant data is needed to further explore the lack of female interscholastic ADs. After conducting the exploratory research within my literature review, I determined females were significantly lagging behind males in all

forms of athletic leadership, but nothing showed they did not have the appropriate skills to do the same jobs.

Literature is discussed further in Chapter 2 of my dissertation to frame and explore the issues within the topic of study. There is a lack of research on open-ended qualitative inquiries that allowed female interscholastic athletic directors to narrate their own stories about how they navigated the pathway to athletic leadership over their careers. I was unable to find this approach to research with this population while reviewing the existing literature. Therefore, I set out to complete a narrative inquiry qualitative study and add the unique insights gained from it to the available research. Without rich descriptions from those who were able to navigate the pathway to becoming the highest ranking member of an athletic department, we had an incomplete picture of the male dominated environment of athletic leadership. Guided by Seidman (2013), I intended to construct detailed, descriptive narratives that illuminate the meaning of previously unexamined experiences, with the goal of understanding how the women in my study interpreted and made sense of their professional journeys. I assumed men would have been a barrier along the way, presenting obstacles for women looking to navigate the career ladder to athletic administration. Since most of my data was reflective rather than active, first-hand accounts, I ended up shifting my study to focus on what current women in leadership roles have taken away from their experiences. As I listened to their stories, I actually found men were not discussed as barriers to my collaborators navigating the pathway to their present role. I share the final presentation of my research, reflective narratives, and assertions in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Over the time it took to complete my research, I continued searching the literature for newly published work addressing women's pathway to athletic leadership. Given the growing societal push for equality amongst all, school leaders need this information to identify and support women interested in a career of athletics. The implications of my qualitative study revealed how six women experienced the process of navigating the career path to athletic director. This form of data collection and analysis provided unique insights from a previously unexplored perspective. With the newly gained knowledge, district and school level administration may better understand how women experience the process of athletic career navigation and identify helpful resources that other women can use. Considering this gap in current knowledge, in the next section I will describe the purpose of my dissertation.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was originally to explore and document what values and experiences influenced six interscholastic female athletic directors (ADs) working in Georgia to persist as they navigated the process of becoming an AD. In order for me as a male to do this, I needed to collaborate with my participants and inform as a member of the majority, I wanted to be an ally, sharing information that could help others understand how current women arrived at their present position. I wanted to explore the meaning behind *lived experiences* or moments as they actually occurred (Seidman, 2013). My intention was to add new insights into how my collaborators were able to persist to their present role. I believed males were a barrier and therefore the women needed to persist as males was hindering their career progression. However, after reviewing my data, I found the information gathered did not go deep enough to collect lived

experiences and produce the narratives I had envisioned. Instead, I constructed reflective narratives to share my collaborator's stories. Within the narratives, I highlighted the value of mentorship, willingness to get involved, and ability to adapt in a storied format that is accessible to all. Not only referring to the women in my study as collaborators, but more importantly using them as such, strengthened my data analysis, and capitalized on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) approach to qualitative narrative inquiry as a mutual process of collaboration between the researcher and participant. According to Patton (2015), a core element found in narrative inquiry research is the collaborative process between the researcher and participants to better understand their meaning of reflected upon lived experiences. The relationship I established was a collaboration where we worked together to build and co-construct essential knowledge. Throughout my qualitative study I planned to ask collaborators to reconstruct the details of their lived experiences as if I were standing right next to them. I planned to explore the meaning they understood from reflecting on those experiences (Seidman, 2013). Reflecting upon the meaning my collaborators derived from reviewing their own lived experiences, moments that they already lived through but may never have reflected on, would have provided me with unique insights into the influence of knowledge gained from their previous experiences and how it impacted their future experiences and view of the world. However, after reviewing my data, I found the information gathered was not active enough. The data was not a description of what happened as much as it was their reflection on what happened.

The approach of my study changed to focus on gathering stories and compiling the reflected upon experiences of women who successfully navigated the career pathway

to athletic director allowed me to explore key insights my collaborators identified that helped them persist along their career path. I used the Seidman (2013) three-interview series to solicit stories about my collaborators' reflected-upon experiences. This interview format would have allowed my collaborators to articulate the details of their experiences as close to what actually happened and derive meaning from reflecting on their experiences. After revisiting Maxwell's (2013) Jeopardy exercise, I realized rather than gather rich, detailed data that aligned with the original approach for my research, I instead collected data that was reflective in nature, leading to my new approach. The three-interview series designed by Seidman (2013) revealed insights about the process of how current women navigated the pathway to athletic director. The three sequential interviews guided the conversation to move from pre-phenomena experiences, through the actual experiences and followed up with reflection across three different interviews. The study also used the boundaryless career theory discussed by Arthur et al. (1989) as a theoretical lens to explore career navigation. A boundaryless career is the sequence of job opportunities, skills, knowledge, and relationships that enable an individual to move beyond the invisible boundary of a singular employment setting. The boundaryless career competencies model (BCCM), created by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996), provided a lens for further exploration of competencies, know-why, know-how, and know-whom, that empowered current women working as interscholastic athletic directors to navigate the professional pathway to career success. In my theoretical framework, I provide further explanation for how I was able to use the boundaryless career competencies model to gain additional insights into career navigation for the women in my study. Gathering detailed stories about my collaborators' athletic experiences, coaching experiences,

administrative experiences, educational experiences, mentors, role models, and significant events in their lives provided me with an increased understanding of what values and experiences helped six female interscholastic athletic directors persist as they navigated their professional pathway.

During each interview, I strived to do as Seidman (2013) suggested and have my collaborators reconstruct moments throughout their lives as closely as possible to how they were experienced. The purpose of using in-depth interviewing as described by Seidman (2013) was to understand my collaborators' lived experiences and the meaning they made from those experiences. The central focus of my study was to gather reflected-upon experiences from my collaborators and seek to understand the value they took away from those experiences (Seidman, 2013). By using this approach, I saw the influence a previous experience had on my collaborators' ability to navigate their career path. In sharing their experiences with others, it is my hope that the insights gained from this study will help women aspiring to become an AD, current ADs, and school district stakeholders to make meaningful, positive changes to the hierarchy of athletic departments. According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative research is not only concerned with the lived experiences themselves, but also seeks to understand how collaborators make sense of lived moments through reflection and how each lived moment influenced current behavior. I wanted to explore the experiences on which my collaborators potentially had never before reflected. Reflecting on an individual's perspective of their lived experiences and contextual meaning they make from that experience could have provided unique insights. I sought to understand how the meaning they made from experiences affected them along their pathway to athletic leadership. I intended to

explore the lived experiences of current, successful female athletic directors at the interscholastic level and shape their experiences into narratives giving each collaborator the power to define their perspective within the context of females in athletic leadership positions. The more time I spent analyzing my transcripts, I found the data to be less active than I hoped it would be and more reflective. This led me to alter my intended presentation of narratives and instead share the data as reflective narratives. In the following section, I discuss the significance this study could provide from learning more about these women's reflected-upon experiences along their pathway to becoming an athletic director.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was intended to provide a holistic view of the experiences of six females in athletic director (AD) roles and contribute to a gap in the literature on how women navigated the pathway to these positions. Through the use of my conceptual framework and in-depth interviews of the reflected-upon experiences of female interscholastic athletic directors, this study contributed new insights of how participants navigated the male-dominated career path of athletics. This study explored the unique experiences of six women who were able to traverse the journey to the role of AD. The values and influences that helped my collaborators persist along their pathway can potentially help aspiring female ADs understand how veteran female ADs navigated their career pathway. By telling my collaborators' stories, I was able to share the motivations, skills, and networking skills they understood as helpful to them as they traversed the pathway to leadership positions.

There is a disparity between the number of girls playing sports and women administrators overseeing sports. In 2023, the NFHS reported girls participating in interscholastic athletics accounted for 3.3 million or 42% (NFHS, 2023) of all athletes. In 2022, the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) reported of its 13,000 plus members, only 14% of U.S. high schools employed a woman as AD (Chapman, 2022). Wolfert et al. (2019) combined survey responses with the analysis of gender employment data from another field and found women are less likely to pursue careers they perceive to have inequalities and obstacles for women compared to men. The survey data from Wolfert et al. (2019) found over 75% of the responses reported lacking same-gender role models as an obstacle for pursuing a specific career pathway. Due to the higher participation of female athletes at the interscholastic level compared to the intercollegiate level, the significance of this study has the potential to influence a larger audience of females since more girls participate in high school athletics, 3,328,180 million, than participate in collegiate athletics, 229,060. The knowledge gained from this study will contribute to the gap in literature on gender employment inequities and lack of representation for women in athletic leadership positions. Looking at how these women persisted from diverse backgrounds to arrive at the role of athletic director, as told through their stories, could help anyone interested in this career better understand how to navigate the male-dominated field of athletics. Since there is a lack of research on what values and experiences influenced women to pursue this career, it is crucial to hear the voices of females who have successfully persisted through this male-dominated field to become AD.

The insights gained from my qualitative research will add to the literature for females looking to break the glass ceiling of athletic administration. The professional experiences and strategies used by these women will inform local stakeholders to assess and improve the hiring process for athletic administrators. Since other researchers have identified barriers as women climb the career ladder, it is crucial to hear the voices of females who have overcome these barriers and challenges. Hearing the stories of what the women in my study understood as most influential to their career success provided valuable insights into achieving the school athletic director position and will be shared in Chapter 6. The resulting knowledge from this study provides meaningful insights into how established females were able to find their place in the male-dominated athletic workplace.

Previous studies on interscholastic athletic directors (AD) have not adequately addressed why women continue to be an underrepresented population in this career field. We currently do not have enough knowledge on why so few women are able to navigate the pathway to AD. In my study, I addressed and contributed knowledge to the current gap in existing literature on female interscholastic athletic directors. While barriers and challenges of female athletic directors have been researched at the intercollegiate level (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock, 2012; Hancock & Hums, 2016), little research has been conducted at the interscholastic level. The majority of college student-athletes played high school athletics, and when issues of representation and perceptions of belongingness permeate at the collegiate level, we have limited understanding of the impacts that can affect younger student-athletes and lead to the continued cycle of inequity and professional stigmas. Knowing the path to collegiate sports is rooted in high

school athletics, previous research focused on understanding the pathways of females participating in high school athletics navigating the journey to participating in college athletics. Currently, there is little research examining the pathway of females navigating the pipeline to interscholastic athletic director. Although Title IX, enacted in 1972, increased the number of females participating in sports, Picariello and Angelle (2016) reported female athletic directors remained an underrepresented group within public high schools across the United States. The majority of previous literature examined the career pathway for women that became intercollegiate athletic directors (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Hancock, 2012). Eighteen years ago, Hums et al. (2007) found the lack of research on women achieving interscholastic athletic leadership roles was a combination of inadequate record keeping, individual state associations, and the lack of a national high school athletic administration organization. As the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) began to track demographic data for its members in 2007, annual gender data highlighted the issue of underrepresentation for women ADs, only 14% in 2022, across the U.S. (Chapman, 2022). A survey conducted by Zippia in 2024 found only 22% of all high schools employed a female athletic director. To better understand the underrepresentation of women working as athletic directors at the interscholastic level, Hancock and Hums (2016) recommended future researchers examine the leadership styles of current female athletic directors as an opportunity to explore how these women obtained athletic director positions. In the next section, following recommendations from Maxwell (2013), I discuss the different kinds of goals (personal, practical, and intellectual) of my research.

## **Research Goals**

Maxwell (2013) described goals as a guide for research design decisions and justification the study is worth doing and why the results matter. He partitioned goals into three types based on their usefulness: personal, practical, and intellectual. My personal goals, which Maxwell (2013) explained are grounded in the researcher's motivation for the study, stem from my own navigation of the professional pathway to becoming an athletic director (AD). I initially wanted to explore how an individual, male or female, ascended the career ladder to becoming an AD. I have been in public education the past 13 years. I navigated from varsity soccer coach, to assistant AD, and presently serve as the associate AD. During my professional journey and in conjunction with the focus of my doctoral program, I noticed the majority of athletic directors at the college and high school level were men. Therefore, I shifted my initial idea for a dissertation away from a non-gendered look at athletic leadership, and I became interested in exploring the stories of women who were able to navigate the pathway to AD. Examining the reflected-upon experiences of an under-represented population, women with senior leadership positions in athletic programs, with the goal of understanding how these individuals arrived at the AD position became the primary motivation for my study. Throughout my research design, I monitored my professional goal of becoming an AD to acknowledge how my personal journey was influencing collaborators' responses. As a male who aspires to one day become an AD, I began each collaborator introduction by informing the women in my study of my personal goals and the goals of my research. To start the process of building an open relationship with my collaborators, I informed each of them that I knew my personal journey, but I needed to explore their story to learn more about how they

arrived at their present position. Gaining unique insights into their journey over time would add to the lack of literature of how women arrived in these roles. Finding out more about their stories is the only way to gain new knowledge on this lacking literature and share insights that may help future women. I informed everyone in my study that I was hopeful to one day become an athletic director. When that day came, I would use my position to promote equitable hiring practices throughout the athletic department I oversaw. I continually invested time building trust with the collaborators by sharing my own positionality, for example, that I was a boys varsity soccer coach that currently has a woman as my assistant coach and has had multiple different women work as the head junior varsity soccer coach within my program, to build relationships and ensure they understood this research is important not only to me, but also to help inform future practices in this career field. I used examples of my experiences with pushing for gender equity to aid the ongoing process of building relationships. Monitoring, memoing, and questioning my own subjectivity was an important process to limit the influence of my biases on my research. In my methods section, I detail the techniques used to monitor the influence of my experiences on my research.

The practical goal, which Maxwell (2013) associated with the accomplishment that results by completing this study, was to use the insights gained from my collaborators' stories to create reflective narratives that when distributed can be a resource women can use along the pathway to athletic leadership. These reflective narratives will enlighten women aspiring to become an AD on strategies other women used while traversing the process and encourage them to persist by sharing stories of how other women that were once in their position achieved this goal. The objective was to

create resources with the goal of helping women that are seeking an athletic leadership position. I am hopeful the knowledge gained from this study will lead to the assessment and improvement of hiring practices for women seeking an athletic administrator position. It is my hope the stories of women thriving in these roles can reduce the perceived barriers in the system, like, lack of football experience or knowledge, that limit women along the career ladder to leadership for interscholastic athletics. The practical goal of the study was to produce recommendations based on the experientially-based perspective of women themselves to help educational institutions better meet the needs of other women looking to travel the pathway to AD.

My intellectual goal is focused on understanding what helped women successfully navigate the pathway to AD. Maxwell (2013) described this goal as a resource to help researchers determine why and what is happening. Understanding how the reflected-upon experiences of my collaborators influenced their journey to becoming an AD will hopefully inspire and influence future women to choose this career path. Intellectually, I want to know how the women in my study arrived at their present position. Maxwell (2013) described this goal as an important way to understand something previous research has not satisfactorily explained.

When the problem of the status quo and my goals intersect, I was led to move forward with a study to explore the stories of women ADs, that helped update the literature on women's experiences along the career trajectory in interscholastic athletics. The knowledge from this study provides unique insights and a deeper understanding of how women experienced the pathway to high school AD. In my study, women described their reflected-upon experiences along the pathway to becoming an interscholastic AD,

reflected on the values and experiences they recalled as most meaningful, and shared how they understood those formative experiences shaping their ability to persist to present day. The knowledge collected throughout the interview process was helpful to exploring the key reflected-upon experiences my collaborators identified as influencing their successful navigation to AD. The research question I developed to guide my study will be discussed in the next section to inform my exploration of a topic previous research has not yet fully addressed.

### **Research Question**

Rather than starting with research questions that could potentially be too specific, I began with tentative questions. According to Maxwell (2013), provisional questions frame the study, guide methods, and influence or can be influenced by the conceptual framework. The tentative questions served as a starting point for what I imagined my research was going to look like and what I would like to understand. Using preliminary questions allowed me to keep an open mind through my data collection. It also improved the validity of my study by reducing the potential of my own subjective thoughts influencing an already developed specific research question (RQ). Starting with tentative questions reduced the potential of me developing tunnel vision and making the study too focused too quickly to the point I miss important information (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout my study, I continued to revisit my RQ and adjust as needed.

Keeping my goals in mind, one primary research question was originally developed for this study that could be answered by talking to women who were employed as interscholastic athletic directors in Georgia about their experiences along the pathway to their present role. My qualitative study was originally guided by this question:

What lived experiences and values influenced six interscholastic female athletic directors (AD's) working in Georgia to persist as they navigated the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation? After data analysis and as I began building narratives, I found the data collected would not allow me to progress with my original RQ. In conjunction with my committee chair, we realized the question I actually answered was: What connections did six Interscholastic Female Athletic Directors make between their life experiences and values and the influence they had on navigating the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation?

My intent was to gather stories during interviews and explore the meaning of those experiences while my collaborators reflected on their lived experiences. I planned to use those descriptive stories to craft narratives. As I progressed with data collection and data analysis, I began to see that I did not gather enough descriptive details to produce rich narratives. Instead, the data was more reflective in nature, leading me to adjust my data presentation. The data I gathered focused more on my collaborators talking about their experiences and what they took away from their experiences. I was unable to gather rich details as if I was standing right next to them during the experience. The insights I gathered were still valuable and are later presented as reflective narratives in Chapter 4.

Through my research, I was able to answer the overarching question guiding my study and provide a deeper understanding of how women navigated the career pathway to becoming interscholastic athletic directors. This new knowledge could help future aspiring women pursue similar roles and enable local stakeholders to assess and improve the hiring process for athletic administrators. In my study I aimed to contribute new

knowledge about how women progressed to leadership positions in athletic departments. Drawing from the reflected-upon experiences, I used the Boundaryless Career Competencies Model (BCCM) as a lens to explore further insights and shared know-why, know-how, and know-whom competencies among my collaborators.

To gain insight into their reflected-upon experiences, I investigated what was the value they took away or how the experience influenced their pathway. This approach facilitated my ability to explore collaborator's unique context and significance of interactions and experiences. With these insights, my collaborators were able to articulate what their experiences meant to them. To uncover these meanings, I employed connecting strategies, an analytic technique described by Maxwell and Miller (2008). This method helped connect their experiences to relationships, time, social influences, and environmental factors, preserving the context and details of their stories. Through these connecting strategies, I analyzed transcripts to identify connections and relationships that extended beyond surface similarities and differences, presented as reflective narratives in Chapter 4.

The process of crafting reflective narratives involved establishing "temporal order," a concept used by Kim (2016) to examine how different elements within the timeline of a collaborator's story fit into context. This approach allowed me to tell the contextualized stories of each collaborator's journey to interscholastic athletic administration while remaining faithful to their reflected experiences. Narrative analysis integrated my memos, interview transcripts, and interpretations from my researcher's journal into a cohesive re-storying process. This collaboration between myself and my

collaborators produced reflective narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end, effectively communicating what they took away from each experience to readers.

Understanding the personal significance of various reflected-upon experiences gave me an opportunity to identify key themes, insights, and potential predictors of career success in the field of athletics. Seidman (2013) described themes as informative categories that represent recurring patterns in the data. Through data analysis, I coded the interview transcripts and constructed initial categories (Saldaña, 2013). After iteratively categorizing and recategorizing the data, I reviewed connecting threads and patterns within the final categories to construct themes discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Conclusion**

In my study, I explored the reflected-upon experiences of women that have navigated the career pathway to athletic director (AD). Hearing the stories of individuals that reached the AD position allowed me to fill a gap from previous studies that did not provide a deep understanding of how personal experiences influenced women along the career ladder. To communicate the concepts, beliefs, literature, and theory used to inform my research design, I followed recommendations for a conceptual framework from Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017). The following chapter provides the blueprint for my study and support for this research. Chapter 2 describes my conceptual framework, personal experiences, theoretical framework, and literature review. These sections provided an understanding of the background that influenced my research and helped me stay focused throughout my research.

## Chapter II

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework that guided my study encompassed components from both Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017). Maxwell (2013) described a useful conceptual framework as an important aspect of research design to explain how personal experience, research, and theory guide the study. Following the recommendations from Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017), I included my personal experiences, theoretical framework, and literature review as components of my conceptual framework. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) argued a conceptual framework provides reasoning for why the chosen research topic is important and selected methods are appropriate. Maxwell (2013) described the conceptual framework as one of the five major components included in a qualitative study and the researcher as the primary research instrument. As the research instrument, my conceptual framework was guided by Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) to describe how my own personal knowledge and current research informed the study. The following sections describe how my personal experiences, theoretical framework, and related literature shaped my qualitative research design.

#### **Personal Experience**

As the instrument of research and particularly a male doing research with women, it was important I connect and acknowledge my personal experiences with my area of focus to avoid missing potential insights, hypotheses, and validity checks (Maxwell,

2013). As both Maxwell (2013) and Patton (2015) noted, the researcher is an integral part of qualitative research and serves as the primary research instrument or medium through which data is gathered, analyzed, and presented. I must be aware of how the culture and subcultures I have experienced shaped my interpretation of the world.

Maxwell (2013) discussed using the researcher's personal experience as a component when building a conceptual framework. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) mentioned using the researcher's personal experience to stimulate which conceptual framework to use. My personal experiences as a male, who progressed from former collegiate student-athlete to high school associate athletic director, guided the topic of my study. Both Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) cautioned that personal experiences should be monitored throughout the study to prevent personal bias from affecting the research. Although my personal experiences helped me choose a dissertation topic, they could have inadvertently influenced my data if I did not constantly acknowledge and monitor how they were influencing my study. Maxwell (2013) discussed that researchers did not need to separate their study and personal experience. Instead, he argued the study and researcher's personal life could provide unique insights and guidance. He advocated for keeping the two combined, but constantly monitoring the relationship in order to prevent personal bias from influencing the conclusion.

Based on my personal life, career, and athletic experiences, I developed personal theories about the career progressions of an individual navigating the career pathway to athletic director (AD). Athletics have always been a major part of my personal life dating back to elementary school. My dad grew up playing football, and my mom grew up playing softball. Both of my parents tell stories of their fond memories from athletic

successes. One of my older brothers played competitive soccer for 15 years. My other older brother also played competitive soccer. His career progressed beyond youth and high school to play two years of college soccer. As the middle child, I followed a similar athletic path as my two older brothers. I played competitive youth and high school soccer. I was fortunate to eventually earn a scholarship and play four years of college soccer at the University of North Georgia. My younger brother followed a similar path. He played for the same youth club soccer organization, same high school program, and eventually the same college as me. My younger sister also grew up playing competitive soccer and ran cross country in high school.

As I reflect on my experiences with youth athletics, I always return to how grateful I am for the time my parents spent investing in me. For many of my youth recreational soccer teams, my mom served as the head coach. When I turned 12 and began the process of progressing from recreational soccer to competitive travel soccer, my soccer club did not have a team for my age group. My mom again volunteered to be the head coach and started a travel team for my age group. At the time, she was a full-time nurse at one of the busiest hospitals in Georgia. Reflecting on her ability to balance work, family, and coaching, I am extremely grateful for the time she invested in me throughout my developmental years.

Growing up my dad would attend every practice he could for all of the five children in our family. I can still remember when I turned 16 thinking how different it would be to drive to my own soccer practices for the last three years of high school. I would drive 25 minutes from my house to soccer practice, only to find out my dad drove his own car from work to my practice just to watch and be part of it. As a kid, I never

really thought much about it. Now, as a parent of my own three children, I reflect on those experiences and understand how grateful I am to have parents that invested that much time in me growing up. Recalling these experiences and exploring my own thoughts on athletics in general really helps me understand why I now value the importance of relationships in my own personal family life, teaching, coaching, and athletics.

Reflecting on my own career navigation, the most impactful mentors along the way are all tied together through the common element of athletics. In high school, my varsity soccer coach for four years was also the school's AD. From receiving the most improved award my ninth-grade season to being the captain of our team my 12th-grade year, my coach constantly pushed me to improve on and off the field. He challenged me to become a better student-athlete each year. I remember my freshman year he told me that I was not getting as much playing time as I wanted because I did not have the same refined ball skills as the other players in our program. The next season I went from juggling the ball less than 100 times to easily juggling a few thousand without dropping it. In high school athletics, half of the games most teams play are called non-region and do not count for the playoffs. The other half are region games and determine playoff standings. My high school coach would always require us to wear a suit on region game days to school. As a high school student, I never understood why this was a requirement. As I now enter my 12th-year coaching my own high school soccer team, I reflect on those experiences and understand he was trying to teach us the importance of those matches and the business mindset we needed to have throughout the day. The life lessons

he taught me on and off the field, helped me develop into the player and person I am today.

Reflecting on my time in college, my soccer coach was one of the most impactful people. As a freshman, I had a very successful start to my college player career. I started and played every game on a winning Division II soccer program. I felt invincible heading into my sophomore year. During preseason that year, I hurt my knee and was limited to start the season. When I became fully healthy, I never regained my starting spot and my playing time was very limited. The team was not as successful as my freshman year, and I really struggled to understand why the coach would not play me more. I went into his office with only a few weeks left in my sophomore season and told the head coach I planned to quit that day. Rather than beg me to stay, he challenged me to question my future at that moment. He said if I quit on the team when things were going bad in that moment, how would I handle adversity in my academic, personal, career, and family life when things were challenging. That moment has had a profound impact on the trajectory of my personal life, career, academic, and family. I went on to earn back my starting spot, graduate as the male scholar athlete with the highest GPA, meet my wife on the women's soccer team, and eventually graduate with the intent of becoming a teacher and soccer coach.

My personal coaching journey began when I was only a junior at North Georgia. A local club organization had to fire a coach for misusing team funds and was looking for a replacement. My college soccer coach recommended I explore the opportunity and thought I would be a good fit. I decided to take the opportunity and coach the elite boys travel soccer team. Gaining experience coaching showed me a new perspective of

athletics that was completely different from my own playing experiences. This opportunity would also become the starting point for my interest in coaching soccer. The following year a local high school was looking for an assistant JV coach. My college coach again recommended me and thought I would be a good fit. I took the opportunity to continue building my coaching resume. I also wanted to learn about the differences of coaching club soccer compared to coaching a high school team. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Coaching this high school team was one of the motivating factors for me to eventually progress to becoming a high school teacher and varsity soccer coach. The following year while student teaching middle school, the feeder high school reached out to ask if I would be the head JV soccer coach. This opportunity provided me my first real experience balancing teaching while coaching a competitive soccer team. The head varsity coach was very supportive of my JV team and helped me balance the responsibilities of teaching and coaching throughout the season. These three opportunities provided me the foundation to begin my own teaching and coaching career at the high school level.

In the summer of 2012, I applied to over 100 middle and high schools throughout Georgia. The limited number of jobs was a correlation to the 2011 recession. Only three schools brought me in for an interview. Only one out of the three job offers came with a soccer coaching position. I knew that was the right opportunity for me. I was interviewed by the male AD, male principal, and female math department chair. All three interviews went well, and I was offered a full time teaching position and the head boys varsity soccer position. I did not know at the time of the interview that AD's twin sons were both juniors on the soccer team I just took over. Reflecting back on being offered the position

to coach his own children as a first year teacher and first year varsity coach, I am always grateful for the opportunity I was provided.

In my first season leading the varsity program, we started 0-3. Three separate times we were leading 1-0 and ended up losing 2-1. I can still recall walking up the bleachers after the third loss around 10:30 PM. The stadium was basically empty, and I only remember seeing the AD at the top of the bleachers waiting for me. I thought, at that moment, I might be fired. He walked me towards the parking lot and told me I was doing all the right things, we were on the right track and once we got the first one, and the rest would come. His belief in me, in that moment, has always resonated with me about how fortunate I was that he not only gave me my first opportunity to teach and coach, but also believed in me when things were not successful. The team went on to win the next 11 games, secure a region championship, top seed for the playoffs, and eventual finish in the Elite 8. Reflecting on that experience has helped me understand what I value in athletics. It is not about winning or losing. It is about doing things the right way, running a program that the players, parents and school are proud to be a part of, and helping develop student-athletes into productive people on and off the field.

As a first-year teacher, I was often worried about getting through every math standard to make sure all my students were prepared for end of course assessments. I would spend all day teaching then several more hours preparing content for the next day at home. The long hours of teaching an academic subject, grading assessments, preparing content, and coaching a varsity sport were exhausting my first two years. I felt like I had limited time to build relationships with students and support them beyond pushing content. I thought about how much student culture had changed since I began high school

in 2003. I went to an affluent high school in Gwinnett County that did not have the same diverse needs as the school I was currently working at. I also did not grow up with the pressures of social media influencing my everyday decisions. Entering my third and fourth year, I really made a point of emphasis to focus on building relationships with all of my students and trying to support them beyond the constant push for academic assessment success. The shift in my teaching philosophy greatly changed my perspective on what makes a valuable teacher or coach in high school athletics.

Throughout my personal educational journey, I can recall specific moments that negatively impacted me. These experiences have stayed with me and made me want to become a positive influence when I entered the profession. I once had a meeting with my high school academic advisor telling my mom not to let me take any additional physical education (PE) courses my senior year. I had already met all my graduation requirements, but he thought it would be a waste of my time and not productive for helping me get ready for college. He did not think PE was a useful elective, and I should take additional academic courses. Flash forward 15 years, and I am a high school PE teacher. The impact teachers and coaches can have on someone can last for a lifetime. My college professor once called me into her office and told me she was thinking about removing me from the education program. She told me I was not a great candidate to enter the profession because I did work as hard as the other students in her course. I thought she was joking at first as I balanced playing college soccer, personal life, working a job, and completing all my other courses with A's. The following year I ended up being the only person in my 40 person cohort to receive a full time teaching position. As much as I wanted to email her and my high school advisor to let them know the importance playing soccer had on

helping me land my first teaching and coaching position, I decided instead to use these experiences to shape how I would treat my students when I entered the classroom.

Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, my school district decided to remain on Zoom for the entire year. The only students that were allowed on school campus were athletes for practices and games. With 99% of all cameras being turned off during our Zoom sessions while teaching PE online, I knew I could do something positive by creating a second junior varsity team. At any normal year of tryouts, I would only have taken 18 to 20 players on the varsity and junior varsity team. However, this year I felt an extraordinary amount of internal pressure to allow everyone to make one of the teams. I wanted to provide an opportunity for more students to leave their house, participate in sports, and continue receiving social interaction in a structured environment.

Throughout my 12 years teaching and coaching at the high school level, I have worked with numerous women in different capacities. While teaching math for four years, my department and collaborative classroom teacher were both women. As someone who did not enter the education field with the specific goal of teaching math, I am forever grateful for how supportive these two individuals were in keeping me in the field of education. While teaching special education, my department head was a woman. My school has had a woman serve as principal for multiple years. My current physical education department head has been a woman for the past six years. While coaching, I have had a woman as my head boys coach or assistant boys JV coach for multiple years. I have had an assistant boys varsity coach that is a woman for the past three years. Growing up with my mom as a coach and now coaching and working alongside women

within my own soccer program, I am constantly reminded of the value women bring to the field of athletics at all levels.

Exploring my own progression from being a male student-athlete, to teacher-coach with no athletic administrative responsibilities to the assistant AD and now the associate AD provided valuable context to understand what I value in life and knowledge that guided my study. Reflecting on my personal career path, being a male likely impacted my career progression. The first position at my current school was for a teaching job and head boys varsity soccer coaching position. One could theorize that since the position was for a boys varsity soccer team, being a male played a role in helping me get my foot in the door as a teacher and coach for this job. It is important to acknowledge that without first getting my opportunity to start teaching and coaching, I would not have been able to begin my own navigation to athletic leadership.

After teaching and coaching for two years, I wanted to become more involved in the athletic department. At the time, I had no children of my own, was not in graduate school, and looking for additional work responsibilities to build my resume. I asked my AD if he had any opportunities for me to get involved beyond coaching soccer. He offered me the chance to work a few ninth-grade and JV basketball games to get experience in game management. The following year, I asked for additional responsibilities. We had someone in our athletic department step down, and I was promoted to assistant AD of winter sports. In my new role, I helped oversee game day operations for all levels of basketball and wrestling. I was grateful for the additional responsibilities because without experience in these roles, I would not be able to build my resume to gain the knowledge required to be successful in athletic management one day.

