

# A National Study of Nonrenewal in High School Coaching

GLENN A. MILLER

RAFER LUTZ

JAEHO SHIM

KAREN FREDENBURG

JOHN MILLER

*Who is coaching, and why are they dismissed?*

**L**ike those who hear the catch phrase on Donald Trump's TV reality show *The Apprentice*, many coaches are hearing those dreaded words "You're fired!" On the reality show, the stakes are high because the eventual winner receives a position overseeing one of Trump's multimillion-dollar business ventures and a six-figure salary. While the stakes for high school coaches may seem small in comparison, their jobs are arguably more significant because of a coach's ability to affect the lives and futures of the nation's youths.

American coaches' jobs hinge on the results of competitive activities that are highly spontaneous and unpredictable (Edwards, 1973). "What makes the position of coach even more unique is the fact that these competitive activities are highly visible and the results of the competitions are publicly reported and discussed" (Coakley, 1994, p. 194). Though Coakley was referring to college coaches, we believe the analogy holds true for high school coaches as well. Of course, not all high school coaches face the same degree of pressure. Pressure to win may vary depending on factors such as the sport, school size, level of competition, school tradition, level of administrative support or community support, or the degree of parental involvement.

In today's hyper-competitive environment, parent-coach confrontations are becoming much more prevalent. Apparently parents think it is their right to have regular, sometimes inappropriate, contact with coaches. More often these confrontations go beyond their original intent, at times leading to violence. In Connecticut, the parent of a high school softball player clubbed the coach in the back of the head with an aluminum bat for suspending his daughter for missing a game. A few days before the Connecticut incident, a girls high school rugby coach in California was punched and kicked unconscious by a group of parents when the coach tried to break up a fight between a parent and a referee (Pennington, 2005). In Texas, a 45-year-old father, who had been barred from attending the local high school football games for shoving and verbally abusing his son's coaches, critically wounded the head coach/athletics director at his son's high school (CNN.com, 2005).

It seems that a win-at-all-costs attitude has become common in high school athletics. Based on anecdotal reports, fans and parents often seem to have unrealistic expectations for the coaches of their children. Because the pressure seems to be increasing, it is important to closely examine patterns of nonrenewal and the reasons for it in high school coaching.

## Previous Research

Among the few studies in this area, Lackey (1977, 1986, 1994) and Scantling and Lackey (2005) surveyed principals from Nebraska high schools and found that one in 10 coaches were fired annually and that relationship problems plagued coaches through all four decades. Dismissals occurred with the greatest frequency in boys' basketball and foot-

ball; however, girls' volleyball and basketball showed the greatest number of dismissals in the 1990s. Examining the trend in Lackey's research, there appears to be an increase in the number of coaching dismissals occurring over the past four decades.

In a recent study of high school coaches in Texas, Miller et al. (2005) found that failing to win was the most common reason for dismissal. Football far surpassed other sports in the number of coaching dismissals, followed by boys' and girls' basketball, respectively. Coaches at larger schools were fired with more frequency, and failing to win was a more common reason for dismissal at larger schools compared to smaller schools.

### Study Purpose

Despite the work of Lackey and Miller et al., much remains to be learned concerning the high school coaching profession. Specifically, questions that require further examination on a national scale include (1) what is the demographic makeup of the high school coaching profession, and (2) what factors relate to nonrenewals in coaching?

### Methods

**Participants.** National Federation of State High School Associations member coaches ( $N = 25,693$ ) and athletics directors ( $N = 11,451$ ) were sent an email containing a link to one of two web-based surveys, respectively. A total of 7,562 coaches completed the coaching web survey (29.4% response rate), and 3,693 athletics directors (ADs) completed the athletics director web survey (32.2% response rate). Though it should be noted that these samples were obtained using nonrandom procedures and therefore may be less likely to portray the actual demographic nature of the high school coaching profession, they do provide a starting point for understanding who is coaching in our nation's high schools.

**Instruments.** Questionnaires used in the present research followed the design of Miller and colleagues' (2005) studies with several modifications to make it easier to tabulate large numbers of responses.

**Coach Questionnaire.** Coaches were asked a series of demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, years coaching, and

ethnicity) in addition to questions about the demographic characteristics of the school at which they currently coached (i.e., public/private, urban/suburban/rural, and school enrollment). The questionnaire also asked coaches in which areas they were certified to teach and whether they had engaged in preparatory experiences for coaching, such as playing high school sports.

