



Review

# Love and Basketball: The Wives and Partners within Athletic Family Systems

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**Abstract:** This article offers an examination of the lives of wives and partners of collegiate basketball coaches, employing the Bronfenbrenner Ecological model as a framework for analysis. While the world of sports coaching is routinely celebrated and scrutinized, the experiences and challenges faced by the wives and/or partners of these coaches remain relatively unexplored. This paper reviews the diverse systems influencing the lives of coaches' partners and the need for holistic support mechanisms. By employing the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model as a conceptual framework, researchers, counselors and other helpers, and support networks can gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play and can offer more effective assistance to coaches' partners as they navigate the unique challenges and opportunities associated with their role in the basketball world. Implications for the NCAA, universities/athletic departments, coaches, and coaches' wives and partners are addressed.

**Keywords:** coaches' wives and partners; basketball; Bronfenbrenner



**Citation:** Blount, Ashley J., Kara Schneider, Abby L. Bjornsen Ramig, and Daniel B. Kissinger. 2024. Love and Basketball: The Wives and Partners within Athletic Family Systems. *Social Sciences* 13: 100. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13020100>

Academic Editor: Denis Bernardeau-Moreau

Received: 20 December 2023

Revised: 17 January 2024

Accepted: 19 January 2024

Published: 6 February 2024



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## 1. Introduction

High-stakes athletics have been around for some time, with players, coaches, and the surrounding administrations taking much of the limelight. Often less discussed or even considered, however, are the individuals behind the scenes—the family members and partners of coaches and the importance of the coach/partner relationship. Within team sports, the strength is in the group—how the group functions on and off the court/field, the group dynamics between players, and personal relationships formed throughout the athletic season and off-season. An athletic family system is no different, with relationships forming and adjusting throughout the athletic seasons and re-adjusting during off-seasons. For coaches' wives and partners, roles and responsibilities and the nature of the relationship change throughout the course of the year as the team adjusts to different schedules and obligations. For families with children, additional responsibilities and stressors are present, and many of the tasks fall on the non-coach partner. Although sports partnerships are diverse, this review focuses on the wives and/or partners of male collegiate basketball coaches in heterosexual relationships—as roughly 85% of all collegiate basketball coaches identify as male, and the majority identify as heterosexual ([College Basketball Coach Demographics and Statistics 2023](#)). For the purposes of this paper, we will use the term coaches' wives and partners interchangeably to refer to those in a relationship with a collegiate basketball coach.

The purpose of this review is to introduce the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model as a theoretical framework for viewing coach/partner dyads and the systems influencing them. This model may be applicable across diverse athletic systems; however, this review focuses on collegiate basketball and coaches' wives and partners. Examining the impact on coaches' wives and families is justified by several factors that

make National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) level coaches a unique population. The high stakes and pressure associated with NCAA competitions create distinctive challenges, placing significant stress on coaches and their families (Graham and Dixon 2024; Bentzen et al. 2020). The responsibility for recruitment, player development, and the integration of academics adds complexity to the role, influencing coaches' work–life balance and family dynamics (Dixon and Sagas 2007; Ortiz 2006). Job insecurity and mobility, for example, are characteristic features of college coaching (Bentzen et al. 2020). This brings about potential relocations affecting the overall family's well-being (Bentzen et al. 2020; Bruening and Dixon 2007). This challenge, coupled with varying compensation, introduces financial stressors that influence family life in ways not seen in coaching at other levels (Bentzen et al. 2020; Dixon and Sagas 2007; Ortiz 2006). Although there may be overlap in shared experiences of coaches across varying stages, ultimately, the demanding nature of NCAA coaching, with extensive travel and long hours, has an impact on family life in unique ways. Therefore, the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model will be explored within this specific context.

