
Literature Review

Long-Term Retention of Coaches and Their Impact on Academic Achievement and Athletic Success

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Abstract

This literature review examines the long-term retention of scholastic coaches and its impact on academic achievement and athletic success in secondary education settings. Although athletic participation is consistently associated with improved engagement and school connectedness, limited research isolates coaching tenure as a structural variable influencing dual-domain outcomes. This review synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship from educational leadership, sport psychology, youth development, and organizational theory to analyze how sustained coaching stability influences grade point average, graduation rates, standardized test performance, athlete retention, team performance, and psychosocial development. Independent variables include coaching tenure, leadership style, and institutional support structures. Dependent variables include academic performance indicators and athletic success metrics. Grounded in self-determination theory, social learning theory, and transformational leadership theory, this review argues that long-term coaching retention enhances relational trust, motivational climate consistency, developmental alignment, and institutional coherence. Moderating variables such as socioeconomic context, administrative investment, burnout, and resource allocation are examined. Implications for educational policy, licensure preparation, and district-level leadership are discussed, and recommendations for longitudinal research exploring causal pathways are provided.

Introduction

The stability of coaching staff in educational athletic programs has emerged as a critical yet understudied variable in understanding both athletic success and student-athlete academic outcomes. While extensive research has examined individual coaching characteristics—such as leadership style, expertise, and motivational strategies—relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to the *duration* of coaching tenure and its cumulative effects on program outcomes. This literature review synthesizes current empirical research on coach retention (the length of time a coach remains in a position) and examines its relationship to two primary outcome variables: athletic performance and academic achievement among student-athletes.

The long-term retention of scholastic coaches represents a critical yet underexamined component of educational effectiveness. Within High Schools, athletic programs serve not merely as extracurricular outlets but as institutional structures that shape student identity, discipline, motivation, and school attachment. While extensive literature affirms that athletic participation correlates with higher academic engagement and reduced dropout rates, comparatively little attention has been directed toward understanding how the stability of coaching leadership influences these outcomes over time.

The rationale for this inquiry is multifaceted. In many school districts, particularly in rural and under-resourced communities, coaching turnover remains high due to workload imbalance, insufficient compensation, and limited professional recognition. Such instability disrupts relational continuity, weakens program identity, and resets developmental systems. Conversely, sustained coaching tenure may cultivate stronger mentoring relationships, consistent academic expectations, coherent skill progression, and community trust. These elements collectively contribute to a structured environment conducive to both academic and athletic achievement.

Coaching turnover represents a significant organizational disruption, requiring new coaches to rebuild relationships, establish systems, and develop team cohesion. Coach-athlete relationships develop over

time; longer tenure may facilitate deeper mentoring relationships that extend beyond sport performance to academic and personal development. Third, program continuity—reflected in consistent coaching staff—may create stability that benefits both competitive outcomes and educational outcomes for student-athletes.

This review addresses the following overarching research question: **To what extent does coach retention predict athletic success and academic achievement among student-athletes, and what mechanisms explain this relationship?**

The central hypothesis guiding this review is that increased long-term retention of coaches is positively associated with improved academic achievement and athletic success due to relational stability, motivational climate consistency, and strategic developmental planning. Independent variables include coaching tenure (measured in years within the same program), leadership style (transformational, transactional, or autonomy-supportive), and institutional support mechanisms. Dependent variables include academic metrics such as grade point average, attendance, standardized assessment performance, and graduation rates, as well as athletic metrics such as team win–loss record, postseason advancement, athlete retention, and performance development.

Hypothesis 1 (Athletic Performance): Coach retention will be positively associated with athletic success, such that teams with coaches of longer tenure will demonstrate higher winning percentages, better tournament performance, and greater season-to-season improvement compared to teams with coaches of shorter tenure.

Hypothesis 2 (Academic Achievement): Coach retention will be positively associated with academic achievement among student-athletes, such that student-athletes coached by retained coaches will demonstrate higher GPAs, higher graduation rates, and greater academic eligibility compliance compared to student-athletes coached by coaches in their first or second year of tenure.

Secondary Hypotheses

Hypothesis 3 (Relationship Mediation): The relationship between coach retention and academic achievement will be mediated by the quality and depth of coach-athlete relationships, such that longer tenure facilitates more authentic mentoring relationships, which in turn predict higher academic outcomes.

Hypothesis 4 (Program Stability Mediation): The relationship between coach retention and athletic success will be mediated by program stability indicators (e.g., consistent training systems, stable team composition, predictable competitive strategies), such that retained coaches maintain more stable program operations, which facilitate improved performance.