The following year our assistant AD for fall sports transferred to a new school. My athletic director moved me into this role since I had experience and this position required more game day involvement. As I grew in the classroom teaching math and evolved as a soccer coach, I also began to build my own foundation of knowledge on what athletics meant to the community they represented and school culture as a whole. I also began to experience my real first feeling of role conflict and work life balance challenges. As my wife and I celebrated the birth of our first child, I began to have conflicting feelings about the length of time I would spend at work. With teaching a full class load, coaching a successful soccer program five days per week after school, and assisting in event management multiple days per week for all levels of football and volleyball, I began to internally question if I took on too many responsibilities. Thankfully for me, my wife was able to take off teaching and raise our children. This has been significant for my own career navigation. With her being able to bring our children to my work while I am staying after school for various sports events, I still have the same connection to my family that I experienced growing up.

Throughout my first five years at my school, I really wanted to transition from teaching 11<sup>th</sup> grade math to physical education. As an athlete growing up, becoming a PE teacher was always something I wanted to do. I wanted to share my knowledge of exercising and eating healthy to hopefully inspire students in a way similar to all the great PE teachers throughout my educational career. To help support my case for transitioning job positions, in my third year teaching , I went back to graduate school to get my masters degree in kinesiology with a focus in health and physical education. During that year, I asked the school to switch me to a paraprofessional to give me the flexibility to

still work at the school, complete my degree, coach the soccer team, and continue my assistant AD responsibilities. After completing my degree that year, I asked the school for a transfer to any PE spot in the district. They were not able to assist my request, but comprised a half time math and half time PE position. I was grateful they were willing to compromise and was thankful to continue teaching, coaching, and completing my AD responsibilities. After my fifth year at the school, I really advocated to my administration that I wanted a switch to full time PE. By this point, we had multiple PE spots open up within my own school and several more throughout our feeder school that I was passed over for. Getting the opportunity to see me teach all three of his children in the classroom, coach his own children two years on the soccer field, and work alongside him in the athletic department for three years, my AD came up with an idea to create a new position within the athletic department for me to become the associate AD as a bridge to keep me at my school for a sixth year. The position would keep me in half math and half PE for another year, but would expand my daily AD responsibilities. As someone who one day aspires to become an AD, that role was very intriguing to me. It would give me the opportunity to continue working at the school I really enjoyed, coaching the soccer team, and further increase my understanding of how to run an athletic department. The following year I received a full time PE position and have remained at the same school all 12 years. Each year I have received additional athletic department responsibilities to further increase my personal experiences with athletic leadership.

My own personal experiences have provided me with a foundation of knowledge that provides unique insights into what I value in life, athletics, career, family, student-athlete development, community involvement, school culture, and personal values. All of

my personal cultural schema could have impacted my research if I did not unpack the details, investigate, and monitor my own subjectivity. Vagle (2016) described subjectivity as the ways a researcher's biases may impact the collection and analysis of data. In my validity section, I discuss how I monitored and acknowledged my own subjectivity as potential validity threats using recommendations from Peshkin (1988). As I monitored my personal experiences, conducted interviews, analyzed data, and constructed themes throughout the study, I recognized there were potential other lenses for making-meaning to occur particularly those dominant in the lives of the participants.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Boundaryless career theory served as the theoretical framework for my study. I was interested in learning how the collaborators in my research experience the world and how they make sense of it through reflection of their experiences. After reflecting on the meaning of their experiences, the theoretical framework provided me with a theoretical lens through which to evaluate how these women persisted along their career path. The use of existing theory provided an additional lens to question what I understand about the phenomenon of how women persisted to the position of interscholastic athletic director (AD). Maxwell (2013) mentioned a good use for existing theory is to gain insights that only existing theory can provide. Throughout my research, I monitored my use of theory to ensure I did not manipulate my study to align to a particular explanation of it. Maxwell (2013) discussed, the imposition of theory is a potential problem for researchers that can lead to the prevention of valuable insights and relations that do not fit the theory, but may be important to participants. As a lens to gain insights only, existing theory provided a way to question what I understand about how women experienced the process of

becoming an interscholastic AD. I used the competencies-based boundaryless career model developed by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996), grounded by boundaryless career theory described by Arthur et al. (1989), as a theoretical framework to further understand career navigation. It was my initial operating belief that the experiences of my collaborators will relate in some way to the boundaryless career competency model (BCCM) established by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996).

The BCCM describes how individuals can take ownership of their career growth, rather than rely on traditional employer growth opportunities. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) found traditional career models are dependent on the organization for growth and progression. These outdated pathways are restrictive to an individual's career development. Traditional career ladders have boundaries limiting career mobility (Arthur et al., 2005). DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) established boundaryless career competencies, knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why, as a model to explain how an individual can gain career mobility by moving away from traditional career progressions and instead focusing on individual agency. Using the three competencies model established by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996), an individual can see how to take ownership of their own career growth to move away from the traditional career ladder boundaries that limit career mobility.

Literature on boundaryless career competencies advocates for individuals to acquire three competencies, knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why, as knowledge for career autonomy (Colakoglu, 2011; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). The first competency, knowing-how, describes the knowledge of an individual's skills and expertise in the chosen career pathway (e.g., athletic leadership). The second

competency, knowing-whom, describes the relationships formed and career networks established that are required to support an individual during career transfer. The final competency, knowing-why, described the individual's motivation for their own career pathway. For career development to become independent of the chosen career path, Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle (1999) described acquisition of career competencies as a model to follow for an individual seeking a boundaryless career. Reviewing employment data, Whisenant (2003) and Acosta and Carpenter (2014) both found the number of women working as head coaches and assistant coaches have steadily declined since Title IX. The decline of women in various coaching roles limits the ability for females to acquire the career competencies required for successful career mobility. This study seeks to gain a better understanding of how current female interscholastic athletic directors experienced the process of successful career mobility. To gain additional understanding of values and experiences that helped my collaborators persist along the pathway to interscholastic athletic leadership roles, I further explored the meaning gained from reflecting upon reconstructed experiences through the boundaryless career competencies model (BCCM), established by Defillippi and Arthur (1996), that influenced their career choices. The use of theory allowed me to question what I understand about the process these women went through and share additional insights into what competencies helped these women on their boundaryless career path to interscholastic athletic directors.

Arthur and Rousseau (1996) proposed a shift from the traditional hierarchical career progression to be replaced by an independently driven, subjective career advancement. The BCCM identified three capabilities, knowledge, skills and relationships, needed for anyone to navigate a chosen career path (Defillippi & Arthur,

1996). The model was established to search for predictors of career success in a non-linear career progression. Defillippi and Arthur described the three boundaryless career competencies as: know-why competencies, or personal meaning and motivation, know-how competencies, or career-relevant skill sets, and know-whom competencies, or networking. Exploring my collaborators reflected upon meanings within these three competencies provided my study with a theoretical lens to better understand how previous experiences influenced and impacted later experiences. Using the BCCM allowed for analysis that goes beyond the identification of similarities and differences among themes. The collection, reflection, and analysis of their unique life stories viewed through the lens of a boundaryless career allowed me to further understand the meaning and influence of their reflected experiences on their career decision. Analyzing the data through an established theoretical model provided valuable insights into the predictors of successful career navigation.

Women continue to be underrepresented in all levels of athletic leadership. As women continue to push for equality and attain athletic leadership positions, the need for additional research on how successful women prepared and the pathway they navigated to interscholastic athletic director is evident. In my study, I explored who my collaborators are, how they experienced the world, and how they make sense of it. The theoretical lens only served to help me explore additional insights between the meaning my collaborators made from reflecting on their experiences and career trajectories. After inductively analyzing my data and letting it and the participants guide my understanding, I used the BCCM framework as a lens to explore potential additional insights into how my collaborators were able to navigate the professional pathway to becoming athletic

directors. Exploring the meaning my collaborators gained from reflecting upon their experiences within the three competencies of my model provided unique insights only existing theory could provide. Knowing why, the individual motivation and value, the women I interviewed became involved in athletic administration provided one component for how current ADs navigated a successful career pathway. For example, I discovered that one of my collaborators had a middle school athletic coach that became a father figure in her life. She described the value of that relationship in her teenage years. She credited that coach's influence on her life as the motivation for her career trajectory and reason why she wanted to get into coaching. Until our three interviews, my collaborator had never stopped to reflect on this coach's impact until my study. Exploring the knowing how competency allowed me to better understand the skills and expertise the women I interviewed had developed to help them persist to the current position of AD. For example, I discovered one of my collaborators was raised by a drug addicted single parent with six younger siblings. As the oldest child, she reflected on how she developed leadership skills as a young age as she helped siblings navigate their childhood, while balancing her own responsibilities. She saw these early leadership skills as the foundation for how was able to transition into a leadership role within her first three years of teaching. Knowing whom, the relationships and networks, the significant networks my collaborators identified provided the final component to reveal insights, which have previously been unexplored. For example, I discovered four of the women in my study all returned to teach and coach at the high school they attended. Within gathered stories a pattern arose with their former coaches having now moved into either becoming a school administrator or the athletic director. The strong relationships formed when they were

student-athletes playing for these former coaches was seen as a key element to helping them get their foot in the door and begin the journey to athletic director. All of my collaborators discussed the existing relationship they had with former coaches as a key reason for their entry into teaching and coaching. The unique insights gained from inductively analyzing my data allowed me to describe context in great detail allowing the reader to decide what applies to their own context as I wrote about implications for practice, guidance, and suggestions for future research.

The beauty of qualitative research and crafting narratives is in the context and uniqueness, which allows data analysis that not only searches for similarity among themes but also shed light on the unique. As I progressed through rounds of coding and mining the data for themes in my study, I acknowledged there may be other lenses for explaining career pathways and remained open to parallels between my findings and other existing theory and research. The last section of my conceptual framework is relevant literature associated with my research topic. My literature review examined previous literature to document the need for further research on my topic (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The literature will help explore what has been studied, what are the previous tentative explanations for the issue, and what still needs additional understanding (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

### **Pilot Study**

I conducted two pilot studies prior to completing my research. My first pilot study was on the topic of exploring high school athletic coaches that lead through the lens of goodness following guidance from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. Although I ended up changing the direction of my research, the valuable insights I gained from this pilot study

helped guide the development of my second pilot study and inform the research methods for my dissertation. In my second pilot study, fall of 2022, I interviewed a woman that is currently a teacher and coach aspiring to navigate the pathway to athletic leadership. I describe my pilot studies and their impact on my study in the following sections.

As a novice researcher, the first pilot interview allowed me to see the strengths of my current research design and areas that needed to be adjusted to improve and strengthen my study. The first pilot study helped me understand how to establish access with my participant, communicate with the participant prior to and after the interview, and how to conduct an interview from starting a recorder, asking questions, to transcribing audio. Reflecting on the first pilot study, I was able to see the difference in insight I could gain from asking a how question versus asking a why question.

Conducting additional interviews helped me become more comfortable and reduce unwanted reactivity. After attempting to code the transcript, I found that I needed to gain a deeper understanding of what exactly categorizing and connecting strategies were and how to properly implement them. I struggled to write any memos throughout the interview because I was too focused on asking all of the questions on my interview guide and keeping the interview flowing. This actually hindered the overall quality of my interview because I never allowed for my participant to go into great depth on their responses. I also never wrote down memos to go back and ask for further explanation on topics of great interest. In my second pilot interview, it was important for me to focus on asking open-ended questions, sitting back, and letting my participants do the majority of the talking. While they were talking, I would also make it a point of emphasis to practice

memoing so that I could go back and ask for further insights on areas that I thought needed additional explanation.

After changing the direction of my research proposal, I was able to conduct a second pilot interview with a woman that is on a similar career trajectory as mine. She was in her seventh-year teaching at the time of my pilot study and coaching high school athletics. She aspired to become a high school athletic director. Using the knowledge gained from reflecting on my first pilot study, I revised my approach, implemented my improved interview techniques, memoing, and data analysis. The second interview helped me ensure the conceptual framework I was building was appropriate for the study I envisioned. Though my pilot participant and I both are assistant AD's in similar schools, I identified differences in our personal histories, educational backgrounds, and athletic experiences that contributed to some contrasts in athletic leadership ideologies. The woman I interviewed had a similar career path as mine. For example, she discussed playing high school sports, college, sports, starting as a JV coach, and eventually getting promoted to a varsity coach. She discussed several of her coaches growing up being some of her biggest role models and mentors. Her unique insights helped me see that even though we were both teachers and coaches, she held her own values, ideas, and beliefs about the meaning of her experiences along the path to where she is currently at.

Reflecting on the second interview allowed me to further see which of my interview techniques aligned with my research methods and supported the objectives of my study and which of those detracted from those objectives and needed to be further revised. Reviewing the second interview showed me that I did a better job asking open-ended questions, but I again struggled to ask timely and effective follow up questions to

get further exploration. I was more successful my second time gathering data that went deeper and produced rich contextual stories. I still needed to practice being concise with asking my questions. Reviewing the transcripts, I saw times when I phrased questions more than one way before turning the interview over for a response by my participant. This slows down the flow of the conversation and might impact my collaborators' responses. This pilot experience supports my proposed approach to explore the process of becoming an interscholastic AD.

As I progressed towards conducting my study and completing my first round of interviews with each collaborator, I reminded myself to focus on minimal interviewer interruption, write memos throughout the interviews, and ask for further clarification as needed. Even though I entered each interview with a guide and list of topics that I planned to cover, I let the conversation flow naturally and take its own direction. Using the lessons I learned from my pilot studies, I was intentional about speaking as little as possible and giving my collaborators the opportunity to share their stories without interruption.

### **Literature Review**

This section explores data-driven literature to frame the context of my research topic. The literature review discusses three key themes: women in workplace leadership roles, the impact of gender discrimination in athletics, and the navigation of professional pathways. By examining trends in women's athletic participation and leadership roles, alongside workplace gender discrimination, this review establishes the need for further research on how women navigate pathways to athletic leadership. Presenting relevant literature sheds light on the underrepresentation of women in these roles and offers

alternative perspectives on addressing this issue. This literature review serves as a starting point to address the underrepresentation of women in interscholastic athletic director positions. Recognizing gaps in existing research, I expanded my review to include studies on women in leadership across various industries and interscholastic administration roles, such as assistant principals, principals, and superintendents. This broader scope provides a richer context for understanding the challenges women face in athletic administration. Throughout my study, I remained open to revisiting relevant literature, as Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the iterative nature of qualitative research. This approach helped create a comprehensive examination of the underrepresentation of women in athletic leadership and supports the importance of my study.

### **Impact of Title IX: Women in Workplace Leadership Roles**

To gain a better understanding of women in athletic leadership, it is important to gain an understanding of the current state of women in workplace leadership roles. A study conducted by Catalyst (2020) found women only occupied the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) role of 5.8% of all Standard and Poor's (S&P) Fortune 500 companies, which are the largest by revenue in the U.S. To further present the landscape within education, as of 6 years ago, Morillo (2017) found females accounted for 75% of non-leadership educational roles, but only represented 24% of leadership positions such as superintendent, principal, or assistant principal. A study reviewing census data conducted 15 years ago by Whisenant (2008) found, in the United States, males held 76% of all principal positions and 85% of all athletic director positions. Males continue to hold the majority of leadership roles as they accounted in 2022 for 66% of principals at the high school level (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022a) and 78% of athletic directors at every

level (Zippia The Career Expert, 2022b). This data is important as Whisenant, Miller, and Pedersen (2005) reported the group holding the majority of power, in this case males in athletic leadership positions, often hired other men due to similar social characteristics. These demographics remained steady as men accounted for 86% of the 13,000 National Interscholastic Athletic Administrator Association members in 2022 (Chapman, 2022). The relevant hiring practices appear to limit opportunities for qualified women.

Since the passage of Title IX, there has been an exponential growth in the number of women participating in athletics. Title IX helped women achieve an equal playing field within the context of sport participation. Participation data gathered by Staurowsky (2016) found female participation in high school athletics increased over 1000% from 1972 to 2014. Participation numbers for female athletes has experienced continual annual growth since the passage of Title IX (NFHS, 2023). However, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found the number of women employed as athletic director, head coach, or assistant coach have all seen a decline since the passage of Title IX. Reviewing employment data from 1972, O'Hallarn, Eckhoff, and Seymore (2016) found that women held 90% of head coaching positions for female sports. A study reviewing employment data at the collegiate level by Wilson (2017) found women only accounted for 40.2% of head coaches for all NCAA women's athletic teams. A similar study conducted by Lapchick (2021) reported women accounted for the head coach of 41.2% of women's NCAA teams. Lapchick found women accounted for only 50% of assistant coaches for women's teams. Reviewing athletic leadership employment data, Lapchick (2021) found women only accounted for 14% of Division I college athletic directors. The purpose of Title IX was to expand equal opportunities for women at all levels of athletics. This goes

beyond simply increasing the number of sports offered or girls participating in athletics. Additional research and discussions are needed to better understand why the enactment of Title IX has not led to more women in coaching and administrative positions. The following section will further examine the impact of Title IX on women obtaining leadership positions within the workplace.

### ***Title IX Athletic Impact***

Title IX Athletic Impact passage of Title IX created opportunities for women to participate in all levels of athletics (Staurowsky, 2016). The impact of giving women equal opportunities to participate in both interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics led to an exponential growth of women participating in various sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Prior to the implementation of Title IX in 1972, Murray (2002) noted educational institutions were not obligated to provide equal athletic programs for female and male students. Reviewing gender participation data before and after the implementation of Title IX, Murray found universities still offered more male sports leading to gender participation disparities affecting women in the pursuit of legal, equal athletic opportunities. Federally funded educational institutions lacking a required institutional commitment, or legal obligation, to offer equal female athletic programs is illegal (Office for Civil Rights, 2015). Before signing Title IX into federal law, spending on female college athletes accounted for only 2% of most athletic department budgets (Murray, 2002). Acosta and Carpenter (2012) found that 40 years after Title IX, female participation in college sports increased from 16,000 in 1968 to over 200,000 athletes in 2012. Employment data reviewed by Acosta and Carpenter (2012) found that although Title IX resulted in increased sport offerings and participation numbers for women, the

number of female head coaches and athletic directors actually declined. The majority of literature focused on how Title IX is the legislation that led to an increase in females participating in athletics. The goal of Title IX was to provide women with equitable opportunities for participation, coaching, and administration in all athletic programs. In spite of the large number of females participating in athletics, 3.3 million at the high school level (NFHS, 2023) and 226,212 at the college level (NCAA, 2022), men continue to hold the majority of athletic director leadership positions, 86% at the high school level (Chapman, 2022) and 76% at the college level (NCAA, 2022). The following section will elaborate on the impact of Title IX specifically for women working in the role as head or assistant coach of an athletic team.

### ***Female Head Coaches***

Over a 40-year time span from 1972 to 2012, the number of NCAA female head coaches leading a women's team declined from 90% to 42.9% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Reviewing employment data at the NCAA level, Wilson (2017) found the number of female head coaches for women's athletic teams continued to decline as women only accounted for 42.2% of head coaches. As recently as 2021, Lapchick reported women only accounted for the head coach of 41.2% of women's NCAA teams. After reviewing the annual survey data from senior women administrators, Acosta and Carpenter (2012) found the rise of male head coaches leading women's athletic programs correlated to the increased pay, resources, benefits, scholarships and prestige resulting from Title IX. After surveying 112 high school principals, Fowler et al. (2017) found experience as a head coach was a key factor for any individual attempting to reach an athletic administrative position. As the number of female head coaches continually declined over the past 50

years, women continued to face gender inequity in the field of athletic leadership and the professional leaky pipeline to becoming an athletic director. After reviewing gender employment data from 2,964 universities, Sagas et al. (2006) found the gender of the head coach related to the gender composition of the assistant coaches and subsequently noted women employed in the role of head coach statistically hired more female assistant coaches than did men working in the role of head coach. With males holding the majority of head coaching roles (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Lapchick, 2021; Wilson, 2017), female athletes were lacking the influential presence of female leaders to mentor the next generation of female leaders.

### ***Female Athletic Directors***

Prior to Title IX, male and female athletic departments were two separate entities, divided by gender and run by two different athletic directors (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). After passing Title IX, schools began to merge male and female athletic departments as a method to merge resources (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Acosta and Carpenter (2012) found that before Title IX, a female athletic director managed a female athletic department 90% of the time. The researchers reported that in 2012, the percentage of female athletic directors in college athletics declined from 90% to only 20.3%. When Grappendorf and Lough (2006) surveyed 23 women working as NCAA athletic directors, they found the decline of female athletic directors was a result of male and female athletic departments merging when Title IX was passed. An unintentional outcome of Title IX was male and female athletic departments merging into singular entities. The survey results of Grappendorf and Lough's (2006) study found women employed as NCAA AD's believed higher education leaders viewed males as more competent to oversee the newly merged

department than females, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in these roles. As men started to fill the majority of athletic director positions, more male head coaches began to enter the profession, and masculinist hegemony began to dominate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Norman, 2014; Schell & Rodriguez, 2000). As men continue to hold the majority of AD roles across the nation (Chapman, 2022; NCAA, 2022; Zippia The Career Expert, 2022b), additional discussion is needed to better understand the underrepresentation of women employed as in interscholastic AD.

### ***Interscholastic Athletic Directors***

Interscholastic athletic departments consist of assistant coaches, head coaches, athletic trainers, assistant athletic directors, and athletic directors (AD). AD is the highest ranked position within an athletic department. The NCAA published a book in 2013 describing an AD as the individual tasked with overseeing the entire athletic department. The book listed the AD as responsible for monitoring student-athletes, athletic staff, department communications, marketing campaigns, fundraising strategies, financial expenditures, facilities supervision, and community relationships (NCAA, 2013). The National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) released a guide identifying roles of the interscholastic AD in 2013. The 2013 NIAAA guide described an interscholastic AD as the leader of the entire athletic department tasked with organizing schedules, managing events, overseeing the budget, managing athletic staff, and evaluating program performance (Blackburn et al., 2013). A survey of 128 athletic directors conducted by Ha, Hums, and Greenwell (2011) found the expectations and role of the interscholastic athletic directors continually expanded. An outline of administrative responsibilities for an AD within the 2013 NIAAA guide included arranging

transportation, manage athletic records, coordinate media, attend booster club meetings, manage equipment, purchase uniforms, and schedule officials (Blackburn et al., 2013). After thematically analyzing interviews from 16 current interscholastic ADs, Kochanek and Erickson (2021) reported the AD as an essential component to shaping the overall culture of interscholastic sports. A national survey of over 400 principals by Schneider and Stier (2001) found the well-being of interscholastic athletes and the successful management of the athletic department correlates to the AD. Currently, there is a lack of research on how the gender of an interscholastic AD influences the culture of an athletic department. To gain a better understanding of the obstacles women face on the pathway to athletic leadership, the following section of this literature review describes the current state of gender discrimination in athletics.

### **Theories of Gender Discrimination in Athletics**

Females continue to face obstacles entering the field of athletics because of male hegemony over all levels of sports (Schell & Rodriguez, 2000). After reviewing annual survey data for high school athletics, Whisenant (2008) concluded hegemonic masculinity, or male dominance over females, existed in interscholastic athletics.

Whisenant (2008) found in the United States males held 76% of all principal positions and 85% of all athletic director positions. Although Whisenant's work was done 15 years ago, I found nothing in the literature that demonstrated a significant change in the field.

Surveying female athletes, Norman (2014) found 24 out of 25 women reported an impact of masculine hegemony on their own lack of self-belief and motivation to pursue a career in athletic coaching. The 24 women responded they were reluctant to progress through the coaching career path due to the historical male domination of the culture of

athletics. It is important to find solutions to the current underrepresentation of women working as head coaches, assistant coaches, and athletic directors as Latu et al. (2018) reported young females are likely to imitate and mimic the behaviors of female role models. With males maintaining control of the majority of leadership positions, hegemonic masculinity within interscholastic athletics contributes to an underrepresentation of female athletic directors (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Schell & Rodriguez, 2000).

### ***Homogenous Reproduction***

Homogenous reproduction limited the opportunities of females to acquire athletic staff positions, head coaching jobs, and athletic director careers (Whisenant, 2008). Researchers Knoppers (1987), Lovett and Lowry (1994), and Kane and Stangl (1991) all reported males were able to maintain power in leadership positions through homologous reproduction a term Kanter (1977) described as the empowering of other individuals, that look, sound, act, and replicate behaviors similar to their own. Although women continue to make strides for equality in the workplace, a longitudinal examination of hiring patterns within college athletic departments by Boucher and LaVoi (2023) found the number of women's teams coached by women remained stagnant at approximately 40% to 43% from 2013 to 2023 as a result of homogenous reproduction. With males leading 86% of Division I athletic departments (Lapchick, 2021), the barrier of homogenous reproduction will continue to perpetuate the cycle of underrepresentation of women as athletic leaders. Whisenant (2008) found the organizational structure of male-dominated interscholastic athletic departments resulted in males being able to sustain their power by hiring male head coaches. The researcher argued that as males continued to hire males

through homogenous reproduction, fewer women entered the profession, and men were able to continue their dominance over athletic leadership. This research builds on the foundation of literature from Kane and Stangl (1991) who found that the theory of homologous reproduction was successful at explaining the decline of women in athletic coaching roles. According to Cunningham and Sagas (2006), homologous reproduction stems beyond the scope of male athletic directors hiring male coaches. The researchers found that male head coaches are more likely to hire male assistant coaches. These results further the argument that homogenous reproduction was limiting the opportunities of qualified females to enter the athletic profession and progress to the position of athletic director.

### ***Glass Ceiling***

Females often faced challenges and barriers in the workplace, beyond what equal males encountered, limiting their employment options or progress to leadership positions (Jackson et al., 2014). According to Cleveland et al. (2000), the glass ceiling is a theory that helps describe barriers limiting the advancement of females in the workplace. Jackson et al. (2014) described the glass ceiling females encountered in the workplace as additional challenges women faced by a system of gender discrimination that can marginalize women. Females interested in pursuing an athletic coaching or leadership career faced additional challenges compared to what male counterparts faced (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). The glass ceiling was described by Jackson et al. (2014) as a barrier preventing females from being able to advance in the workplace. In a review of literature and theories used to describe the barriers women face throughout career choices, Betz (2006) identified perceived artificial barriers or the glass ceiling as an

obstacle women faced while trying to navigate the career ladder, affecting their decision to pursue a given field. A study conducted by Glass (2000) found female superintendents perceived restrictive forces were working against them from the board of education during the hiring process. These studies highlighted the negative expectancy that gender discrimination reduced the promotional opportunities of females in athletics. The glass ceiling, a term Betz (2006) used to help explain artificial barriers females encountered throughout their career pathway, could be useful to help explore the underrepresentation of females in the coaching field and/or athletic leadership pathway and why they did not decide to pursue certain career paths as their career choice.

### ***Gatekeeping***

Gatekeepers are key individuals who influence another individual's career progression (Shoemaker, 1991). Recognizing the existence of gate keepers contextualizes the importance of the previous discussions from the literature where men hold control of the majority of leadership positions. A review of employment data by Swift (2011) found 90% of all college athletic directors (AD) were males and 89% of the assistant or associate athletic directors were males. Tallerico (2000) analyzed female career progressions through the lens of gatekeeping. The researcher found stereotyping by gender as one of the unwritten criteria employed by the gatekeeper during the selection process of candidates. A qualitative study investigating the experiences of eight athletic directors conducted by Ray (2010) found gatekeepers, current employed ADs, as the individuals responsible for deciphering the unwritten rules of hiring during the selection process of coaches and athletic administrators. Men comprise the overwhelming majority of gatekeepers or individuals with influence over another person's career within an

athletic career progression as 86% of interscholastic departments are overseen by a male (Chapman, 2022) and 76% of collegiate departments are overseen by a male (NCAA, 2022). My proposed study seeks to add additional knowledge to help provide further understanding on how to overcome the male-dominated athletic gatekeeping that currently contributes to the underrepresentation of women employed as ADs and could help improve hiring and pathway resources for career progression.

### **Professional Pathway Navigation**

The professional pathway for women seeking an athletic administration position has become increasingly difficult to navigate. The pathway is challenging as highlighted by Acosta and Carpenter's (2014) longitudinal study showing the number of women employed as athletic director (AD) or head coach continues to decline. A study by Bower and Hums (2013) sought to understand how women currently working in athletic administration positions were able to experience success navigating the professional pathway. Using the boundaryless career competencies model (BCCM), Bower and Hum (2013) identified the competency of knowing whom, a term used to describe career networking resources, as a key factor to the women in their study traversing their pathway. With this being the study I found that came closest to connecting to my study and with the number of women entering the field of athletic leadership continuing to drop, resulting in the opportunities for women to mentor and network with each other declining, and therefore the number of women in leadership roles dwindling, I turned my attention toward the idea the self-efficacy may be important. Self-efficacy begins to influence an individual's belief if they possess the skills to achieve career success within that field (Abele & Spurk, 2009). I considered how reviewing the literature on self-

efficacy could help explain where the individual motivation came from for the women I plan to interview. An individual's lack of one's own belief they can achieve a specific career choice leads to an individual altering his/her outcome expectations within a chosen professional pathway (Lent et al., 1994). Because of the connection between self-efficacy and outcome expectations I realized I would need to probe for how they, my collaborators, altered their own career aspirations by acquiring the skills and expertise needed for their current position of ADs. With this approach in mind, I re-entered the literature search, but still found no direct connections in athletics. Ultimately, the decline in women role models within the field of athletic leadership is leading to the alteration of goal setting within the context of women choosing athletic leadership as a career field. Hence, reviewing the literature on goal setting within the prism of who, a term used to describe the relationships and mentors that impacted choosing a goal as articulated in my theoretical framework, could provide the final component to reveal which common themes these women shared in their pursuit to becoming an AD. Reviewing relevant literature to better understand the impact of females lacking role models in athletic leadership positions will serve as a starting point to better understand the advancement of women into AD roles.

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Self-efficacy is the belief an individual possesses regarding the individual's ability to perform necessary behaviors required to achieve a desired performance (Bandura, 1986). The theorist identified an individual's personal judgement as a predictor of the person's capacity to set goals, take action, and achieve the expected outcome. Bandura (1986) found an individual develops self-efficacy through learning experiences.

According to his research, social interactions, personal input, background environmental influences, and contextual factors influenced learning experiences. Betz and Hackett (1981) found females avoided male-dominated occupational pathways due to lacking self-confidence. Even though females have closed the participation gap in athletics representing 45% of all high school athletes last year (NFHS, 2023), the male dominated leadership positions have not shifted, with women only representing 14% of interscholastic AD's (Chapman, 2022) and 24% of collegiate AD's (NCAA, 2022). According to Whisenant (2008), gender stereotyping athletics as a male-dominated career path directly influenced female career choices. When girls are growing up and do not see females in head coaching positions or athletic leadership positions, the lack of leaders that look and sound like them is potentially impacting their belief they can one day navigate the process to becoming an athletic director.

### ***Outcome Expectations***

Outcome expectations describe an individual's own belief about the perceived consequence, positive or negative, for a specific behavior (Lent et al., 1994). The researchers found an individual's confidence in her or his own abilities affect outcome expectations. Females avoid pursuing athletic leadership as a career pathway based on the perceived challenges from their personal expertise (Lent et al., 1996). The researchers found learning experiences that shaped an individual's outcome expectations began in early childhood and continued to develop during adulthood. Research has shown gender-related efficacy for females was hampered less by their abilities and more by the link to perceived stereotypical male occupations (Bandura, 1997). Acosta and Carpenter (2014) reported only 43.4% of female intercollegiate sports teams had a female head coach.

Recent studies have shown women only accounted as the head coach of 41.2% of women's teams in college athletics (Lapchick, 2021), 14% of interscholastic AD's (Chapman, 2022) and 24% of collegiate AD's (NCAA, 2022). The belief a woman can navigate the process to achieve the outcome of interscholastic AD is impacted by the perceived obstacle that athletic leadership is a male occupation. Without women in highly visible athletic leadership roles, girls will continue to lack the ability to observe and model the behaviors required to break systemic barriers found in athletics. The findings suggest that women are lacking the visual representation of women in athletic leadership roles limiting their belief they are able to set a goal of achieving this career pathway.

