# Should I stay or should I go? Retention of junior sport coaches

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**ABSTRACT** • Coach retention is a crucial issue for sport delivery systems in most countries. Studies directed towards understanding why volunteers choose to remain involved have tended to focus on personal motivations and dispositions with generally less attention given to the organisational setting in which volunteers work. Using data from focus groups and archival material, the aim of this research was to examine the extent to which interactions between volunteer coaches, the immediate club setting, and the broader AFL context influenced the decision of coaches to either leave their club or remain involved in coaching. The findings reveal that the decision by volunteer junior football coaches to leave is not driven by the same underlying factors as the decision to stay. Enjoyment, success (manifested through either team wins and/or player/team improvement), and the nature and level of support from parents, the club, and the league, were identified as the key factors contributing to the decision to stay involved as a volunteer coach.

**Key words:** Coaching, retention, sport, volunteer, motivations

## Introduction

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, sport is an important organised leisure activity for children aged five to 14 years with higher participation rates reported for sport (63% in 2006 up from 59% in 2000) when compared with other organised cultural activities such as playing a musical instrument (20%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006). Sports such as swimming, soccer, netball, tennis, basketball, cricket, and Australian Rules football (commonly abbreviated as AFL, referring to the Australian Football League) rely heavily on volunteers to sustain capacity, achieve growth, and

importantly, maintain the quality of programs. According to one report (Local Government Focus, 2001) without volunteers, the delivery of community sport would be severely compromised, sport complexes would close, and physical activity levels would fall sharply with severe consequences for community health, especially for young Australians.

Coaches are a significant category of sport volunteers who make substantial contributions of their time to the organisations with which they are involved (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006). Wiersma and Sherman (2005) noted that youth sport programs in the USA rely heavily on parent volunteers to act as coaches. According to the ABS (2005) almost 595,000 persons aged over 15 years in Australia (3.8% of the population) participated in sport as a coach, instructor, or teacher in 2004, accounting for 26.4% of all non-playing participation in sport. Furthermore, 77,000 of this group contributed more than 10 hours of volunteer work per week. Coaches are often the most visible component of the sport delivery system due to their direct involvement with sport participants, interactions with parents and other stakeholders, and the relationship between the nature of the sport experience and coaching (Cuskelly et al., 2006). Coaches can influence long-term sport participation rates and hence the health and well-being of those they coach (Mackenzie, 2005; Sport and Recreation New Zealand [SPARC], 2004).

However, despite the highly publicised international success of Australian athletes in recent years, there are concerns that not all is well within the Australian sport system with declining numbers of sport volunteers as well as a decrease in the average time spent per week by each volunteer (ABS, 2000, 2002; Cuskelly, 2001). As suggested by Cuskelly et al. (2006) this situation creates a conundrum for sport policy in Australia, especially given the release of the Commonwealth of Australia's (2001) Backing Australia's Sporting Ability (BASA) policy which has focused on community sport and how volunteers are managed within the sport delivery system. The 'centrepiece of [the] policy is a new strategy to increase community participation in sport' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001: 2), but this goal is highly dependent on volunteer contributions, particularly that of coaches. A lack of coaches is likely to impede the growth of sport despite the goals contained in BASA and the development of ambitious growth strategies by a number of sporting organisations. This view is further reinforced by SPARC (2004) which in a report on the status of coaching in New Zealand reiterated the crucial role of coaches in the future development of sport.

Although a substantial body of research exists on why coaches decide to quit, less attention has been directed towards understanding why coaches decide to stay. This paper examines this important research question in the

context of junior (aged under 18 years) Australian Rules football. This setting is appropriate because Australian Rules football is a popular sport with over 188,000 junior participants (ABS, 2006).