### 1.1. Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model

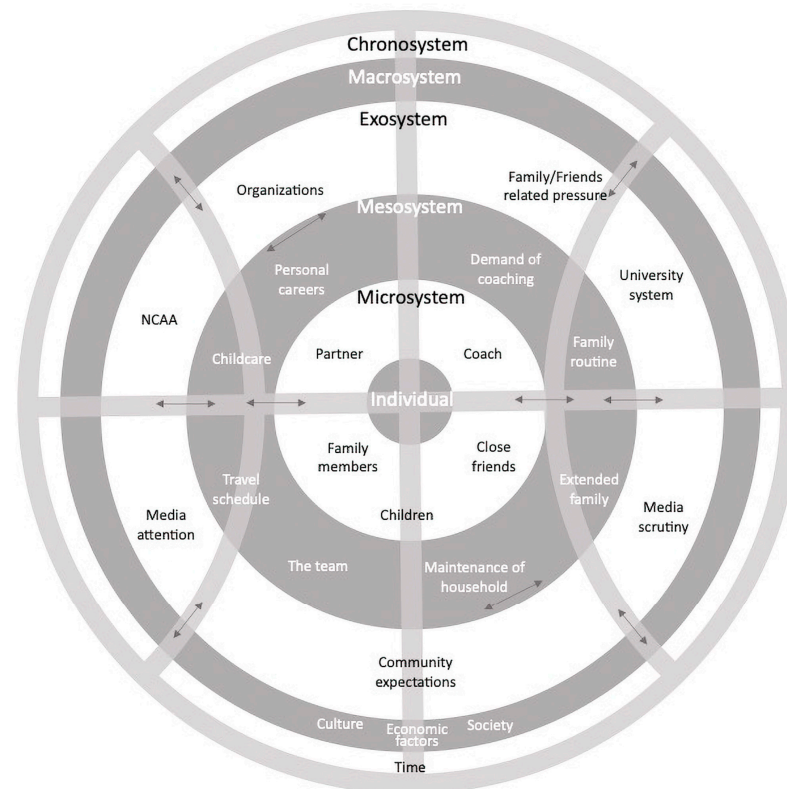
In the social sciences, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner 1974) describes development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate family and school settings to broad cultural values, laws, and customs. Since athletics operates within a system, the Bronfenbrenner model was a sound theoretical background for examining the complex nature of coaches and their partnerships. Bronfenbrenner divided an individual's environment into five different systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1974). The microsystem is considered the most influential level of the ecological systems theory—and the coach/coaches–partner dyad is no different. This internal system is where many of the factors influencing the relationship and family system are housed. In Figure 1, the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model shows the many factors within the microsystem that influence the coach/coach partnership. This partnership is the nucleus of the family system—its health influences all aspects of the ecological model, from coaches/partners to their sports teams. The following highlights the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model and the systemic influences on the coach/partner relationship within the athletic family system.

#### 1.1.1. Microsystem

The microsystem is the most immediate and direct level of influence within the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1974). The microsystem includes the relationships and interactions within an individual's immediate environment. For coaches' wives, the microsystem would encompass their relationship with their partner, the coach, as well as their immediate family members and close friends. This microsystem is “close to home” and often encompasses the day-to-day relationships and priority events for coaches and partners.

The microsystem can be influential on the well-being of coaches' wives (Frey 2007). Their relationship with the coach can be both a source of support and stress, depending on how well they navigate the demands of the coaching profession. Within this system, the coach's partner often balances family/kids, extended family, and close friends and support. Furthermore, coaches' partners often balance the coach's extended family and friends—something that is often atypical in non-coach relationships. For example, coaches' wives often navigate ticket requests from extended family as well as manage individuals coming to games, as coaches are often busy with game preparation and routines. These tasks add another layer of engagement, often having coaches' wives or partners in “hosting” roles pre- and post- games. In the family area, the coach's wife is often accountable for many, if not most, of the responsibilities as the

primary parent (Frey 2007). This responsibility can be especially taxing if the wife/partner has a career of their own.



**Figure 1.** Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model. Arrows refer to fluidity between and within levels (e.g., individuals can be influenced by many areas/factors simultaneously).

### 1.1.2. Mesosystem

The mesosystem focuses on the interactions and connections between elements of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1974). In the context of coaches' wives, this might include the way their partner's coaching career affects their relationship with their children, extended family, or social group. The demands of coaching, such as travel and long hours, can disrupt family routines and relationships (Root and Wooten 2008). Understanding this interplay is crucial in supporting coaches' wives. Although many of the traditional roles are the same, coaches' wives are usually responsible for running the family life, maintaining household responsibilities, supporting child growth and development (if children are present), and being supportive partners (Graham and Dixon 2024). For example, women in these roles navigate changing schedules, high-stress environments, and childcare, while often maintaining their own careers (Graham and Dixon 2024). Furthermore, coaches' wives sometimes put their plans and careers on the backburner when supporting their partners' career goals and aspirations. As they are often the primary breadwinner, coaches' career successes are at the forefront of the relationship and can, if not monitored, be detrimental to their partner's career and the health of the relationship itself (Graham and Dixon 2024; Bentzen et al. 2020; Root and Wooten 2008). For these reasons, coaches' wives and partners face additional challenges due to the increased expectations placed upon them than the general public (Bentzen et al. 2020; Bruening and Dixon 2007; Frey 2007).

Within this mesosystem, the coach and partner also deal with stress due to the nature of the job and balancing work/life responsibilities, often referred to as the work/life conflict (Graham and Dixon 2024). This work/life conflict is the root of many of the relationship issues within the coupling, namely, how to balance the rigorous demands of supporting two families, between the one at home and the many individuals associated with the team (Bentzen et al. 2020; Dixon and Sagas 2007). Often, this balance is carried heavily by the

wife/partner, as they are responsible for most, if not all, the home life responsibilities and sometimes responsible for sport-related tasks (Bruening and Dixon 2007).