### ***Goal Setting***

Individuals set goals based on the anticipated consequences, positive or negative, of their actions Bandura (2009). Goals, as described by Bandura (2009), are set based on an individual's perception of personal abilities that were likely to produce successful outcomes. His theory on why individuals set goals could be useful in shedding light on how the underrepresentation of women in athletics began and remains low. Using the social cognitive model of career decision-making, Lent et al. (2013) identified background and contextual variables as resources that explained why an individual with a passion for a specific career decided not to pursue that goal. Females with an interest in athletic leadership may not go into that field due to the perceived barriers that athletic leadership was not a career pathway for women. This study aims to expose the process of how current women navigated the professional pathway to athletic leadership. Exploring the contextual supports and barriers my collaborators encountered as they traversed the pathway to athletic administration could help explain their motivation for why they set

certain goals and how they accomplished them. Exploring how their experiences enabled career success along the pathway to becoming an AD could provide valuable insights for future aspiring AD's to achieve career navigation success.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study explores the professional pathway for women entering interscholastic athletic administration. By collecting the reflected-upon experiences of female athletic directors, the study seeks to understand the values and experiences they believe helped them persist and successfully navigate their career journeys.

To provide historical context on the underrepresentation of women in various fields, the first section of my literature review examines the evolution of women in the workplace, athletics, and athletic leadership. This historical foundation highlights gender trends in employment, Title IX's impact on leadership opportunities, and the current state of female athletic directors. Existing research on workplace gender disparities underscores the relevance of this issue, reinforcing the need for strategies to increase the number of aspiring female athletic directors.

The second section of the literature review focuses on gender discrimination, exploring barriers women face in athletic leadership through established theories and workplace discrimination concepts. Before analyzing the key social and emotional competencies my collaborators identify as critical to their career success, I first examine the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting on women's career choices. This review of existing literature provides insight into how DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) *boundaryless career competencies model* can provide an alternate lens to explore the challenges in women's athletic leadership.

The final section of the literature review introduces key social and emotional competencies influencing my collaborators' career development. These insights, accessible only through qualitative research, offer a deeper understanding of the persistent underrepresentation of women in athletic leadership. By applying DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) model, I aim to examine my collaborators' career pathways through their expressed social and emotional competencies as female interscholastic athletic directors.

The literature review advances the research question by linking issues of women's workplace leadership with data-driven findings, framing the broader context of this study. It emphasizes the urgency of understanding the values and experiences that have enabled current female leaders to reach their positions. My conceptual framework, personal experiences, theoretical foundation, and literature review collectively guide this research. My background as a student-athlete, high school teacher, varsity coach, assistant athletic director, and associate athletic director shaped the study's development. This review confirms the need for additional stories of women who have successfully navigated the pathway to athletic leadership. Chapter 3 outlines my research design, study setting, participant recruitment strategies, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, data presentation approach, and validity considerations.

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 of my study describes the setting, participant recruitment, procedures for data collection, data analysis, data presentation, and validity. In order to reach the goals I established previously and answer my research question, I attempted to use narrative inquiry as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). As will be explained in detail later, I found my data didn't lend itself to active story telling as is the target of narrative inquiry. Consequently, I used key components of narrative inquiry to create modified reflective narratives. The methods I applied are laid out in this section and were organized according to lessons learned from studying Maxwell (2013), Patton (2015), and Creswell (2013) on basic qualitative research. Methods were chosen to assist in answering the question: What experiences and values influenced six interscholastic female athletic directors (ADs) working in Georgia to persist as they navigated the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation? The original question was designed to gather stories and allow for meaning making to occur during the reflection of my collaborators' experiences. After data analysis and a discussion with my chair, we realized the question I actually answered was: What connections did six Interscholastic Female Athletic Directors make between their life experiences and values and the influence they had on navigating the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation? In the following section, I detail the research design for my study.

## Research Design

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) guided my reflective narrative inquiry research design. Through Seidman's (2013) three-interview series I collected reflected-upon experiences. My original intent was to follow traditional narrative inquiry and analyze the meaning of lived experiences. I had planned to use this methodology in a collaborative process with my collaborators to co-construct meaning by analyzing how their re-storied narratives reflected their lived experiences and their journey to becoming athletic directors. After analyzing my transcripts, I found the data was primarily expressed in a reflective format rather than an active one. I shifted the focus of research to share how experiences were remembered, processed, and understood over time. Following narrative inquiry allowed me to provide my collaborators with the opportunity to share their individual experiences in a first-person reflective format (Creswell, 2013).

Seidman's (2013) interview structure supported the study by first gathering life histories, then exploring the details of experience, and finally, through reflection, deriving meaning from those experiences. This framework aligned with the purpose of my reflective narrative inquiry approach, which was to uncover the significance behind reflected-upon experiences through storytelling and collaborative re-storying. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative research as the retelling of life stories to understand the connection between knowledge, context, and identity. In my study, collaborators and I co-constructed stories that are presented in a reflective format. The stories focus on introspection, interpretation, and significance of interactions and experiences rather than direct, real-time recounting of events. The stories presented in Chapter 4 illustrate the relationships between actions and events over time, shedding light

on the values and experiences that contributed to their persistence in becoming athletic directors.

Narrative inquiry, as described by Kim (2016), gathers life stories within cultural and historical contexts to create meaning. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional inquiry structure, temporality (time), sociality (relationships and influences), and spatiality (environment), helped me analyze my collaborators' experiences holistically. Maxwell and Miller (2008) emphasized contiguity-based relationships, exploring how factors like time and place influence experiences. My intent was to analyze interview transcripts and structure narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and ends that would present a coherent presentation of their experiences in context. After spending time with my data, I began to see that I did not gather the thick, rich descriptions I hoped. The reflective nature of my data led me to present illustrative snapshots of each collaborator as reflective narratives.

Using Seidman's (2013) open-ended interview approach allowed collaborators to direct the conversation, narrating their histories in depth. This technique illuminated the meaning of their experiences by highlighting interactions, continuity, and situational context. I presented short, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences that authentically represented what my collaborators took away from their experiences, offering insight into the challenges and successes encountered on their path to leadership.

Throughout the research process, I kept a journal to record memos, reflections, and contextual information, which proved invaluable during data analysis. Using both categorizing and connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013; Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Patton, 2015), I identified themes while preserving the individuality of each narrative. Narrative

inquiry was an appropriate methodological choice for understanding how women navigate the pathway to interscholastic athletic director roles in a male-dominated field. Patton (2015) highlighted how stories provide insight into processes, making them essential for understanding my collaborators' career trajectories.

Qualitative research has evolved from a dynamic where researchers held sole power over participants to a more collaborative approach. In my study, I shared authority with my collaborators, co-constructing narratives that authentically conveyed their perspectives. This approach ensured that the data collected was rich and meaningful, providing a deeper understanding of the journey to becoming an interscholastic athletic director. The following sections will discuss my study's setting, collaborator selection, data analysis, data presentation, and validity.

### **Setting and Participant Recruitment**

The setting for my study was Georgia. Initially, I considered narrowing the scope to athletic directors based on school enrollment size, geographic location (North or South Georgia), or classification (public or private). After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A), I began sharing my Qualtrics demographic survey with women employed in the role of interscholastic athletic director across the state of Georgia. However, after analyzing the first submissions of my Qualtrics demographic survey, I found the responses too varied to focus on a specific subgroup. Consequently, I expanded my recruitment to include any female currently employed as an interscholastic athletic director in Georgia.

This study employed purposeful selection to identify information-rich collaborators, individuals with in-depth knowledge of the process of becoming an

interscholastic female athletic director (Patton, 2015). This approach ensured that participants had personal experience or expertise in the topic. Initially, I sought collaborators with a minimum of five years in their current role, believing this would exclude those who may have entered the position by chance and left quickly. Additionally, I assumed less experienced directors might lack meaningful insights into their career path. However, discussions with my committee led me to reconsider. I realized that newer athletic directors might recall their journey more vividly, while more experienced collaborators sometimes struggled to remember details. This shift in perspective proved valuable, as recent hires provided fresh insights into their career trajectories.

To recruit participants, I emailed all of the female ADs with publicly available contact information. Using the GHSA Member School Directory, I identified schools in Georgia that employed female athletic directors, then searched school websites for email addresses. When necessary, I contacted county board offices or school principals for assistance. Despite multiple rounds of outreach, I struggled to secure enough participants. At that point, I employed chain sampling, where informants recommend additional potential collaborators (Patton, 2015). This strategy was particularly effective, as many female ADs had established professional networks with other female AD's across the state. Below is a table with demographic information for all my collaborators, followed by a section that details my data collection methods.

Table 1

List of Collaborators

Collaborator (Pseudonyms)	Age	Highest Degree Earned	Years Teaching	Years as Interscholastic AD
Pam Beesly	58	Bachelors	28	10
Meredith Palmer	40	Masters	16	6
Jan Levinson	36	Bachelors	9	6
Angela Martin	59	Masters	34	20
Karen Filippelli	47	Masters	25	8
Erin Hannon	45	Doctorate	22	15

### Data Collection

The primary data collection method for this study was individual interviews. As the primary research instrument, I conducted the majority of my data collection using Seidman’s (2013) three-interview series. I adhered to Valdosta State University and IRB guidelines to protect my collaborators’ anonymity. To ensure reliable recordings, I used both a digital voice recorder and my mobile device as backups. Additionally, I maintained handwritten minutes and memos in my researcher’s journal. All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a computer with two-factor authentication.

Seidman’s (2013) three-interview structure provided a framework for exploring my collaborators’ experiences in depth and reflecting on their meaning. Maxwell (2013) described open-ended interview questions as an effective qualitative method, allowing individuals to share their experiences through personal narratives. Following this approach, I developed interview guides (see Appendix B) designed to encourage open

storytelling. This structure allowed interviewees to steer conversations toward aspects they deemed significant, avoiding leading questions that could influence their recollections. By reconstructing experiences, collaborators not only recounted past events but also reflected on their evolving understanding of their significance.

Building rapport with my collaborators was essential to collecting rich, meaningful data. Maxwell (2013) noted that qualitative research relationships require ongoing effort and sensitivity. To foster trust, I followed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) recommendations, ensuring collaborators understood that this research aimed to contribute not only to my study but also to improving practices within their field. Establishing strong relationships helped collaborators feel comfortable sharing detailed accounts of their experiences and the insights they had gained. The following section discusses my approach to conducting in-depth interviews using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series.

## **Interviews**

Using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series enhanced the credibility of my study by allowing me, as the primary research instrument, to collect rich, personal details through my collaborators' reconstruction and reflection on their experiences. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. As Maxwell (2013) and Patton (2015) emphasized, the researcher plays an integral role in qualitative research, serving as the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, and presentation.

In a later section, I discuss my connections to the study, acknowledge my personal biases, and describe how I monitored their influence throughout the research process. As the primary research instrument, I remained vigilant for potential threats to

data integrity, ensuring my conclusions were well-supported by evidence. The stories and meanings my collaborators assigned to their reflected-upon experiences allowed me to construct accurate narratives, providing deep insights into their journeys. The three-interview process facilitated a comprehensive understanding of my collaborators' experiences and the significance they attributed to them, which was the core objective of my study.

Through in-depth interviews, I explored how my collaborators made meaning of their experiences, both in the act of reconstructing events and reflecting on their impact (Seidman, 2013). The open-ended questions were designed to capture details as closely as possible to how events actually occurred (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Seidman's (2013) approach allowed each female AD to articulate her experiences, reconstructing them as accurately as possible and reflecting on how those experiences shaped her path. This methodology was particularly effective in examining the shared process of becoming female interscholastic ADs. By capturing individual stories and narrated experiences, I gathered rich, descriptive data and uncovered unique insights only attainable through qualitative research. In the following paragraph, I outline the purpose of each interview.

The first interview (Seidman, 2013) focused on the participants' life histories, placing their experiences within a broader context (see Appendix B). I aimed to understand how their childhood connections to athletics, educational backgrounds, and athletic roles contributed to their current positions. The second interview (see Appendix B) gathered details about their present experiences as female interscholastic athletic directors. Seidman (2013) designed this phase to capture the realities of their current

roles, allowing participants to share stories about their day-to-day experiences. The third interview (see Appendix B) encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2013). Together, my collaborators and I examined how various factors influenced their professional journeys and present identities. Seidman's (2013) structured approach, dividing interviews into past, present, and reflective phases, enabled participants to make sense of their experiences over time.

To explore meaningful areas in greater depth, I incorporated Kim's (2016) "two-sentence follow-up technique" (p. 170). Initially, I prepared prompts to probe further into key experiences. For example, I considered asking participants how a particular experience affected them, what they learned from it, and how it shaped their self-perception. However, based on my committee's recommendation, I adopted Kim's (2016) technique, which transformed my data collection approach. This method involved revisiting something a previously mentioned and asking for further elaboration. Kim (2016) described this technique as a way to elicit richer descriptions while strengthening the researcher-participant relationship through active listening. For example, one collaborator mentioned that her middle school basketball coach was like a father figure to the team. After she completed her thought, I followed up with, "You described your middle school basketball coach as a father figure. Can you explain what you meant by that and describe the characteristics that made you see him that way?" By integrating Kim's (2016) approach into my interview guides, I was able to ask follow-up questions on topics that needed further clarification. Next, I discuss my use of a researcher's journal throughout my study.

## **Researcher Journal**

Beyond conducting interviews, I enhanced the credibility of my study by maintaining a researcher's journal, where I documented observations, developing ideas, and analytical memos. I recorded notes in a composition book throughout my research, using the journal as a tool for reflection and analysis. Creswell (2013) emphasized the importance of a researcher's journal in qualitative studies, while Maxwell (2013) described memos as a valuable analytic technique for capturing insights, recording rich details, and supporting data analysis.

Memos allowed me to track my own subjectivity, document initial impressions after each interview, and serve as reference points during data analysis. Writing memos while transcribing interviews helped me recall my thought processes and deepen my analytical engagement. The researcher's journal also provided a space to examine personal perceptions and cultural influences on data interpretation.

In addition to handwritten memos, I used MAXQDA to write digital memos, ensuring a systematic record of my thought processes throughout coding cycles. Documenting memos across data collection, transcription, and analysis enriched my study with detailed content, descriptive data, and personal context. The integration of a researcher's journal, analytic memos, and Seidman's (2013) three-interview series created an effective framework for exploring the shared and unique experiences of women on their journey to becoming interscholastic athletic directors.

## **Memos**

Data analysis began with memos written before, during, and after each interview (Maxwell, 2013). These memos captured my initial reflections, documented assumptions,

acknowledged biases, and supported the coding and categorization process. Writing memos immediately after each interview created an audit trail improving the credibility of my study. Additionally, memos helped identify gaps in my understanding, revealing areas of experiential knowledge I had not initially considered. Memos strengthened sequential interviews, tracked my progress, and provided contextual depth to my findings. The following section details how I recorded and transcribed interviews to ensure data accuracy and maintain an organized analysis.

### **MAXQDA**

At the conclusion of each interview, I transcribed the data using MAXQDA, a comprehensive software that enables centralized data analysis. MAXQDA's features allowed me to adjust audio speed while transcribing, facilitating deeper engagement with the data. Within my transcriptions, I include pauses that were represented as (pause --), with dashes indicating duration. Descriptive phrases for tone and nonverbal cues, hearty laughter, arm gesture of exasperation, were also noted, serving as an initial step in categorizing analysis. In addition to maintaining a researcher's journal, I wrote memos directly in MAXQDA to document personal reflections, monitor subjectivity, and track my evolving interpretations. Recognizing and acknowledging my subjectivity helped minimize its influence on the data. Once interviews were transcribed verbatim, I began coding the data.

### **Data Analysis**

My data analysis followed recommendations for conducting in-depth qualitative research from Maxwell and Miller (2008), Maxwell (2013), Saldaña (2013), Seidman (2013), and Kim (2016). Before collecting or analyzing data, I ensured my study met all

IRB requirements. As Maxwell (2013) advised, my analysis incorporated memos, categorizing strategies, and connecting strategies. Kim (2016) emphasized the importance of using multiple analytic methods in narrative research rather than adhering to a single rigid approach.

Following Maxwell's (2013) guidance on categorizing analysis, I coded field observations and interview transcripts using three coding techniques. Maxwell and Miller (2008) described categorizing analysis as a method for deconstructing and sorting data to identify similarities and differences within and across interviews. This approach allowed me to explore cultural, contextual, and individual variations in collaborators' reflected-upon experiences. To gain a deeper understanding of the process women undergo to become interscholastic athletic directors, Maxwell and Miller (2008) advocated for integrating both categorizing and connecting analyses. Using both approaches strengthened my analysis and enhanced the credibility of my findings.

Following their recommendations on connecting analysis, I preserved the context and depth of my collaborators' narratives by examining relationships and connections beyond surface-level similarities and differences. This technique helped me analyze the contiguity of themes within their stories, revealing how past experiences shaped and influenced later ones along their pathway to leadership. Alongside analytic memos written during the first two interviews, I created timelines for each collaborator's life. These timelines provided a temporal perspective on their reflected-upon experiences, illustrating how their stories unfolded over time. The following sections outline how I applied memos, categorizing strategies, and connecting strategies to analyze my data in detail.

## **Categorizing Strategies**

After transcribing each interview verbatim in MAXQDA, I began data analysis using categorizing strategies, including coding and thematic analysis (Seidman, 2013). Categorizing analysis involves labeling segments of data, grouping them into categories, and identifying thematic connections within and across those categories (Seidman, 2013).

Once interviews were completed, I examined my collaborators' spoken words to uncover unique insights, following coding recommendations from Maxwell and Miller (2008), Saldaña (2013), Maxwell (2013), and Seidman (2013). After verifying transcript accuracy, I proceeded with a coding cycle consisting of three steps. First, I assigned codes based on my research questions and selected coding methods. A qualitative code is a word or phrase that captures essential elements within the data. When grouped by similarity, codes form categories that facilitate thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). I employed three coding methods, *in vivo*, values, and process coding, each focusing on specific aspects of the data. The following sections detail how these methods helped identify patterns and construct themes.

Saldaña (2013) encouraged novice researchers to use *in vivo* coding, applying participants' own words or phrases as descriptive summaries, as an initial review to honor their spoken words. Maxwell and Miller (2008) described *in vivo* coding as a categorizing strategy that helps researchers explore contextual data within and across interviews. This method allows researchers to use participants' words as codes to better understand the meaning behind significant experiences (Saldaña, 2013).

By incorporating *in vivo* coding, I investigated how my collaborators made sense of their experiences. I began by using Saldaña's "splitting" technique, which involves

breaking data into smaller coded moments for detailed scrutiny. Saldaña (2013) emphasized that researchers should rely on their instincts rather than adhere to a fixed number of codes. I understood this to mean that anything that popped out to me should be coded. All in vivo codes were recorded using direct quotations.

Initially, I planned to complete in vivo coding for all transcripts before moving to another coding method. However, after attending a summer course with Dr. Lorraine Schmertzling, I learned the value of integrating multiple coding methods simultaneously. Combining in vivo coding with values and process coding allowed me to identify patterns I might have overlooked if I had adhered too rigidly to my original approach. To document my thought process and track the use of multiple coding methods, I wrote memos, creating an audit trail of my data analysis.

Values coding, which applies three interrelated codes, values, attitudes, and beliefs, allowed me to explore my collaborators' self-constructed identities and perspectives shaped by their unique experiences (Saldaña, 2013). Coding for values provided insights into the foundational influences on their professional pathways by examining how they reflected on lived social interactions. Saldaña (2013) described values coding as a method for understanding a participant's worldview, which I found particularly relevant in exploring leadership development.

I believe values play a crucial role in becoming a leader, and this coding method helped me analyze key aspects of my collaborators' journeys to athletic leadership. While coding, I identified spoken words or phrases that expressed values, attitudes, or beliefs about the path to becoming an athletic director. Saldaña (2013) defined values (V) as the level of importance placed on an experience, attitudes (A) as emotional or cognitive

reactions to an experience, and beliefs (B) as personal knowledge and perspectives shaped by experiences.

After coding the transcripts, I categorized the data to examine the interconnected nature of these constructs (VAB). Understanding how values, attitudes, and beliefs interacted helped me analyze the role of an integrated belief system in shaping leadership development, a core objective of my study. As the primary research instrument, I was responsible for delving beyond spoken words to uncover deeper insights. Identifying the significant values my collaborators' emphasized provided valuable context to bridge gaps in research on this topic. To further strengthen my analysis, I also incorporated process coding.

Process coding enabled me to examine the interplay of various dynamics within a timeline as events unfolded and changed over time (Saldaña, 2013). This coding method was essential in understanding how the women navigated their journey to the athletic director position. Saldaña (2013) describes process coding as a technique for identifying words or short phrases that capture observable and conceptual actions within the data. As an action-based approach, process coding was well-suited for my research, allowing me to analyze the experiences and interactions that shaped the pathway to athletic leadership. By using gerunds, "ing" words, this technique facilitated an examination of actions and their outcomes in sequential order (Saldaña, 2013). It provided a dynamic account of the events leading to my collaborators' advancement to athletic director roles, offering insights into the step-by-step progression of their professional journey. Understanding the impact of various interactions helped me grasp the intricate process they navigated to achieve their leadership goals.

Integrating in vivo, values, and process coding allowed me to employ multiple methods to gain deeper insight into the values and experiences that motivated the women in my study to persist in their pursuit of athletic leadership. By systematically organizing my codes into meaningful categories and subcategories, I was able to crystallize my collaborators' experiences and begin identifying patterns within my data. Categories do not emerge spontaneously. Rather, I actively constructed them through an inductive process of continuously organizing and reorganizing data, both for individual collaborators and across responses, allowing me to explore patterns within the data and share thematic analysis. Comparing major concepts between collaborators helped me identify connections within the data and develop broader insights into the research topic (Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the process, I employed multiple coding strategies and adjusted my final presentation as categories evolved. I remained flexible in my approach, allowing my data analysis procedures to adapt as I progressed through coding, categorization, and reorganization.

Following the recommendation of my committee, the following section will describe and explain my coding and thematic analysis. I found it helpful to document my thought process, not only as an audit trail of my work but also as a way to share how I was thinking as I progressed through coding. I have included figures to show my thinking as I progressed through labeling segments of texts, working through cycles of coding, category development, recategorization, and construction of themes. Manipulating my categories led me to identify patterns within data and construct themes.

Coding was an incredibly time-consuming process. It took months. After my proposal defense, I was optimistic that finding collaborators, scheduling interviews, and

coding the data could be completed within a reasonable timeframe. However, recruiting collaborators and scheduling interviews turned out to be more challenging than I initially expected. Data analysis was the most time-consuming element of my entire dissertation. The ongoing processes of memoing, coding, recoding, and categorizing was a continuous learning experience. Each time I revisited the data, I discovered new insights, which led me to refine my understanding of how to effectively code. Memos became one of my most important tools throughout data analysis. Writing memos during and after each interview allowed me to conduct a preliminary analysis and reflect on the data while it was still fresh (Maxwell, 2013). These detailed memos, which captured information about body language, setting, behaviors, and my reflections, became valuable resources throughout the data analysis process.

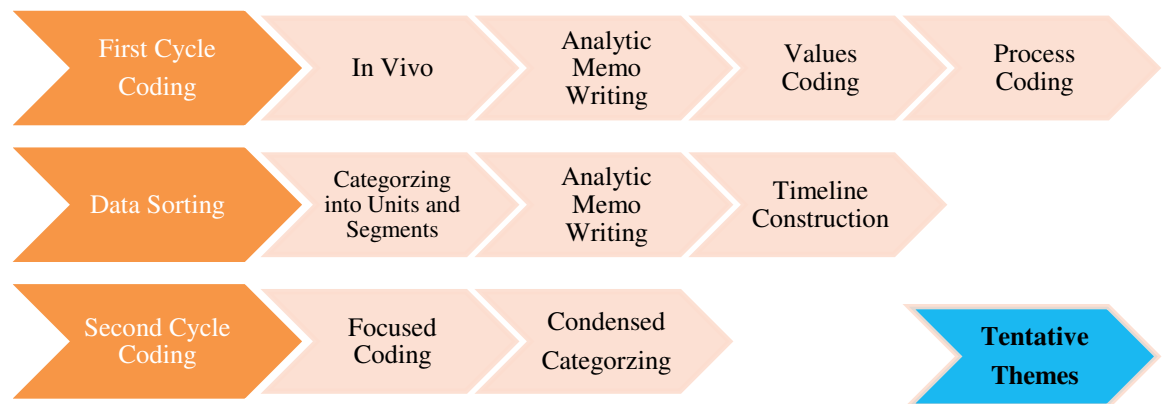
When I began coding my first collaborator's transcript line by line, I generated over 600 codes. I carefully examined and reexamined these codes, wrote memos, and attempted to categorize them logically. From those 600 in vivo codes, I initially created 60 categories. However, upon reviewing my first round of coding, I realized that I had decontextualized the data to the point where I was missing key insights. It took time for me to understand that creating too many categories made it difficult to find the essential elements of each collaborator's story. As my own coding techniques got better over time, I was able to find more of the essence-capturing moments within each collaborator's story.

As I reviewed my earlier attempts, I found several categories that included related topics and needed to be collapsed and condensed for better clarity. Additionally, when I first started coding, I was too rigid in my approach, limiting myself to using only in vivo

codes. I initially thought I needed to code with in vivo codes first, then separately repeat the process with values coding and process coding. However, in my third and fourth rounds of recoding, I discovered that integrating values coding and process coding alongside in vivo coding significantly improved my ability to identify more meaningful categories. By examining the data more critically, looking for key words, ideas, and phrases, I was able to generate a more refined and meaningful list of codes. From there, I started the iterative process of organizing these codes into logical categories, refining the categories, and comparing for similarities and differences. Below are figures to help showcase my thinking process throughout the data analysis phase.

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of my data analysis process. I employed a bricolage coding approach, combining in vivo, values, and process coding to identify categories, uncover patterns through cross-case analysis (Saldaña, 2013), and construct thematic connections.

**Figure 1** *Data Analysis Display*



When I first began coding, I initially used the splitter method. After assigning a code to nearly every line of my first interview, I became overwhelmed. The sheer number

of codes caused me to view the data through a fragmented lens, which made it difficult to retain the context and meaning of my collaborator’s narrative. To address this, I revisited the same passages and applied the lumper method. This allowed me to reduce the number of codes while preserving the overall context of my collaborator’s story. Figure 2 is an example from one of my interviews that contrasts my use of the splitter method with the lumper method.

**Figure 2** *Splitter versus Lumper Method*

**Splitter Method**

I was <sup>1</sup> raised by my grandparents. In elementary my experiences were very <sup>2</sup> positive because my grandmother was involved in the PTA. I played <sup>3</sup> youth sports. My <sup>4</sup> grandfather was heavily involved in that taking me to practice and games. All of those things were very positive memories of my elementary experiences.

**Codes**

1. “RAISED BY MY GRANDPARENTS”
2. “POSITIVE GRANDMOTHER INVOLVED”
3. “PLAYED YOUTH SPORTS”
4. “GRANDFATHER INVOLVED PRACTICE AND GAMES”
5. “POSITIVE MEMORIES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL”

**Lumper Method**

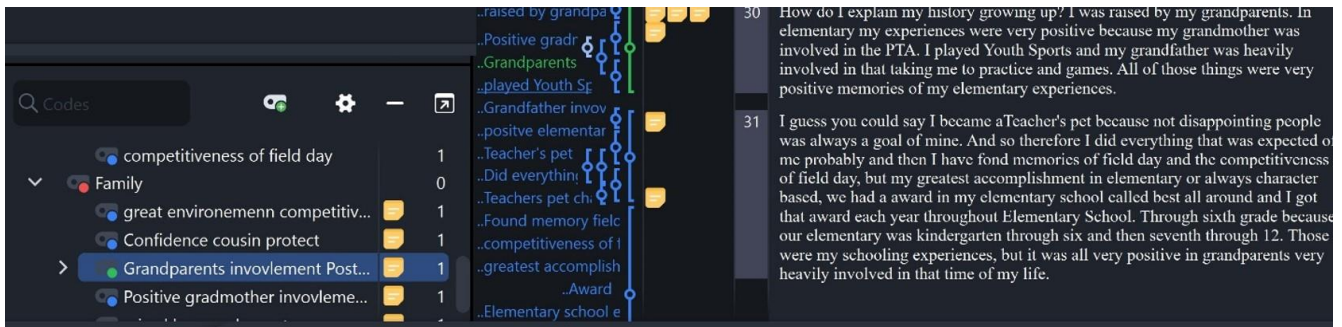
I was raised by my grandparents. In elementary my experiences were very positive because my grandmother was involved in the PTA. I played youth sports and my grandfather was heavily involved in that taking me to practice and games. All of those things were very positive memories of my elementary experiences.

**Codes**

1. “GRANDPARENTS INVOLVED PTA”
2. “GRANDPARENTS INVOLVED YOUTH SPORTS”

All of my interview transcripts were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software package MAXQDA. Figure 3 shows the early tentative categories. The middle section of the screenshot displays each individual code that was assigned. I followed this same format as I progressed with values coding and process coding. Next to each code, you can see yellow notes where I wrote memos throughout the interview.

**Figure 3** Screenshot of MAXQDA Coding.



While analyzing the raw transcript data to develop in vivo codes, I focused on identifying words and phrases that stood out, particularly those emphasized that provided insight into the meanings or values the collaborators attached to their experiences. To strengthen the audit trail for my study, I created a figure that shows my thinking behind my initial attempts to code the data with in vivo codes and develop preliminary categories. Figure 4 highlights some of the preliminary categories I constructed based on the combinations of my analytic memos and in vivo coding.

**Figure 4** *In Vivo Coding and Preliminary Categories.*

<b>Initial In Vivo Coding</b>			
<b>Collaborator</b>	<b>Transcript Line of Text</b>	<b>In Vivo Codes</b>	<b>Preliminary Categories</b>
Pam	I was raised by my grandparents. They were heavily involved in my school and youth sports	“GRANDPARENTS” “SCHOOL” “YOUTH SPORTS”	Family Education Athletics
Angela	I grew up in a small town where everyone knew everyone. All of your friends went to church with you, and played on the same sports team as you.	“SMALL TOWN CHURCH” “SPORTS”	Religion Athletics
Erin	I was born and raised in rural Maine. Everyone you went to school with also attended the same church and played on the same sports teams.	“RURAL MAINE” “CHURCH” “SPORTS”	Religion Upbringing Athletics

### **Connecting Strategies**

To move beyond identifying similarities and differences, I also employed connecting strategies for data analysis. Maxwell (2013) described connecting strategies as a valuable tool for any narrative inquiry study to capture deeper insights. According to Maxwell (2013) and Seidman (2013), these strategies help establish contextual meaning and explore relationships within interview data. Maxwell and Miller (2008) cautioned that relying solely on categorizing strategies can limit data analysis. Instead, they

advocated for integrating both categorizing and connecting strategies to mitigate potential constraints associated with a single-method approach.

I crafted reflective narratives by sequencing my collaborators' transcripts to preserve their stories rather than fragment them. This approach provided a holistic understanding of the process these women underwent on their path to becoming athletic directors. Structuring narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end allowed me to examine the connections and relationships among my collaborators' experiences in chronological order, offering deeper insight into the journey to interscholastic athletic leadership (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). The intent of my connecting analysis was to illustrate, for example, how early experiences influenced later ones, such as whether a middle school athletic experience shaped a collaborator's trajectory toward an athletic director role. Maxwell's (2013) approach to connecting analysis and Creswell's (2013) framework for restructuring data in meaningful chronological order, guided the framework for how I presented my collaborators' experiences in an accessible format.

Narrative analysis, as an analytic strategy, emphasizes integrating experiences into cohesive stories, revealing meaning through the relationships between different elements within a life journey. I employed this technique to better understand how the women in my study interpreted the impact of their experiences on their career choices. By shaping what my collaborators took away from the experiences into a cohesive story, I provided each collaborator with the opportunity to define their perspectives within the broader social construct of their underrepresented voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The next section outlines how I present my data.

## Data Presentation

I shared my connecting and categorizing analysis as two separate sections: Chapter 4, which presents the reflective narratives based on connecting strategies, and Chapter 5, which offers the final thematic analysis based on categorizing strategies. To construct meaningful narratives and construct insightful thematic discussions, I adhered to Maxwell and Miller's (2008) theory of qualitative data analysis. They emphasized the importance of recognizing "two types of relationships: those based on similarity and those based on contiguity" (p. 461). Chapter 4 addresses relationships through narratives, while Chapter 5 explores these connections through thematic discussion.