## Literature review

Volunteer recruitment, management, and retention are universal issues of concern to organisations dependent on volunteers for their operational viability. Retention is of particular interest given the inefficiencies associated with high turnover rates and consequent continual need for recruitment. Auld and Cuskelly (2001) in a study of community-based organisations in Brisbane, Australia, found that volunteer retention was one of the key problems facing these organisations (some of which reported annual turnover rates of 40%). These broader findings are reflected in more detailed data on coaches which reveal that the number of coaches in Australia is declining. Australia recorded a 7.2% drop in the number of accredited coaches in 2002–03 and the trend accelerated in 2003–04 with a 9.6% reduction (Australian Sports Commission, 2003, 2004). These data are reinforced by anecdotal evidence at the local Australian Rules football level. For example, while the Aspley Football Club in Brisbane grew from 21 to 32 teams between 2001 and 2005, only three of the 21 people who coached in 2001 were still doing so in 2005 (D. McClare, AFL Queensland, personal communication, 2005). The trend is also evident overseas and quite recently, Sports Coach UK (2005) reported that the coach drop-out rate continues to be a problem in many sports.

Although considerable attention has been directed towards understanding the factors influencing the recruitment and retention rates of coaches, a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena is still elusive. Studies conducted to date have identified a wide range of factors that affect the decision to discontinue coaching. These include: burnout (Zitzelsberger & Orlick, 1998; Kelley, Eklund, & Ritter-Taylor, 1999; Price & Weiss, 2000; Duda, Balaguer, & Crespo, 2003; Pease, Zapalac, & Lee, 2003); concerns about self-efficacy (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998; Feltz, Chase, Mortiz, & Sullivan, 1999; Malete & Feltz, 2000; Fung, 2003; Kent & Sullivan, 2003); lack of enjoyment and challenge (Raedeke, Warren, & Granzyk, 2002; Sports Coach UK, 2004); lack of time (Raedeke et al., 2002; Pease et al., 2003; Sports Coach UK, 2004); lack of work–life balance (Sports Coach UK, 2004); administrative problems (Sparks, 2003; Sports Coach UK, 2004); and lack of opportunities for professional development (Sparks, 2003). It also appears that retention may also be influenced by 'a growing sense of apprehension' (Healey, 2005) and 'unease' (McGregor-Lowndes & Edwards, 2004) due to the potential for personal legal liability and associated financial risks.

Interestingly, this did not appear to be an important issue to the participants in the current research.

Much of the research in this area appears to have been based on the assumption that by identifying the reasons why coaches leave, sport organisations could then implement appropriate actions to ameliorate the impact of these 'push' factors on their coaches. However, many of the reasons why volunteers leave are personal in nature (e.g. time, efficacy) and therefore organisations find it difficult to directly influence these factors (Auld & Cuskelly, 2001; Auld, 2004). Moreover, such an approach does not overtly address the 'pull' factors inherent in the nature of the coaching experience and organisational setting (e.g. player enjoyment and the social milieu) that may tend to keep coaches engaged with their sport, their club, and the activity of coaching. By identifying key pull factors, sport clubs may therefore be able to focus on those areas in which they have more potential to exert direct influence.

There has been some research that has focused on the reasons why volunteers decide to stay. Auld and Cuskelly (2001) found that the most influential reasons for continuing to volunteer for a community-based organisation were related to personal attitudes and dispositions, such as altruism, involvement, social interaction, and personal benefits (e.g. enjoyment, constructive use of free time). On the other hand, external factors (e.g. encouragement of friends and family members, gaining experience for future employment, feeling obligated to help) have little impact on the decision to continue.

There has also been specific research on factors associated with the decision to stay on as a coach and in general the findings have tended to centre on intrinsic factors related to the nature of the coaching experience. It is interesting to note that studies considering a coach's decision to stay have tended to be atheoretical. Taken together the results of research into decisions to stay suggest that coaches who gain intrinsic satisfaction from their involvement are more likely to stay whereas those coaches motivated by extrinsic factors (e.g. winning athletes and teams) were likely to quit when these outcomes were not realised (Hart, Hasbrook, & Mathes, 1986; Sisley, Weiss, Barber, & Ebbeck, 1990). Research has found the intrinsic factors that play an important role include: the enjoyment derived from seeing athletes improve, learning new skills and reaching their goals; the fun element in coaching; and the challenges associated with blending individuals into a team (Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, & Forrest, 1991; Weiss, Barber, Sisley, & Ebbeck, 1991; Weiss & Stevens, 1993; Raedeke et al., 2002). Coaches involved in junior sport indicated that fulfilment achieved through encouraging and teaching children to learn and excel was important (Gray & Cornish, 1985; Sports Coach UK,

2004), while others felt the need to 'put something back into sport' (Weiss & Stevens, 1993; Sports Coach UK, 2004).