**Athletics Director Questionnaire.** The questionnaire administered to ADs paralleled the principal's questionnaire (Miller et al., 2005) with a few modifications and greater depth to allow more insight into coaching nonrenewals. Athletics directors were asked the same demographic questions as were the coaches, in addition to the same set of questions concerning the demographic characteristics of the school at which they worked. Additionally, ADs were asked what sports they currently coached, what sports their school offered, which sport they felt posed the most difficulty for finding coaches, and a series of questions about coaches who were dismissed over the past five years (2001-2005) or who voluntarily left their coaching position.

### Results

**Demographics of Respondent Coaches.** The age of coaches in this sample ranged from 19 to 78 years ( $M = 40.3$ ,  $SD = 10.3$ ), and these coaches reported a tenure in coaching ranging from 0 to 52 years ( $M = 13.1$ ,  $SD = 9.5$ ). Our sample included 6,449 (85.3%) coaches from public schools, 907 (12.0%) coaches from private schools, and 206 (2.7%) coaches who did not report school type. Three-thousand, one-hundred, forty-four (41.6%) coaches came from suburban schools, 2,620 (34.6%) came from rural schools, 1,578 (20.9%) came from urban schools, and 220 (2.9%) did not report school type.

Schools with an enrollments of 0 to 500 employed 1,800 (23.8%) of these coaches, while 1,684 (22.3%), 1,427 (18.9%), 1,123 (14.9%), 594 (7.9%), 329 (4.4%), and 351 (4.6%) were employed at schools with enrollments of 501 to 1000, 1001 to 1500, 1501 to 2000, 2001 to 2500, 2501 to 3000, and greater than 3,000, respectively, with 354 (2.4%) not reporting. Additional demographic characteristics of the coaching sample appear in table 1.

**Demographics of Respondent Athletics Directors.** The age of

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondent Coaches

Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total
White/Caucasian	1,945 (28.3%)	4,927 (71.7%)	6,872
African American	49 (24.4%)	152 (75.6%)	201
Hispanic	56 (29.6%)	133 (70.4%)	189
Asian/Pacific Islander	27 (31.8%)	58 (68.2%)	85
Native American	11 (26.8%)	30 (73.2%)	41
Other	8 (16.7%)	40 (83.3%)	48
Total	2,096 (28.2%)	5,340 (71.8%)	7,436

Note: 126 respondents did not indicate one of either gender or ethnicity and are not included.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondent Athletics Directors

Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total
White/Caucasian	501 (15.0%)	2,838 (84.0%)	3,339
African American	25 (20.8%)	95 (79.2%)	120
Hispanic	10 (15.4%)	55 (84.6%)	65
Asian/Pacific Islander	11 (23.4%)	36 (76.6%)	47
Native American	5 (22.7%)	17 (77.3%)	22
Other	5 (21.7%)	18 (78.3%)	23
Total	557 (15.4%)	3,059 (84.6%)	3,616

Note: 77 respondents did not indicate one of either gender or ethnicity and are not included.

Table 3. Frequency of Sport Offerings

	Public Schools (n = 2,957)		Private Schools (n = 537)		Total (n = 3,494)	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Girls Basketball	2,934	99.2%	494	92.0%	3,428	98.1%
Boys Basketball	2,915	98.6%	467	87.0%	3,382	96.8%
Boys Track	2,826	95.6%	379	70.6%	3,205	91.7%
Girls Track	2,787	94.3%	387	72.1%	3,174	90.8%
Football	2,802	94.8%	343	63.9%	3,145	90.0%
Boys Baseball	2,671	90.3%	430	80.1%	3,101	88.8%
Girls Volleyball	2,626	88.8%	446	83.1%	3,072	87.9%
Girls Softball	2,645	89.4%	413	76.9%	3,058	87.5%
Girls Cross Country	2,588	87.5%	409	76.2%	2,997	85.8%
Boys Cross Country	2,589	87.6%	396	73.7%	2,985	85.4%
Boys Golf	2,581	87.3%	401	74.7%	2,982	85.3%
Cheer or Spirit Squad	2,570	86.9%	350	65.2%	2,920	83.6%
Boys Soccer	2,138	72.3%	418	77.8%	2,556	73.2%
Girls Soccer	2,079	70.3%	406	75.6%	2,485	71.1%
Boys Wrestling	2,253	76.2%	231	43.0%	2,484	71.1%

Note: 199 respondents did not indicate school type and/or sport offerings and are not included.

ADs in this sample ranged from 21 to 79 years ( $M = 47.0$ ,  $SD = 9.1$ ), and these ADs reported tenure as a director ranging from 0 to 53 years ( $M = 9.3$ ,  $SD = 7.7$ ). Our sample included 2,975 (80.6%) ADs from public schools, 538 (14.6%) ADs from private schools, and 180 (4.9%) ADs not reporting. One-thousand, five-hundred, seventeen (41.1%) ADs came from rural schools, 1,290 (34.9%) came from suburban schools, 806 (21.8%) came from urban schools, and 80 (2.2%) did not report school type.