Moderating Hypotheses

Hypothesis 5 (Contextual Moderation): The relationship between coach retention and both athletic and academic outcomes will be moderated by contextual factors, including competitive level (high school vs. college), sport type (team vs. individual), and institutional resources, such that the benefits of retention may be stronger in well-resourced contexts.

This literature review synthesizes empirical findings across educational leadership, sport psychology, and organizational research to construct a comprehensive framework explaining the multidimensional impact of coaching retention.

Theoretical Framework

This review is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985). Each framework provides insight into mechanisms linking coaching stability to student outcomes.

Self-determination theory posits that human motivation is optimized when three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied. Long-term coaches are uniquely positioned to cultivate environments that consistently reinforce these needs. Over multiple seasons, athletes develop a sense of relatedness rooted in relational trust. Competence is reinforced through structured skill

progression, and autonomy is supported through increasing responsibility and leadership roles. Sustained exposure to such an environment strengthens intrinsic motivation, which is strongly associated with both academic persistence and athletic commitment.

Social learning theory emphasizes observational modeling and reinforcement processes. When coaches remain within a program long-term, their behavioral expectations, disciplinary standards, and academic priorities become embedded within team culture. Athletes internalize modeled behaviors such as time management, resilience, and accountability. The continuity of leadership strengthens normative influence and reduces ambiguity.

Transformational leadership theory further explains how enduring leaders influence followers by articulating vision, providing individualized consideration, and inspiring collective purpose. Research consistently links transformational leadership behaviors to elevated motivation, satisfaction, and performance outcomes in athletic contexts. Stability amplifies this influence by allowing credibility and trust to deepen over time.

Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional explanation for why coaching retention may significantly influence both academic achievement and athletic success.

Athletic Participation and Academic Achievement

A substantial body of research demonstrates that participation in structured extracurricular activities correlates positively with academic engagement and educational attainment. Eccles and Barber (1999) found that adolescents involved in school-based activities reported higher grade point averages and stronger educational aspirations. Similarly, Fredricks and Eccles (2006) concluded that extracurricular participation predicts improved attendance and reduced dropout rates.

However, participation alone does not fully account for variability in academic outcomes. The quality of adult mentorship significantly moderates the relationship between involvement and achievement. Stable coaching relationships provide consistent monitoring of academic eligibility requirements, reinforce academic expectations, and facilitate communication with teachers and families. When coaching leadership changes frequently, accountability structures may weaken, diminishing academic oversight.

Longitudinal analyses suggest that students engaged in athletics under sustained adult mentorship demonstrate stronger school identification and time-management skills. Over multiple seasons, coaches reinforce academic norms that become internalized by athletes. Thus, coaching tenure may amplify the positive academic effects associated with athletic participation.

Coaching Leadership, Motivation, and Athlete Development

Côté and Gilbert (2009) conceptualized coaching effectiveness as the integration of professional knowledge, interpersonal competence, and intrapersonal reflection. These dimensions deepen with experience and contextual familiarity. Long-tenured coaches accumulate institutional knowledge regarding school culture, community expectations, and athlete developmental needs.

Empirical research links transformational leadership behaviors to enhanced athlete motivation and satisfaction (Callow et al., 2009). Coaches who provide individualized consideration and articulate long-term vision foster psychological safety and resilience. Stability enhances credibility, enabling athletes to trust developmental feedback over time.

Furthermore, autonomy-supportive coaching climates—characterized by encouragement of initiative and constructive feedback—are associated with intrinsic motivation and persistence. When such climates are maintained consistently across seasons, athletes develop internalized standards of discipline that transfer into academic domains.

Therefore, leadership style and tenure interact to produce cumulative motivational advantages that influence both scholastic and athletic performance trajectories.

The Coach's Role in Student Development

Before exploring what athletic coaches do to help their student athletes succeed academically, it is important to establish the coach's role and importance in influencing their student athletes. Coaches serve

multiple critical functions in student development. First and arguably foremost, coaches are role models. Student athletes notice every detail of a coach's behavior, and this behavior lays the foundation for teaching life skills, values, proper behavior, respect, and team building (Coffino, 2018; Gould et al., 2007). All coaches must decide on the importance of their own behavioral choices and how they affect those they lead.

A coach can choose to serve as a mentor to one or more student athletes. The difference between being a mentor and a role model is that a role model is an individual whose life example is looked up to and imitated by others, whereas a mentor is a trusted individual who personally guides someone. As a mentor, a coach establishes a deeper relationship with their student athlete(s) which allows a transfer of knowledge and skills, not taught or learned in a classroom, which apply throughout a lifetime (Coffino, 2018; Gould et al., 2007).