The coach, on the other hand, deals with work passion (Bruening and Dixon 2007) on their side of the model, usually falling into one of three pressure areas: (a) the “F it” response; I cannot balance this, so my priorities are with the team; (b) the “Balance: response; I can be both a partner/father and a coach; and (c) the “lost it” response; I lost my family but I will help you with yours (Bronfenbrenner 1974). In the first response, the coach is unable to be both a coach and a partner and therefore places more energy on the team (Bentzen et al. 2020; Dixon and Sagas 2007; Joncheray et al. 2019). In the second (balance) response, the coach can navigate the demands of athletics as well as home life and be a supportive coach and partner/father (Root and Wooten 2008). In the final pressure area, the coach has lost his family/partner relationship and decides to focus energy on not allowing assistants or admin to fail in their own relationships (Dixon and Sagas 2007; Frey 2007; Joncheray et al. 2019). It is important to note that work passion is fluid, meaning that coaches can transition in and out of phases. For example, a coach might start the season feeling balanced and able to perform well in both family and team life and shift into the “F it” phase if they feel like they need to put more energy toward the athletic team. Additionally, coaches may oscillate between these phases throughout their careers as they become more or less successful, resulting in changes in their partnership and family dynamics.

Another area the coach navigates within the microsystem is that of being the primary breadwinner or financial provider for the family (Dabbs et al. 2016). The level of turnover for coaches is high. The stressors of success and winning are always at play, and being financially stable is highly correlated with success on the court (Bentzen et al. 2020; Chung 2017). We note the coach’s experience here as it is directly related to how the partner functions within the relationship. The stressors and work/life conflict, and specifically how the coach deals with their passion for the job, can influence how their partner manages other parts within the microsystem (Graham and Dixon 2024; Bronfenbrenner 1974).

### 1.1.3. Exosystem

The exosystem includes external environments that indirectly affect an individual (Bronfenbrenner 1974). For coaches’ partners, this involves the basketball team’s organization, media attention, the surrounding community, and the NCAA or other governing bodies, depending on the level/league. In other words, as media scrutiny and community expectations add stress to the lives of coaches and athletes (Bentzen et al. 2020), coaches’ wives may need support in managing/dealing with these external influences. External pressure may also develop in the form of new rules from the NCAA governing body—rules that make change and adaptability a constant for collegiate coaches and their partners.

Coaches and partners are influenced by systems such as the NCAA, family-and friend-related pressures, and the mass media (Pilkington et al. 2022). The NCAA essentially runs college basketball at most levels and makes the rules and regulations that programs must follow (What Is the NCAA? 2021). The NCAA influences coaches/partners, as there are constant adjustments to rule and policy changes. This parallel process inherently influences the coaches’ partners, as they must adjust to updates and changes posed by the NCAA throughout the collegiate season and the off-season (e.g., recruiting periods; game rules; and player transfer rules) (Pilkington et al. 2022).

In the exosystem, the couple’s family and friends are also influential (Bronfenbrenner 1974). For example, as the coach becomes more successful, individuals may feel entitled in sharing the experience, whether it be attending games, having access to the coach and/or the players, or gaining financial stability and/or financial handouts (Bentzen et al. 2020; Dixon and Sagas 2007; Bronfenbrenner 1974). If entitlement arises, it can influence the health of friend relationships, having a negative effect and resulting in the loss of friends. Additionally, pressures on how coaches/partners’ friends “should act” (e.g., when at the games or on camera) could also

influence the friendship in a negative way (Pilkington et al. 2022; Faustin et al. 2022), often placing unwritten expectations on individuals associated with the coach/partner.

The mass media is impactful in this area as well. We know that social media pressures can have a negative impact on the mental health of elite athletes and coaches (Faustin et al. 2022; Walton et al. 2022), and “coaches have felt substantial and unique pressures in their jobs over the past several years, manifesting in high levels of stress and mental exhaustion (Pilkington et al. 2022; What Is the NCAA? 2021).” We suggest these pressures exist for coaches’ wives as well, as they support their partners while also being exposed to news and posts released about them (Faustin et al. 2022). Another negative impact of media pressure felt by coaches’ partners includes objectification and a focus on traditional masculine and feminine gender roles (Faustin et al. 2022; Grindstaff and West 2011). Specifically, coaches’ wives and partners often face increased scrutiny of parenting, body objectification, and a certain way of “doing gender” because of hegemonic masculinity, or the concept of the positional dominance of men and the subordination of women (Grindstaff and West 2011) and media-related pressures (Faustin et al. 2022; Walton et al. 2022). Because of media access in collegiate sports (especially at high levels), coaches’ wives and partners are often placed in the spotlight regardless of their desire to be there.