One-thousand, three-hundred, twenty-eight (36.0%) of these ADs were employed at a school with an enrollment of 0 to 500 students, while 805 (21.8%), 563 (15.2%), 446 (12.1%), 242 (6.6%), 117 (3.2%), and 112 (3.0%) were employed at schools with enrollments of 501 to 1000, 1001 to 1500, 1501 to 2000, 2001 to 2500, 2501 to 3000, and greater than 3,000, respectively, with 80 (2.2%) not reporting. Ad-

ditional demographic characteristics of the sample of ADs appear in table 2.

*Additional Responses by Coaches.* A great majority of coaches (81.9%) reportedly had some type of teaching certification. The most common teaching certifications were physical education (36.1%), health (18.8%), history (15.0%), social studies (14.8%), and science (13.1%). Most coaches reported that they taught five academic classes per day (22.5%), while 15.8% of coaches taught none, 14.7% taught six, 12.2% taught three, and 10.2% taught four per day. When asked about preparatory experiences, 59.6% of coaches reported having played youth sport, 86.7% played high school sport, 62.2% played sports in college, 2.1% played professional sports, 37.2% had taken one or two university coaching-related classes, 26.1% had a university degree in sport sciences/coaching, and 26.7% had received some type

Table 4. Sports for Which It Is Most Difficult to Find Coaches

	Public Schools (n = 2,957)		Private Schools (n = 537)		Total (n = 3,494)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Cheer or Spirit Squad	351	13.7%	42	12.0%	393	13.5%
Girls Volleyball	259	9.9%	52	11.7%	311	10.1%
Girls Soccer	214	10.3%	20	4.9%	234	9.4%
Boys Wrestling	175	7.8%	19	8.2%	194	7.8%
Boys Soccer	165	7.7%	28	6.7%	193	7.6%
Girls Basketball	143	4.9%	15	3.0%	158	4.6%
Football	116	4.1%	19	5.5%	135	4.3%
Girls Softball	104	3.9%	16	3.9%	120	3.9%
Girls Track	100	3.6%	20	5.2%	120	3.8%
Boys Basketball	90	3.1%	7	1.5%	97	2.9%
Boys Track	64	2.3%	20	5.3%	84	2.6%
Boys Baseball	47	1.8%	10	2.3%	57	1.8%
Girls Cross Country	40	1.5%	8	2.0%	48	1.6%
Boys Golf	25	1.0%	8	2.0%	33	1.1%
Boys Cross Country	20	0.8%	2	0.5%	22	0.7%

Note: 199 respondents did not indicate school type and/or sport offerings and are not included. Percentages were calculated based on the number of schools offering each of these sports.

of coaching certification.

**Additional Responses by Athletics Directors.** The majority of ADs did not currently coach (55.8%), though 16.4% were coaching football, 7.6% boys' basketball, 7.0% girls' basketball, 6.6% boys' track, 6.2% baseball, and 5.7% girls' track. No other sports were coached by ADs at a rate greater than 5.0% in the present sample. Results showed that girls' basketball is the most commonly offered sport in this sample. Sport offerings, broken down by school type, appear in table 3.

Athletics directors were asked to identify in which sport it was most difficult to find coaches. Responses showed that cheer/spirit squad coaches and girls' volleyball coaches are the most challenging positions to fill (table 4).

**Coach Dismissals.** Concerning the primary question of interest—why are coaches' contracts nonrenewed—ADs reported a total of 8,364 coach dismissals over the past five years. This equals a rate of 2.26 coach dismissals per school over the past five years, indicating that there is an average of less than one coach dismissal per year among the schools (ADs) sampled in the present investigation. Of these dismissals, 7,026 (84%) were male, 1,263 (15.1%) were female, and 75 (1%) did not report gender. Seven-thousand, five-hundred, twenty-eight (90.0%) of these dismissed coaches were Caucasian, 284 (3.4%) were African American, 184 (2.2%) were Hispanic, and 134 (1.6%) were Asian or Pacific Islander.

Figure 1 shows the sports with the greatest number of coach dismissals in the present sample. As can be seen, 17.5% of the dismissals were football coaches. According to ADs, the most commonly reported reason for dismissal was poor player discipline. A total of 1,070 coaches were dismissed

for this reason. As this was a forced-choice response format question, it should be noted that the greatest proportion of responses fell in the category labeled "reason not listed." See figure 2 for a breakdown of commonly reported reasons for coach dismissals.