According to Auten (2023), when coaches help athletes prioritize their academic work, learn interpersonal and social skills, and develop and display their physical abilities to their potential, these athletes are more likely to keep winning in perspective and prepare themselves to become productive members of society. Auten emphasizes that coaches are positioned not only to develop athletes but to teach student athletes many of the skills necessary to develop successful lives and become impactful leaders. This perspective aligns with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes that leaders create connections with followers that positively affect ethical climate, decision making, and moral action (Northouse, 2019).

Coach Mentorship and Student Retention

Hinojosa and Maxwell's (2023) qualitative study of high school coaches revealed that effective coaches draw upon personal life experiences and family influences to guide their mentoring relationships with students. The three coaches interviewed—with 13 to 40+ years of experience—consistently emphasized that their ability to relate to students and athletes, rooted in shared experiences of adversity or challenge, enabled them to provide meaningful mentoring.

Coach relatability emerged as a critical factor in student retention and success. One coach noted that students recognized he "grew up in the neighborhood," allowing him to relate authentically to their struggles and provide relevant guidance. Another coach credited her ability to connect with female student-athletes to her own experience growing up in a tough neighborhood, understanding firsthand the challenges they faced. This relatability fostered trust and created conditions where students felt supported in persevering through academic and personal challenges.

The coaches in this study provided concrete examples of long-term impact: former athletes returning to express gratitude, students overcoming bullying with coach support, and athletes maintaining connections years after graduation. These outcomes suggest that the coach-athlete relationship extends beyond sport, creating lasting developmental effects that influence life trajectories.

Contradictory Findings and the Coach Variable

Despite widespread evidence supporting the positive relationship between athletics and academics, some researchers have raised concerns. Dempsey (2002) noted that men's basketball and football student-athletes graduate at rates far below the rest of the student body, while Gerdy (2000) challenged the assumption that sports promote positive social behavior or educational gains. Fleenor (1997) found no significant differences in test scores between control and athletic groups in grades four through eleven, leading her to reject the hypothesis that sports have a positive effect on academic achievement. Lee (1996) similarly found no real difference between student-athletes and regular students in academic performance, though athletes reported higher perceived self-esteem.

These contradictory findings suggest that the quality of athletic programs—and specifically, the leadership provided by coaches—may be a critical moderating variable. Sarver's (2010) dissertation investigated this gap, examining the relationship between coaches' leadership styles and student-athlete academic achievement in Tennessee high schools. The research sought to determine whether transformational or transactional leadership styles were more effective in fostering academic success alongside athletic performance. However, Sarver's findings revealed that transformational leadership was

not more influential on student-athletes' team ACT scores, team GPA, or winning percentage compared to transactional leadership, suggesting that the relationship between leadership style and academic achievement is more complex than previously theorized.

Coaches' Perceptions of In-Season vs. Off-Season Academic Performance

Monitoring and Coaching Impact

A critical question in athletic education research concerns whether student-athletes perform better academically during their sports season or during the off-season. Marra (2024) conducted a comprehensive study examining coaches' perceptions of athlete academic performance in a New Jersey High School Athletic Conference, surveying 111 coaches (61 head coaches and 50 assistant coaches) about student-athlete grade point averages, attendance, and behavior referrals both in-season and off-season.

Schultz (2017) found that the effects on athletes' academic performance differ based on participation demands from different levels of high school sports. Junior Varsity athletes experienced minor academic improvements compared to Varsity athletes. Varsity athletes, with greater time requirements and pressure than lower-level programs, may substitute time committed to sports for leisure time, potentially taking time away from academics. This evidence supports the time allocation theory (Schultz, 2017).

Conversely, Foye (2018) found that student athletes performed better in academic achievement during the season across all facets, including grade point average, attendance, and behavior referrals. Foye (2018) implied the reason could be because of the coaches' influence on the players. This finding suggests that coach involvement and monitoring during the season may be a significant factor in maintaining or improving academic performance.

Zaugg (1998) attributed better attendance among athletes to school policy on attendance and athletic participation. Students who missed class were unable to attend practices or games as per school policy. Zaugg (1998) stated, "This supported earlier findings indicated that participation in athletics is not a detriment to academic progress and may even improve grades" (p. 72).

Coach Monitoring and Academic Support

The Marra (2024) study specifically investigated coaches' perceptions on whether student athletes perform academically in season or out of season and how they monitor their athletes both in season and out of season. The research questions addressed whether there were significant differences in perceptions between head coaches and assistant coaches, between coaches with more versus less experience, and between coaches who monitor their student athletes with counselors and those who do not.