#### 1.1.4. Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural, societal, and economic factors that influence an individual’s life (Bronfenbrenner 1974). In the case of basketball coaches’ wives, this could include societal expectations of gender roles, the value placed on sports in society, and the economic pressures of professional sports (Dabbs et al. 2016). Within this system, external societal pressures also include Hegemonic Masculinity, culture, and social norms that influence the coach/wife partnership (Dabbs et al. 2016; Grindstaff and West 2011). According to Grindstaff and West (2011), in Westernized culture, sports have historically been characterized as one of the most masculinized and sex-segregated institutions. Despite recent progress in promoting gender equality in sports, it remains predominantly organized and oriented toward men, particularly within the central structures of men’s football, baseball, and basketball (Grindstaff and West 2011). Within these core institutional domains, masculinity continues to be closely associated with socially endorsed expressions of aggression and physical prowess (Grindstaff and West 2011; Dolance and Messner 2003). This masculinity is present when looking at women coaching in men’s college basketball arenas, as well (Dolance and Messner 2003). For instance, while women occupy nearly 42% of the head coaching positions for women’s college basketball teams, they occupy only 0.01% of men’s college basketball head coaching positions (Megargee 2023). Furthermore, Walker and Sartore-Baldwin (2013) found that NCAA Division I men’s basketball coaches reinforce hypermasculine institutional norms. Additionally, results suggested that men’s college basketball is hypermasculine, gender exclusive, and resistant to change (Grindstaff and West 2011; Walker and Sartore-Baldwin 2013). Considering the resistance among coaches to embrace gender diversity within the professional realm (Grindstaff and West 2011; Dolance and Messner 2003), it is not unreasonable that similar sentiments may extend to their personal relationships with partners and partners. More specifically, within the context of coaches’ personal lives, women often find themselves assuming secondary roles to support their partners (Root and Wooten 2008; Grindstaff and West 2011). These roles frequently align with traditional gender expectations, encompassing responsibilities such as caretaking and homemaking (Bruening and Dixon 2007). These conventional gender norms have been historically prevalent, whereby women are expected to prioritize caregiving and maintaining the household, which can result in an imbalance of power and decision making within the relationship (Grindstaff and West 2011; Dolance and Messner 2003). This dynamic may be influenced by the coach’s professional identity and the broader societal expectations associated with traditional masculinity, which can permeate into their personal lives (Dixon and Sagas 2007; Dabbs et al. 2016). On the other hand, coaches who promote women’s rights, support equity across sports, and take on extended roles and

responsibilities in homelife when able, may be better able to navigate work/life balance while simultaneously enhancing their personal relationships and mitigating negative traditional norms. Consequently, such gender dynamics can shape the relationships and roles that coaches and their partners assume outside the realm of coaching.

Furthermore, the passion, expectations, and responsibilities of coaches are known to influence their perceptions and selections of their partners (Root and Wooten 2008; Joncheray et al. 2019). For example, coaches report wanting a partner who is independent, supportive, and competent at juggling multiple demands for extended periods of time (Graham and Dixon 2024; Joncheray et al. 2019; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This promotes an “I need my partner to be everything at all times” narrative, something that can be impossible to achieve and harmful to women in these partnerships (Graham and Dixon 2024; Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016). Furthermore, strong, independent women are often stereotyped as bossy, unkind, and inflexible—even though they may be a sound match for a coaching lifestyle—where independence is a must (Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016). The skills it takes to independently manage a household, child-rearing, and family/social connections are often bracketed as rigid and controlling (Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016). Wives and partners of coaches who excel in the “life management” realm are ironically criticized as interpersonally difficult (Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016). Furthermore, while many individuals might struggle with a partner’s unyielding job dedication, many coaches purposely select and/or are the beneficiaries of supportive partners who understand the rigors of the coaching profession (Graham and Dixon 2024; Joncheray et al. 2019; Lundkvist et al. 2016). Additionally, society can place more pressure and expectations on the ideal coach’s wife and place additional stress on an already full plate, particularly if the wife has a demanding professional career of their own (Ortiz 2006; Root and Wooten 2008; Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016).