As with the research on why coaches leave, research relating to a coach's decision to stay has also been dominated by an emphasis on personal motivations, needs, and dispositions. Relatively few studies have incorporated organisational context and management issues or broader sport systemic factors. For example, Priest (1990) found that administrators who were democratic and understanding with excellent communication skills were more likely to retain their coaches. Other retention factors include: providing extra assistance and balancing workloads (Kelley, 1994); opportunities for professional development, incentive pay, and recognition of exceptional work (Pastore, 1994; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998); and effective communication skills (Knoppers, 1987; Pastore, 1994; SPARC, 2004). SPARC (2004: 16) argued that 'communication is at the heart of a successful coaching community.' Moreover, administrators should provide constructive feedback to coaches in order to help coaches learn and to assist with the development of self-efficacy (Knoppers, 1987; Kent & Sullivan, 2003). As self-efficacy is increased, Kent and Sullivan (2003) and Barber (1998) argued that the likelihood of coaches leaving is significantly reduced (especially inexperienced coaches).

The literature on coach retention has concentrated mainly on personal attitudes and dispositions. Moreover, the role of these variables has tended to be examined mainly in the context of factors associated with why volunteers leave. What is lacking is an empirical examination of how personal attributes, as well as organisational factors, may influence the decision to stay. In order to address this gap, the present study will utilise the sustained volunteerism model developed by Penner (2002). Penner's (2002) model suggested two groups of factors influence the initial decision to volunteer and subsequent decisions to continue or discontinue: personal dispositions and organisational setting. Penner (2002) argued that the three main enduring dispositional attributes of individuals that influenced volunteer behaviour were:

1. Personal beliefs and values — these relate to perceptions of the role and importance of volunteering.
2. Prosocial behaviour — this is a very specific personality trait that is especially relevant to long-term and planned helping and includes the dimensions of empathy and helpfulness.
3. Motivation to volunteer — volunteer motivations are frequently measured using the functional approach (Clary et al., 1998) that focuses on six main dimensions: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement.

This research will extend Penner's (2002) approach through the examination of broader sport system variables and will therefore, in addition to looking at personal factors, examine the nature and degree of influence of AFL club organisational practices and AFL systemic factors.

A number of researchers (e.g. Penner & Finklestein, 1998; Penner, 2002) have argued that *in situ* variables, such as organisational commitment and job satisfaction, are central to understanding why people remain engaged as a volunteer. However to date, their roles are still largely unexplored in a coaching context. The present study will also investigate the perceived quality of organisational practices (e.g. volunteer policies, management styles, support received) and how these relate to the decision to continue to coach. Priest (1990) and Kent and Sullivan (2003) reported that the actions of administrators played an important role in coach retention.

While the original Penner (2002) model focused only on personal and organisational issues, it is argued here that questions concerning AFL systemic issues should be incorporated into the study in order to contextualise the research in the wider sport system. Issues beyond the immediate club context such as coaching education and accreditation program quality, government sport policy, and liability concerns, are also likely to play a role in coach retention.

## Methodology
### Study design
Given the nature of the research area, it was important that coaches were provided with the opportunity to express their own feelings and reflect on their personal experiences as a coach. In-depth qualitative research methods were chosen in order to allow detailed consideration of a coach's perspective on the coaching experience, organisational and sport system context, and the decision to either continue or discontinue coaching. A combination of focus groups and archival data was subsequently chosen to facilitate the opportunity for the coaches' experiences to be heard and to develop a deeper understanding of the factors associated with sustaining involvement as a coach. Archival data allowed these perspectives to be contextualised within an organisational setting.