In Chapter 4, I present the authentic stories of each collaborator. Reflective narratives, as described by Maxwell (2013) and Seidman (2013), effectively convey the meanings of personal experiences in the collaborators' own words. Kim (2016) asserted that stories are "the primary way we express what we know and who we are" (p. 9). This narrative approach offers valuable insights into how individuals interpret their own experiences (Seidman, 2013). Mishler (1986) argued that the context of a story, its time, place, past actions, and future aspirations, establishes meaning. Through these reflective narratives, I offer compelling accounts that help the audience understand data as a holistic story rather than isolated events. The narratives in Chapter 4 allowed me to share what my collaborators' took away from their various experiences (Seidman, 2013) in a format accessible beyond the academic community. This approach presents their realities in context, using their own words.

To develop analytical reflective narratives, I followed Miller and Maxwell's (2008) guidance on connecting coded "segments into a relational order within an actual

context” (p. 468). Comparing these segments with the co-constructed timelines of my collaborators enabled me to assemble comprehensive stories that prioritize relational analysis. After sharing narratives in Chapter 4, I transition to a thematic presentation of the data in Chapter 5, sharing my insights gained from exploring the similarities and differences among my collaborators.

Utilizing Saldaña’s (2013) coding methods, I analyzed interview transcripts to establish initial categories. Through iterative categorization, I identified connecting threads and patterns, leading to the themes discussed in Chapter 5. This section offers a thematic analysis of the data, outlining my process of coding, categorizing, and exploring patterns to construct themes. Visual tables illustrate my analytical journey, showcasing the development of early coding and categories to understand my thought process. Cross-case thematic analysis facilitated the comparison of commonalities and differences in the pathways to athletic director roles for the women in my study.

To conclude my dissertation, I composed a section summarizing my findings, reflecting on the research questions, and providing recommendations for future studies. The following section addresses the validity of my research, including how I accounted for personal biases and subjectivity throughout the study.

### **Validity**

Simply listing abstract strategies such as bracketing, member checks, or triangulation is not sufficient to ensure validity (Maxwell, 2013). Instead, Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of demonstrating how these strategies apply specifically to a given study. In qualitative research, validity cannot be guaranteed solely through the description of methods and techniques. Rather, it requires ongoing scrutiny. I

acknowledged that validity is always at risk and sought to enhance the credibility of my conclusions through evidence. Throughout my research, I consistently examined potential threats at each stage of the study, remaining vigilant for instances where my interpretations might be flawed. My goal was not to eliminate all threats by relying on abstract strategies but to actively recognize, monitor, and productively manage my influence as the primary research instrument.

Maxwell (2013) argued that researchers should focus on identifying and addressing plausible threats to data interpretation rather than attempting to prove their research is the only valid explanation. The purpose of monitoring validity is not to establish absolute truth but to ensure that the profiles I present are credible, authentic interpretations of my collaborators' experiences. Two common threats to validity in qualitative research, according to Maxwell (2013), are researcher bias and reactivity.

Researcher reactivity, the effect of the researcher on interviewees' responses, is a significant threat that must be addressed (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout my interviews, I remained mindful of my impact on my collaborators' responses. Since complete neutrality is impossible, I focused on identifying how my presence influenced the interviews and ensuring that this influence was managed productively. To reduce reactivity, I documented my observations in memos, noting how my collaborators behaved, how my presence shaped the interview context, and how I avoided leading questions. Maxwell (2013) emphasizes that keeping detailed memos about how my presence affected the interviews serves as a critical component of my audit trail, providing transparency in how I addressed reactivity throughout the study.

Researcher bias, shaped by personal values, theories, and preconceptions, is another major threat to validity (Maxwell, 2013). Addressing bias is crucial to designing a credible qualitative study. The goal is not to eliminate personal biases but to continuously monitor and manage them throughout the research process. Peshkin (1988) advocates for acknowledging subjectivity as a resource rather than suppressing it. Instead of concealing my personal experiences and perspectives on athletics, I applied Peshkin's (1988) "subjective I" method to prevent my biases from unduly influencing the study's findings.

I critically examined how my cultural and subcultural experiences shaped my worldview, as outlined in my conceptual framework. Following Peshkin's (1988) guidance, I wrote reflective memos to acknowledge, monitor, and manage the influence of my emotions, both positive and negative, on my interpretations. This self-auditing process helped me understand how my personal identity shaped what I observed and heard throughout the study. Prior to conducting research, I identified three specific subjective identities and considered their potential impact: the *Teacher-Coach I*, the *Athletic-Administrator I*, and the *Privileged I*.

My experience teaching 11th-grade math for three years, special education for one year, and physical education (PE) for seven years, while simultaneously coaching a competitive varsity sport, has undoubtedly shaped my perspective as both a researcher and educator. Reflecting on my role as a teacher-coach (TC), I continually return to the significant after-school hours I spend on campus and the minimal monetary compensation for that time.

Over my 12 years of teaching and coaching, I have grappled with the ongoing challenge of balancing time between developing classroom resources for my students and preparing meaningful athletic experiences for my student-athletes. This dual-role conflict stems from the reality that my teaching position provides my primary salary, yet success on the athletic field can open doors to more desirable teaching positions or administrative opportunities. This tension is a common struggle for many TCs.

As I conduct interviews on career progression, I must remain aware of my own biases and assumptions regarding why individuals enter the TC role. While I once believed teachers coach solely to use sports as a tool for student development, my perspective has evolved. I now recognize that coaching serves different purposes for different individuals. Some accept coaching positions as a prerequisite for securing a teaching job at a specific school, while others view it as a means of earning supplemental income. For some, coaching enhances their résumé, facilitating career advancement within their current school or at a more prestigious institution.

I must be particularly cautious not to impose my personal belief that some TCs prioritize winning at all costs, whether for financial gain or career advancement, at the expense of their students' academic development. Likewise, I must not assume that all TCs enter the role purely to support student-athletes' growth on and off the field. Acknowledging that the TC role is a unique professional experience with diverse motivations and outcomes, I must approach observations and interviews with a neutral lens to ensure the integrity of my data collection.

The second subjective *I, Athletic-Administrator I*, reflects my need to monitor my perspective as an associate athletic director (AD). I have spent 12 years at the same

school, progressing from teacher-coach (TC) to assistant AD and now associate AD. In my first two years as a TC, I closely related to other TCs in the building, we shared similar viewpoints about our school and athletic department, including the belief that we should receive higher pay, more resources for our teams, and additional time during the school day to focus on athletics.

However, as I transitioned into administrative roles, my perspective began to shift. Now, as associate AD, I have access to ticket sales data, corporate sponsorships, and county funding records, giving me a clearer understanding of the financial limitations we face. I now see that the lack of additional funding for athletic programs is not due to neglect but to budget constraints. Recognizing how my experiences and evolving perspective have shaped my outlook, I must remain aware of how others perceive my professional trajectory.

Reflecting on my background, I acknowledge that being male likely influenced my initial hiring as a teacher and boys' varsity soccer coach. As I conducted interviews, the goal was for my collaborators' viewpoints to be authentically represented, rather than filtered through my own aspirations of one day becoming an AD. To minimize my influence during the interview process, I actively monitored my biases, acknowledged my cultural schema, and wrote reflexive and analytic memos to document how my presence may have shaped interactions with my collaborators.

The final subjective *I, Privileged I*, must be consciously monitored throughout my study. Based on common explanations for male dominance in athletic leadership, I align closely with the established mold. I am a White male who coaches sports, played college

athletics, teaches PE, and holds the necessary education for an athletic leadership role.

McIntosh (1988) describes these advantages as an "invisible package of unearned assets."

Rather than disregarding or concealing my own experiences and perspectives, I will use reflective memos throughout data collection and analysis to actively acknowledge and monitor my subjectivity. Memoing heightened my awareness of how my biases may influence data gathering and interpretation, ultimately strengthening the validity of my study. This approach helped ensure that the narratives I constructed are credible and authentically represent my collaborators' experiences.

Following Maxwell's (2013) validity checklist, I employed multiple strategies to enhance the credibility of my study, including gathering rich data, incorporating member checking, examining discrepant evidence, integrating triangulation, using numerical data, and making comparisons. Using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series strengthened the validity of my conclusions by providing in-depth, contextualized responses. Respondent validation further improved the accuracy of my final narrative profiles, while member checking helped mitigate the influence of my own biases in coding and interpretation.

Critically examining both supporting and discrepant data was essential for ensuring valid conclusions. Maxwell (2013) stresses that qualitative researchers must resist the temptation to ignore data that contradicts their findings. Instead, he advocates for thoroughly assessing discrepant evidence to determine whether it necessitates revising initial conclusions. Triangulation helped verify the consistency of interview data across multiple sources, further strengthening the study's validity.

Incorporating tables allowed me to present evidence both numerically and visually, supporting my thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, Seidman's

(2013) three-interview series enabled responses to be recorded in context, facilitating meaningful comparisons across interviews. However, as Maxwell (2013) emphasizes, no single technique guarantees validity. Instead, credibility is established through the strength of the evidence itself, rather than merely employing methods designed to rule out threats. The following section explores the relationships built with my collaborators.

### **Researcher and Participant Relationships**

I established transparent and professional relationships with all the women in my study. As a male associate athletic director and aspiring athletic director, I recognized the likelihood of encountering my collaborators in various professional settings beyond this research. It was important to inform them not only of my research goals but also of my future career aspirations.

Openly sharing my intent to become an athletic director served several purposes. First, it set the expectation that we might one day work together under the Georgia High School Association (GHSA). While this transparency could potentially limit their willingness to discuss male barriers in athletic leadership, I believed it would ultimately foster trust and encourage more open conversations during interviews. Establishing this understanding beforehand helped create a more comfortable interview environment, allowing for deeper and more candid responses.

Second, withholding my career aspirations could have risked damaging trust if collaborators later discovered my intent. Perceived deception might have led participants to withdraw from the study. Transparency, on the other hand, strengthened our professional rapport and ensured that participants felt fully informed.

Additionally, developing open working relationships offered potential networking benefits for both my collaborators and me. While some female athletic directors may initially view a male-led study as encroaching on a conversation best explored by women, others might appreciate a male ally examining how to support and prepare future female athletic administrators. As the movement for female empowerment in athletics grows, my study could contribute to the broader conversation on equitable leadership opportunities.

A key agreement with my collaborators was ensuring they felt comfortable discussing past or present experiences with male colleagues, even in a critical light. I acknowledged that their journeys were likely different from mine as a member of the majority in the athletic world. By fostering collaborative and trusting relationships, I created an environment for honest reflection, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of their personal experiences and the broader challenges facing female athletic directors.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am a male teacher, coach, and associate athletic director, seeking to understand how women navigate the male-dominated career pathway in athletics. This is my first experience conducting qualitative research, including interviewing and data analysis. Throughout the process, I continuously read, learned, and refined my approach to present a comprehensive representation of the data.

As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, it was essential to acknowledge my subjective insights before, during, and after the study. As outlined in my conceptual framework, I actively monitored my own biases to minimize their influence and provide meaningful, objective insights.

One prevailing theory regarding the underrepresentation of women in athletic leadership is the dominance of football. Historically, women have had limited opportunities to play or coach football, leading to a perception that they lack the expertise to run a football program, hire coaches, or manage a successful season. Since football often generates the most revenue, it serves as the financial backbone of many athletic departments. Consequently, women are potentially being overlooked for leadership positions because they are perceived as lacking the knowledge needed to sustain and grow football programs, which, in turn, support the broader athletic department.

On a personal level, I recognize this is a potential explanation, but my experiences have shaped a different perspective. My first travel soccer coach was a woman, my alma mater, the University of North Georgia, has a female athletic director, my high school's former principal was a woman, and my mother serves as the director of labor and delivery at a major hospital in Georgia. These experiences reinforce my belief that women are just as capable as men, if not more so, when it comes to leadership.

### **Summary**

Narrative inquiry involves collecting individuals' stories to gain a deep understanding of the meaning they assign to their reflected-upon experiences. I wanted my collaborators to share detailed accounts of their journeys to help me understand and communicate why they chose their current paths. This research method preserved context and conveyed the human experience through storytelling, which Seidman (2013) described as a process of making meaning.

Despite female athletes comprising nearly half of all participants in American high school and college sports, athletic leadership remains overwhelmingly male at all

levels. Without greater representation in head coaching, athletic administration, and athletic director roles, female athletes may continue to view these positions as unattainable.

My goal was to capture insightful narratives from experienced female athletic directors, tracing their journeys from childhood to the top of the athletic leadership hierarchy. These untold perspectives provide a deeper understanding of how these women made sense of their experiences and navigated the challenges of their career paths. The insights gained from these interviews can help shape and mentor the next generation of athletic leaders, fostering a more inclusive environment for women in sports leadership.

## Chapter IV

### NARRATIVES

In this section, the narratives are presented as reflective accounts, constructed through a synthesis of collaborator stories, reflections, and memos. Since the majority of my data was reflective about what happened based on semantic memory instead of active descriptive stories constructed from episodic memories, I presented each collaborator story as a reflective narrative. I understood reflective narratives as a way to present my collaborators stories as them describing what they took away from the experiences, rather than truly describing the details of the experience as if I were next to them as it happened. Following Seidman's (2013) three-interview structure, I asked female interscholastic athletic directors (AD) to share their life histories, the details of their current experiences, and the meaning they derive from those experiences to bridge the connections between their lives prior to becoming AD and their current lives as AD. My intention was to follow Miller and Maxwell's (2008) recommendation of connecting strategies, I reconstructed narratives by putting incorporated "segments into a relational order within an actual context" (p. 468) and Saldaña's (2013) guidance on in vivo, values, and process coding, to honor the collaborators' reflected-upon experiences by presenting their narratives in a cohesive and meaningful way. After spending time with my transcripts, I found the data was not full of the rich, thick descriptions needed to write narratives full of descriptive stories. Rather than placing the reader directly within the collaborators' lived moments, the narratives in my research offer a reflective synthesis, emphasizing the

broader themes and insights that my collaborators took away from reflecting on their experiences. The collaborators voiced their narratives to me. The interviewee and I pieced them together to construct the written narratives in this section. While recognizing a traditional reflective narrative as “a type of personal writing that allows writers to look back at incidents and changes in their lives. Writing a reflective narrative enables writers to not only recount experiences but also analyze how they’ve changed or learned lessons” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021). The resulting narratives serve as a bridge between raw data and broader themes, offering readers a vivid and authentic representation of the collaborators’ journeys. Through this process, Chapter 4 provides a structured yet interpretive representation of my collaborators’ experiences, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexities that shaped their professional paths.

To ensure confidentiality and protect collaborators’ identities, pseudonyms were assigned to each collaborator. I also altered the names of additional characters and specific locations mentioned in the stories. Statements I added to introduce the collaborators, my comments interspersed throughout the narratives, and my reflections at the end of narrative are italicized to indicate my words versus theirs. Any words I used to fill gaps in sentences and enhance the flow of the story have been bracketed. To help temporally explore various events, I co-constructed timelines with each collaborator. Creating timelines for all of my collaborators provided me with an informative view of how certain actions led to other actions and consequences. Creating timelines helped me temporally connect data from all three interviews I had with any single individual, which proved useful when writing the final narratives. Co-constructing timelines with each

collaborator of the significant moments throughout their lives to present day helped shape the construction of each final reflective narrative.

Instead of letting my collaborators' words stand alone, I introduced each collaborator and followed their stories with reflections of my own. In these reflections, I shared my insights and highlighted connections within the narratives, using specific examples to illustrate how different parts of the conversation intertwined. This process allowed me to uncover and articulate the continuity between what these women took away from their experiences and how it shaped their career path. For instance, I was able to contextualize how early life experiences shaped later actions, such as one collaborator, who, lacking family support at youth sporting events, viewed her team as a family. Hearing her describe what she took away from the experience, athletics being perceived as an extension of her family, inspired her to become an athletic director and foster a similar family-like atmosphere within her athletic department for students who might need a sense of belonging. Following each introduction in my words, are the reflective narratives of each woman's life. I structured each narrative in temporal order to share what they took away from early life experience before becoming an athletic director, including their introduction to sports, entry into administration, and the start of their career path toward the athletic director role. Following Chapter 4, I present my thematic analysis in Chapter 5. This chapter details the themes constructed through in vivo coding, process coding, values coding, and memoing.

## **Pam Beesly**

### **Meet Pam**

*Pam Beesly is an experienced classroom teacher and athletic director. She grew up in rural Maine in the 1980's and 1990's. She was raised by a family that valued physical activity, competition, hard work, and education. Her parents were both sports enthusiasts who enjoyed skiing, tennis, and wrestling. Pam participated in a variety of sports growing up. Whether skiing downhill slopes, horseback riding, or engaging in team sports like softball and volleyball, She thrived on physical challenges and developed an internal competitiveness that still drives her today. Pam moved from rural Maine, to Canada, and eventually ended up in Georgia. She struggled to fit in socially, but found solace in sports and soon discovered a passion for coaching. Her passion for sports and coaching was fostered by impactful mentors and family values. Her enjoyment of sports led her to walk onto the tennis and softball teams in college. Along the way, she developed leadership skills as a team captain, teaching horseback riding lesson, managing the campus pool, and giving swim lessons. All of her sport and leadership experiences led her to a career in education. She began as a middle school teacher and coach, eventually transitioning to a high school athletic director. The process she went through was not without challenges, but her philosophy of collaboration, support, and empowerment of others has guided her to a successful career in athletic administration. Today, she continues to mentor aspiring teachers, coaches, and female athletic directors by drawing strength from the lessons learned throughout her life, from the dairy farm fields of Maine to the complexities of running a high school athletic department.*

## **Pam's Story**

I organized Pam's reflections to start with sections on early experiences and move through her career trajectory, leadership philosophy, and the unique challenges she faced. From childhood days spent exploring a dairy farm, to discovering a passion for sports and coaching, her journey was shaped by resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to student-athletes. Overcoming challenges as a female athletic director in a male-dominated field, she embraced leadership roles with a focus on fairness, mentorship, and building strong relationships within her athletic department.

### ***Early Beginnings***

I grew up in the northeast. I was immersed in a world of physical activity and community values from an early age. My childhood consisted of running around a dairy farm and engaging in outdoor play. I had a horse, so I was always outside, riding, chasing cows, running through cornfields. I went to a 3-room schoolhouse for kindergarten, first, and second grade. I can remember the recess games of kickball and swinging from trees as my first introduction to athletic endeavors. [My childhood] experiences laid the foundation for a lifelong commitment to playing and coaching sports. As I transitioned from elementary school to middle school, my athletic endeavors became more organized. I began playing sports like softball, volleyball, and basketball, marking the beginning of a structured athletic journey.

My family relocated frequently, moving to the west coast of Canada during my middle school years. Here, I was introduced to organized athletics, playing softball and volleyball. In middle school, I got involved with organized athletics. . . softball and volleyball. These team sports marked the beginning of my structured involvement in

sports. My family eventually moved again and settled in Georgia. I struggled throughout my high school years to find my place. I wasn't involved in athletics at the high school level because (pause) I was weird according to my peers. The discomfort of being perceived as "weird" in high school due to my background pushed me towards individual sports like equestrian and tennis, where I could excel without the pressures of team dynamics. When I was in high school, I picked up tennis because my mom and dad played. I had a really good coach who worked with me. When I went off to college, and I thought, the heck, I'll try it. I mean, the answer is, no, unless you try. I was able to walk on the college tennis team.

When I began college, I was initially pursuing a pre-vet major. I was driven by a desire to work with animals. However, the competitive nature of veterinary programs led me to reassess my educational path. While in college, I played on both the tennis and softball teams. Using credits from participating on these teams, I transitioned into an education major, finding a fulfilling niche that combined my love for sports with teaching. This shift, initially seen as a temporary measure until I could find out what career I really wanted to pursue, evolved into a lifelong career in education, coaching, and athletic administration. This shift in academic focus ultimately led me to the teaching profession, where I discovered a passion for guiding and mentoring young people. It was during this time that I began to recognize the potential for my diverse experiences to translate into a successful career in athletic administration.

### ***Coaching and Leadership Development***

From an early age, I began coaching before I ever considered athletic administration as my career choice. With my foundation in horseback riding, I was able

to provide younger riders with lessons. While in college, I gave swim lessons to students while developing my leadership skills managing the pool during the summer. I was also the tennis team captain throughout my collegiate playing career. These formative experiences were instrumental in developing my organizational skills and leadership qualities. My role as a pool manager provided practical lessons in scheduling and management. These two skills would later prove valuable in my transition to athletic director.

### ***Transition to Athletic Administration***

Entering the teaching profession, I began as a middle school teacher and assistant coach. I taught health and physical education while coaching three sports. I eventually transitioned into a middle school athletic director role, using my coaching background and teaching experience to help me succeed in this new role. When the opportunity unexpectedly arose to advance to a high school athletic director position, I felt well-prepared, thanks to my extensive experiences in education, athletics, and the support of mentors throughout the previous 18 years of my career. [My] coaching background and [middle school] athletic director leadership position allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of team dynamics, importance of clear communication, and delegation. Reflecting on these experiences, I can see how they laid the groundwork for my eventual career path in high school athletic administration. My transition to becoming an AD was marked by support from a former assistant principal, who later became the principal. This mentor's encouragement and guidance were instrumental in helping me navigate the complexities of the AD role. The support system provided by this mentor, along with

other administrators, was pivotal in building my confidence and readiness for this new role.

The transition to high school athletics introduced new complexities, including eligibility rules, scheduling, resource management and demanding scheduling. I was fortunate to see how a successful athletic department is run by an effective athletic director as well as how an ineffective athletic director manages the department. An effective AD taught me the value of autonomy and trust, demonstrating the benefits of empowering coaches without micromanaging. This experience shaped my own approach to leadership. I now emphasize the importance of giving my coaches trust and fostering independence among my staff. I also got to learn and grow from my negative experiences with less effective leaders. I learned some of the pitfalls to avoid, such as failing to follow through on commitments and lacking transparency. These lessons shaped my leadership philosophy, emphasizing reliability and integrity in my leadership role.

My leadership philosophy evolved over time. I began as a young athletic director ready to engage quickly with students and parents without thinking through the different ways to handle each unique situation. Overtime, I have grown and my leadership philosophy has evolved. I now focus on ensuring student-athletes have the best experience possible while participating in our athletic department through a more balanced approach that includes open communication and clear boundaries with all stakeholders. I adopted a customer-service-oriented approach, balancing the needs of coaches, parents, and student-athletes while maintaining high standards.

### ***Impact of Mentors***

Mentors have been a foundation of my career and played a critical role in my success. My principal and assistant principal offered guidance, teaching me to handle difficult parents and navigate administrative complexities. Coaches come to me and say, “I need \$4,000 for equipment,” and I tell them, “You have \$350. Let’s fundraise.” My mother, an associate superintendent, also influenced my understanding of leadership and budgeting. With my mom being on the top of the upper echelon of education in being an assistant superintendent, I’ll call her up and we bounce ideas back and forth on how to handle difficult situations. With his business acumen, my dad also taught me lessons throughout my childhood in decision-making and authority. [He] taught me, “Always look at the facts and run with just the facts, and don’t put your emotions in your responses.” [Another key] mentor throughout my life is Dr. Lauren, a veterinarian who exemplified perseverance. Her values of independence, resilience, and effective management [helped] ground my leadership approach today.

### ***Balancing Professional and Personal Life***

In my role as an athletic director, I manage a demanding schedule, balancing early mornings, administrative tasks, teaching responsibilities, and extensive travel, especially during the spring season. Despite the intense workload, I maintain a commitment to family life, drawing firm boundaries to protect personal time. I am grateful for my husband, who understands the demands of my role. I almost left education when my son was born due to my husband’s cancer diagnosis. I wanted to transition into a nursing career to help take care of my husband. However, I was forced to stay in education to keep my insurance for our family’s well-being, when my husband lost his. I am thankful

to have parents nearby who can also provide my family support as needed. I can't stress the importance of work-life balance in this career field enough.

### *Looking to the Future*

Along the pathway to this position, I faced challenges related to gender stereotypes and resistance from male colleagues but rather than allow these experiences to bring me down, I instead used these experiences to strengthen my approach to leadership. Early in my career, the men would forget to tell me when our athletic directors' meetings were. They would specifically not inform me of the day or time the meetings were scheduled to take place. I would miss the meeting, and then [the men] would ask why they didn't see me at the meeting. I very politely would say, "Well, if you would inform me I would be there. I have a calendar that I keep stuff on. Just shoot me an email." So I actually insisted, with our district athletic director that they send a calendar invite on email and to make sure that everybody was included.

My leadership style contrasts with more aggressive tactics, focusing instead on collaboration and fairness. [To help overcome] the resistance and lack of information sharing from male colleagues, [I took] a proactive approach, including seeking out information and building relationships with fellow athletic directors, eventually helped me overcome these barriers. To help establish my own career, I buddied up with another athletic director who was a little bit younger than me, but he would call or text me and say, "Hey, did you get the email that the meetings on Tuesday at 1:00 p.m.?" I'd be like, "Nope!" He goes, "I'll forward it to you." So then I would call the district office, and I'm like, "You forgot to put me on the email." And they're like, "Oh, sorry." For my own personal career navigation, it was helpful to kind of pair up with somebody. The athletic

director I paired up with was so young that he kind of was doing the same thing as me. To be successful in this role, I kind of had to have a confidence in my own abilities for this role.

Being a woman in a predominantly male field has occasionally led to underestimation of my capabilities. Initial perceptions, often influenced by stereotypes, can make it challenging to be taken seriously. However, once people engage with me, they come to recognize my organizational skills and commitment to supporting my student-athletes, coaches, and stakeholders. The increasing participation of women in coaching roles and the support of institutional backing have contributed to a more inclusive environment. I remain committed to ongoing professional development and mentoring the next generation of leaders. My desire is to create a legacy of guidance and support that is reflected in my dedication to fostering success in others. I am currently in a high school setting and many of my coaches have only taught and coached in high school. They know I've taught middle school and younger kids as well as coached these young athletes, so I have a range of experiences that can help troubleshoot problems. I think the coaches, teachers, students, and parents feel comfortable with how I lead and share information, because they know that I'm not going to sugarcoat anything. They know that I'm 100% here to support them, but they also know and respect that if they are doing something that is out of line, or maybe they just forgot to do something, that I'm going to come in and go, "Hey, guys, look, this is what happened. We need to make sure it doesn't happen again." So it's not like, I come in with an iron fist yelling and get ugly about it. So because I have some young coaches in my department, I feel like being a female athletic director means I can be a mentor and role model, which could be different

if a male were in this role. I am just like alright, we can't do that again. Let's work on improving this. So it doesn't happen again next time. Over the past several years, I have been extremely humbled to have former players of my own come back to coach for my athletic department. I have a former student who's a coach at another high school here in town. When his team was playing [my school], he came in, and he was like, "Hey, Coach!" And I'm looking at him, I'm like, "Hey?" And I always used to call him by his nickname and not by his name on paper. and I'm looking at him, and he goes, "You remember me?" And I'm like, "A little bit." Then he told me who he was, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh!" He told me, "I'm coaching because [he had me] as a coach." I was (pause) like, "Oh, cool." I was kind of shocked because I was like, cause you know (pause) you talk to the kids like right now, and I'm the hard nose. I'm the one who has boundaries and expectations, and don't dare step outside of it, or you're up a creek without a paddle. But we also have a lot of fun. And so he remembered that he liked having clear, defined boundaries and expectations. [He told me that] was a game changer for him, apparently and now he does that with his students, and he says it's brilliant. And I'm like, "Yeah, sometimes you just have to put on the bold face and not show them that you can smile until Christmas." But then, once you cut loose, you still have to have a lot of fun. But within those boundaries, so that was a lot of fun to see him.

### **My Reflection**

*Coach Beesly shared unique insights that shed light on the process a woman may go through along the pathway to athletic leadership. Her upbringing in rural Maine provided the foundation for her athletic and leadership skills. As I saw the excitement and joy on her face as she told me about being active and outdoors as child. These*

*positive and formative experiences in her youth influenced her later in life to become a coach due to her personal family values of growing up in an environment that valued physical activity and the outdoors. She reflected on what she took away from various experiences and the transformative power of having powerful mentors, such as the young male AD that shared important information with her early in her career, has had on her life. Her mom was a district level administrator and taught her the value of hard work from a young age. She discussed a foundation of leadership that has been shaped by mentors that not only empowered her with support, but also challenged her to overcome obstacles and to pursue her passions. Her parents taught her the significance of having a small circle of allies, the value of open communication, and the need for transparency. These early life lessons proved influential on her career pathway as she now discusses a leadership philosophy that is rooted in the values she learned as a child. Her leadership framework revolves around collaboration and can be seen in her commitment to both the student-athletes and staff. She focuses on continuous improvement through both successes and failures. She ensures all sports and activities receive equitable attention and support, creating an inclusive environment for all stakeholders. Her commitment to being present and accessible ensures that both coaches and athletes are supported, reinforcing the value of a nurturing leadership style.*

### **Angela Martin**

#### **Meet Angela**

*Angela, a seasoned leader in both education and athletics, is a woman whose life journey has been shaped by resilience, mentorship, and a deep commitment to fostering connections. She has over 30 years of experience spanning across teaching, coaching,*

*and administration. She started her career in special education, taking on a department chair role in her first year, and quickly rose to leadership positions such as assistant athletic director. Her passion for sports began in her early years, inspired by her family, especially her grandparents, and she pursued athletics as a way to build connection and community. Throughout high school, she contributed as a manager and statistician for various teams, eventually becoming a cheerleading coach and assistant athletic director. College solidified her leadership philosophy, where she learned the value of accountability and personal responsibility, and developed a deep sense of community through her involvement in intramural sports. Her leadership extends beyond her professional achievements; she attributes much of her growth to mentors who invested in her, just as she now mentors others. With a strong focus on servant leadership, Angela continues to impact the lives of students, coaches, and athletes, leaving a lasting legacy in her school community.*

### **Angela's Story**

I structured Angela's reflections to highlight her journey from childhood influences to present leadership in athletics. Guided by her grandparents, she developed a strong sense of responsibility and a passion for sports. Athletics became both a refuge and a leadership path, from managing teams to navigating challenges that shaped her philosophy. Her career evolved through resilience and a commitment to inclusivity, leading to initiatives that celebrate all athletes and coaches. Beyond work, she integrates family into her role, emphasizing that sports leadership is about fostering community, recognition, and opportunities for those served.

### ***Early Foundations***

My childhood was grounded in a strong family influence, primarily from my grandparents, who played key roles in my upbringing. They were not just caregivers; they were active participants in my extracurricular activities. My grandmother was involved in the PTA. I played youth sports, and my grandfather was heavily involved in that, taking me to practice and games. [From an early age], I felt the responsibility of my actions and was driven by a desire to excel. I strived for perfection, with a goal of not disappointing people.

My involvement in sports, particularly youth softball, [was my] first engagement in the athletic world. I initially struggled with the transition from [a] “girly girl” to athlete. I found solace in the community sports provided, despite my early hesitations. In elementary school, I received recognition from teachers as the best all-around student due to my character. That fueled my determination to succeed, both academically and athletically. My involvement in youth sports, shaped by my family’s encouragement, laid the foundation for my future role as an athletic director.

### ***Middle and High School***

As I entered middle and high school, athletics became both an escape and a source of growth. [As my grandparents aged], athletics became my sanctuary and my family. I embraced every opportunity in sports. I carved my niche as a manager, trainer, and statistician. I was not the best athlete, but I always found my way to athletic coaches. My recruitment as a football manager was a critical turning point in my life. Our head football coach once told me, “You don’t want to be a cheerleader. I need you to be a football manager. You could be one of many cheerleaders or the sole football manager.” I

took his challenge and served in this role for the next 4 years. It was not just about filling a role. It provided me with a leadership opportunity that would expand my understanding of team dynamics and sports management. Being part of a team [helped me] find a sense of belonging and purpose providing me a sense of security to take on leadership roles. My time as a manager, statistician, and trainer for our boys' football and basketball teams proved pivotal. Through these roles, I developed a deeper understanding of the dynamics within sports teams and honed my ability to lead from behind the scenes.

A negative encounter with my high school softball coach, helped shape my philosophy of leadership. After having a great game and the opposing coach telling me how great I performed, my coach only told me how poorly I performed and refused to acknowledge the other coach's praise. This experience led me to develop a leadership approach that centers on positivity, inclusivity, and the value of every athlete. My softball coach at the time made me feel bad about my performance, and that taught me to always make athletes feel valued.