Within this system, coaches’ wives are confronted with societal expectations and stereotypes that can exert considerable influence on their self-esteem and overall well-being (Dabbs et al. 2016; Faustin et al. 2022; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). In terms of career pursuits and personal sacrifices, the partner of a coach frequently encounters the necessity to set aside their own dreams and aspirations in order to accommodate the demands imposed by their partner’s profession (Bentzen et al. 2020; Dixon and Sagas 2007; Frey 2007). Furthermore, this multifaceted role often shapes the identity development of the coach’s wife. She may grapple with questions about her primary identity, whether she primarily sees herself as a mother, an individual with her own distinct identity, or predominantly as the coach’s wife (Ortiz 2006; Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Bruening et al. 2016). In many instances, women in such partnerships are reduced to being identified simply as “The Coach’s Wife”, (whether married or not) rather than being recognized and acknowledged as individuals with their own unique identities and names (Ortiz 2006). We suggest that this objectification and depersonalization can yield detrimental effects on their sense of self-identity (Ortiz 2006).

#### 1.1.5. Chronosystem

The concept of the chronosystem underscores the dynamic nature of individuals and their environments, acknowledging that these relationships undergo transformations over time (Bronfenbrenner 1974). For coaches’ wives, this includes the evolving demands and stressors they encounter as their partner’s coaching career unfolds or undergoes alterations (Dabbs et al. 2016) and their family dynamic develops. In other words, one can conceptualize the coach/partner dyad as a system that continually evolves in response to various factors. This evolution encompasses shifts in the coach’s career trajectory, adaptations within the family’s dynamics, broader societal changes, particularly in relation to evolving gender roles, and significant career milestones (Dixon and Sagas 2007; Dabbs et al. 2016; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). Consequently, the coaches’ wives must also be flexible and adaptable to suit the changing coaching landscape (Ortiz 2006; Bruening et al. 2016).

As the coaching profession progresses, coaches' partners navigate a multifaceted web of changes, necessitating ongoing adjustments in their roles, responsibilities, and coping mechanisms to effectively meet the evolving demands of their circumstances (Joncheray et al. 2019; Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Lundkvist et al. 2016; Christensen 2013). Understanding this dynamic interplay between the systems and the coach/wife dyad offers valuable insights into the complex and ever-changing nature of their experiences.

## 2. Discussion

The Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model (Figure 1) can be utilized to highlight the unique tenets of being a partner to a coach. However, there are a few areas that warrant a closer look in relation to the women in these partnerships. The experiences and challenges faced by basketball coaches' wives can be diverse, but some of the most important aspects to consider when discussing their roles and needs include (1) unique lifestyle, (2) identity and independence, (3) children and family life, and (4) unique external pressures. See Figure 2 for representation. Implications for supporting coaches' partners/wives are also included.

1. **Unique Lifestyle:** Coaches' wives and partners lead a unique lifestyle marked by frequent travel, long hours, and public scrutiny. Understanding the demands of this lifestyle is important for addressing coaches' wives and partners specific needs.
2. **Identity and Independence:** Coaches' wives and partners balance their own identities and aspirations with the demands of being a coach's spouse/partner. Encouraging personal growth and independence is essential.
3. **Children and Family Life:** Coaches' wives and partners often manage family life, including the well-being of their children. Balancing spouse's/partners coaching commitments with family needs is critical. Further, the stress and pressure associated with coaching can impact coaches' wives and partners mental and emotional health and well-being.
4. **External Pressures:** Societal expectations and stereotypes related to gender roles may affect coaches' wives and partners. Encouraging individual choices and challenging traditional roles is important. Additionally, dealing with media attention and public perceptions can be challenging. Media training and support in managing public relations can be beneficial for coaches' wives and partners.

Figure 2. Coaches' wives and partners unique tenets.

### 2.1. Unique Lifestyle

The lifestyle of coaches' wives is a unique one that demands a comprehensive understanding. As demonstrated via the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model (Figure 1), their lives are deeply intertwined with the world of basketball, and this partnership often shapes their identities, roles, and overall well-being. While there may be financial stability associated with successful coaching careers, this lifestyle comes with its own set of difficulties—and success can have different meanings to coaches and their partners (Bentzen et al. 2020; Christensen 2013). Being a “coach's wife” is often associated with financial stability, especially when coaching careers are successful (Bentzen et al. 2020). However, it is important to note that the financial income can vary significantly, with assistant coaches generally earning less and working longer hours than head coaches (Bentzen et al. 2020; Christensen 2013). Along with finances, the time spent together is often less than in many non-coaching career partnerships (Dixon and Sagas 2007). Coaches' partners can find themselves isolated and feeling lonely, given the demanding and often unpredictable nature of their partner's profession (Graham and Dixon 2024; Dixon and Sagas 2007; Bruening and Dixon 2007). Given that this is distinct from the general population, this oftentimes compounds those feelings of isolation, as they may struggle to find others who can relate to and understand their unique circumstances (Dixon and Sagas 2007;

Bruening and Dixon 2007). The implications of this understanding are crucial for providing effective support to coaches' wives as they navigate their unique roles in the sports world (Ortiz 2006; Christensen 2013).