Four focus groups were held in four different football clubs in three different states during the 2006 season. The national AFL office provided contact details for regional officers who then approached clubs on behalf of the researchers seeking their willingness to participate in the study. The clubs that agreed to participate in this research included three metropolitan and one regional club of which two were situated in Queensland, one in NSW, and

one in Victoria. Multiple contexts were used to generate different perspectives on the decision to continue junior AFL coaching to ensure the findings reflected a broad array of views and potential influences inherent in different organisational and geographical settings. Focus group participants were coaches who were involved in coaching in the 2006 season. All participants volunteered for the study and were recruited via the coaching coordinators from each of the participating clubs. Contact details for the coaching coordinators from the clubs were provided by the AFL to the researchers who subsequently emailed and phoned the coordinators to explain the purpose of the research and the focus group methodology. Participants were offered either a double movie pass or a $30 shopping voucher to acknowledge their time contribution.

Prior to the start of each focus group, issues related to ethics and informed consent were explained to the participants, who each read and signed a consent form which was then collected by the researchers. The coaches were also assured of their confidentiality, their rights to withdraw from the study at any time and that every endeavour would be made to maintain participant anonymity. For this reason the names of the clubs and the coaches participating in this study have been withheld. The researchers (who led the focus groups) were independent of the AFL and the clubs participating in this research allowing objective views from coaches to be obtained.

Focus groups were held in the respective club facility and averaged approximately 90 minutes duration. A total of 41 coaches involved in coaching in four junior AFL clubs participated in the focus groups. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed allowing all data to be captured. A total of 127 pages of transcripts were analysed.

The focus group discussions were designed to yield two complementary types of information: (1) a description of why people initially volunteered to coach and why people choose to stay involved in junior AFL coaching; and (2) contextual details influencing continued involvement in junior AFL coaching. Questions were located within Penner's (2002) theory of sustained volunteerism and were designed to encourage consideration of a range of personal, organisational, and systemic factors that led to continued involvement in junior AFL coaching. A semi-structured approach utilising open-ended questions was employed for this research following Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander's (1995) guidelines.
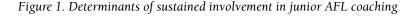
*Data analysis*
The data analysis employed qualitative procedures (assisted by NVivo Version 7) to reduce data to allow theoretical themes relating to sustained involve-
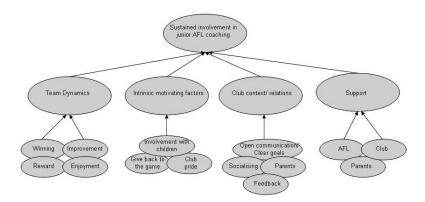
ment in AFL coaching to be identified (Marshall, 2002). Statements were coded by two researchers firstly using an open (or initial meaning code) and secondly an axial (or categorisation of open codes) coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Transcripts were open coded to identify concepts relating to sustained involvement in junior AFL coaching and continued until saturation was reached. That is, coding continued until no additional concepts could be analysed. Open codes were compared and contrasted to eliminate repetition in concepts and ensure the data were reduced to a meaningful number of concepts. Once open coding was completed, axial coding was used to identify the key factors contributing towards sustained involvement in junior AFL coaching. An audit trail containing the eventual categories and memos concerned with the development of the categories and themes has been retained in the NVivo project file. Archival data were used to gain additional insight into the coaching experience and club and AFL contexts, thus increasing the internal validity and reliability of the evidence obtained. The archival data consisted of databases sourced from AFL state and national offices. The databases contained demographic details and the nature of the coaching involvement (e.g. age group of team coached) for all junior coaches in Australia for the years 2001 through to 2006.

## Results

In order to fully explore the richness of responses from in-depth interviews, the bulk of the analysis and discussion focuses on the data derived from the

*Figure 1. Determinants of sustained involvement in junior AFL coaching*

focus groups. The archival data serve to support or discount findings stemming from the interview data.

Coaches were asked to consider their reasons for their continuing involvement in junior AFL coaching. Four categories emerged from the analysis of the focus group data (Figure 1).

Sustained involvement in coaching occurs when:

1) team dynamics are positive
2) coaches are intrinsically motivated to continue coaching
3) clubs have clear and open communication
4) coaches feel they are supported.

It is important to note that not all factors were present in each and every coach, nor was equal salience attached to each of the themes. Each individual coach noted between two and four of the factors illustrated in Figure 1 suggesting interdependency between the many factors that contribute towards a coach's decision to stay. Understanding the diversity of influences is important as this perspective suggests a variety of strategies are required to cater to different volunteer coach types. Each of the four themes will now be discussed.