### *College Years*

During my college years, my understanding of leadership continued to evolve. Intramural sports provided me a competitive outlet that helped me build social networks, see the value in cultivating camaraderie and being part of the community. One of the best lessons I learned in college was the importance of personal responsibility and accountability. I had a health professor who told our class, "I would put up a billboard if my children did drugs, with the message, 'It's not my fault.'" That funny message stuck with me. He was teaching us the balance of tough love and accountability.

### *Early Career*

My career began with a rapid rise through the ranks. In my first year as a special education teacher, I was also unexpectedly given the responsibility of becoming department chair due to me being the only certified staff member in our building. Balancing these two roles helped me demonstrate my ability to thrive under pressure. By my second year, I was appointed to the role assistant athletic director. This new position thrust me into the world of sports administration. The early portion of my career was filled with many challenges. At the time, my now ex-husband was a high school football coach. His coaching job led to frequent moves. I had to constantly adjust to new environments, staff, and administrations. As a head cheerleading coach, every move meant that I had to interview with a new principal and work collaboratively with a new head football coach. These experiences helped grow my own resiliency and adaptability. Characteristics that define my journey to athletic leadership. At each new school principals and athletic directors continually expanded my responsibilities by appointing me to the role of assistant athletic director and entrusting me with budget management, event planning, and athlete recognition programs. As a former cheer coach in a male-dominated field of athletic leadership, I knew I had to prove myself. Through transparency in financial dealings and visible efforts to celebrate all male and female athletes and coaches alike, I earned respect of my peers. I introduced initiatives like Athletic Honors Night and Coaches of the Year awards, creating a culture of recognition and pride within the schools I worked at.

### *The Philosophy of Leadership and Service*

Throughout my career, I adhered to a philosophy of leadership grounded in service and inclusivity. Everything that I know about leadership goes back to serving, giving and creating opportunities that didn't exist prior. My approach is rooted in sacrificial leadership, where the focus is always on the needs of others, whether athletes, coaches, or colleagues. I recognize the importance of showing appreciation to those who serve in demanding roles, particularly in athletics, where the rewards often seem intangible. Instead of just holding an annual honors night, you know that they do for all the academic honors and stuff, I created an athletic honors night celebrating student-athletes, players of the week, coaches of the week, positive athlete nominees, athlete of the year, all these different things, female and male coach of the year, etc. I created that athletic awards night within my school to give back to the coaches that worked in my department and student-athletes that were under my watch. I wanted to recognize athletes that might not have been the [best performers], but might have the highest GPA or coaches that might not have won a championship, but got their team to do community service. Winning on the field is important, but I wanted to make everyone feel valued being part of my athletic department. I think that it's a lot for athletes and coaches to balance the demands of sport and school, and so, if we can celebrate them and elevate that experience every year, then there's no reason not to. Coaches don't get paid enough. They don't have any free time. They do it because they love it. While serving in the role assistant athletic director role at my previous school, I nominated our head basketball coach for a particular recognition, and she got the award. I proceeded to make all the arrangements. I made sure the hotel rooms were secured, the system approved, the van

was ready to make the trip up there. As I sat there in the crowd during the ceremony and saw her get recognized, and saw what a big deal that recognition was, it was a state level recognition. I was like, I made a difference here. This is cool. This is an opportunity she would have never known about this particular award. I took, you know, whatever time, 30 minutes, or whatever it was, to nominate her and write out all the things that she did as a leader, and she got the award. That's when I got the understanding of what such small gestures made can have a huge impact on other people and that's why recognitions and awards and honors have been such a big part of me as a coach and also as an athletic director.

Outside of school, I have also maintained a delicate balance between my professional aspirations and family life. I annually attend the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) conference. Recently the NIAAA just approved a new staff member specifically for finding ways to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. So, they added a new position with the goal of helping everybody who is in the profession or wants to get in the profession has opportunity to do so. And so a lot of intentional efforts have been made to include women and other minorities and engage with them and bring them to the table. So, you know, I'll say that from like a transition point my eyes were open significantly, because as a member of the NIAAA I also feel like it is my responsibility to find ways to include more diversity and equity within my own athletic department.

I always try to integrate my children into my work. I try to ensure they feel part of my journey. I make gamedays into a family affair. I love sharing resources with others, and, you know, appreciate the time that any athletic director [male or female] puts into

growing the profession and doing it with their family. Bringing your spouse and kids to athletic events is important. You get to see how your family can enjoy gameday with you. You know you're not 100% of every moment that you're at a game engaged in work, you know, and so you can interact with them rather than you be, even behind a wall or away. And then, you can avoid the "We won't see you tonight" conversation because they will be in bed before you get home. I always bring my children to events. I celebrate their personal milestones as intentionally as I do the athletes within my school.

### **My Reflection**

*Angela's journey is defined by an ongoing commitment to leadership, resilience, and service. Her early formative experiences were shaped by her unique family situation. From a young age, her parents moved away with her sister and left her to be raised by her grandparents. This had a profound influence on her life. She told me stories of how athletics from an early age gave her a sense of belonging. As she progressed through middle and high school, her grandparents became elderly and unable attend all of her sporting events. Without her parents or grandparents present at sporting events, the team and coaches created a sense of family and belonging that would influence her to this day. This sense of family continues to inform her understanding of sports as a community event. She told me stories of her elementary and middle school years being guided by influential mentors such as her church pastor, teachers and athletic coaches. These early experiences shaped her ongoing desire to uplift and empower others, evident in her leadership philosophy today. Throughout our time together, Angela told me about early leadership roles that shaped the leader she is presently. She told about how she would babysit for her teachers' children throughout middle and high school. She told me about*

*how in her first year teaching the principal promoted her to department head. These early exposures to leadership helped her establish a foundation for how she currently leads today. Reflecting on the impact her mentors had on her growth as a person lead her to dedicate her career to create opportunities for others. Her leadership is characterized by inclusivity, recognition, and an unwavering dedication to improving the lives of those she leads. This was seen through her creation of an athletic honors night designed to recognize athletes and coaches' successes beyond the on-field successes. Her legacy is clear. She has not only excelled in her own right but has also opened doors for others to follow in her footsteps, creating a lasting impact on her community and the world of athletics.*

### **Erin Hannon**

#### **Meet Erin**

*Erin is an experienced athletic director with over 10 years' experience. She has a deep passion for sports and education. Her career evolved from teaching to coaching, to assistant athletic director to taking on the athletic director role after being encouraged by a former coach. Throughout her career, she has coached a variety of sports, including softball, basketball, tennis, and swimming, always emphasizing fairness and equity, particularly advocating for girls' sports. She played sports from a young age, excelling in basketball and track in middle school and later receiving a basketball scholarship in college. Her commitment to education and leadership grew throughout her journey, including advocacy for Title IX in high school and her doctoral studies in sports management. She comes from a family that values both sports and education, and her*

*experiences as a student-athlete, coach, and educator have shaped her leadership philosophy today.*

### **Erin's Story**

I organized Erin's reflections along the same lines as the other collaborators, starting with sections on school years and moving through her career trajectory and things that were unique to her. For Erin, equality for all students is a section of particular interest.

#### ***Early Years***

Growing up, I always had a unique relationship with learning. I was an early reader, and by the time I reached elementary school, I was already ahead of my peers. While others were just catching up, I was off to the side, working independently, which, while giving me a sense of accomplishment, also left me a bit isolated. I knew from a young age, I loved sports. Even as an elementary student, athletics captured my heart. The physicality, teamwork, and the lessons learned through competition fascinated me. I remember watching my brother win an award for his performance at field day and counting down the days until I was old enough to participate in the same events. Later my brother won a fitness assessment and was presented with a certificate at one of the parent teacher association meetings. I recall wanting to win that same award so badly. We have always been very competitive, which helped install the competitive nature leading me to become a college basketball player, coach, and now athletic director.

#### ***Middle, High School, and College***

In middle school, I began formally competing in organized sports. I participated in both track and field and basketball from 6th – 10th grade. For the last 2 years of high

school, I focused all my attention on basketball. While in high school, I developed a passion for equality amongst all sports. After presenting a class project on Title IX, I began to advocate for equality within the sports I participated [in]. I can remember a confrontation I had with my athletic director at the time about why the boys team got new uniforms, but the girls' team did not. [Even from a young age], I always wanted things to be fair and equitable when it came to girls being respected the same way the guys were. It was my senior year, and the boy's basketball team got a new set of uniforms. The girls team did not. [As a girls basketball player], I went on my title soapbox to the AD. I asked him, "How could you do this? That's not fair that they would get uniforms, and we not get uniforms." I reminded him that we both got the current uniforms 3 years ago, when I was a freshman, so I know they were purchased at the same time back. Then why would the girls not be considered this time? So, I went on and on, and he just sat there and listened. And I'm just rolling. And I'm like, "Okay, well, we'll still be playing when the guys are at home in their new uniforms." And it actually turned out that way that we advanced in the playoffs when the guys were eliminated. And you know that was just all I needed. But looking back, especially as athletic director now, I'm like. I have no idea how they paid for those uniforms. A booster could have done it or a parent could have donated them. I never was able to find out how they got the new uniforms, but I was very adamant that it was a bad look regardless of how they were purchased. This early formative experience fueled my passion for a lifelong commitment to ensure equity for all student-athletes, male or female, to ensure everyone had a positive experience with athletics.

In college, I had initially set my sights on becoming an attorney, a path I believed would make my family proud. But deep down, I knew I was meant to teach and coach. It was my high school basketball coach who truly influenced me. Her skills and leadership inspired me to want to become a PE teacher and coach. She was young, active, and full of energy, and watching her taught me that it was possible to be both a coach and a mentor in the most positive sense. She was my 9th – 10th grade basketball coach and was someone who saw me as a leader. The high school [basketball season] is a much longer season [than my middle school basketball season]. [The extra time] allowed for more opportunity to build a relationship with the coach. You're practicing more. You're practicing over the holidays. Practice is through the summer leading into high school. I think she made an effort to just get to know us as people. She was still pretty young herself, but she was never too [friendly with the players] she made sure to remind us she was still in charge. She was never inappropriate or trying to be, you know, on our level, but she did respect us. I guess [thinking back on that time] I just admire that. I admire the fact that she wanted to build relationships with us. She cared about us outside of just basketball. She would come to other extracurricular things we might have had on campus. She would come to those and support us as more than just her athletes. She could play [basketball at a high level]. She could still, I mean she could tell you what to do, but she could also show you. That mattered a lot to me, because, you know, now I have this model in front of me, and I want to be able to do that. Reflecting on my time with her was when the idea of becoming a PE teacher and coach began to form in my mind.

### ***Athletic Director Career Pathway***

Fast-forward a few years, and I found myself right back where it all started at my alma mater, teaching and coaching volleyball and basketball. I was young, but I jumped in without hesitation. I was eventually promoted to become the head basketball coach for the very same program I used to play for. I never had that moment in my life where I wanted to become an athletic director. [The role] was presented to me unexpectedly by my former high school coach, who had become the athletic director and believed in my potential for leadership. Initially I was hesitant and doubted my readiness. I didn't know enough about managing all of the various sports in an athletic department. Ultimately, I accepted the role, driven by my desire to ensure fairness, especially for girls' sports programs. I asked [myself], if I don't take it, who are they going to give it to? Will that person care anything about my program as a coach or girls sports in general?

It wasn't until I was offered the role of athletic director that I truly realized how much I wanted to make a difference. There was no moment of ambition or longing for a higher position; it was simply a feeling that if I didn't take it, the program might not get the attention it deserved. It was a tough decision, but one rooted in a desire for equity. I wanted to ensure that every sport, especially girls' sports, had a fair shot at the same resources, opportunities, and respect as the more traditional programs, like football.

### ***Leadership Philosophy***

When I took the job, I was prepared to follow every rule to the letter, not only because I believed in fairness but because I was determined to prove myself. It was a difficult learning curve (pause) there were a lot of moments where I felt like I didn't know enough or wasn't supported enough. I was enjoying my physical education job and

coaching when one day, out of the blue, my former high school coach, who was now my current athletic director, brought me into the office. He said, “Do you want to be the athletic director or the department chair?” And I’m saying, “What are you talking about?” And he says, “I’m going to the new high school to open it up as the athletic director. I think you would make a good AD here.” I’m like (pause), “I (pause) don’t want to be the athletic director. I don’t know anything about football,” that’s what I remember as my first thought. I clearly remember where I was in the room to just say football was my apprehension to even considering being an athletic director. I felt like football’s king in Georgia, and I don’t know enough about it to take on that type of role. And then, you know, having seen so many athletic directors that were football coaches, even the my current AD offering me the job was a former football coach as well, so my thought was just no, I hadn’t seen it, and my immediate reaction was, “I do not want to do that.” I go home, talk to my parents, and my dad is saying, “Well, you know, if you take the role, at least you know the lay of the land.” I’m still thinking I don’t know enough about managing all of this stuff. I never had that moment in my life where I wanted to become an athletic director. I think I initially took the position because I felt like, if I don’t take it, who are they going to give it to? Will that person care anything about my program as a coach? Because I assumed it would probably be just another duty given to the football coach. I wondered (pause) would they care about my program? Would they care about any of the other girls programs? So, I felt like, at least, if I do it, I can make sure that everybody is taken care of equally. [With me] being the lifelong learner that I am, after accepting the position and recognizing how much I didn’t know, I decided to go back to

school myself, and that's when I pursued my doctorate in sport management, just because my district, had no real structure as to how athletics will go as a kind of universal plan.

I recall the early part of my career as a rigid adherence to rules. This was a strategy I developed and relied on due to limited mentorship and preparation for the role. When I was young as an AD [it was hard to find a balance in how to lead] because I mean, I wasn't 30 yet. Having to correct someone that was older than me or someone who was a coach at the school while I might have been a student less than 9 years ago being that I was AD at the high school that I attended, was challenging. That was a lot more difficult when I was young because I wanted everyone to respect me regardless of my age. [As I have gotten] older and found different ways to interact with people just as (pause) as adults, has made a difference in those relationships I now establish with my colleagues. I wasn't really shadowing my previous athletic director to try to learn. It was not on my radar to become an athletic director at all. [Rather than work to build relationships or collaboratively solve problems], I just went straight to the rule book. I used my knowledge of the rules to advocate for proper protocol and fairness. My small physical stature and youth motivated me to know my stuff as a way to earn respect from my colleagues and navigate confrontations effectively. While this approach ensured compliance, it initially alienated some of my colleagues. I like for things to be fair. When people start skirting around the rules is where a lot of times there are things that become unjust, and the fairness is not there. So I've always been one that was a rule follower. As a coach, it is always something I like to tell to my athletes, "You're playing a sport. There are rules to the game. It's no different in any other place in life. You don't follow those rules. There are penalties, you know, a foul or a flag. There's a punishment like (pause) a

red card when you don't follow the rules." I've grown into the concept of relationships are a lot more important than just following the rules. Of course, we're still going to be rule followers. That's kind of this position. I guess that I have come to better understand now that the relationship piece is also important. I now strive to find out why something's happening the way that it is, rather than think someone is automatically a cheater. It could have been an oversight. When I was a newer athletic director, I might have gone pretty hard on someone that stepped out of line, but part of that again going back to my youth, the inexperience, and me having nothing to go by, but the rules in hand. Now I've had more experiences, and I know more, I really don't believe in wasting experiences. So what I've learned from my interactions with coaches, my interactions with other athletic directors within our regions or throughout our state to help with my own growth.

Over time, I learned that being a leader wasn't just about enforcing rules. Relationships mattered. I came to understand that leadership is about finding balance between rules and relationships, structure, and empathy. I had an experience this week actually, where we were hosting a game and a lot of coaches came out. It was a work day, so students were not around and a lot of coaches are just in the bleachers. So, I just decided to go and sit in the middle of the coaches and now we're just, you know, shooting the breeze as fans, watching the game, not as I'm your leader and you're my support, anything like that. But it just opened the door for opportunity to learn more about them and for them to learn more about me and just kind of take some of the stigma off of, hey, here's the leader that's going to be so tough on you. I think moments like that make it easier for me if I do have to have a difficult conversation with someone later, that we've already built this rapport, this relationship, so that you have an understanding of

me and what is important to me and I have an understanding of what's important to them. And I think that also helps me to give people the benefit of the doubt, you know, not automatically assume that someone was trying to do something that wasn't right or trying to break a rule or something. Whereas before my immediate mindset was, this is wrong, you did wrong. You know, it could have been an oversight. [As I have evolved] coaches respect me more when they see I am not just about enforcement but about hearing their concerns and valuing their input.

### ***Mentorship and Legacy***

My journey has been profoundly shaped by the support of mentors, including my parents, coaches, and brother, who introduced me to the idea of studying physical education. These influences instilled a strong work ethic and a commitment to mentorship, which I now extend to others. I take pride in mentoring younger athletic directors and encouraging female leaders in the field. When I'm speaking to other female athletic directors, I often talk about the importance of having the support of your principal or your direct supervisor. If you have that support it kind of helps with the feeling that people can't just go behind you to the top to get something done. They just circumvent your authority. By having that relationship with your principal, it makes things a bit easier to do what it is that you have to do. If they're behind you, then people will know that they can't just bypass you. However, they may discount you, whether it's as a woman or just some people are just rude, but that's something that I speak to other women in this profession or women looking to get into this profession about. Some [women] have families, and that requires a bit more of them. I try to share an understanding of delegation to get some support help, so that you are still connected, but

also knowing you still got to take care of home. Just making sure you find people that can support you, whether it's an assistant athletic director or another head coach that can take on small responsibilities, but just finding ways to share the load a little bit. I encourage everyone to inspect what you expect from those folks, just don't leave them by the wayside, but kind of follow up to make sure things are being done the right way. I think it took me a few years to learn this lesson, but I try to share the knowledge of how important it is to build relationships with your coaches and staff. I encourage other AD's to build those relationships and not feel like they have to be so rigid in order to be respected. It's not going to guarantee that somebody's going to respect you, but just keeping in mind that you can get a lot farther with building those relationships. As I say, you catch more bees with honey. That's what I try to encourage when I'm speaking to others, too. Speaking of helping kind of encouraging them to build those relationships. So they kind of have a support network.

Part of my influence is just me being employed in this public athletic director role. It's been cool to see that my presence in this role has impacted female students to consider the possibility of doing something like this. To me (pause) that's neat. That's neat, because, you know, maybe they hadn't seen [a female athletic director] before, they wouldn't even know there was a possibility. I've had more than one actually, former students mention that they are interested in leadership and athletics because of what they've seen me be able to do, and I was blown away, because, you know, that wasn't necessarily the goal, but for that to be a result (pause) that's encouraging.

The more females that enter athletic administration, the more it will diminish the perception that women can't lead departments or be as successful as men. One of the

most rewarding aspects of my career has been witnessing former student-athletes return to coach at their alma mater. The most rewarding aspect of my position is seeing former student athletes come back to coach in some capacity, both male and female. That has been pretty cool to see. I actually interviewed one of my former students probably 3 weeks ago, that'll come on and join us soon. So that's positive to see former student-athletes wanting to come back and be part of the school they played for. I'll give another example. Last year our new head girls track coach, who played basketball for me and was a 3-sport athlete here, asked to bring in an assistant coach. The assistant coach also played basketball for me. To see my former students now as mature young adults, who are mothers now, and knowing how to lead the current young ladies has been very meaningful to me. To see the student athletes respect them, and really want their approval and to see them have success drives me to keep molding the next generation of student-athletes to be successful beyond their sport. I know that because they played for me and now work under my leadership, they know how I want things done and they're going to follow that to the point that if I if I walk outside to practice, they still, kind of you know, straighten up. I try to tell them like, "It's okay, guys, we work together now," but that is cool. It's rewarding to see them go about things in the way that I know they might have learned, even if not intentionally, from the way I coached them.

### ***Equality For All***

The journey to becoming an athletic director was one filled with both challenges and rewards. One of the greatest rewards has been seeing former players and coaches, those I had the privilege of guiding, develop into strong, passionate leaders themselves. I've come to realize that it's not just about the wins or the titles. It's about creating an

environment where everyone feels valued, where athletes and coaches have the chance to thrive.

There were times early in my career where I felt like a lone voice in the room. As one of the few female athletic directors in my region, I often found myself fighting to be heard, but over time, I grew more comfortable in my role. I focused on my work, built relationships, and let my actions speak for me. Today, I'm proud to see more women taking on leadership roles in athletic administration. To see one of my former athletes become the head track coach and coach one of her current athletes to break her own school record this last season, and to see her encouraging that student athlete to break her record and screaming and cheering louder than anybody in the stadium as she was about to cross the finish line (pause) that was (pause) that felt pretty good to just see it, you know, kind of recycle itself, knowing that, I know that my presence here was enough to make her want to come back. My job as an athletic director or a coach wasn't so bad that you never wanted to come back around. So if anything, if I didn't do any damage. To see my former student-athletes want to come back to teach or work in the same building as me is cool. That's one of the more rewarding things that I've experienced as an athletic director, because I guess that's another example of results. Their experience was good enough that they wanted to be able to pour back into young people themselves. And they thought it was a good idea to do it at our school. It's been gratifying to mentor others, especially women, in the field, and I remain committed to supporting their growth.

Looking back, I see a journey shaped by pivotal moments. My early advocacy for Title IX in high school, my commitment to fairness, and my evolution as a leader is an ongoing process. And through it all, my goal has remained the same: to make a positive

impact, to ensure that all athletes, regardless of gender or sport, have the resources, respect, and opportunities they deserve. It's been a long road, but one I'm grateful to have walked.

### **My Reflection**

*Erin's career journey is a testament to growth, resilience, and a deep commitment to fostering fairness in athletics. From her early experiences as a competitive student-athlete, Erin's path to becoming an athletic director was shaped by pivotal moments, including her passion for sports and advocacy for equity in athletics. Erin's formative years set the foundation for her future in education and sports. In high school, Erin's awareness of inequities in athletics, particularly regarding the treatment of girls' sports, ignited her lifelong commitment to Title IX advocacy. This early exposure to systemic issues in athletics shaped her belief in fairness and gender equality in sports, ideals that would continue to define her professional philosophy. Her college years solidified her dedication to athletics and education. Initially aspiring to become an attorney, she found her true calling in education, following the example set by her high school basketball coach. Her coach's leadership and influence inspired Erin to pursue a career in physical education and coaching, eventually steering her toward the role of athletic director. Erin's transition into the athletic director position was not driven by a lifelong ambition to hold that title, but rather a sense of responsibility. When the opportunity arose, Erin accepted the role, not out of personal desire but from a deep sense of duty to ensure equity for all sports programs, especially for girls' teams. Her early experiences as a coach, paired with her thorough understanding of rules and regulations, equipped her to navigate this new challenge. As Erin grew into her role, she found herself evolving in her*

*leadership approach. Initially, she adhered strictly to rules, which, while ensuring fairness, sometimes created tensions. Over time, however, Erin learned to balance her commitment to rules with the importance of building relationships. She found that strong, open relationships with coaches and colleagues enhanced her ability to enforce rules while fostering a more collaborative environment.*

## **Jan Levinson**

### **Meet Jan**

*Jan is a high school athletic director with over 10 years experience. She came from a diverse background shaped by resilience, determination, and a deep passion for education and sports. Growing up in a challenging environment, including periods of homelessness and navigating life with a drug-addicted mother and abusive father, she found stability and solace in school, which became her safe haven. Excelling academically, she developed a love for sports in middle school, participating in volleyball, basketball, and track. After graduating high school, she joined the Air Force, serving in military intelligence and gaining valuable leadership skills. Using the GI Bill, she returned to college, earning a degree in health and physical education. She started as a special education teacher before transitioning to physical education. Her career rapidly advanced to an assistant athletic director title and then head athletic director. She has a diverse background in sports, having played softball since the age of four and coaching numerous sports, including basketball, soccer, tennis, swimming, and even equestrian activities. As a trailblazer and the first female athletic director at two schools, she is dedicated to fostering equity, supporting her coaches and students, and creating a lasting positive impact on her community.*

## **Jan's Story**

Jan's reflections were organized beginning with her early school years and moving through her career trajectory, leadership philosophy, and the values that define her approach. For Jan, resilience and mentorship play a pivotal role in shaping her journey. From finding stability in school during a turbulent childhood to stepping into leadership roles in athletics and education, she has consistently sought to create a supportive environment for students and coaches. Her experiences, both personal and professional, have fueled her commitment to fostering equity, accountability, and a strong sense of community.

### ***Early Life***

For as long as I can remember, school had been my sanctuary. It wasn't just a place of learning (pause) it was my safe haven, a constant amidst chaos. School's always been my safe place. Every day, I knew where I was going. I knew I'd get to eat. I knew I'd have friends around. These small certainties anchored my life and fueled my dreams. By the time I was in third grade, I already knew I wanted to be an educator.

My early years were defined by challenges. I was born eight weeks premature. I defied early predictions of physical or intellectual disabilities. The adversity I faced deepened as I grew. I grew up with a drug-addicted mother and an abusive father. At one point, we were homeless, living in a shelter. [Yet], through the instability, school emerged as a beacon of hope and stability, offering me not just an education but a vision for the future.

### *Middle School and Athletics*

Middle school marked a turning point. My family relocated to Texas and I found solace in sports. . . volleyball, basketball, and track. All of these sports offered an outlet for the growth of my leadership skills. Throughout my playing career, I had several coaches that were not fully committed to the team. I would often step into leadership roles and take responsibility for the growth of the teams I participated on. In 7th grade, I played basketball and ran track. My least helpful years with coaches [specifically track] were in 7th and 8th grade. To be honest, that was kind of one of those things that pushed me into wanting to be a coach and wanting to help kids. Cause, of course, you know in a lot of places track is not a top priority sport. When you typically look at the hiring process for any grade levels, you're always trying to fill basketball, football, maybe some soccer in there, depending on where your location is at, but those are your primary coaches. They get hired on, and then at high school you had, you know, your volleyball coaches as well. Track is just typically one of those sports that a coach that's not in season ends up picking it up to get a check so the kids can still do it and whatnot. I did hurdles so that was my event. My first coach was actually the cheerleading coach and just to give you kind of an idea of this woman (pause) nothing against her and whatnot, but she was probably close to 300 pounds, so she was not demonstrating anything to us. To be honest, most of the times, I don't even remember her coming outside with us to practice which is crazy. You're supposed to be coaching us, and you're not even at the practice. She told me how to sit in the hurdle stretch and she was like, "That's how you're supposed to look over the hurdle." That was the extent of the coaching me and my best friend received at the time. My best friend and I just went out there, and we just

figured it out, like we just kept doing it. We're like, oh, that looks good. And because, of course, this was before smartphones, any of that. So it's not like you could just go to YouTube University. You know, this was still when we had, like The Oregon Trail and that type stuff like we didn't have access to computers like dial up AOL was the best we had, so we could not just look these type of things up like you can nowadays. So we just kind of figured it out ourselves [during our] 7th grade year. And then, when we went into the 8th grade we took over. We led the practices for the 7th graders. We came up with kind of the practice plans what to do. All of that. We just did it ourselves. We figured it out in middle school and became the leaders without anyone asking us to take on this responsibility. Once I got to the high school level, the coaching was a lot better. Whether leading warmups, helping organize practice, or motivating teammates, I always sought ways to become more involved and help the entire team achieve success.

### ***High School Mentorship and Adversity***

Unfortunately, I suffered an injury in high school that sidelined my playing career. However, my injury was a blessing because it opened my eyes to the career of teaching and coaching. My high school cross country coach became a pivotal figure in my life. Coach Caleb [modeled] the kind of support and care that a truly supportive role model displays. His leadership was like a father figure in my life. My childhood was a little bit on the rougher side (pause) .you know, I went through physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental abuse, all, all that type of stuff at home. Being a member of his team gave me a place where I felt like there was an adult that I could trust. That was very big for me, because that is something that I struggled with in those years. I was still very much a very quiet and introverted kid that I never wanted to be noticed. I never wanted to be seen

like I just wanted to be invisible and he made sure we knew he noticed us, and that he cared and kind of gave that layer of trust and while he was still a tough love type of coach, it was still a safe place. He wasn't the type that babied us. You know he had high expectations. He held us accountable all the things you need in those years. Having someone that could do that for me, even though I wasn't a bad kid, I didn't go off the rails, I still had A's and B's, I was in honors classes, all of those things at that point, but still having somebody that cared, that is what kind of drove me into the coaching side. I know there's other kids out there that need what I needed. And so that's kind of what has always driven me and my passion into going into this career field. I want to be that person for somebody else. And so that's kind of the approach I take to it. I would later take the lessons he taught me and strive to offer these same principals to my own students and athletes.

### ***Military Service***

My career journey to education was by no means linear. After high school, I joined the Air Force. I knew I couldn't afford college and needed to find stability in my life. The military provided me with a way to grow as a person and fund my education. The military [helped] me hone my discipline and leadership skills. I became calm under pressure and left the military with the ability to adapt to challenging situations. These traits would significantly help me later in my career as an athletic director.

After completing my time in the military, I returned to college and completed my degree in health and physical education. After college, I found a job right away teaching special education. Special education wasn't what I planned, but it taught me patience, understanding, and how to meet students where they are. In my first-year teaching, I also

took on the challenge of coaching multiple sports. By my third year, the athletic director named me the assistant athletic director and not long after that I took over as the athletic director. As I stepped into my new athletic leadership as a young, female AD it was not without challenges. I faced rumors that I must have slept with the principal to get the job. I knew that I had to work twice as hard to prove I deserved to be here.

### ***A Visionary Leader***

My athletic leadership philosophy centers on accountability, open communication, and support. I want my coaches to hold me accountable. My commitment to the students and staff within my building is unwavering. It's not about me. It's about my students getting what they need and my coaches being supported. Even before I became an athletic director, I was very big on driving support for the various sports. In the high school community it's hard to get people to help volunteer, to come work games, or even to come watch games. It's hard to get other teachers to come out and support. Find small solutions to all of these things was my passion. So I actually befriended a lot of coaches, and I would come out to their events. I would fill in where they needed. If somebody was missing an assistant coach that day I would step in and try to help. I told them, "I don't exactly know what you want me to tell them, but tell me what you want me to tell them, and I'm going to hop in and learn in the process." I had started helping the football team by doing all their game recording. So I was the one on top of the booth every Friday night, recording the game so the kids could get their highlight reels. I just got very good at stepping back, seeing where there are missing pieces. I've tried to fill those missing holes to help whatever slack is happening. So I

earned some people's respect, some people's support from all those volunteer roles I served in before moving into the AD role.

I've been through a lot, but when it's your life, you don't always process it that way. Adversity has not been an obstacle for me. Instead, I view it as an important element that shaped me into the leader I am today. The values of equity, empathy, and strength are the foundation of how I lead every day. I come to work every day with the mindset that I must prioritize supporting my coaches anyway I can and create a collaborative environment that enables my coaches to focus on what they do best (pause) coaching. I'm really big on my coaches taking time to be with their families. With GHSA dead weeks and stuff like that, you know, you have people that still want to be in touch with their teams, all that stuff. I have a strict policy where I don't let my coaches do it. I tell them, "This is your time for you and your family. You do that." I always encourage my coaches to bring their families to the school. Those with younger kids bring them to practices, bring them to games. Like I have no problem attaching one of their kids to my hips and taking them with me throughout the games while they're still coaching and can do what they need to do. Just so they still get to be around them and still have that bond and all of that. At the school, I currently work, even my principal is big on that we're very family oriented here. We consider each other family, because we're the ones that go through the trenches together. Other people don't understand what we do. They don't understand the sacrifices, all of those pieces that go into athletics. So for me, I treat all of my coaches, their kids, their, you know, their spouses, I try to, you know, be involved, know that what's going on in their personal lives, ask about things, all of that because it's important not to lose that fact and not to, because in athletics, we get so caught up in wins

and losses and, you know, what I could do to, you know, get better and all that they lose sight of the importance of coaching and approaching everything with the whole child in mind. My role is to take the administrative burden off their shoulders. I try to lead the way I want to be led. I'm not one for micromanagement. I want my coaches to feel comfortable giving me feedback.