The study's benefits extended beyond individual coaches. Marra noted that "the information examined can help athletic departments create programs that can help student athletes academically, help them with their behavior, and help with their attendance. The conclusion of the study can help the coaches be aware of student athletes' academic, behavioral, and attendance needs throughout the school year. The schools in the conference can create and provide resources and programs that can help student athletes leverage the relationship between athletics and academics" (Marra, 2024, p. 4).

Broh (2002) stated that "sports participation is beneficial to the educational process by connecting student-athletes not only to academically oriented peers, but to adults, specifically parents and teachers" (p. 72). Additionally, Barron et al. (2000) discovered that men who had participated in high school sports, at an average age of 32, had earned 31% higher wages than their peers who had not participated in high school sports, suggesting long-term career benefits from athletic participation and associated coaching mentorship.

Leadership Styles and Their Impact

Transformational Leadership and Coaching

Leadership theory provides a framework for understanding coach effectiveness. Burns (1978) distinguished between transformational and transactional leadership, with transformational leaders serving as reformers and ideologues who inspire followers to achieve beyond expectations, while

transactional leaders function as bargainers who exchange rewards for compliance. Bass (1981) further refined these concepts, identifying autocratic, democratic, participative, and directive leadership styles.

Sarver's (2010) research examined whether transformational leadership—characterized by inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation—would yield better academic outcomes for student-athletes than transactional leadership. However, the dissertation findings revealed that transformational leadership was not more influential on student-athletes' team ACT scores, team GPA, or winning percentage compared to transactional leadership, suggesting that the relationship between leadership style and academic achievement is more complex than previously theorized.

Auten (2023) emphasizes that transformational leadership, defined as a process that changes people and influences followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them, is particularly relevant in coaching contexts. Transformational leaders promote followers' goals and enhance their confidence to increase one's own expectations (Hampson & Jowett, 2014). According to Hampson and Jowett (2014), the followers of transformational leaders feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader.

Teacher-Coaches and School Climate

Distinct Advantages of Teacher-Coaches

Recent research highlights the distinct advantages of teacher-coaches in fostering positive school environments. The National Coach Survey (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2022), which examined 3,899 school coaches, found that 50% (n = 1,933) were teachers employed in the schools where they coached. Significantly, teacher-coaches reported greater confidence and engagement in several critical areas: coaching tactics and techniques, supporting student-athlete mental health, and promoting positive youth development through sport. Teachers who were school coaches were 20% more likely than non-teacher coaches to report contributing to positive academic outcomes, including supporting educational persistence among athletes.

The survey revealed that teacher-coaches felt more prepared to work with athletes, particularly those experiencing mental health challenges and other social vulnerabilities. This preparedness stems from formal training in education-related fields; coaches with 4-year degrees in education, physical fitness, or psychology reported feeling significantly more prepared to address holistic student development. Importantly, participation in training and greater efficacy in these areas are associated with higher career-winning percentages and greater coaching satisfaction (Bates & Anderson-Butcher, 2023).

The Coach as Teacher and Educator

Cranmer (2015) notes that coaches would be well-advised to consider their role as instructors. The student can then use this, not only in the competitive arena, but also to enjoy academic success. Those strong personal relationships developed by positive communication and individualized interaction increased athletes' well-being while improving player and team performance (Stewart, 2016).

The relationship between athletes and coaches is at the heart of sport training and successful coaching. According to Ascii (2016), the coach is in a position where they can provide the student with psychological, social, or tangible rewards or benefits like praise, recognition, and playing time. The coach can use these benefits to form relationships with their players that will be beneficial in the overall development of the student. The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is positively associated with several athlete variables, including self-concept. The coach can instill self-worth by identifying and then meeting the athlete's physical and emotional needs (Horsley, 2015). The transferability of the positive self-image that students receive from their coach-athlete relationship can play a role in keeping the student in school.

School Climate and Teacher Leadership Development

Relationship Between Teacher Leadership and School Climate

The relationship between teacher leadership and school climate provides additional insight into how educators—including teacher-coaches—influence broader school environments. Gningue et al.'s study of the Mathematics Teacher Transformation Institutes (MTTI) examined the connection between teacher-leadership development and school climate in Bronx schools serving predominantly low-income,

Hispanic, and African-American students.

Gningue et al. found that schools encouraging teacher-to-teacher interactions were more likely to see personal growth and development in teacher leaders. The study identified seven types of teacher leadership roles, including in-classroom support of individual teachers, professional development activities, indirect support benefiting several classrooms, crisis management, interactions with larger educational communities, initiating extracurricular activities, and fostering personal professional growth. These leadership types parallel the mentoring and developmental functions that effective coaches provide.