*Team dynamics*
Enjoyment, reward, improvement, and winning are concepts that relate to team dynamics and these collectively have a significant influence on a coach's decision to continue coaching.

> It's an adrenaline-pumping thing. You go to an Aussie Rules game and you have got every parent out there and it's full-on. Even though you have got all of this business about player codes and parents' codes and what have you, parents get involved. Everyone's happiness depends on the day. If the team is winning and it is a good team everyone is happy. The coach is happy because he is not getting hit behind the ears. Whereas if you have a team that is not achieving, that's when the knives come out.

Factors such as team success have a strong bearing on a coach's enjoyment while individual player improvement was also cited by many coaches as being rewarding. Coaches emphasised that an improvement in those players with the lowest skill levels outweighed improvements demonstrated by players with high skill levels. Given that team success impacts enjoyment for coaches, leagues need to consider the role that equitable competitions and/or the focus on win/loss records have on enjoyment and therefore reten-

tion for coaches and players alike. Coaches made both positive and negative comments about the importance of team success and winning. While many professed that it was not important to win, it was also readily apparent that many club cultures appeared to highly value winning. As indicated in the coach's comment above, when teams are winning everyone is happy, while losing teams result in coaches feeling under pressure and scrutiny, especially from parents. Given that winning is a zero sum game, 50 per cent of coaches are unlikely to experience a 'winning' season and therefore, in clubs that place strong pressures (sometimes implicitly) on coaches to win, it seems that a certain proportion of turnover may be structurally locked into the AFL, and other junior sport competitions.

*Intrinsic motivating factors*
Most of the people who coach junior AFL have children involved in the sport. Consider the coach who stated:

> My son wanted to play AFL. I used to play it, so I said look he wants to play. He came down, first year I was assisting another coach, because I didn't know what was the go with it. I went on to take the role as being the coach. At first it was because he (my son) was doing it. I had played myself previously and I wanted to get in the position of helping kids, trying to give back a little of what I'd learnt from the coaches I'd played under. Hopefully, try and develop these boys, as well as my own son, to learn the game and benefit from playing the game.

Data supplied by the AFL enabled typical patterns for individual coaches to be identified. Analysis indicated that coaches frequently moved with the same teams (i.e. the same group of players) through the age categories in subsequent seasons during their time coaching at the club. A very small proportion of coaches (approximately 6%) took a season off and returned following a one-year break from coaching. Coaches continued to coach their own child where possible. This pattern is illustrated for five typical coaches in Table 1.

Of five coaches tracked during the four-year period, three coached for three seasons and did not return in the fourth season. For example, consider Coach 1 who started coaching with the under 14s in Year 1 followed by under 16s in Years 2 and 3. Similarly, coach 4 started with an under-8 team and moved through over four seasons to coach an under-12 team. Providing opportunities for coaches to remain with the same team (and in all likelihood their own child) may be an important 'pull' factor that helps to retain coaches.

*Table 1. Teams coached by five coaches*

| Year | Coach 1 | Coach 2 | Coach 3 | Coach 4 | Coach 5 |
|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| One | 14 years | 10 years | 9 years | 8 years | 8 years |
| Two | 16 years | 12 years | 10 years | 9 years | 9 years |
| Three | 16 years | 14 years | 11 years | 11 years | 10 years |
| Four | No longer coaching | No longer coaching | No longer coaching | No longer coaching | 12 years |

> I wouldn't mind keeping coaching but as long as my coaching didn't involve missing out on seeing my boys play.

> Once your kids leave, it is probably hard for you to come back. I mean you have piles of other work to do and you're feeling old and there are others coming through.

Coaches indicated they wanted to feel they were making a real contribution and importantly, assisting players to develop and improve. Additional motivation to continue junior AFL coaching centred on the pride coaches attached to the club or league with which they were associated, while a few coaches mentioned they chose to coach to give back to the game they love. Occasionally this was manifested because the coaches wanted to nurture and develop the sport of AFL in the face of competition from other sports, especially alternative football codes.