### **My Reflection**

*Jan's journey to becoming a high school athletic director is a testament to her resilience, determination, and unwavering passion for education and sports. Growing up in a tumultuous environment marked by periods of homelessness and family struggles, Jan found stability in school, which became her sanctuary and a foundation for career. As she reflected on her childhood, all of her stories revolved around how influential school was on her life. She told me that school served as a place of structure and safety. This connects to her current philosophy of creating supportive environments for students. This temporal thread underscores how her early life shaped her understanding of stability and the importance of school as a refuge. She recalled overcoming her reading difficulties in elementary school with the help of teachers pouring their passion for helping others into her. By middle school she was excelling in all academics, which showed her the transformational power of someone helping and believing in you, that fuels her passion for helping students with challenges today. The trajectory of overcoming adversity demonstrates how her past informs her ability to overcome difficult situations in her athletic department.*

*A high school injury sidelined her playing career but opened her eyes to teaching and coaching as a profession, inspired by the mentorship of her cross-country coach,*

*who modeled the support and care she would later strive to emulate. The positive experiences with coaches not giving up on her when she was injured were key to her decision to enter education and her belief in the transformative power of athletics for young people. After high school, Jan joined the Air Force, where she developed discipline and leadership skills, preparing her to handle high-pressure situations while teaching and coaching. Her career quickly advanced, and by her third year of teaching, she became assistant athletic director and soon after, head athletic director. Her leadership philosophy is built on creating a collaborative environment where coaches can focus on their teams while she handles the administrative burdens. Growing up in a challenging environment where she did not have family support, led her to find belonging within her athletic teams. These formative experiences would shape the view of her athletic department. She described the coaches and students within her school as her family. This underscores the relational aspect of her leadership and influence her youth had on her present job. Her emphasis on fostering community, work-life balance, and inclusion reflects her commitment to creating strong social bonds within her athletic department. Jan's journey, marked by adversity, has shaped her into a visionary leader committed to fostering a culture of growth, inclusion, and excellence within her school community.*

### **Karen Phillipelli**

#### **Meet Karen**

*Karen is an athletic director with over 13 years' experience in athletic administration. She balances her professional duties with family life as the mother of three young children. In elementary and middle school, she excelled academically as a*

*"nerdy" student who participated in school plays and became an officer in the National Honor Society. Her passion for sports developed at a young age where she earned leadership roles like captain of the middle school basketball team. After pursuing a career in journalism, she transitioned into education and coaching, starting as a freshman girls' basketball coach. Her coaching career progressed to head coach, where she developed mentorship relationships with experienced coaches. This foundation led to her eventual appointment as assistant athletic director and later transitioning to a full-time athletic director role. Throughout her career, she has focused on equity, relationship-building, and supporting her teams. With a background shaped by supportive mentors and a drive to create positive experiences for students, she remains deeply committed to her role, emphasizing leadership and the importance of community.*

### **Karen's Story**

Karen's reflections were organized beginning with early school years and moving through her career path, coaching experiences, and transition into athletic administration. For Karen, relationship-based leadership is a key theme, shaping her approach to coaching, mentorship, and equity in sports.

#### ***Early Life and Grade School***

I guess I was kind of nerdy even from a young age. I have always had a love for learning. I [also as far back as I can remember] have always had a passion for structured and engaging physical activities. Some of my best extracurricular memories came from participating in the school plays. Although these were not organized sports, they gave me an opportunity to showcase my talents in another avenue and build relationships with peers outside the classroom. My love for organized sports and official athletic career

began in middle school. I participated in various sports throughout middle school including gymnastics, softball, track, and basketball. I enjoyed all of the sports, but my passion was geared towards basketball. My leadership journey began to take shape in seventh grade when I was selected for the bus patrol program. This was an honor to be chosen for this position and I wanted to treat the role like it was the most important part of my day.

As I entered high school, I was presented with new opportunities to lead, both academically and athletically. I became the captain of my basketball team and an officer in the National Honor Society. Although these two roles were very different and presented their own unique challenges, they both taught me the value of teamwork and accountability. I mean, I was kind of a quite kid. I wasn't like a natural, loud kind of leader, because I was pretty shy. I was quiet pretty much all the time off the court, but on the court, and you know, on the playing field I was a little different cause (pause) it was more, I guess that's where I was comfortable. Stepping onto the basketball court gave me an opportunity to experience a leadership position and start to develop my own philosophy of what leading others looked like. For me it was never about just excelling in these roles, it was about the development of relationships I built with my peers along the way that truly resonate with me. These experiences helped shape my view of how important it was to develop meaningful relationships with the people you work with on a daily basis to achieve similar goals. [Dating back to when I was captain,] I formed my own [ideas and thoughts] about how to lead through establishing relationships. Everything has to be relationship based. It's really hard to talk to people and give any guidance if you don't have any relationship with them, you know. It's like, when you are

the coach and have kids on your team, you have to have a relationship, so when there's days, you know, all of us as coaches, we get mad at our team, or we're frustrated and we have to be able to voice that, but if you don't have a relationship with [the athletes on your team] it's hard for you to get through to kids because they just automatically think you don't like them. Learning from a young age the power of taking the time to establish relationships with peers was a powerful tool that still benefits me today.

### ***College and Early Career***

I initially had career aspirations to become a journalist. These dreams were rooted in my love for *Sports Illustrated*. However, I soon realized the entry-level writing positions were extremely competitive and hard to come by, leading me to alter my career aspirations. My high school basketball team had a lasting impact on me that still shapes my view of leadership today. Coach Walker was one of the most supportive and encouraging mentors I have ever been fortunate enough to interact with. His encouragement for me to pursue coaching was a suggestion that shaped my life and steered my eventual career path. Even today I am still friends with a lot of my teammates from high school, you know you can, even when you don't see them regularly, or people are moved around like you can pick up with those people and talk like you know we were just together last week. High school basketball provided me with an opportunity to see the influence of [two different] coaching styles. My first high school basketball coach (pause) was a successful coach (pause), but he didn't always make you feel very good. Now that I am older and have seen all sides of coaching, I recognize that particular coach was kind of more about himself versus the support and growth of the players. My second coach was also successful, but his approach was more about the kids. Now, I see the

difference in how those contrasting styles influenced me. Throughout my playing career, we always had very good teams, but I think one coach made it about himself whereas the other one, just you (pause) you felt like he loved you, no matter what. If you played great, or if you sucked, you know he was (pause) he was supportive. I have so many fond memories of my time with Coach Walker because of how supportive he was of us as student-athletes and not about his own successes.

I initially entered the education field as a substitute teacher, hoping that the position would only be a temporary stop until I figured out what I really wanted to do. It was during that time as a substitute I unexpectedly reignited my interest in education and coaching. I kind of had fun with that experience and wanted to keep doing it. [Looking back] at the journalism piece of my journey, I now obviously recognize I was not going to start [directly out of college] as a full time Sports Illustrated writer. At the time, I remember entry level positions in writing came with almost no money. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do with my life, but after I got my degree in journalism, I just needed some time figuring it out. I did some substitute teaching while I was trying to figure out what job am I going to get. As I subbed, the thought of teaching became a real possibility. I knew that maybe I had an inkling that coaching would be fun. So that's when I, you know, decided I would do the graduate school route and get into education. When I started the process of entering education, I thought maybe I'm going to get certified [to teach] in literature. [I thought that field] went with journalism. I told myself I would go to graduate school and get certified to teach English. In my 1st semester back, I had 3 classes. Two were literature courses. One of them was like old English literature, and I forget what the other one was. The other course I took was intro to special education. I

went to the 1st literature class, and they piled up, like (pause) 14 different old English literature books for us to read. I was like, “Hmm! I don’t think this is (pause) I don’t think this is me.” I remember dropping those classes. I literally only took the intro to special education class that semester. As the semester progressed, I started doing some research at high schools like, how do you get hired? What’s the best job to get hired fast? I was interested in PE, but I knew it would be very hard to get a job in PE at least at a high school. The research said special education or math would be the best pathways to consider. I ended up doing graduate school with a focus in special education. I was interested in learning more about students with learning disabilities, or maybe some behavior issues. My sister actually kind of struggled in school, where school was always very easy for me. She probably, you know (pause) I don’t know that it was really officially diagnosed, but she probably was like, had kind of a learning disability in math. It always really bothered me if school was easy for me, why was it so hard for her? I hated that it was hard for her and that kind of I think sent me into the special education route. That’s kind of how my journey into teaching and coaching started. My career pivot from writing to education led me to pursue graduate studies in special education, setting the stage for my lifelong commitment to working with students and athletes.

### ***Coaching Pathway***

Coaching sports became my gateway to even bigger leadership roles. My first coaching role was as the freshman girls’ basketball coach. This position came with its share of challenges as a new coaching attempting to figure out lineups, combinations, and how to effectively manage a team. I now recall those times as key moments for me to hone my philosophy of relationship-based leadership. The way I coached was rooted in

the lessons I learned from my high school basketball experiences. I knew my players would think, “Coach is mad, now coach doesn’t like me.” Whereas if [I] have that relationship, I can say things and they’re like, oh, yeah, you know, I see what coach is talking about. I think that’s a huge, and I think that philosophy has followed me in every bit of my career journey. [For example,] in the classroom it is hard to talk to another teacher about what they need to do better in their classroom (pause) if you (pause), if you’ve never talked to them before. [As athletic director,] when someone I have never met tries to give me feedback or critique me, I don’t appreciate that. I’m like, who are you? I don’t even know you, and you’re telling me that I’m not doing this, or I need to do this. So I think relationships have to be the foundation of all of this. I do think, as an athletic director, it’s important to have had coaching experience. You know I’ve heard some situations where athletic directors have been hired, and they don’t have coaching experience, and I find that (pause) like, I don’t know how that works, cause I feel like people need to know you’ve been in their situation. You’ve had a parent attack you after a game for no good reason. You’ve had, you know (pause) you’ve dealt with the completely misguided information that gets out there (pause) where something you said got translated [several] different ways and then got to a parent. And they come at you like, “Why did you say this?” And I’m like, “Okay, let’s back it up. This is what was said.” I think there has to be relationships involved so that there can be trust, and once there’s trust, then I think you can be a leader. I came to the conclusion that everything has to be relationship-based. I found it easier to guide and lead people once you built the foundation of the relationship.

As I progressed through coaching roles. . . from JV to varsity assistant and eventually head coach. . . the mentors I worked with along the way played a critical role in my own personal growth. I never had that aha moment where I knew along my pathway I wanted to become an athletic director. I don't think when I was playing sports it was anywhere in my realm of hey, this is what you're going to do at some point, you know, I don't think I was thinking like that at the time. Once I started coaching, I remember a particularly negative experience. I was a first-year head 9th grade girls' basketball coach. I think it was the second game of the season when I was still like at that point of where you're just kind of like trying different lineups, you know, playing different combinations of people. I mean the team was freshmen girls so you know, I was trying to play everyone. I remember I started this girl one game but didn't start her in the next game. I started like a whole bunch of different people, but she didn't start, and her parents went ballistic and came at me after the game like literally came down to the bench. I was (pause) sort of like what (pause) what is happening. I remember our boys' varsity coach at the time saw it happening. He kind of like came and grabbed me. He pretended like I had coached such a great game, grabbed me, and we walked off. Once our girls' head coach found out about it later that day, when he got there, he was like, oh, well, we're going to take care of that. I remember he had a meeting with them, and they were still, they were literally still trying to come after me like, said I had a vendetta against their kid. They kept [going on and on] about all of this stuff and all these things. I was blown away because I was just like (pause) I was really just trying to start different people to see who worked the best together and it was only game 2, you know. I mean literally it went to a meeting with the athletic director. That's where I realized, you know,

the power of having someone support you. They were all so supportive. I mean, I was really blown away because I didn't even really know at that early point of my career, does anyone support me? I didn't even understand, like why people were so mad about not starting one game. That was my introduction to parents are crazy about their kids, but it also showed me the value in working with people that have your back in tough times. [Reflecting] on that experience also showed me a glimpse at all the other stuff an AD has to do that no one really sees. The experienced coaches at my high school fostered a sense of community and shared wisdom, shaping my approach to team dynamics and leadership. When the opportunity arose to transition into athletic administration, the lessons I learned throughout my coaching journey became my guiding principles.

#### ***Athletic Administration Career and Value of Mentors***

My role as an athletic director is deeply rooted in equity and relationships. I focus on ensuring all teams feel supported, I want to make sure all of my coaches are able to navigate the complexities of dealing with upset parents, booster clubs, and other unexpected challenges they may encounter. I remain steadfast in my commitment to fostering a positive environment for all the athletes, coaches, and parents that are involved in my athletic department. I know that no one wants to see a team that's miserable on or off the court. My leadership philosophy, [influenced by mentors like Coach Walker and Dr. B], is rooted in the importance of confidence and encouragement. You know, after I got hired by Coach Walker to coach 9th grade, I felt like I moved up pretty quickly with him in terms of like [my role within his program]. I went from just the 9th grade coach to, you know, Coach Walker asking me, "Hey, will you go scout this team for me (pause) for the varsity." I thought that was the coolest thing ever because I

felt like he started trusting me. Dr. B, was one of my former principals and another key mentor who saw potential in me. He encouraged me to pursue more leadership roles. He trusted me to take over the entire basketball program and he hired me for my first leadership position as the special education department head. Dr. B (pause) he always seemed very confident in what he thought I could do. And I, you know, I owe him a lot for that trust and inspiration. I think all of us at some point, we need somebody to say or give us confidence that we're doing things the right way, or that they see something in us. At least for me, I knew I wasn't always the most and I am still not always the most confident person. I might fake it a little bit but inside, when really I might not even know what I am going to do. I think just having people that you respect you, say things to encourage you, praise your success, that goes a long way to give you that belief that okay maybe I can do this job, or maybe I should try to do this. You know, at least for me I think it helped me a lot. That [positive reaffirmation] is a critical component I ask all of my coaches to instill in their players.

I acknowledge that throughout my time in athletic administration I have seen the occasional challenges of navigating a traditionally male-dominated field, but I remain focused on displaying my own competence and professionalism. My school received a new turf athletic complex 4 years ago. During the installation, the male workers kind of gave off a vibe during our interactions, without necessarily saying anything directly, about what my knowledge might have been or not been. They assumed I [might not know] the dimensions of a turf installation for a football field. In one of our meetings, I explained they had made a mistake and would need to address the issue. The men said they would need to consult with the principal before making any changes. Our principal,

who also happened to be female, informed them anything I wanted adjusted, needed to be taken care of. To have the male workers try to go above me was frustrating in the moment, but to have the support of my principal (pause) meant the world to me. Another challenge I faced early in my career was the football booster club wanting me to let go of our football coach and hire a new coach. The group that met with me was comprised entirely of older adult males. In the meetings, [the men] brought preconceived notions about my football knowledge, because [I was a female]. I took the time to meet with them, hear their thoughts, and share my view of the situation. [The males] might not have gotten what they wanted out of the meeting [a new head football coach], but 2 of them emailed me thanking me for giving them time to express their concerns. The bottom line is you can't make everybody think that you are making the perfect decision every time. You just have to keep doing your job and hope the right people notice and keep plugging away. I am not able to can't control what others think. I just focus on doing my job effectively. My personal resilience, coupled my passion for leading other, continues to drive my success.

### ***Athletic Leadership Philosophy***

Looking back, I see my journey as a tapestry woven with pivotal experiences, supportive mentors, and a steadfast commitment to relationships. Whether it is me cheering for teams in my athletic department, staying connected with former student-athletes, or mentoring young coaches, my role as an athletic director feels less like a job and more like a calling. I love the fact that I am able to stay in touch with former players. I think it's always cool to [say to them], "You know we're family, even after you are no longer playing at the high school." I actually just hired the sister of one of my former

players to teach and coach in my department. She's going to be on the basketball coaching staff this year. I keep in touch with a lot of former players. I think that is a really cool part about coaching to get invited to one of my players weddings or get invited to, you know, something they're. Even getting a happy birthday coach text is really cool. And I like to reciprocate that, you know, to, like I said, it's, it's cool to go to a wedding or see someone have a baby and be happy for them. Moments like that continue to remind me how impactful [my leadership can be]. I see my entire athletic department as an extension of my own family. Their successes are important to me both on and off the field.

### **My Reflection**

*Karen's life and career are a testament to the power of mentorship, resilience, and the deep impact of relationships in shaping one's leadership style. From a young age, she stood out not just for her academic achievements, but for her passion for structured physical activities, which would later evolve into her career in education and sports administration. Her family's background in education, father as a coach and school administrator and mother as a teacher, provided early exposure to teaching and athletics, sparking her interest in these fields. These foundational experiences highlight how early life moments build a framework for future aspirations. Her journey began with early leadership roles like bus patrol and progressed through high school, where she excelled both as a captain of the basketball team and an officer in the National Honor Society. These experiences taught her valuable lessons in teamwork, accountability, and the importance of developing meaningful relationships with peers. Starting as a substitute teacher, Karen rediscovered her passion for teaching and coaching, which led her to*

*pursue graduate studies in special education. This shift laid the foundation for her lifelong commitment to students and athletes. As a coach, Karen learned the importance of relationship-based leadership, finding that strong relationships made it easier to guide and lead people effectively. As she advanced through various coaching roles, Karen's leadership was further shaped by the mentors she encountered. She told me how the trust others put in her to take on leadership roles nurtured her belief in her abilities and pushed her to take on challenges. The encouragement and guidance from her former basketball coach inspired her transition into athletic administration. Now as an athletic director, Karen remains deeply committed to equity, ensuring that all teams are supported and that coaches have the tools to navigate the complexities of the role. Her focus on fostering positive environments for athletes, coaches, and parents reflects her belief in the power of encouragement and confidence as critical components of leadership.*

### **Meredith Palmer**

#### **Meet Meredith**

*Meredith is a veteran classroom teacher with over a decade of experience at the high school level. She is currently in her 8<sup>th</sup> year as athletic director. She grew up in small rural town. Her childhood was shaped by participation in organized sports, family, and church. The life lessons she learned from playing softball with her peers would influence her career path in unexpected way. The positive and negative experiences she encouraged throughout her grade school journey would shape how she would one day want to lead others. A critical moment in high school where an athletic coach forced her to make a tough decision on whether or not to play softball or join the band, would alter*

*the trajectory of her athletic and academic paths. Meredith is able to use all of her life experiences to ground her leadership approach with fairness and an inclusive approach that accommodates all athletes.*

### **Meredith's Story**

I organized Meredith's reflections in the same style as the other collaborators, beginning with her early life, mentors, athletic journey, then moving through her career path and leadership philosophy. Her commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students is a defining aspect of her journey.

#### ***Early Life and Mentors***

Growing up my life was profoundly shaped by the relationships and interactions I had with my family, teachers, and the broader community. My grandmother and aunt, both educators, were among the first to demonstrate the transformative power of teaching. My grandmother, in particular, had a gentle yet firm way of inspiring curiosity and resilience. She'd encourage me to read aloud and work through problems independently, showing me that education was not just about finding answers but about cultivating a love for learning. My aunt, a lively and passionate teacher, often brought her classroom stories to life, and her students' admiration of her work deeply influenced my perception of what it meant to be a teacher. Their dedication planted a seed in me that education was more than a career, it was a lifelong passion that ran deep in our family's history.

My experiences in school exposed me to a spectrum of teaching styles and approaches. Some teachers, [like my 4th grade teacher], Mrs. Hill, brought energy and creativity into the classroom. She has a unique way of making learning feel dynamic and

engaging. She demonstrated a commitment to fostering students' growth and made me feel seen and valued. Conversely, there were teachers [like my 5th grade teacher] Mrs. Johnson, whose methods felt rigid and mean. Her lack of warmth made me keenly aware of the importance of making students feel valued in the classroom, regardless of their academic ability. These contrasting elementary experiences shaped my understanding of what students need. . . a balance of [structure, kindness, and encouragement].

My first organized sport participation was joining the church softball team. From a young age, softball would become and remain a significant part of my life for several reasons. I remember playing softball around age 4 or 5. The best memories from this time were the family bonding moments. Many of my earliest games were attended by my family, who supported me from the sidelines. My parents and relatives always attended practices, games, and encouraged me to do my best, listen to my coaches, and enjoy the time with my friends. Playing on a softball team outside of school allowed me the chance to bond with both school and church friends. The camaraderie made the experience feel more like a family affair than mere recreation. My early involvement in sports, coupled with my love for learning, cemented the foundation for my future.

### ***Middle and High School Athletic Journey***

As I entered middle school, I found my place in physical education courses and extracurricular activities. These two avenues gave me a sense of community and purpose. I was always drawn to sports. I discovered the power of teamwork and the joy of helping others succeed as a rewarding aspect of participating in team sports. I enjoyed all sports throughout middle school, but I focused the majority of my time on softball. I thought this would become my primary sport for high school and college as my passion continued

to grow, but as I progressed through middle school the dynamic shifted. My enjoyment of the game and time spent bonding with friends, soon began to be overshadowed by a growing pressure to win. This was a turning point in my athletic journey that would shape the rest of my life. As the pressure to win continued to push me away from softball, I began to focus more time participating with the middle school band. This extracurricular gave me a new opportunity to showcase my talents in an environment that was not concerned with wins or losses.

As I began to enjoy band more throughout 8th grade and into 9th grade, I was faced with a key moment in my life. My 9th grade softball coach was not thrilled that I needed to miss practice to train with the band program. He told me, “You must pick softball or band, but that I would not be able to participate in both programs.” The pressure to choose between softball and band, imposed by my high school softball coach, led me to step away from softball. I was devastated to give up a sport I played for 10 years. Rather than give up on sports all together (pause) I decided to try out for the tennis team. This program did not conflict with band and gave me an opportunity to play sports with my best friend. I had never had any formal training [with playing tennis], but I actually ended up being great at it. My friend and I would go on to become one of the most successful duos in school history only losing two doubles matches over the next four years. Tennis allowed me to pursue both my love for music through marching band and my desire to compete in sports.

### ***College and Early Career***

My college educational path was anything but straightforward. I initially was set on becoming a computer engineer. I applied and was accepted to a prestigious academic

university. It took less than a year to realize that my true passion was not computer science. After struggling through calculus in my first semester and missing the ability to participate in organized sports, I reassessed my future and pivoted toward a career in environmental science, inspired by my love for sea turtles. After switching universities, I was able to participate on the college tennis team and join the football marching band. These two extracurricular activities reignited my passion for belonging to an organized group of friends and achieving success through teamwork. Participating in both college tennis and marching band was one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of my life. Both activities required discipline, leadership, and an ability to manage my time effectively. The lessons I learned on the court and on the field continue to shape my approach to teaching, coaching, and athletic administration today. Playing at the college level taught me lessons in discipline (pause) I do think I could have learned anywhere else. The early morning practices, the long road trips for matches, and the intense competition pushed me to grow both as an athlete and as a person. My teammates became my second family, offering encouragement through wins and losses alike. The camaraderie I gained through that time is something I am still grateful for today. Balancing tennis and band was hard. There were moments when I questioned whether I had taken on too much. But through that struggle, I developed organizational and time management skills that helped as I transitioned to athletic director. These [college experiences] provided me with skills that have served me well. Switching colleges and playing tennis again, helped define my career path. It solidified my love for sports, for teamwork, and for mentoring others.

It wasn't until a conversation with my grandmother that my career aspirations became clear. She reminded me, "Each department of nature resources only needed one or two sea turtle agents and every school would need hundreds of teachers." Her guidance led me to change my major again. Her encouragement to become an educator influenced me to earn a biology education degree and move into a teaching position. I was thankful to have direction in my life, but I was not aware of how pivotal my grandmother's suggestion would become for my future.

As soon as I graduated, I was able to land my first teaching job at a big school in the city. The big city job seemed like a great start to my career. The opportunities for career and personal growth seemed perfect. I very quickly realized I was not a good fit for this life. The large student body lacked the small community feeling that had always been a part of my life. Sports for me growing up were a chance to bond with your teammates and coaches, not about wins or losses. After only one year at this school, I realized the city life was not for me, and moved back to small town where I grew up. It was here I found a science teaching position and volleyball coaching role at the high school level. The new job felt right to me. The students reminded me of my childhood. The staff felt like an extension of my own family and by the end of my first year, I started to feel like this is where I belonged. In my third-year teaching and coaching, an unexpected opportunity arose. My principal, [saw potential in my leadership abilities], offered me the position of athletic director (pause) knowing that I had no prior experience in athletic administration. The position of AD was not one I had aspired to or even had on my radar. Trusting my principal's judgment and feeling a sense of responsibility to the school where I grew up, I accepted the role.

### *Athletic Director Career and Philosophy*

I remember the early years of serving as athletic director as challenging. Each new season was filled with mistakes and steep learning curves. Once I forgot to book a bus for an away basketball game. I still remember the coach calling me to ask, “What time was our bus supposed to arrive, it still hasn’t shown up.” I tried calling transportation to get them a bus, but was unable to find a driver on short notice. To fix the issue, I had the girls team ride with the boys’ team. Thankfully sharing a bus was only a small problem. This mistake helped me grow and now I double check with transportation weeks before each game to prevent it from happening again. Another mistake I made in my 1st year was not submitting an official coaching roster to the athletic state department. I was not aware this was a requirement of the athletic director. Once I received the \$250.00 fine for not turning in the document on time, I realized (pause) I needed to learn more about the athletic director role if I was going to be successful in this position. This fine encouraged me to become an expert in the policies and regulations for all of the sports my school offered.

As I navigated the complexities of the role, I found myself relying on the values instilled in me by my grandmother, high school tennis coach, and high school marching band director. All the positive and negative experiences I had with teachers and coaches throughout my life, influenced how I wanted to lead my athletic department. I never want one of my athletes to feel [the same pressure I had] to pick between two conflicting extracurriculars. I take my negative experience [with softball and band] and use that formative time to guide my coaches to find a way to allow all students the opportunity to participate in activities they enjoy, even if it is not convenient for them. I remind coaches,

“Missing a practice or two is not the end of the world. Show the athletes how much you value them, which is more impactful in the long run.” These formative figures grounded my approach to handling moments of uncertainty and difficulty.

Now, in my eighth year as athletic director, the role has become second nature, though each year brings new challenges. I have found my stride and each new year excites me with endless possibilities to help mold the next generation of students. Although becoming athletic director was never a role, I actively sought it has become a position I never want to leave. Reflecting on my negative high school experience, has shaped how I want to lead and how I would like my coaches to lead. Sports provide students a chance to learn values and skills beyond the classroom. I will always be an advocate for fairness, inclusivity, and the well-being of all athletes under my care.

### **My Reflection**

*Meredith's life story is shaped by early years in a small rural town. Both her personal and professional journey, all the way to her current role as an athletic director, have been influence by the people, experiences, and decisions she encountered at pivotal points along the way. A crucial thread throughout Meredith's life is the importance of mentorship and family. Her grandmother and aunt, both educators, played instrumental roles in fostering her love for learning and demonstrating the transformative power of teaching. An early exposure to education through close family members instilled a passion for academics and a love for school. At the time it was not a career goal. However, over time she was able to revisit that passion for school and use it to lead her to become a teacher. The diverse teaching styles she encountered as a student also left a lasting impression. Seeing both transformational positive and negative classroom*

*experiences as a child enabled her to develop her own strategies for how to effectively reach students. Her early days on the church softball team provided her with valuable life lessons in teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. The sense of camaraderie she experienced with her family and teammates was pivotal, showing her the power of sports in fostering a sense of community. As she transitioned into high school, the pressure to win began to overshadow the joy of the game. This formative experience would later serve as part of her foundation for leadership as she now runs an athletic department focused on fairness and inclusivity, rather than chasing championships. Playing college tennis and joining the marching band, reignited her passion for belonging to organized groups and working toward collective goals. Her eventual decision to become an educator was influenced by both her personal experiences and the legacy of mentorship from her family. Meredith's entry into the teaching profession and later the athletic director role marked a series of unexpected but meaningful shifts. After teaching science and coaching volleyball in a large city school, she returned to her small hometown, where she found a sense of belonging and was eventually promoted to athletic director. The people who shaped her, both the positive and negative influences, helped her develop a deep understanding of what it means to lead with empathy, fairness, and a commitment to the well-being of others. Today, Meredith embodies these lessons in her leadership, continuously striving to create an inclusive, supportive environment for all the athletes she oversees. Her story demonstrates the power of perseverance, the importance of mentorship, and the impact of making decisions that honor one's values.*

## **Conclusion**

As I listened to the collaborators share their stories and reflect on their journeys, I felt grateful for the candid and transparent narratives they entrusted to me, especially as a male aspiring to become an athletic director in the future. At the start of the interview process, I was concerned that the women might hesitate to share personal insights with a male interviewer, particularly given the power dynamics favoring men in athletic leadership roles.

In Chapter 4, my collaborators' stories were shared as reflective narratives to highlight what they took away from reflecting on their experiences as women navigating the path to becoming athletic directors. They shared their athletic and educational journeys, spanning from childhood to their transition into the role. The narratives present a cohesive story aligned to Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) three-dimensional narrative approach. Each narrative starts with the collaborator's childhood experiences and transitions to present day. The narrative was written to display the connection between the time of an event, the context of that event, where key experiences occurred, and how the meaning each collaborator attributed to that experience influenced decisions later in life. Chapter 5 sheds light on the 4 themes that were constructed from coding collaborator responses during interviews and concludes with the additional insights gained from exploring the data within the boundaryless career competencies model.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Guided by Saldaña's (2013) approach to coding and thematic analysis and Maxwell's (2013) insights on qualitative research design, I was able to analyze all parts of the data, create codes, form categories, and eventually develop themes. In this section, I share the similarities and differences among my collaborators through similarity-based coding and categorizing strategies. The thematic analysis presented in this section, along with the reflective narratives presented in Chapter 4, allowed me to share collaborator insights using both categorizing and connecting strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

The process of discovering themes, according to Saldaña (2013), is deliberate, iterative, and "equally as rigorous as coding, necessitating similar contemplation of participant meanings and outcomes" (p. 200). He stated themes are an outcome of coding. Using his guidance, I understood theming the data as pulling together all the short codes, memos, and reflections to make a statement about my findings. To start the process of developing themes, I carefully analyzed and revisited the codes while simultaneously composing reflective memos to capture expressions and insights shared during the interviews. I used the iterative data analysis process, which I understood to mean repeatedly moving between data collection, analysis, and refining research questions or methods based on developing insights. This process included writing memos, reviewing transcripts, crafting timelines for each collaborator, conducting first-cycle coding, creating initial categories, performing second-cycle coding, refining categories, forming

initial themes, and further refining those themes. The back-and-forth process of conducting interviews, analyzing in vivo, values, and process codes (Saldaña, 2013), and reviewing memos allowed me to synthesize what I had learned. Analyzing everything I learned throughout the coding process helped me to construct thematic connections from the categories and patterns identified during coding. After several iterations, I established four major themes: Leadership Skills Cultivated through P-12 Years, Mentors Molded Leadership Skills at a Formative Stage, Leading Through Values, Relationships, and Advocacy, and Balancing Life and Leadership in Athletics. After a presentation of each theme, I conclude the chapter with a presentation of the additional interpretations gained from analyzing the data through the boundaryless career competencies model.

### **Theme 1**

#### **Leadership Skills Cultivated through P-12 Years**

Childhood experiences, both positive and negative, profoundly shaped my collaborators' journeys to athletic leadership. Throughout my interviews, I heard stories of challenging upbringings shaped by frequent relocations, difficult family dynamics, and personal adversity. At the same time, there were also memories of joy, spending time with parents, playing sports for pure enjoyment, and finding comfort in school and athletics. These formative experiences became catalysts for perseverance, shaping their pathways to leadership.

For many, adversity necessitated early leadership roles. Jan reflected on the responsibilities placed upon her from a young age: "I'm one of six kids. So there were five of us originally in the house growing up. I'm the oldest girl. So I was the mom of the group." She went on to describe how she took on responsibilities well beyond her years:

I was the one that sat at the table and helped my siblings with their homework. I would cook dinner. I would make sure [my siblings] were bathed and ready to go. I would get them up for school the next morning.

Angela shared similar sentiments about independence in her youth, explaining how she had to navigate relationships with her parents on her own:

When I was 16, my grandmother passed away. When I was 18, my grandfather did. So when I went off to college, of course, I had a mom and a dad, but I had not really had a relationship with them up to that point. So as a young woman, 18 years old, I started to establish those relationships.