## 2.2. Identity and Independence

Coaches' wives often face a complex interplay of identities and independence within their microsystems. The microsystem encompasses their immediate relationships, which, in the case of these women, primarily revolve around their relationship with the coach. In these partnerships, women often identify strongly with the term "coach's wife" (Dabbs et al. 2016; Faustin et al. 2022). They navigate the delicate balance of being supportive partners, primary parents (e.g., responsible for most of the childcare), and often maintaining their own careers (Root and Wooten 2008; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This intricate web of responsibilities places significant demands on these women, leading to a necessity for independence and self-identity (Root and Wooten 2008; Greenhaus and Powell 2003).

The coach's career success and passion for the job influence the dynamics of this microsystem. The term "coach's wife" also implies a certain level of expected access and visibility, with fans often feeling entitled to know about the coach's partner and family (Vincent and Crossman 2008; Jenkins 2006). While some individuals thrive in the spotlight, many coaches' wives prefer to maintain their privacy, leading to feelings of intrusion and discomfort (Christensen 2013; Jenkins 2006). Furthermore, some exposure is forced as attending games and other events almost always have a media presence (Christensen 2013; Jenkins 2006).

Coaches' partners may find themselves expected to be everything at all times, which can be overwhelming and may lead to stereotyping (Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Vincent and Crossman 2008; Jenkins 2006). Women who are strong and independent, qualities essential for the coaching lifestyle, may be unfairly characterized as bossy or inflexible (Jenkins 2006). These societal expectations and stereotypes can impact the self-esteem and well-being of coaches' wives (Jenkins 2006). Moreover, they often must make personal sacrifices and set aside their own goals to accommodate the demands of their partner's profession (Root and Wooten 2008; Faustin et al. 2022; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This, in turn, influences their identity development and can lead to the objectification of being solely identified as "The Coach's Wife", rather than as individuals with unique identities (Dabbs et al. 2016; Faustin et al. 2022).

## 2.3. Children and Family Life

For coaches' wives/partners with children, family life becomes a central aspect of their microsystem. Balancing the demands of coaching and family life is a challenging task, often falling heavily on the non-coach partner (Ortiz 2006; Joncheray et al. 2019; Lundkvist et al. 2016). In the context of heteronormative relationships, it is important to consider the concept of gender work within the sport marriage. This gender work is generally guided by traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, as described by Ortiz (2002, 2021). The quality of a wife's gender work is reflected in her efforts to fulfill expected roles, maintaining marital stability and family functioning, particularly during the sports season (Ortiz 2002, 2021).

Ortiz's (2002, 2006, 2021) extensive research on wives in heterosexual relationships with professional athletes is relevant to this discussion, even considering variations that may exist among coaches' wives. His findings underscore a key characteristic of sports marriages—the prioritization of the husband's career success. In this dynamic, the wife typically assumes responsibility for most domestic and parenting duties, providing both occupational and emotional support to her husband. Ortiz (2002, 2021) describes "work spillover" to illustrate the stress that can result in the relationship due to the husband's career demands. In a sports marriage, the wife is married to both her husband and his career, creating a complex interdependence (Ortiz 2002). Ortiz (2002) suggests that when



stressful occupational events occur, dependency patterns in the marriage may either emerge or be disrupted.

The mesosystem highlights the importance of understanding how the coach's career affects family routines and relationships (Graham and Dixon 2024; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). Coaches' wives often find themselves juggling multiple roles in their family and relationship dynamics (Ortiz 2006; Joncheray et al. 2019). They play a pivotal role in supporting their partner's coaching career, offering emotional support during victories, losses, and beyond (Greenhaus and Powell 2003). Furthermore, they manage household responsibilities and help their partners balance their demanding schedules, which can be highly erratic and stressful (Graham and Dixon 2024; Dabbs et al. 2016; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This can be especially challenging if they also have their own careers to manage. Coaches and partners must navigate the unique challenges of supporting two families—their home family and team family (Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This multifaceted role requires making decisions independently of their partners, a distinction from other couples.

#### 2.4. Unique External Pressures

The exosystem introduces a set of unique external pressures that indirectly affect coaches' wives. These include the regulations and rules imposed by the NCAA and other governing bodies, media attention, community expectations, and the influence of family and friends (What Is the NCAA? 2021; Faustin et al. 2022; Ortiz 2021). The NCAA can be influential on coaches and their partners, requiring flexibility to rule changes and updates (Dabbs et al. 2016). The external pressure from family and friends, which often results from the coach's success, can lead to strained relationships and expectations on how coaches and their partners should behave (Dixon and Sagas 2007; Frey 2007). Furthermore, during NCAA college basketball tournaments, research has shown that the concept of hegemonic masculinity prevails (What Is the NCAA? 2021; Lundkvist et al. 2016), sustaining dominant gender norms and notions of gender order. For example, announcers fixating on aggressiveness, confidence, strength, and competitiveness as better or more important than other character traits perpetuate stereotypical gender expectations. This dynamic directly affects coaches and their partners, reinforcing the notion that the positional dominance of men correlates with the subordination of women (Vincent and Crossman 2008; Ortiz 2021).