> It's about helping youngsters. Helping them with life and showing them that their dreams can come true if they put their thoughts to it.

> It is great to see improvement. At the start of the year they wouldn't have a clue how to hand pass or kick a ball from here to there but at the end of the year they can do that. You know they might kick a goal or something.

> I think it is rewarding. Kids start with very little ability. If you do the job by the end of it they start winning games. You might lose your first few but, bit by bit, it just gets fantastic.

## Club context/relations

Club culture and atmosphere have a strong bearing on the decision to stay. The clubs participating in this research can generally be characterised as large and successful and this is acknowledged as a limitation of this study as the results may disproportionately reflect the dynamics of successful clubs. For

example, during the 2006 season, 80% of junior teams in the Queensland clubs that participated in this research reached the finals with half of the teams finishing in the top three. Furthermore, coach retention rates over a five-year period for the four clubs participating in this research were between 57% and 63%, higher than clubs that did not participate in this research (e.g. one Queensland club recorded only a 25% retention rate during the same time period).

> It goes back to the culture of the club. Coaches stay because they love the game, they love the setup, they love the organisation, they love the mateship, and they enjoy the atmosphere we've got at the club. And it's enjoyable to them because they know everything is organised, they are comfortable with it and they want to keep helping the kids.

As evident in one coach's comment, the culture of the club, the organisation within the club, and the relationships developed between the people are factors that influence a coach's decision to stay. One of the integrating features of the coaching experience appeared to be loyalty to the club and/or more broadly, to the sport. Most of the coaches participating in this research demonstrated strong camaraderie with their fellow coaches with some coaches actually completing sentences for others during the focus group discussions. It was evident that within each club, the coaches had developed strong relationships with each other. This mateship provided coaches with a colleague to call on in time of need or simply a person with whom to compare notes. These networks are likely to partially shield coaches from external pressures (e.g. parents) through the provision of allies and sounding-boards that can assist to overcome hurdles faced throughout the season.

## Support

Support was identified as a crucial factor that encourages sustained involvement in junior AFL coaching. A range of different types, levels, and sources of support were identified by coaches. These included appropriate and timely information, effective administration, clinics, meetings, and team managers. Furthermore, strong feelings were expressed about how much they valued support from both inside and outside of the club. The emphasis on support also extended well beyond the immediate boundaries of the club and personal relationships of the coaches. For example, external training and development programs that are currently made available by the AFL for junior coaches were viewed very favourably by the coaches and there was strong and widespread support for the AFL's coaching accreditation requirements.

In the more immediate context, clubs are also capable of providing direct tangible support to coaches (and are expected to by coaches). Support can be in the form of well-structured and organised administration processes, coaching clinics, regular meetings throughout the season allowing opportunities to share coaching experiences, assisting coaches to recruit team managers and other parent helpers, and different types of mentoring support. Coaches also indicated the value of in-house 'operational manuals' and other materials that provide some structured guidance, especially for inexperienced coaches. Consider the following comments:

> I'm sure if you turned up every week, and you had dramas with people doing the jumpers, people doing this and that, I guarantee you wouldn't want to do it again next year.

> The thing about Aussie Rules is that I only just found out today where we are playing next weekend.

> So all of a sudden they have finished grading. I don't know if we will get the rest in the draw from now on. It's bloody annoying that you don't know where you are playing.

> If you have someone that is very keen that is coming right through to the under 12s, he may not quite have the skills but gee he loves what he is doing. I think they need to take him aside and help him get to the next level, through clinics and whatever it takes. He could be a damn good coach. He might just be missing something to take him to the next level. You can't throw a bloke out of a game because you think he is probably only going to be good for under 8s or under 9s. You can't expect him to get to the next level himself.