Early exposure to hardship, whether growing up in rural settings, struggling to fit into new environments, or facing instability at home, fostered independence, resourcefulness, and resilience. Jan recalled the extreme challenges she faced: “My mom was a drug addict ‘till I was about 8 years old. She divorced my biological dad when I was 4 cause he was an abusive drug addict, alcoholic. All that stuff.” She also described living in a homeless shelter, “I come from a very kind of more rough background. I was one of those people that, you know, grew up at one point in a homeless shelter with my mom and my older brother,” an experience that forced her to mature quickly and develop an unshakable drive to succeed.

Moving frequently was another common experience shared by Jan, Angela, and Pam. Relocating required them to constantly adapt to new environments. Jan recalled: “My mom remarried when I was 8. . . that started the Army brat lifestyle.” Similarly, Angela described how relocating changed her perspective on the world: “We also moved, and when we moved, my world opened up a little more to the outdoor elements, not just

organized sports but building forts in the woods, a lot of boating, water skiing, and all those things.” However, these transitions were not always easy. Pam shared the difficulties of trying to fit in after relocating to the U.S.:

When I was in high school, we moved to Georgia, and coming in as a kid from a different country, even though I’m a U.S. citizen, was challenging. I really wasn’t involved in athletics at the high school level because I was ‘weird’ according to my peers.

For many, school became a stabilizing force during turbulent times. Jan spoke candidly about what school meant to her:

For me, school’s always been my safe place. That was every day I knew where I was going. I knew I’d get to eat. I knew that I’d have friends around. I knew that there’d be some type of schedule.

She reinforced how impactful school was for her development: “School for me growing up was a safe zone. Being at school kind of gave me an escape for my mind. It was kind of a place where I felt comfortable being at.” Additionally, she noted how positive moments with teachers inspired her career path: “I knew early that I wanted to be in education. I had teachers who made a difference for me, and I wanted to do that for kids.” This structure provided a refuge, allowing them to focus on their futures despite personal hardships.

A shared experience among all six collaborators was the impact of school-based athletics on their development. Sports provided structure, discipline, and early opportunities for leadership. Angela explained how she sought out leadership roles within athletics as a way to build connections: “I took stats, then I became the football manager

and trainer (pause). I did anything I could every season so that I didn't have to go home." She elaborated on the deep sense of belonging she found through sports: "Athletics gave me a family and provided me with siblings and people to hang out with, so I was involved in every season even though I wasn't an athlete every season."

Participation in athletics was also a crucial avenue for personal growth. Karen recalled: "I remember doing school plays. I wanted to be involved in as many things as possible. Throughout middle school, I was a member of the bus patrol." Meanwhile, Jan described her early experiences as an athlete and how she adapted to poor coaching environments by taking initiative:

My first track coach, I did hurdles. My coach was actually the cheerleading coach. She was probably close to 300 pounds, so she was not demonstrating anything to us. Me and my best friend, we just went out there, and we just figured it out. This was before smartphones, so it's not like you could just go to YouTube University. When we went into the 8th grade, we took over. We led the practice for the 7th graders. We came up with the practice plans, what to do. All of that. We just did it ourselves.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive impact of athletics, Erin and Meredith encountered disillusionment with competitive sports. Erin reflected on the limited athletic opportunities available to girls in her community: "It didn't seem as popular, really, in my community either, for girls to really do anything except maybe cheerleading for the local football team. That's all I remember. I don't really remember girls doing anything else." Meredith spoke about how her enthusiasm for softball faded due to the pressure to win: "At the high school level, the coaches were much more about winning and pushing

us to win instead of it also being enjoyable. The passion I once had was just killed.” She later recalled a defining moment when she had to choose between her two passions: “My high school softball coach made me choose between band and softball, and by that time, I just enjoyed band more than softball.” Resilience and perseverance allowed Meredith to rediscover her love for athletics. She discussed how:

Like any sport, softball comes with its challenges and setbacks. There were times when I didn’t perform as well as I hoped or faced tough competition. Learning to handle these situations, stay motivated, and keep improving was a crucial lesson in resilience.

When forced to choose between band and softball, Meredith eventually found a new passion: “Joining the tennis team with my best friend and making the team despite having no experience was an exhilarating and rewarding experience. It demonstrated that with determination and enthusiasm, new challenges could be met successfully.” She reflected on the lessons learned from sports:

Softball taught me the value of teamwork. Playing with a group of friends and working together toward a common goal was a powerful experience. It wasn’t just about individual achievement; it was about supporting each other, communicating effectively, and celebrating our successes as a team.

Diverse experiences shaped leadership philosophies for Angela and Jan, inspiring them to create more supportive and empowering environments for future generations of athletes. Angela explained how, as a young girl, she was left to live with her grandparents while her sister moved with their parents: “My sister and I played softball only until I was 10 years old and then she moved with my mom, and I stayed with my grandparents.”

Without a traditional family support system, she found one through athletics. She described how as her grandparents “became elderly and they no longer came to my events. I joined athletics so that I would have a family.” Similarly, Jan described how her challenging upbringing required her to grow up fast, leaving little time for a carefree childhood: “I didn’t have much of a childhood like the fun, the experiences, all that. I started taking care of my siblings and babysitting, changing diapers. All that stuff by the age of 8.”

Despite these hardships, each collaborator demonstrated remarkable resilience. Jan, who had faced early struggles in school, overcame initial challenges to excel academically: “Initially, I did have issues with reading. So I was in a special additional reading help type class, but by the second grade, I had surpassed all of that and was actually up to a 5th-grade reading level.” She also adapted to academic disparities when relocating: “In the middle of 3rd grade, we moved from Colorado to Georgia, and I got behind a bit initially. The stuff that we were learning in Georgia in the 3rd grade was on pace for 5th grade in Colorado.”

Adaptability was a common trait found among Pam and Angela. Pam recalled the versatility she developed in softball: “In softball, I played every position at some point. It taught me that understanding different roles made me a better teammate and a better leader.” Angela shared a powerful story of resilience that influenced her coaching philosophy:

My senior year, we played a game and it resulted in one of those ugly wins. The other coach said to my coach, “Your catcher is probably best in the district, in the league.” My coach ignored that and complimented someone else instead. That

moment stuck with me in a negative way. . . . This experience influenced me as a coach. It shaped the way I wanted all of my athletes, no matter what skill they brought, to always feel impactful and important on the team.

Ultimately, participation in athletics, whether as a player, manager, or statistician, helped these women build confidence, the ability to adapt, and leadership skills. Their experiences shaped their belief that sports should serve as a space for personal growth and inclusion, rather than just competition. Repeatedly, youth sports was brought up as the catalyst that inspired them to enter coaching and athletic administration, ensuring that future generations of athletes would have supportive and empowering leaders to guide them.

## **Theme 2**

### **Mentors Molded Leadership Skills at a Formative Stage**

Throughout each collaborator's journey, relationships played a transformative role, with mentors serving as guiding forces in their personal and professional development. These mentors, family members, educators, and coaches, provided stability, encouragement, and inspiration, shaping their paths to becoming athletic directors. The significance of mentorship extended from childhood through adulthood, fostering resilience, confidence, and leadership skills that would define their careers.

Every collaborator emphasized the importance of having someone believe in them and affirm their leadership potential. Karen described the importance of receiving encouragement, saying:

I think all of us at some point, we need somebody to say or give us confidence that we're doing things the right way or that they see something. At least for me, I

did. I know I wasn't always the most confident person. You know, I might can fake it a little bit inside where I'm going, 'Oh, I don't know.' And I think just having people that you respect say things to encourage [you], that goes a long way to kind of giving you that belief that, okay, maybe I can do this job, or maybe I should try to do this.

Meredith and Pam discussed early mentorship starting within their own families. Meredith spoke about the influence of her grandmother, saying, "She was more than just a teacher; she was a mentor, a guide, and someone who genuinely cared about the success and well-being of every child in her classroom." The impact of her grandmother's encouragement guided Meredith toward a career in education, emphasizing how family mentors shaped their career choices. Pam similarly credited her mother, saying:

One of the people I'm going to talk about is my mom. She's always been my biggest cheerleader and a wonderful sounding board. Whether it's from her personal experience in administration, which I think translates easily to being an athletic director, or just supporting me, she's been incredibly helpful.

Beyond family, educators and athletic coaches were discussed as pivotal mentors, modeling effective leadership and fostering personal growth. Angela reflected on the impact of her first athletic mentor, saying:

When I was actually trying out for cheerleading in 8th grade, as I was transitioning to 9th grade, the head football coach came into the gym for tryouts and came up to me and he said, "You don't want to be a cheerleader." I said, "Yeah, I do." He goes, "No, you don't. I need you to be a football manager."

This early opportunity opened doors for her to develop leadership skills that would later define her career.

Many collaborators also described how specific coaches played life-changing roles in their development. Jan recalled, “Coach Caleb, that was probably by far my favorite coach I’ve ever had in my entire life. A good old-school Texas boy, real Southern accent (pause) he was just that father figure to all of us.” Karen spoke about the influence of her first coaching mentor, sharing:

The coach that hired me as a freshman coach (pause) he was awesome. I remember he started trusting me more and more. He’d ask me, “Hey, will you go scout this team for me (pause) for the varsity.” I thought that was the coolest thing ever.

These mentors provided more than just guidance. They instilled confidence, created opportunities, and demonstrated the power of servant leadership.

For some, mentorship also extended into their early careers, guiding them into administrative roles. Erin, who became an athletic director unexpectedly, recalled, “My former high school coach, who is now my athletic director, brought me into the office and said, ‘Do you want to be the athletic director or the department chair?’ And I’m saying, ‘What are you talking about?’” Similarly, Pam was encouraged into athletic administration when her athletic director transitioned into an administrative role, stating, “She was like, ‘Hey, do you want to learn the ropes? I need help.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, fine. I’ll help you because this is not hard for me.’”

Mentorship was consistently identified as a driving force behind each collaborator’s ability to adapt, grow, and lead. These relationships influenced their

commitment to mentoring the next generation of student-athletes and aspiring athletic directors, underscoring the importance of leadership legacies. Angela emphasized:

I fully contribute my growth in leadership to those adults or those leaders that poured into me, and saw something in me, and gave me opportunities. I think that it's a mix of you presenting yourself as a candidate for those opportunities, asking the right questions, stepping up, volunteering, you know? Showing up when it is not required.

Their experiences reinforced the belief that mentorship is not just about guidance but also about creating opportunities for others to succeed.

Erin, Meredith, Karen, and Pam all experienced unexpected career shifts, often influenced by factors beyond their control. Many initially envisioned careers outside of education and athletic leadership before pivoting to these fields. Erin shared:

In college, I had initially set my sights on becoming an attorney, a path I believed would make my family proud. Deep down, I knew I was meant to teach and coach. It was my high school basketball coach who truly influenced me. Her skills and leadership inspired me to want to become a PE teacher and coach.

Meredith also shared how a conversation with a family member changed her career plans:

It wasn't until a conversation with my grandmother that my career aspirations became clear. She reminded me, "Each department of nature resources only needed one or two sea turtle agents and every school would need hundreds of teachers." Her guidance led me to change my major again. Her encouragement to become an educator influenced me to earn a biology education degree and move into a teaching position.

Karen shared how a passion for writing initially led her to pursue becoming a journalist, but a desire to make a decent salary out of college prompted her to change paths:

[Looking back] at the journalism piece of my journey, I now obviously recognize I was not going to start [directly out of college] as a full time Sports Illustrated writer. At the time, I remember entry level positions in writing came with almost no money. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do with my life, but after I got my degree in journalism, I just needed some time figuring it out. I did some substitute teaching while I was trying to figure out what job am I going to get. As I subbed, the thought of teaching became a real possibility.

Pam echoed the challenges of selecting a career path and eventually changing to a new pathway, when she discussed her decision to change from a pre-vet major to an education major:

Well, after my second year of college I realized that getting into vet school was more competitive getting into medical school, and I kind of realized right then. There I had to have another plan. So I had obviously credits from playing athletics which went into health and PE, and in my mind. I was like, well, I can transition into education and maybe just teach something. Cause I ended up with a degree in biology when I graduated. So it's like I could teach science. I could teach health and PE.

This theme explores the evolution of their aspirations, from childhood dream jobs to entering the education profession, securing their first coaching positions, advancing to head coach roles, and ultimately stepping into athletic administration.

While their initial career paths varied, 2 collaborators embraced leadership opportunities, often under unforeseen circumstances. Early experiences in teaching and coaching provided essential skills in organization, communication, and adaptability. Karen shared how her role in special education prepared her for athletic administration, stating, “My job as a special ed teacher also helped me prepare for the AD role. Special ed parents advocate for their kids just like sports parents do. There’s always drama, always problem-solving. It was a good stepping stone.” Similarly, Jan reflected on her leadership development in retail, saying, “I worked my way up in a grocery store from being a cashier up to a store manager. . . . I just naturally went into being in control, leading people, all of that.”

Career-defining moments were shared by 3 collaborators. They discussed how opportunities for leadership arose unexpectedly. Angela shared:

The athletic director pulled me in to do special events and special recognitions, find scholarship opportunities, awards, and recognition opportunities for athletes, and to apply for all those things. So that was my first stint with it, and then, after having done that, I put myself in that role everywhere I went thereafter.

Erin recalled her initial hesitation about stepping into administration, saying:

I never had that moment in my life where I wanted to become an athletic director. I think I initially took the position because I felt like, if I don’t take it, who are they going to give it to? Will that person care anything about my program as a coach? Would they care about any of the other girls’ programs?

The power of mentorship and unexpected opportunities shaped each collaborator's trajectory into athletic administration. Meredith reflected on how a principal's belief in her shaped her career:

I cannot say that there was a direct path for me to become an athletic director. As it was not something 'on my radar,' it was just a position that was placed in front of me as an opportunity to grow because my principal felt that I would be a good individual for the position.

This belief in potential was a recurring theme, with mentors guiding them into roles they had not previously considered.

Their stories illustrate the significance of resilience and adaptability in navigating nonlinear career pathways. Erin reflected on how she had to overcome societal expectations, stating:

I didn't want to tell my family that [teaching was] what I wanted to do, because that might have been a disappointment when you're supposed to be this attorney. So for a while I started to say physical therapy, because that just still sounded a little more acceptable than saying PE.

Ultimately, these experiences highlight the power of seizing the moment, embracing challenges, and recognizing that unplanned detours often pave the way for the most impactful career advancements. Karen, who hadn't initially considered becoming an athletic director, recalled, "When the previous AD left for another school, I remember looking around thinking, 'Hmm, I wonder who's going to be the AD,' and then it was me." This sentiment captures the essence of her journey. Each collaborator stepped into

leadership, often unexpectedly, demonstrating how mentorship, resilience, and adaptability were critical in shaping their careers in athletic administration.

### **Theme 3**

#### **Leading Through Values, Relationships, and Advocacy**

As I listened to the experiences of women working in a male-dominated field, gender-related challenges were identified by Jan, Angela, and Karen, but never discussed as barriers limiting my collaborators entry to the field, ability to perform their job effectively, or hindering their career advancement. Jan described the negative backlash she received when she was promoted to athletic director:

I'm the 1st female athletic director in the history of my school. I had to deal with the rumors that went around that I slept with my principal and my former athletic director to get into my position. People openly expressed that I was too inexperienced. They questioned if I even deserved the role.

Angela described how her coaching background and gender created perceived challenges:

At all the AD meetings, the room is filled with men talking sports. I am normally the only female in the room. They're talking about what sport they coached, and I'm like, "I coach, cheerleading." I can see their faces (pause) and know my credibility goes to 0 in that moment. I know they're looking at me like, "What can [she] contribute. . . . When I stand on the field as game manager, the spectators perceive me as somebody's mom on the sidelines, and they're ticked off because they want to know how I got down there, and they are stuck up here in the stands. I had another situation where I was talking with an official association, the head of an officials' association, and he was complaining about schools that didn't pay

bills on time. I said, "I can assure you, if you send it to me, it will get paid." And he looked at me, and he goes, "Are you the bookkeeper?"

Karen shared a story of when male construction workers challenged her knowledge:

We recently had new turf put on our stadium field and there's been some (pause) let's say, construction related issues. I have had to question some things. . . .

"Why

are you doing it this way?" When they send people out to discuss they're all men. [My school has] a female principal and the two of us, went out last week to have a discussion. They wanted to meet us on the field. I could tell there was a definite (pause) a vibe in that group. They asked, "Do you guys even know what we're talking about when we're talking about this stuff?" I was able to just blow it off, but my principal, she was hot when we were walking away from it. She was just like dropping a few words after that.

Erin, Meredith, and Jan recounted the internal drive to be over prepared for the role, to prevent skepticism they could face early in their careers. I heard about the need to constantly prove competence in how to run run an athletic department, to prevent someone from challenging their knowledge. Erin recalled:

I had this fear in the back of my mind that I didn't want people to say that lady does not know what she's doing as an athletic director. I never really thought they might say that about a male athletic director, because I know a lot of them that sometimes have the privilege of (pause) they were a successful coach, or (pause) they are the football coach, which in a lot of places, the football coaches are the athletic director. . . . I remember that summer [heading into my 1st year as AD]

sitting in my office and just taking notes, upon notes of the GHSA bylaws. I just wanted to get a handle on everything. I just had a yellow legal pad, and tried to learn anything that I didn't really know or understand beyond my experience as a head basketball coach.

Unlike their male counterparts, they described heightened scrutiny as potential challenge they faced early due to their gender. However, by demonstrating resilience and expertise, they established credibility and thrived as athletic administrators. Meredith captured this challenge when she reflected, "[I was] initially hesitant, especially because of my limited knowledge of football and the traditionally male-dominated role. I ultimately accepted the position out of concern for the equitable treatment of all sports programs, especially girls' sports." This sentiment was echoed Jan, who felt that her leadership journey was shaped by the necessity to enforce the rules and prove her abilities in ways male counterparts did not:

I was hired to replace a male AD that had been the head football coach. He had been in his role for 30 plus years. I think as females, we lead more by the book . . . we enforce the rules. In my school some of these things . . . weren't being done, or they were being overlooked because the former AD just didn't know and didn't care. I see male AD's not following certain rules because they don't think other people are, so they think what's the big deal? Female AD's catch push back because we are the ones stepping in, following the rules, and doing thing the right way. You don't see it as much with the male AD's. . . even the younger ones, because a lot of the male AD's are trained by older men that didn't follow the rules to begin with.

A common experience among these women was being underestimated because of their gender or background. This challenge necessitated a persistent effort to showcase their skills and dedication. Over time, these obstacles became catalysts for growth, strengthening their leadership capabilities. Leadership styles evolved significantly throughout Jan and Karen's careers. Jan relied early in her career on strict rule enforcement to assert authority, but over time, adopted a more balanced approach that emphasized relationship-building, trust, and open communication. Jan illustrated this evolution, saying:

Early in my career, I was known as that woman that showed up and ran these things with my loud approach. I have no problem being very direct. And there's times that it's kind of misconstrued into that I'm just that angry female that's power hungry, whereas it's no, if I'm not assertive, y'all ignore me, and you think you can do whatever you want. As I have grown and my work now speaks for itself, I can approach things less abrasively and allow the power of the relationships I have built to still get the same desired outcome.

Establishing connections with coaches, athletes, and families became the foundation of leadership philosophies for Erin, Karen, and Pam. These three women described shifting from rigid enforcement to relational leadership. Erin shared how she evolved overtime:

When I was a newer athletic director, I might have gone pretty hard on someone that stepped out of line, but part of that again going back to my youth, the inexperience, and me having nothing to go by, but the rules in hand. Now I've had more experiences, and I know more, I really don't believe in wasting experiences.

So what I've learned from my interactions with coaches, my interactions with other athletic directors within our regions or throughout our state to help with my own growth. Over time, I learned that being a leader wasn't just about enforcing rules. Relationships mattered. I came to understand that leadership is about finding balance between rules and relationships, structure, and empathy.

Karen emphasized:

I think leadership is all about relationships. Early in my career I was very rigid in my approach following the rules exactly how they were written. Coaches thought my approach was strict, but I wanted to make sure I did everything correctly.

Over time, I adapted and saw the importance of following the rules, but ensuring my coaches knew our relationship was equally as important to a cohesive athletic department.

Pam echoed a similar evolution in how she leads:

When I started, I was known as, the hard nose who has boundaries and expectations, and don't you dare step outside of it, or you're up a creek without a paddle. I've evolved a bunch with how I respond to people. I used to have moments where a parent or a kid would say something, and I would shoot back immediately. Not that I was rude, but I would have an answer right away. . . . I had a major moment that shaped how I lead (pause) in maybe my 2nd or 3rd year teaching. There was this kid, he was just being a turd. It's the nicest way to put it. I was like, "Dude, your behavior sucks. You need to. You need to stop, and you need to act, you know in a better way. Let's try to fix this." Well, he went home and told his mom that I told him he sucked. Of course the mom came in the next

day and said, “Why did you tell my kid that he sucked?” And I was like, “I didn’t tell him he sucked, ma’am.” The mom followed up with, “Well, you said the word sucked.” I was like, “Yeah, you’re right. I did. That’s not exactly what I said, and that wasn’t the intent.” The kid took it at that, and I had to deal with his interpretation. I told the mom, “You are right, and I should not have said that.” I should have rephrased it, and so it was a huge learning experience for me and helped me become a more thoughtful leader. Now I’ve learned that sometimes you

have to take a deep breath. Look at them and say, “I’ll get back to the human, so I’ll get back to you tomorrow on that,” and I have every right to do that as a, as a teacher or coach and a professional, and they have to respect that as well.

Jan identified transparency and communication as essential leadership tools. She described her philosophy in leading coaches, stating, "For my leadership, the biggest things are communication, transparency. I’m big on loyalty, but I think the loyalty, the respect, all that comes just from being there, being involved, and being transparent."

By cultivating inclusive and supportive athletic programs, Erin and Pam shaped a more equitable landscape for future generations. Erin recalled a formative experience that influenced her commitment to equity:

When I was in high school, the boys’ basketball team got a new set of uniforms. The girls’ team did not. I was on my Title IX soapbox to the AD at the time, saying, “How could you do this? That’s not fair that they would get uniforms, and we not get uniforms.” I went on and on, and he just sat there and listened.

This early realization of inequities motivated her to ensure fairness across all athletic programs under her leadership. Pam shared her approach to ensuring resource allocation remained fair, stating:

I recently had someone that wanted to buy \$180,000 of weight room equipment, but I had to remind them they got a new weight room 4 years ago. I had to share that in the girls' locker room, the youngest piece of equipment is 15 years old, so I think we need to make sure it's fair across the board that we all get what we need.

Meredith, Jan, and Angela viewed their roles not merely as careers but as callings rooted in mentorship, advocacy, and long-term impact. Meredith recalled her coaching experience as foundational to her leadership: "Fostering team unity and building strong relationships among players was crucial in developing my ability to create a cohesive and supportive team environment." Similarly, Jan described how she leads with trust and autonomy, saying:

I try to lead the way I want to be led (pause) I do not like to be micromanaged. I don't feel like as an adult that we should have to be micromanaged. If you are in the role of coach or a teacher, or anything like that, I should be able to trust you will get your job done. Yes, I can help you. I can guide you. I can mentor you, all those things, but I don't want to be micromanaged, so I don't like to do that to others.

While athletic success was important, their vision extended beyond the field. They championed a holistic approach to student development, celebrating not only athletic achievements but also personal growth, academic success, community

engagement, and leadership development. Angela discussed the importance of ensuring all athletes feel valued, stating:

I created an athletic honors night celebrating student-athletes, players of the week, coaches of the week, positive athlete nominees, athlete of the year, female, male, all these different things, coach of the year. I've now created that for the whole district.

Interestingly, many of these women did not initially aspire to become athletic administrators. However, once in leadership roles, they recognized the unique opportunity to inspire others, create meaningful change, and pave the way for future generations. Angela recalled early moments in her career when she faced skepticism about her capabilities: "I have had a lot of times where they stop and they're like, 'I need to talk to the athletic director.' And I say, 'Yes, this is she.' That takes them by surprise." Through their work, they reshaped traditional expectations of athletic leadership.

Ultimately, these women were united by their dedication to creating inclusive and supportive athletic environments where coaches, students, and families felt empowered. For many, the most rewarding aspect of their work was witnessing the long-term impact of their leadership, from the personal growth of individual athletes to broader cultural shifts within their schools. Their commitment to mentorship, equity, and legacy-building underscores the transformative power of athletic leadership as a vehicle for fostering personal growth and shaping the next generation of leaders.

## **Theme 4**

### **Balancing Life and Leadership in Athletics**

All six collaborators shared the significant time demands of serving as interscholastic athletic directors, with their stories emphasizing the critical importance of achieving work-life balance and integrating family into their professional lives. Four of the six women in this study not only served as athletic directors but also coached a varsity sport, further complicating the challenge of managing multiple roles. These roles often included being a parent, teacher, coach, administrator, and spouse, making time management and boundary-setting persistent challenges. Karen captured this struggle, stating:

It can definitely be hard to balance. I mean, there are some long nights. I know during football season Friday nights, I'm here at the school, probably till close to 11 p.m. and at school most of the day, so there's not much time for anything else that day. So at least on game days, I try to carve out time for myself. I've learned the hard way that if I don't eat during the day, I won't get to eat again until midnight. So I force myself to take that break.

Erin discussed her own personal sacrifices she made as she navigated the demands of her new role. She spoke candidly about how remaining single allows her to successfully complete her job. Erin acknowledged this, saying:

I know that as a female athletic director, my experiences are different. I'm single. I don't have any kids. I know that my experience is probably different than maybe my colleague that has young children or my colleague that might have a spouse and older kids off in college.

Others recounted early struggles with balancing personal and professional responsibilities, which eventually led them to develop strategies for integrating family life into their work. Pam shared, "When my son was born, my husband was diagnosed with Stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I took a short leave of absence to be there for him during treatment." This demonstrated her personal career sacrifice to ensure a balanced family life. As her husband improved, she returned to education and resumed her career.

Angela and Jan shared how they involved including their families in school and athletic events. By bringing their spouse and children to games, meetings, or community activities, they were able to strengthen family connections while modeling a sense of community for their coaches and athletes. Angela discussed the value of family integration, saying:

To make sure my kids didn't feel like I was giving everything to other people's children, I would take them to my events, have them ride the golf cart, or get them involved. I had to be intentional about making them feel just as valued as my athletes.

Jan has established a family environment in her athletic department where coaches are encouraged to bring spouses and children as often as possible, stating:

I always encourage my coaches to bring their families to the school. I make sure my coaches know that their family comes first. If they need to miss something for their kids, I support them. I encourage them to bring their kids to practices and games. I've had their kids attached to my hip during games just so they can still be involved.

The women emphasized the importance of prioritizing their roles as wives and mothers, even when the demands of their careers threatened to overshadow these responsibilities. Angela described how she would let her kids know how important they were: "You've got to convince them that those things [being on the field, press box, free snacks] are very special, and only you, because you're the athletic director's kids, get to do this." Many spoke about moments when they had to refocus on their families as their top priority, reminding themselves of the need to maintain balance. Angela described needing to let go of her work before returning home, stating:

Before I walked in the door at home, I had to stop focusing any attention on work and give my full energy to my family. It was important my family didn't feel like they were getting the shell of me after I gave everything to my job.

I heard stories describing the importance of delegation, grace, and persistence in managing their responsibilities. Collaborators shared stories of their early days in athletic administration when workdays stretched to 18 hours. Over time, as they gained confidence in their leadership roles, these women began delegating tasks to other coaches and staff members. This not only eased their workload but also provided valuable mentorship opportunities for aspiring athletic directors, helping them gain practical experience and prepare for future leadership roles. Karen shared how she learned to set boundaries over time, stating, "It's easy to get roped into, 'Oh, let me stay and do this.' But at a certain point, you have to say, 'Okay, I'm going home now.'" Setting clear boundaries has helped her thrive in her current role. Similarly, Erin, though early in her career, emphasized:

I tell the coaches to, "Clock out. At some point, you have to clock out." My work

phone, I tend not to turn it on the weekends. If the coaches know they need me, they can call my personal phone. It's not a big deal at all. However, the same way I want them to clock out, I have to clock out and just take a break.

Ultimately, the women in this study shared insights and strategies that reflect their commitment to holistic success. Whether by integrating family into professional events, leaning on supportive spouses, or fostering strong community ties, these women demonstrated resilience and adaptability in maintaining a balance between their personal lives and demanding careers. Their experiences highlight not only the challenges inherent in the role but also the transformative potential of persistence, community, and relational leadership in overcoming them. Meredith summarized the unique nature of each athletic director's experience, saying, "Being both a teacher and an athletic director allows me to have a broader impact on students' lives. I can support them academically and athletically, contributing to their overall development and well-being." Their stories collectively underscore the importance of boundaries, self-care, and adaptability in sustaining long-term success in athletic administration.

### **Boundaryless Career Competencies**

The four themes presented in this chapter were inductively created from what collaborators shared. I did, however, use Boundaryless Career Competencies as one of the theoretical contributors to my research. This section reviews that theory in light of how the data relates to it. Building on the 4 themes identified through the thematic analysis of coded interview transcripts, the boundaryless career competencies model provides an additional lens through which to interpret these findings, offering deeper insight into how 6 women navigated their career trajectories and the factors that

influenced their pathways to athletic director roles. The boundaryless career competencies model established by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) suggested that careers are no longer linear or confined to a single organization. Instead, career progression is shaped by an individual's ability to navigate change, develop transferable skills, build relationships, and maintain a sense of purpose. This model is particularly relevant for the women in this study, as they often entered athletic administration unexpectedly, adapting to new challenges along the way. Below is an analysis of their career journeys through the three boundaryless career competencies (Know-How, Know-Why, Know-Whom):

The "know-how" competency refers to an individual's ability to develop and apply skills that are transferable across various roles and industries. The women in my study gained leadership skills through unconventional and diverse experiences, including childhood responsibilities, coaching, and managing teams. Their expertise evolved not through formal training in athletic administration but through hands-on experiences in problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership. Many of the women in my research learned leadership informally, through taking care of siblings, working in retail management, coaching sports, and mentoring students. This provided opportunities for early skill development, which later translated into their ability to manage complex athletic programs. Coaching helped these women refine their strategic thinking, team management, conflict resolution, and organizational skills, all critical to succeeding as an athletic director. Early in their careers, many women relied on strict rule enforcement to establish authority, particularly in a male-dominated field. However, as they gained confidence, they shifted toward relational leadership, understanding that relationship-building, transparency, and mentorship were more effective for long-term success.

The "know-whom" competency refers to the importance of relationships, networking, and mentorship in career success. Across all six women, mentorship played a defining role in their journey into athletic administration, often shaping their career direction in ways they had not anticipated. The reoccurring know-whom competency revolved around various forms of mentors. Many women did not actively seek out athletic director roles but were encouraged by mentors, former coaches, athletic directors, or principals, who saw their leadership potential.

The "know-why" competency reflects an individual's sense of purpose and motivation, the personal values, passions, and commitments that drive career decisions. The women in this study did not pursue athletic administration for power or prestige but were deeply motivated by their desire to create equitable, inclusive, and supportive sports environments for students. All of the women in my study spoke about their commitment to equity and inclusion. The women in this study were deeply committed to equity, inclusion, resilience, community impact, and student success.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 5, I highlighted the four themes constructed through the analysis of the interview data provided by six women navigating the pathway to becoming interscholastic athletic directors. I also used the boundaryless career competencies model as an additional lens through which to interpret my findings. These themes provided a rich understanding of the challenges, perceptions, and triumphs they encountered along their journeys. The personal stories of the collaborators offered insights into challenges and opportunities within the field, underscoring the profound interconnectedness of early experiences, resilience, mentorship, and advocacy in shaping their leadership journeys.

The findings underscore the transformative power of perseverance, equity, and relational leadership. Collaborators shared how their nonlinear paths into athletic leadership were influenced by mentorship, resilience, and their commitment to equity and inclusion. They navigated gender dynamics while balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family roles. The collaborators focused on creating meaningful and lasting impacts in their communities and fostering holistic success for student-athletes. These insights, informed by Maxwell's (2013) emphasis on context and Saldaña's (2013) iterative coding process, contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership in athletic administration, particularly for women navigating complex professional landscapes. Chapter 6 will revisit these findings in connection to broader literature, exploring implications for action and suggestions for future research to further drive progress toward equity and opportunity for women in interscholastic athletic leadership.