Media coverage also plays a role in supporting stereotypical definitions of gender and male dominance, which can become particularly distressing for coaches' partners (Grindstaff and West 2011; Vincent and Crossman 2008; Ortiz 2021). The negative impact on mental health, objectification, and gender role expectations further adds to the unique external pressures they face (Vincent and Crossman 2008; Ortiz 2021). For instance, media scrutiny has extended beyond the court (Jenkins 2006; Ortiz 2002, 2021). Notably, coaches' wives have found themselves thrust into the limelight, with their clothing choices, for example, becoming a focal point of attention (Jenkins 2006). Such media scrutiny can lead to heightened expectations and pressures on coaches' partners, affecting their well-being and self-identity (Christensen 2013; Vincent and Crossman 2008; Jenkins 2006). Recognizing the impact of these external factors is essential in providing effective support to coaches' wives and partners.

#### 2.5. Implications for Supporting the Wives/Partners of Coaches

The systems surrounding coaches' wives and partners are paramount in supporting the health of coaches' wives and partners. The next section includes implications for these systems and highlights the NCAA, universities/athletic departments, coaches, and coaches' partners.

##### 2.5.1. NCAA

The NCAA and other governing bodies can take several steps to support coaches' wives and partners (What Is the NCAA? 2021). First and foremost, providing recognition and acknowledgment of the sacrifices and contributions of coaches' partners by recogniz-

ing their role and support during NCAA events and programs. Educational resources, mentorship programs, online support communities, and counseling services can be offered as support for coaches' partners. Additionally, encouraging flexible scheduling and family support policies for NCAA events and coaching responsibilities could help coaches' partners better manage family commitments. Similarly, exploring options for on-site childcare services or family support programs during NCAA events or coaching duties would relieve some of the burden on partners who often handle family responsibilities when coaches are away. The NCAA may also want to consider financial support or scholarships for the education or career development of coaches' partners, particularly for those who may have had to sacrifice their own pursuits for the sake of their coaching partner's career (Ortiz 2002). Working closely with NCAA member universities to ensure they provide support systems for coaches' partners, including access to university facilities, resources, and community networks, would also benefit coaches' partners. Finally, it would behoove the NCAA and similar systems to conduct research to better understand the needs and challenges faced by coaches' partners and use data to ensure support programs are accessible to coaches' partners of all gender identities and orientations. By implementing these initiatives, the NCAA can provide valuable assistance to coaches' wives and partners, fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment within the coaching profession. This, in turn, can contribute to the overall well-being and success of coaches, their teams, and their families.

#### 2.5.2. University and Athletic Departments

It would behoove universities and their respective athletic departments to support coaches and their partnerships beyond that of traditional coach/sport support. Specifically, since the health of the coach is related to their home life, universities directly benefit from a well coach across biological, psychological, and social aspects. According to the NCAA Coach Well-Being Study, "Coaches have felt substantial and unique pressures in their jobs over the past several years, manifesting in high levels of stress and mental exhaustion" (NCAA Research 2023). Furthermore, coaches want their schools to understand the changing climate of collegiate sports and the unique personal challenges they experience (NCAA Research 2023; NCAA.org 2023). In the study of over 6000 collegiate coaches, roughly one-third of coaches reported experiencing mental exhaustion, sleep issues, and being overwhelmed (NCAA.org 2023). The coaches highlighted many contributing factors (e.g., pandemic-related factors, roster management, budgetary concerns), but coach relationship issues such as financial stress and childcare were also at the forefront (NCAA Research 2023; NCAA.org 2023). As the partners of coaches are often integral in the familial financial budgeting and child-rearing process, supporting coaches' wives in these activities could be advantageous and promote the health of the coach/partner relationship. Thus, it would benefit institutions to view coaches and their relationships as integral to the success of the athletic department and to support the coaches' wives along with the coach.

#### 2.5.3. Coaches

Coaches are a unique population, and collegiate basketball coaches can support the health of their relationships by doing several things. For starters, open communication (a pillar of any healthy relationship) is essential. Additionally, time management and balancing team time and family/partner time are important aspects of promoting healthy partnerships. While the care and well-being of others is often a focus in coaching, self-care is also essential for a coach. Like other professions, a well coach will better be able to meet the needs of the team and their partnership (Ortiz 2002, 2021; NCAA Research 2023). Another area in which coaches can support their wives and/or partners and their relationship is by being flexible and changing plans and routines when necessary. For example, many coaches and sports programs have a strict schedule for athletes (e.g., workouts, meals, and meetings). When balancing work/life relationships, however, allowing for changes to attend important life events like children's doctor's visits or school programs is beneficial.