The research revealed that positive school climate correlates with several advantageous educational outcomes, including increased student academic success, reduced maladaptive behavior, increased job satisfaction for teachers and administrators, and smoother school transitions for students (Gningue et al., 2018). Conversely, negative school climate can inhibit optimal learning and development.

Program Stability and Competitive Success

Organizational leadership research indicates that leadership continuity enhances institutional performance (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). In athletic programs, sustained coaching tenure enables coherent multi-year development plans, consistent strategic philosophy, and incremental performance gains. Programs experiencing frequent turnover often undergo cyclical rebuilding phases that delay competitive progress.

Long-term coaches establish feeder system relationships, alumni engagement networks, and offseason development protocols. These cumulative advantages contribute to measurable improvements in win-loss records and postseason appearances over time. Stability allows for systematic evaluation and refinement rather than reactive restructuring.

Thus, athletic success may not be solely attributable to talent availability but also to the structural consistency provided by enduring coaching leadership.

Coach Retention and Athletic Performance

Evidence for Positive Relationships

Research examining the relationship between coaching tenure and team performance has yielded mixed but often supportive findings. For example, analyses of coaching data across professional leagues indicate that longer-tenured coaches tend to be associated with better team outcomes; coaches with tenures longer than four years in multiple major U.S. professional sports leagues demonstrated higher winning percentages than those with shorter tenures, suggesting potential performance benefits associated with retention. (Kries, 2021)

In the context of collegiate athletics, coaching stability appears related to program continuity. While specific NCAA basketball continuity studies with formal five-year criteria are less frequently published, research on coaching transitions in NCAA Division I underscores that leadership changes can precede declines in athletic and academic performance, indicating that stable coaching environments support sustained competitive outcomes. (LaVoi et al, 2022)

Although much of this research focuses on professional and collegiate contexts, its implications are meaningful for high school athletics: consistent coaching allows for cultural stability, technical refinement, and relationship building, all of which are known predictors of team performance and athlete retention at the youth and high school level.

Mechanisms: Why Retention Matters for Athletic Performance

System Development and Refinement

Retained coaches have extended time to develop, test, and refine systems, training protocols, and competitive strategies. Research on expertise development suggests that prolonged engagement in structured, deliberate practice contributes to the acquisition of coaching knowledge and effectiveness — implying that coaches who remain in position longer can deepen their sport-specific expertise and better tailor practices to athlete needs. (Rezania, Gurney, 2014)

Deliberate practice frameworks (originally articulated by Ericsson et al 1993) highlight that expert performance (in coaches and athletes alike) arises from long-term, effortful engagement in systematic learning and refinement — a process that necessarily unfolds over multiple seasons rather than in short tenures.

Athlete Development and Continuity

Longer coaching tenure facilitates multi-year athlete development trajectories. Athlete development models in sport science emphasize that elite performance often requires systematic training across multiple years — this is equally true for athletes working within coherent coaching systems. Frequent changes in coaching can disrupt athletes' progress toward skill mastery, training consistency, and confidence in competitive settings.

Although much of the research on multi-year development emphasizes athlete practice itself, high-quality coaching continuity supports stable feedback loops, individualized technical progression, and deeper understanding of athletes' learning trajectories — all essential conditions for long-term performance gains.

Recruitment and Team Building

Research indicates that established coaches with strong networks and reputations often have more effective recruitment and team-building capabilities; they understand how to identify talent compatible with their systems and have longer windows to build pipelines. While specific recruitment network studies for high school contexts are limited, the general principle holds across athletics: stable coaching relationships enhance social capital and trust that attract and retain athletes within a program.

Limitations and Null Findings

However, not all research unequivocally supports a simple positive relationship between retention and performance:

- Some studies of collegiate sports find that coaching changes do not always predict winning percentage once institutional resources and recruiting strength are accounted for, suggesting that retention effects may be conditional on broader organizational factors rather than tenure alone.
- Broad leadership research in sports underscores that coach quality and leadership behaviors (e.g., motivation support, communication skills) are strongly associated with athlete performance and engagement, perhaps even more so than tenure per se. Coaches who build strong coach-athlete relationships and promote positive motivational climates tend to foster greater competitive outcomes, regardless of time in position.

These findings highlight that coach effectiveness — not just length of tenure — matters for athletic performance. In high school environments where resources and athlete turnover vary widely, organizational support, professional development, and fit between coach and program goals may be just as important as duration of stay.

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