## Chapter VI

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to fill gaps in the literature regarding the experiences women go through along the pathway to interscholastic athletic director. Women remain significantly underrepresented in the formal role of athletic director within the interscholastic sports setting. Despite Title IX's impact in expanding athletic opportunities for women, this progress has not translated equally into leadership roles, with statistics indicating that female representation in interscholastic and collegiate athletic administration remains disproportionately low with females accounting for only 14% of high school athletic directors (Chapman, 2022) and 24% of collegiate athletic directors (NCAA, 2022). The lack of female representation at the interscholastic level has been acknowledged, but little is known about the specific barriers that contribute to this disparity.

This qualitative study provided the women in my research a platform to share their voices and offer unique insights into their reflected-upon experiences as they navigated their pathways to athletic leadership. Almost two decades ago, research showed female administrators were more likely to hire female coaches than their male counterparts (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006), underscoring the broader implications of gender disparities in athletic administration. This appears to still be true as Knoppers et al., (2023), published a study that found female athletic directors are more likely than male athletic directors to hire women as coaches. They found this especially true for

women's teams. This study aligns with the concept of homologous reproduction as discussed in my relevant literature, where people in power tend to hire others who resemble themselves. Through processes of categorizing strategies and connecting strategies while completing data analysis, the personal narratives of six women who successfully ascended the career ladder to interscholastic athletic director were recorded and explored. These narratives help shed light on how these women navigated, attained, and sustained leadership roles in interscholastic athletics, ultimately fostering greater equity and inclusion in the field. The reflective narratives in Chapter 4 provided a vehicle for the women in my research to share their personal stories of how they persisted along the male dominated pathway to achieve leadership roles. The construction of these narratives preserved each collaborator's unique context and significance of interactions and experiences, which is a form of data analysis that can only be produced through in-depth qualitative research.

Crafting narratives based on the framework established by Kim (2016) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions, personal and social, temporal, and place-based, was the original plan for my research. I wanted to present a holistic understanding of each collaborator's experiences. Rather than gathering the thick, rich descriptions I had hoped for, after a deep examination of my data, the data I collected turned out to be more reflective in nature. For example, I had one collaborator reflect on what she took away from an early life experience, in which her youth basketball coach became a father figure while her biological father was incarcerated. She reflected on how that person caring for her at a time of need later influenced her decision to pursue coaching as a means to provide the same support for young athletes that she once

received. The reflections my collaborators shared did support broad findings in the literature that emphasized the importance of mentorship, representation, and early exposure to leadership pathways in shaping womens' aspirations in athletic administration (Bower & Hums, 2013; Whisenant, 2003). After reviewing my data, I changed course and crafted first person stories that share what my collaborators took away from reflecting on previous experiences more than they describe the experience itself.

The final thematic analysis enabled me to identify patterns and present assertions that these women discussed as helping them persist as they navigated their careers to becoming athletic directors. This section presents the findings from my research, discusses implications for action, addressed the limitations of my study, and proposes recommendations for further research to explore the systemic barriers and opportunities for women in interscholastic athletic administration.

### **Research Questions Revisited**

Research on the impact of women in interscholastic athletic director roles is limited, much like the representation of women in these positions. There is a lack of understanding about what barriers, if any, are preventing equitable representation. This study sought to understand what experiences influenced female interscholastic athletic directors to navigate the pathway to their position. Their stories helped to address the lack of information on why there is such a disparity between the number of women and men working as high school athletic directors. In this research study, I examined the experiences of six female high school athletic directors serving in Georgia school

districts. In this section, I align the research question that guided my study with the findings from my research. The original question guiding my study was:

What lived experiences and values influenced Interscholastic Female Athletic Directors (ADs) working in Georgia to persist as they navigated the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation? After data analysis and as I began building narratives, I realized Maxwell's (2013) Jeopardy exercise maybe a worthwhile undertaking. In conjunction with my committee chair, we realized the question I actually answered was: What connections did six Interscholastic Female Athletic Directors make between their life experiences and values and the influence they had on navigating the process of becoming an AD in a male dominated occupation?

In line with the revised overarching research question, I wrote reflective stories for each collaborator and discerned patterns within the data to construct meanings and demonstrate connections. To articulate the implications of my study, I present my interpretive understanding of the data and then share suggestions that I assert will help improve the path for women in the field. The development of assertions within this study follows Saldaña's (2013) approach, where qualitative research moves beyond description to construct interpretive conclusions that synthesize patterns across collaborators' experiences. As a male, the interpretations from the study originate from the prospective of a member of the majority. As someone aspiring to navigate the same pathway as the women in my study, it was important to constantly monitor and analyze how my gender might be influencing the data. In the following section, I discuss how the findings from my study align to previous literature and add to the lack of literature on the value of having women in these roles and interscholastic athletic director pathway navigation.

Collaborators in my research discussed facing scrutiny about how they got the position and skepticism about their competence in managing athletic programs. Jan discussed how as she “stepped into [her] new athletic leadership [position] as a young, female AD. . . . [she] faced rumors that [she] must have slept with the principal to get the job.” She told me that she “knew that [she] had to work twice as hard to prove [she] deserved to be here.” The perception she got the job unfairly because she was a woman caused her to internally feel like she needed to work harder to establish credibility in ways male counterparts do not. This persistent challenge shaped their leadership journeys, compelling them to demonstrate their expertise through diligence, resilience, and a commitment to equitable athletic administration. Many began their careers with a rigid, rule-enforcing approach to assert authority in a traditionally male-dominated field. However, as they gain experience and confidence, their leadership evolves into a more relational and adaptive style, emphasizing communication, trust, and the cultivation of supportive environments for coaches, athletes, and stakeholders. This transformation highlights their adaptability and dedication to servant leadership, where fostering meaningful relationships becomes just as important as enforcing policies.

Meredith’s experience encapsulates this struggle, as she recalled initial doubts about her qualifications to lead, particularly in a traditionally male-dominated role: “Initially hesitant, especially because of my limited knowledge of football and the traditionally male-dominated role, I ultimately accepted the position out of concern for the equitable treatment of all sports programs, especially girls’ sports.” Similarly, Angela recounted instances where people assumed she was not the athletic director: “I have had a

lot of times where they stop, and they're like, 'I need to talk to the athletic director.' And I say, 'Yes, this is she.' That takes them by surprise."

This need to constantly prove themselves led Jan, Karen, and Angela to adopt a highly structured and disciplined approach to leadership. Jan, for example, noted that she initially relied on a strict enforcement of rules to assert authority:

Early in my career, I was known as that woman that showed up and ran these things with my loud approach. I have no problem being very direct. And there's times that it's kind of misconstrued into that I'm just that angry female that's power-hungry, whereas it's no, if I'm not assertive, y'all ignore me, and you think you can do whatever you want.

Over time, as her work spoke for itself, she shifted toward a relational leadership style that emphasized transparency, communication, and collaboration. Jan stated "As I have grown and my work now speaks for itself, I can approach things with a less abrasive approach and allow the power of the relationships I have built to still get the same desired outcome."

Karen's experience highlights this evolution:

Early in my career, I was very rigid in my approach, following the rules exactly how they were written. Coaches thought my approach was strict, but I wanted to make sure I did everything correctly. Over time, I adapted and saw the importance of following the rules, but ensuring my coaches knew our relationship was equally as important to a cohesive athletic department.

This shift from rigid enforcement to relational leadership allows female athletic directors to create inclusive and empowering spaces where coaches feel supported and athletes

thrive. Angela and Jan mentioned the value of servant leadership principles, prioritizing the needs of their staff and students while ensuring fairness and consistency in decision-making. Angela told me about how:

Instead of just holding an annual honors night, you know that they do for all the academic honors and stuff, I created an athletic honors night celebrating student-athletes, players of the week, coaches of the week, positive athlete nominees, athlete of the year, all these different things, female and male coach of the year, etc. I created that athletic awards night within my school to give back to the coaches that worked in my department and student-athletes that were under my watch. I wanted to recognize athletes that might not have been the [best performers], but might have the highest GPA or coaches that might not have won a championship, but got their team to do community service.

Jan articulated this philosophy, stating: "For my leadership, the biggest things are communication, transparency. I'm big on loyalty, but I think the loyalty, the respect, all that comes just from being there, being involved, and being transparent."

The adaptability displayed by these women demonstrates a strategic approach to leadership. They begin by establishing authority in a field where their expertise is often questioned, and as they gain respect, they transition to a leadership style that fosters collaboration, inclusion, and trust. This progression not only benefits their athletic departments but also redefines expectations of leadership in interscholastic sports, paving the way for future generations of female administrators. Their experiences highlight how gendered perceptions in athletic administration necessitate additional effort from women to gain recognition and respect, yet they also illustrate how persistence, adaptability, and

strong leadership can dismantle outdated stereotypes and pave the way for future generations of female athletic directors.

None of the women in this study initially aspired to become athletic directors. Instead, their journeys into leadership were shaped by a combination of early adversity, unexpected leadership opportunities, coaching experiences, and volunteer roles that unknowingly prepared them for success in athletic administration. Despite not actively seeking this career path, the skills they developed through perseverance, adaptability, and mentorship positioned them to excel in the role once the opportunity arose.

Throughout their childhood and early careers, these women navigated significant challenges, including family instability, frequent relocations, and financial hardships. These experiences fostered resilience, independence, and problem-solving skills that later became invaluable in athletic leadership. Jan reflected on how taking care of her younger siblings at an early age instilled in her a sense of responsibility and leadership:

I was the one that sat at the table and helped my siblings with their homework. I would cook dinner, I would make sure they bathed and were ready to go. I would get them up for school the next morning.

Similarly, Angela described how the loss of her grandparents forced her to establish independent relationships as a young adult, without the presence of her biological parents, further shaping her ability to navigate complex relationships and advocate for herself.

Their involvement in sports provided an additional foundation for leadership. While some collaborators initially played on teams, others found their leadership skills developing in supporting roles, such as managing teams, keeping stats, or volunteering in

various capacities. Angela recalled how, instead of going home, she found belonging in athletics through participation in various roles: "I took stats, then I became the football manager and trainer (pause). I did anything I could every season so that I didn't have to go home." This early exposure to team dynamics, organization, and problem-solving laid the groundwork for future leadership.

For many, coaching provided a natural transition into leadership, further strengthening their ability to communicate, manage people, and strategize. Meredith reflected on how coaching developed her leadership abilities: "Fostering team unity and building strong relationships among players was crucial in developing my ability to create a cohesive and supportive team environment." Similarly, Erin described how her passion for coaching led to her unexpected appointment as an athletic director:

I never had that moment in my life where I wanted to become an athletic director.

I think I initially took the position because I felt like, if I don't take it, who are they going to give it to? Will that person care anything about my program as a coach? Would they care about any of the other girls' programs?

Many of these women were identified as leaders before they saw themselves in leadership roles. Their supervisors, coaches, or mentors recognized their potential and encouraged them to step into administrative positions. Meredith described how a principal's belief in her shaped her career trajectory:

I cannot say that there was a direct path for me to become an athletic director. As it was not something 'on my radar,' it was just a position that was placed in front of me as an opportunity to grow because my principal felt that I would be a good individual for the position.

Despite never explicitly striving for the role, these women found themselves uniquely equipped to navigate the demands of athletic administration due to the leadership experiences they had accumulated throughout their lives. Their stories illustrate how resilience, adaptability, and servant leadership develop organically through experiences, shaping capable and compassionate leaders who are deeply committed to supporting their athletes, coaches, and school communities.

The unique narrative insights combined with the thematic analysis illuminate the multifaceted journey of women in athletic leadership, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and organizations seeking to promote diversity. The implications from this study can help inform stakeholders on how to create more inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments that empower the next generation of leaders to thrive.

### **Assertions and Implications for Practice**

The following assertions and implications offer practical guidance for school leaders, districts, and athletic associations seeking to foster a more inclusive and supportive pipeline for women in athletic leadership. Across all six narratives, mentorship, or the lack thereof, was shared as a defining factor in leadership development. While some participants, like Karen, benefited from the informal guidance of trusted mentors, others like Erin and Meredith entered their roles with minimal support or preparation. “I wasn’t really shadowing my previous athletic director to try to learn. . . . I just went straight to the rule book,” Erin shared, revealing a widespread gap in structured onboarding. I assert school districts and state associations must establish formal mentorship programs specifically for women interested in athletic administration.

These programs should match current ADs with aspiring leaders early in their careers, providing regular check-ins, opportunities for shadowing, and guidance through the policy and compliance landscape. Pam described how prior to becoming the athletic director, the current AD brought her into the office and said, “Hey, do you want to learn the ropes? I need help.” Pam took the offer and gained valuable experience prior to becoming the athletic director. Women should not have to rely on luck to receive the mentorship they need.

Traditional hiring and preparation models tend to prioritize candidates with high-profile coaching experience typically in male-dominated sports, over those with diverse or nontraditional backgrounds. Yet, as Pam and Angela shared early leadership experiences in lifeguarding, cheerleading, or department chair roles served as critical components to their success. “These formative experiences were instrumental in developing my organizational skills and leadership qualities,” Pam noted. I assert hiring committees must broaden their criteria to recognize transferable skills from diverse leadership experiences. Women’s leadership potential often emerges in roles that are overlooked or undervalued. Districts should revise job descriptions and evaluation rubrics to reflect this inclusive lens.

All of the women in my research shared how they chose to lead with a relational leadership approach. They shared leadership styles that focused on empathy, communication, and care. Yet, these leadership styles are often devalued in traditionally masculine athletic cultures. Meredith, for instance, spoke about how her inclusive approach was shaped by a desire for fairness rooted in her own experiences: “I never want one of my athletes to feel the same pressure I had to pick between two conflicting

extracurriculars.” Similarly, Karen stated, “If you don’t have a relationship with [your athletes or coaches], it’s hard for you to get through to them.” I assert leadership development programs must go beyond rule enforcement and operational training. Professional development should intentionally build relational and emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and inclusive communication. As Angela’s story affirms, “Everything that I know about leadership goes back to serving, giving, and creating opportunities that didn’t exist prior.” These so-called “soft skills” are, in practice, powerful tools for transformational leadership.

Jan, Karen, and Angela described instances where their leadership was challenged, disrespected, or undermined due to gender assumptions. Jan shared an example: “People spread rumors that I must’ve slept with the principal to get the job.” Karen recounted male contractors ignoring her decisions until they were confirmed by another female administrator. Angela shared a story about the head of an officials’ association asking if she was the bookkeeper. Such experiences are not isolated. These stories reflect an outdated cultural stereotype that assumes women are not able to lead athletic departments as well as men. I assert districts must offer ongoing professional development on gender bias and respectful workplace interactions for coaches, contractors, booster clubs, and administrators. In addition, clear policies should protect women in leadership from harassment, undermining, and retaliation.

Work-life balance is not a liability but a powerful leadership asset when it is normalized and modeled within athletic departments and school districts. When leaders are empowered to integrate personal and professional responsibilities, they lead with greater empathy, sustainability, and effectiveness, creating inclusive cultures where

others feel seen and supported. As Jan explained, “I tell my coaches, this is your time for you and your family. . . I try to take the administrative burden off their shoulders.” Her leadership not only protects the well-being of her staff but also models a healthy, humane approach to athletic administration. Similarly, Angela integrates family into her leadership philosophy stating, “I always bring my children to events. I celebrate their personal milestones as intentionally as I do the athletes within my school.” I assert that athletic departments and school districts need to intentionally normalize and support work-life balance. Normalizing this balance challenges outdated norms that equate sacrifice with strength and instead promotes leadership rooted in authenticity, care, and sustainability. Without this shift, the field risks continuing to exclude capable leaders who refuse to compromise their personal well-being for professional validation. This philosophy was modeled by Angela when she shared, “I tell my coaches, this is your time for you and your family. . . I try to take the administrative burden off their shoulders.” By recognizing work-life integration as a strength rather than a shortcoming, institutions can retain diverse talent, reduce burnout, and foster cultures where servant leadership, empathy, and authenticity thrive. This shift not only benefits individual leaders but strengthens entire school communities by modeling healthier expectations for coaches, educators, and student-athletes alike.

These assertions are not merely observations; they are calls to action grounded in real experiences. Districts need to intentionally invest in mentorship programs, inclusive communication, validation of relational leadership, creation of more student leadership opportunities, and endorsement of work-life balance being a priority.

Additionally, I explored how women navigate the pathway to becoming high school athletic directors through the boundaryless career competencies model (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996), using know-why, know-how, and know-whom as analytical lenses. I assert this model is a useful tool to further understand the motivations, skills, and relationships that shaped their career trajectories. By applying this perspective, I identified key themes that illuminate the factors enabling women to succeed in this field, despite systemic challenges.

The know-why competency reflects the personal drivers, values, and motivations influencing career decisions. The women in this study were deeply committed to equity, inclusion, resilience, community impact, and student success. Many were drawn to the role out of necessity, stepping up to ensure strong leadership for female athletics. Their ability to overcome adversity and their belief in sports as a transformative force reinforced their commitment to leadership in a male-dominated space.

The know-how competency encompasses the skills and expertise these women developed to succeed as athletic directors. Many gained leadership experience informally, through early responsibilities, participation in sports, coaching, and administrative roles, which translated into key competencies such as multitasking, adaptability, strategic thinking, and problem-solving. Their career development was nonlinear, requiring them to navigate unplanned transitions and evolving leadership styles.

The know-whom competency highlights the critical role of mentors, professional networks, and stakeholder relationships in career progression. None of the women actively sought out the athletic director role; instead, they were encouraged by mentors, former coaches, and school administrators who recognized their leadership potential.

Applying the boundaryless career competencies model to my data analysis provided unique insights into how these women successfully navigated nonlinear career paths. Their experiences underscore the interplay of motivation (know-why), skills development (know-how), and social capital (know-whom) in career advancement. By framing these findings through the Boundaryless Career Competencies Model, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the career trajectories of female athletic directors and highlights the structural and personal factors that influence their success. Their collective experiences emphasize the transformative power of mentorship, adaptability, and resilience in shaping the next generation of women in athletic administration.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this study was my positionality as a researcher. As a white male investigating gender inequities in high school athletic administration, I faced challenges in fully understanding and exploring the lived experiences of my collaborators. While my goal was to highlight the strategies women used to successfully navigate the pathway to athletic director and shed light on gender disparities, I recognize that my identity may have influenced the data collection process and collaborators' willingness to share deeply personal experiences.

At the outset of each interview, many collaborators expressed appreciation for a male researcher dedicating time to studying women in athletic leadership. However, they frequently inquired about my motivations for choosing this topic. I openly shared my research journey, aiming to build trust and establish rapport by emphasizing my role as an ally. Despite these efforts, I suspect my gender may have inadvertently hindered their

ability to share certain sensitive experiences, particularly regarding the intersectionality of being a woman in this role.

Although my interviews were productive, I found that using the Kim (2016) two-question follow-up technique did not always elicit the depth of reflection I had hoped for. As a member of the majority group, I may have unconsciously represented the individuals who have historically impeded the advancement of women in athletic administration. This dynamic may have created a subtle barrier, limiting the richness of collaborators' responses and potentially obscuring deeper insights into why more women are not in these roles.

Another key limitation was the small sample size of six women. While appropriate for a narrative inquiry approach, this number limits the generalizability of the findings. I contacted over 30 female athletic directors in Georgia, but despite two rounds of follow-up emails, I only received eight responses. Two participants later withdrew, one before the interviews and another after the first session, further reducing the sample. A larger and more diverse sample could provide a broader range of perspectives, enhancing the depth of understanding on this topic.

Additionally, the study's geographical scope was limited to Georgia. The regional and cultural context of this area likely shaped the experiences and perspectives of the collaborators. While valuable, these findings may not fully capture the experiences of women in athletic leadership across different states, regions, or cultural settings. Expanding this research to include participants from varied geographical and cultural backgrounds could yield more nuanced insights into the systemic barriers and opportunities women face in this profession.

One of the most important findings of this research is that women are fully capable of succeeding as athletic directors, yet they are not in these roles in expected numbers. This realization initially prompted my research, as I sought to understand why more women were not stepping into leadership positions despite having the skills, experience, and dedication to succeed. However, after conducting interviews and analyzing data, I still could not find a definitive answer.

No matter how I framed my questions, I struggled to get collaborators to openly discuss whether gender was a major influence in their experiences. I began to wonder: Was it because I'm a man, and they didn't feel comfortable sharing? Or was this an issue so deeply ingrained that it was difficult for them to articulate? The intersectionality of gender and leadership was not something they openly addressed, leaving me with more questions than answers.

Although I may not have uncovered the root cause behind the underrepresentation of women in these roles, this research still provides valuable insights and practical advice for aspiring female athletic directors. I was able to document successful career strategies, highlight mentorship and support networks, and identify key competencies that helped women advance in this field. However, I cannot shake the feeling that an unspoken factor remains, contributing to their underrepresentation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several areas warrant further exploration to build upon the findings of this study and deepen the understanding of gender equity in athletic leadership. One key area of interest is how the gender of the researcher influences participant responses in studies focused on gender equity. If a female researcher were to replicate this study, the findings

may differ, particularly in the depth of personal experiences shared. In Georgia, where fewer than 500 high schools exist and the Georgia Athletic Directors Association (GADA) serves as the sole professional organization for athletic directors, participants may have been hesitant to share candid reflections with a male researcher, especially someone they might encounter professionally in the future. Exploring how researcher gender impacts qualitative research on gender disparities could provide valuable insights for refining methodologies in equity-focused leadership studies.

Another compelling avenue for research is the long-term impact of youth athletic coaching styles on athletes' career trajectories and personal development. All collaborators in this study described youth coaches who prioritized relationships, care, and mentorship, often treating players as extensions of their families. In contrast, modern youth sports often emphasize results over relationships, with an increasing focus on winning at all costs. Investigating how different coaching philosophies shape athletes' leadership skills, resilience, and long-term career aspirations could offer critical insights into developing future coaching practices. A longitudinal study comparing the career pathways of athletes from highly competitive, results-driven programs with those from holistic, player-centered environments could inform best practices for preparing the next generation of athletic administrators.

Additionally, future research should further examine whether gender itself is a defining barrier in career progression or if other factors, such as work-life balance, career aspirations, or systemic hiring practices, play a larger role. Are women being systematically excluded from athletic director positions, or do fewer women actively pursue these roles due to broader career preferences? A different methodological

approach, such as focus groups or anonymous surveys, may provide more candid insights into the barriers women face in this profession. Expanding this research across diverse geographical and cultural contexts is crucial for fostering more equitable leadership opportunities in interscholastic athletics. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gender disparities in athletic leadership and inform strategies to promote greater inclusivity and equity in the profession.

### **Final Thoughts**

When I began this study, I assumed that men might be a contributing factor to the lack of women employed as interscholastic athletic directors (ADs). As a man myself, I expected to hear women describe male influence as at least a partial barrier to their advancement in athletic administration. However, after conducting my interviews and analyzing the data, I did not encounter any stories in which women blamed men for the current gender disparity among interscholastic ADs.

People rarely aspire to be things they haven't seen. Across the U.S., there are more than 500 undergraduate sports management programs. One might expect that someone interested in becoming an AD would pursue this type of degree. With only 30% of the professors in these programs being women in 2021, college aged females might not perceive this as a viable degree and future career option (Zippia, 2021). With only 14% of high school athletic director roles held by women in 2022, and just 40% of girls' sports at the high school level being coached by women in 2022, females are not seeing other individuals that look like them in these roles and are less likely to consider them career options (Chapman, 2022; Zippia, 2022c). When women don't see themselves represented

in these roles, they are less likely to envision these paths as possible or desirable. The current status quo is less about men acting as barriers and more about women choosing different career paths.

Aspiring female leaders don't need men to guide them, they need opportunities and representation. Just as women have shattered glass ceilings in other professions without having female mentors ahead of them, many of the women in my study forged their own paths without modeling their careers after anyone. I anticipated hearing frustration or blame for the difficulties they faced. Instead, I heard stories of perseverance, determination, and earning respect through hard work. None of the women blamed others for holding them back. Rather, they reflected on the lessons they'd learned, through mentors, challenges, and life experiences, and how those lessons shaped their leadership. They spoke about creating inclusive, supportive environments, making athletes feel seen and valued, and ensuring that everyone had what they needed to succeed.

This study highlights the resilience, adaptability, and leadership of women in athletic administration. Through their narratives, I saw the profound impact of early experiences, mentorship, and advocacy on their professional journeys. Their stories underscore the importance of creating supportive, equitable environments that empower future leaders. By amplifying these voices, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and triumphs of women in leadership, offering valuable insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and aspiring leaders alike. The legacy of these women extends beyond their immediate roles, inspiring a new generation to pursue leadership with courage, compassion, and commitment.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
For the Protection of Human Research Participants**

**PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

**Protocol Number:** 04395-2023

**Responsible Researcher(s):** Chris Aiken

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing

**Project Title:** *Exploring the Process of Becoming an Interscholastic Female Athletic Director: A Narrative Inquiry Approach.*

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research study.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- *Upon completion of the approved study, collected data must be securely maintained and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interviews provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted permanently from recording and storage devices.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, recordings and transcripts must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant's understanding, and establishing the participants willingness to take part. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- *To ensure confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists., email addresses, etc.*

*If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

*Elizabeth Ann Olphie*      *06.16.2023*  
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.  
Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16

APPENDIX B  
Interview Guides

## Interview One: Life Story

All interview questions included in this application are intended to be samples to demonstrate the types of questions that will be asked and prompts that will be used in interviews. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research and the conversational style that will be used in interview the words will likely not be verbatim as listed here. Hi [insert name here],

I am excited to talk to you today! I am thankful you are taking the time out of your busy schedule to help me with my research. Athletics has been a huge part of my personal life, and I am looking forward to exploring how athletics has influenced your life. The insight you share will be extremely enlightening.

A goal of this study is to investigate the personal lived experiences of experienced female ADs at the high school. Exploring the meaning they make from reflecting on those experiences will provide unique insights that can only be found in qualitative research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes per each of the three interviews. Total participation in the study, including 5 to 10 minutes for the survey, is approximately 180 to 270 minutes combined time after completing all three interviews. The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Your participation in the interview

will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older, and to consent to my recording of the interview.

Today we will complete our first interview. In this first interview, the goal will be to put your lived experiences in context. I want to understand how and why you ended up working as an educator and athletic director in Georgia. The context of my questions will focus on your life history in reference to the periods before and up until your current leadership position. I want to explore what you were doing before you became an athletic director and the significant moments that led you to your current job.

Throughout the three-interview series, I will follow up with the two-sentence format technique below (Kim, 2016).

Follow up: You said, mentioned, described, .... Please elaborate, describe, explain what, why, how ....

1. Think back to your earliest elementary school experiences. Tell me about your educational experiences as far back as you can remember.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Favorites (subject, teacher)
- b. Positive experiences & negative experiences
- c. Family involvement
- d. Extracurricular activities (at school or in community)
- e. Friend or peers

2. Continue conversation with middle, high school, and college.

3. Think back to your earliest elementary athletic experiences. Tell me about your athletic experiences as far back as you can remember.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Favorites (sports, coaches)
- b. Positive experiences & negative experiences
- c. Family involvement
- e. Friend or peers

4. Continue conversation with middle, high school, and college.

5. Describe when you realized what you wanted to do in life.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Family support
- b. Peers positive or negative
- c. Athletic coaches positive or negative

6. Going back as far as you can remember, tell me about some of your experiences with leadership in the context of athletics.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Team captain
- b. Assistant coach
- c. Head coach
- d. Assistant Athletic Director

7. How do you think those experiences set the foundation for how you lead today and the values that are important to you?

8. Create a roadmap describing your pathway to becoming an athletic director.

Tell me about some of the significant points along your personal journey. I will give my collaborators a piece of paper to draw while they talk.

9. Why do you believe these moments were significant?

10. Describe some of the most impactful professional mentoring relationships you had throughout your pathway to athletic director.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Previous coaches
- b. Previous players
- c. Previous Athletic Directors
- d. Family

11. How did these mentoring relationships influence your decision to pursue a career in athletic administration?

12. Tell me the story of how you choose to pursue an athletic director position.

13. Walk me through the details of your athletic director application process.

14. Describe your successes during application process

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. References
- b. Previous experiences
- c. Educational background
- d. Coaching certifications

15. Why do you classify those experiences as successes?

16. Who were the top two influential people along the way and why?

## Interview Two: Details of experience

Hi [insert name here],

I hope your school year and athletic season have been going well. Thank you again so much for agreeing to meet with me a second time. I thoroughly enjoyed our first interview together, and I am looking to gathering new knowledge today. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older, and to consent to my recording of the interview.

During our second interview, the goal will be to focus on specific details of your present experience. I will ask you to reconstruct details about how you experience being a female athletic director. The goal of this interview will be to examine the details of your current experiences working as a female high school athletic director.

Throughout the three-interview series, I will follow up with the two-sentence format technique below (Kim, 2016).

Follow up: You said, mentioned, described, .... Please elaborate, describe, explain what, why, how ....

1. Tell me about how your educational and athletic background prepared you for your career in athletic administration.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. Educational background (high school, college)
- b. Teaching experience
- c. Coaching experience
- d. Athletic administration experience

2. Reconstruct the experiences as you transitioned from player, to coach, to assistant athletic director, and to eventual athletic director.

3. Describe your leadership philosophy as an athletic director.

4. Along your pathway to becoming an athletic director, describe for me any challenges you experienced relating to your gender while pursuing an interscholastic athletic director position.

5. If I were to follow you as a shadow, can you reconstruct a day in the life of your role as athletic director from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed?

6. In any leadership role, there are some challenges. Describe the impact your gender has on challenges you have faced or are currently facing in your role as an athletic director.

7. Describe how your gender impacts present experiences associated with leading an athletic department.

Exploratory prompts if needed:

Coaching hires

Budgets

Athletic meetings

Parent and community involvement

8. As a female athletic director, how would describe your career affecting personal or professional relationships presently?

Exploratory prompts if needed:

- a. How does your role as athletic director influence your personal life?
  - b. How do your personal life affect your role as athletic director?
  - c. How do you balance you professional and personal life?
9. Describe how your gender impacts relationships with stakeholders such as board of trustees, staff, faculty, and community at large, given your current leadership position.
10. Describe any athletic leadership experiences where you felt being a female affected your job.
11. What is the climate like for other females working in this profession?
12. Describe how males within your school and other male athletic directors around the state react to your leadership.
13. What is your impression of the challenges women may face in this field?
14. Describe your best and worst experiences as a female athletic director.

### Interview Three: Meaning Making

Hi [inset name here],

I have really enjoyed our last two conversations. I am very grateful you were able to meet with me for a third interview. The personal insights you have shared will be extremely beneficial to my research. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older, and to consent to my recording of the interview.

Today we will complete our third interview. In this third interview, the goal will be for you to reflect on the meaning of all your lived experiences. Together we will explore how you understand the connection between previous lived experiences and their impact on your life story. To understand your present situation, this interview will attempt to make sense of how the various factors in your life contributed to your pathway of becoming an athletic director. Exploring a combination of your past and present experiences to clarify your present situation will allow for a complete reflection of your journey to becoming an athletic director. This interview will focus on the process of using reflection to make meaning.

Throughout the three-interview series, I will follow up with the two-sentence format technique below (Kim, 2016).

Follow up: You said, mentioned, described, .... Please elaborate, describe, explain what, why, how ....

1. Reflecting on (a previously discussed experience), how would you describe your feelings about....?

Describe how you were affected by (previously discussed experience). How did it change your view of yourself?

2. Describe what it means to be a female athletic director.

3. Why do you think there are so few female athletic directors in interscholastic athletics?

4. Looking back on (a previously discussed experience), describe what you see as the main components of how you navigated the pathway to athletic director.

5. Explain how (a previously discussed experience) influence how you construct relationships with others.

6. Reflecting on the meaning of your life story so far, can you identify a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout your story? What is the central theme of your life? Explain.

7. Considering (a previously discussed experience) how would you describe the impact your gender has influenced how you choose to lead.

8. How do you believe your leadership journey has played a role in your current leadership style as athletic director?

9. What advice do you have for females looking to navigate the pathway to becoming athletic director?

10. Considering (a previously discussed experience) how do you see that experience influencing your future? How did the meaning of that experience impact your career aspirations? How will your current role as athletic director help you with your future goals?

11. Is there anything you would you like to share?

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Chris Aiken at [caaiken@valdosta.edu](mailto:caaiken@valdosta.edu). This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)