Finally, coaches and their wives and/or partners benefit from creating shared goals and dreams. Working together to develop relationships and individual goals can create a sense of unity and leave both the coach and the wife or partner feeling supported.

#### 2.5.4. Coaches' Wives and Partners

Supporting wives and partners of coaches requires understanding, communication, resilience, and a strong commitment to maintaining a healthy balance between personal and professional life. By being supportive, flexible, and taking care of their own well-being, partners can play a crucial role in the success and happiness of both them and their coaching counterparts (Greenhaus and Powell 2003). Individuals must be aware of/utilize a systems perspective when understanding the unique dynamics within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem when working with coaches' wives and partners (Bronfenbrenner 1974; Dabbs et al. 2016). Additionally, promoting coaches' wives' independence, self-identity, and emotional well-being, as well as helping them manage work–life conflict and cope with external pressures, is paramount. Building strong support networks can also be beneficial and work as a protective factor for coaches' partners (Greenhaus and Powell 2003).

#### 2.6. Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this review includes the focus on wives and partners of male basketball coaches in heterosexual relationships, and thus, the implications may only be applicable to such coach/partner dyads. Furthermore, additional sports may have varying experiences for the coaches' wives and partners; considering differences in athletic seasons, recruiting periods, financial support, and others. Finally, we recognize that sports vary widely between Division I, II, and III schools and between additional levels (e.g., NAIA and NJCAA), and thus, experiences of coaches' wives and partners may vary within and between these levels.

Although research on coaches' wives and partners is scarce, future research could utilize the Coaches' Wives and Partners Adapted Bronfenbrenner Model to assess the health of the coach/partner relationship. Furthermore, although this review focuses on coach/partner relationships in heterosexual pairings, "coaches who identified as Black, Indigenous or people of color; female; or members of the LGBTQ+ community reported higher rates of mental health concerns" (NCAA Research 2023; NCAA.org 2023) and researchers could focus additional resources on investigating how best to support these populations via their relationships. Special circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and community/societal events like systemic racism and their influences on the wives and partners of coaches, as well as on the athletic system, are also warranted. Qualitative research could be utilized to assess the experiences of coaches' wives and partners within basketball and across other collegiate athletic venues. Additionally, quantitative measures could be utilized to assess the biological, psychological, and social health of coaches' wives and partners and support new systems tailored according to empirical results.

### 3. Conclusions

Being a coach's wife and/or partner offers both benefits and challenges. When coaching jobs are secure and successful, the financial rewards can be substantial (Bentzen et al. 2020). Opportunities such as travel, networking, and being part of something larger than themselves can be appealing aspects of this lifestyle (Bentzen et al. 2020; Bruening and Dixon 2007). However, being the partner of a coach also faces numerous challenges. Coaches often experience frequent job changes, making this profession less stable than other careers (Bentzen et al. 2020; Christensen 2013). Additionally, basketball families are often transient, relocating more frequently than individuals with non-sports-related careers (Greenhaus and Powell 2003). This mobility can be challenging for coaches' wives, as they must adapt to new environments and support systems with each move while receiving less community support (Dabbs et al. 2016; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). Furthermore, the pressure for success and

winning in coaching careers creates stressors for coaches' wives, who may have less direct influence on the outcome. This pressure can lead to feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and anxiety (Dabbs et al. 2016; Ortiz 2002) for coaches' wives and/or partners. Coaches' long working hours, including extensive travel requirements, can also place many family responsibilities on their partners, contributing to a sense of tremendous responsibility (Dabbs et al. 2016; Greenhaus and Powell 2003).

In conclusion, the relationship between basketball coaches' wives, the Bronfenbrenner model, and the importance of a systemic support system underscores the importance of recognizing the holistic nature of their experiences. Coaches' wives and partners are accountable for nurturing the coach–partner dyad within and across the competitive and often opposing realms of athletics and family life. As noted, they manage family responsibilities, children, and identity issues and often make personal and career sacrifices for the betterment of their family system (Ortiz 2002, 2021). By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of their experiences, we can better address the needs of basketball coaches' wives and support them in leading fulfilling lives amidst the demands of their multiple and dynamic roles while simultaneously supporting the coach's and the athlete's well-being and success.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.J.B. and K.S.; methodology, A.J.B. and K.S.; writing—original draft preparation, A.J.B., K.S., A.L.B.R. and D.B.K.; writing—review and editing, A.J.B. and K.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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