In states where AFL is not as well established as other football codes, coaches may not have previously played or been involved with Australian Rules football. Additional support may be required to train those coaches with little or no AFL experience to help them gain the specific skills required for AFL. Appointing specialist skills coaches for junior teams will assist clubs to overcome such skills deficits. The facilitation by the club of informal mentoring for inexperienced coaches may also be crucial. Regular meetings at key points during the season provided coaches with an opportunity to interact with each other and to share their experiences thus learning from others and also gaining confidence in their own coaching performance. Many of the coaches indicated the importance of being able to share their concerns and frustrations

with others and to realise that they were not alone in sometimes questioning their efficacy as a coach. Effective and efficient administration was also a dominant issue raised as a key support mechanism at club and local league levels. For example, some coaches expressed frustration at last-minute venue changes and competition structure changes at the mid-point of the season. These specific issues plus generally poor communication from the leagues and clubs often resulted in the coaches being subject to criticisms from parents for situations such as insufficient players for a game or people arriving at incorrect venues. It was clearly evident that the nature, frequency, and quality of support provided by clubs plays a crucial role in a coach's decision to stay.

The final source of support for coaches is also very direct and tangible in nature and comes from parents and other people associated with the actual team. The important role of the team manager was a dominant theme, especially if they were able to buffer the coach from distracting (and frequently stressful) interactions with parents thus allowing the coach to focus on actually coaching.

> If you are not enjoying it you don't want to do it again. It comes from the support outside. You know the parents and that. When parents come up to you and say they want you to come back next year it makes you feel good.

> It makes you want to do it if you are getting support. If you have had a year where you've had more parents whinging about everything and they don't want to help out, then you do look at it and question it a bit. But, otherwise most of the times I think we all enjoy it.

The ability of a club and league to manage parent behaviour, especially when it impacts directly on the coach, is an important factor likely to influence a coach's decision to return for another season, especially inexperienced coaches. Coaches who receive praise and encouragement from parents or other signs of support (e.g. willingness to assist at training or on game days) report a willingness to continue coaching. On the other hand, many coaches choose to discontinue coaching when faced with excessive pressure from parents to win and/or interference (direct or implicit) by parents in areas such as team tactics and selection. This was expressed clearly in one discussion.

> I know a few mates of mine who stop coaching when they get to the under 12s when the kids actually start playing for premierships. They don't want to be involved when it actually starts getting serious because the parents will ring up and say 'Oh my kid should be here'.

> I think what you are saying is that there is a trepidation factor there for some people who feel that they might not be the right person for the job.

Furthermore, parental 'interference' impacts more substantially on relatively inexperienced coaches. Consider the experience of one first-year coach as explained by another experienced long-term coach:

> There is a new young coach that's coaching an under 11s side. The parents are absolutely up him for the rent because the blokes doing nothing. Rather than getting in and helping him, the parents are saying 'He can't do this. He can't do that'.

## Discussion

This research has confirmed and extended previous findings regarding the decision to stay involved in volunteering in general and volunteer coaching in particular. The themes emerging from this research suggest that both organisational and broader systemic level factors influence coach retention. This research extends Penner's (2002) approach to sustained volunteerism highlighting the role of systemic factors on a coach's decision to stay. Systemic factors include coaching education and accreditation quality. Club culture and the nature of the interactions between coaches and their clubs are also crucial. Although personal dispositions have a role, they appear to be secondary to club social and administrative milieu in this specific context. Research in a student volunteer context (see Auld, 2004) identified that the decision to stay involved in volunteering was more likely to occur when the opportunity to socialise was provided, and the current research has identified that this is also the case in the volunteer coaching context. Providing coaches with the opportunity to build social and mentor relationships within the club and to regularly engage with other coaches is a crucial strategy in encouraging coaches to continue. In addition, there is some likelihood that the development of close relationships is likely to counteract negative perceptions relating to time pressures and burnout.

The results of this study also extend the current understanding of coach retention by eliciting a more comprehensive understanding of a key organisational pull factor, namely support. Types of support that coaches felt were important included direct support from parents through team managers, assistance at training and games, the provision of other required services (e.g. washing jumpers), and perhaps most importantly, moral support and encouragement. Coaches also receive support from the club through other coaches and volunteers (e.g. mentors, social occasions, relevant and timely

communication) and in the manner in which clubs help manage the coach/
parent relationship. While the immediate connections to the club are cen-
tral, support from the AFL through accreditation programs and information
(e.g. newsletters and training DVD's), plays a less crucial but nonetheless still
important role.

The findings of this research are important because they focus on issues
related to retention such as support structures and processes over which
sporting clubs, associations, and leagues have some degree of influence. One
barrier to improving retention is that clubs often feel that the issues faced by
sport volunteers are beyond the control of clubs. There are numerous trends
(e.g. perceived time squeeze, two-income families and increased family com-
mitments, increased mobility, changed attitudes to volunteering) impacting
on voluntary organisations over which many clubs and associations may feel
they have little influence. Some organisations may subsequently perceive
that they therefore cannot really influence retention and thus may 'become
complacent about the organizational practices that attract, involve, motivate
and support new and continuing volunteers' (Cuskelly et al., 2006: 157).
The findings from the current research indicate that this is not the case —
there are numerous opportunities for sport organisations to positively impact
coach retention through focusing on core activities such as communication,
support, education and training, parent engagement policies, and social activ-
ities. Clubs should focus on those factors they can control rather than on
those they cannot control. Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, and Darcy (2005) found
a positive relationship between the use of volunteer support practices and
retention rates in volunteer-managed rugby clubs. So although many of the
factors influencing the decision to discontinue coaching may be out of the
control of sports clubs, as suggested by Cuskelly et al. (2006: 157), those
organisations 'that develop a strong culture that values volunteers . . . are
likely to provide the types of support that attract, involve and motivate sport
volunteers.'

An additional contribution of this research is clarification that a coach's
decision to stay is a different decision than the decision to go (Table 2). While
some variables contribute to both decisions (italicised in Table 2), other vari-
ables appear to be unique to each decision.

## Future research
Many opportunities for future research arise from the insights gained in this
study. Firstly, future research endeavours should consider both current and
past volunteers. Consideration of both groups will enhance our ability to
identify key push and pull factors for volunteer organisations. While push

*Table 2. Factors influencing a coach's decision to stay or to go*

| Decision to stay | Decision to go |
|---|---|
| Involvement with children | Lack of work–life balance |
| Give something back to the sport | Lack of opportunities for professional development |
| Social interaction | Burnout |
| Support (from parents, the club, the AFL) | Time |
| *Enjoyment* | *Lack of enjoyment and challenge* |
| *Improvement (both individual and team)* | *Efficacy* |
| *Winning* | *Not winning* |
| *Good communication* | *Poor communication* |
| *Good administration* | *Administrative problems* |

factors are largely beyond the organisations' control, pull factors are more likely to be directly controllable.

A key limitation of the present study was that the clubs participating in this research were successful clubs evidenced by growing player and team numbers and high levels of team competitive success. A comparison with the perspectives of coaches from less successful clubs would further enhance understanding of the factors influencing coaches to remain with a sport. For example, it would be interesting to compare smaller or less resourced clubs which may not be able to provide the level of communication and support to their coaches to the extent to which their larger or better resourced counterparts are capable. Differences in club culture should also be explored.

Areas touched on in the context of this research that lend themselves to further investigation include the emphasis on winning, the role of level of development of the sport, and the importance of support networks for sports seeking to grow in new geographic areas. For example, some coaches had not played Australian Rules football as youngsters. The provision of additional support such as specialist skills coaches assisted non-playing coaches to overcome deficiencies thus reducing pressure on the coach. Future research is encouraged to compare the level of support and communication received in successful clubs with that received in unsuccessful clubs and the impact this has on coach retention. Additionally, research considering the impact of team competitive success on a coach's decision to stay is also encouraged.

## Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that the decision to continue coaching is influenced by different factors from the decision to discontinue. While acknowledging that many of the factors associated with decisions of volunteers to continue or quit are related to personal issues (largely not under the direct control of clubs), many other critical factors can be influenced by club administrators. The social context and culture of the clubs, and the direct and indirect sources of support from the club, are key ingredients in creating an atmosphere in which coaches report more positive experiences. By recognising the complexities of volunteer dispositions and the role of the club social organisational and management context, clubs can take tangible actions that may influence both the general environment of coaches as well as the immediate day-to-day coaching experience. These research findings are likely to have implications for the 30,000 sport clubs in Australia which should focus on the means, already at their disposal, by which clubs can influence a coach's decision to stay involved.

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