**Reasons for Voluntarily Leaving Coaching.** Athletics directors were also asked to indicate how many coaches had voluntarily left their position over the previous five years. Results showed that the median number of coaches leaving voluntarily per school per year equaled 0.96. The most commonly reported reasons for voluntarily leaving coaching over the last five years were "taking a new position" (1.72 coaches/school), "[not wanting to deal with] parental problems" (1.28), "health problems" (0.81), "poor pay" (0.76), "spouse relocation" (0.51), "conflicts with athletes" (0.46), "conflicts with administration" (0.38), and "pressure" (0.36).

## Discussion

Results of the investigation indicated that an average of less than one coach dismissal occurred per year among the population studied. This number is less than reported by Miller et al. (2005), which indicated that just over two coaches per school were dismissed in Texas high schools. However, the number is similar to Lackey's (1977, 1986, 1994) as well as Scantling and Lackey's (2005) findings, where the number of coaches dismissed per school equaled 0.45, 0.36, 0.55, and 0.89, respectively.

Previous studies (Lackey, 1986, 1994; Miller et al., 2005; Scantling & Lackey, 2005) revealed that football coaches had the highest percentage of dismissals of all interscholastic

Figure 1. Sports for Which Dismissal Is Most Common

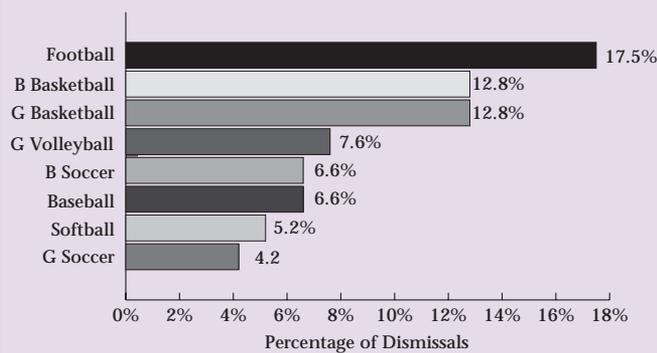
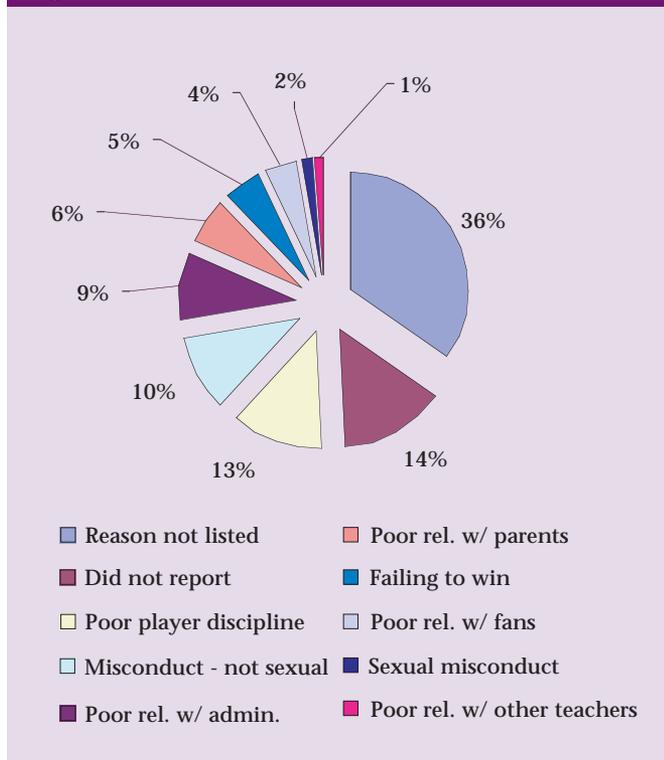


Figure 2. Common Reasons for Coach Dismissals



sports. Results of this study also indicated that the greatest percentage of coach dismissals occurred in football (17.5%). This makes sense considering that football is one of the most common sport offerings and employs the greatest number of coaches. Because there are more positions, it is logical that there would be a higher number of dismissals (because the percentages are not adjusted for the number of coaches in each sport). Also, it appears that ADs feel that football coaches are not particularly difficult to replace (table 4). Therefore, based on the larger number of football coaches and a relative ease of replacement, we might expect this finding.

Dismissals were common in other sports as well. Football was followed by boys' and girls' basketball in total percentages of coach dismissals. This makes three of the top five most common interscholastic sport offerings, as identified by responding ADs, as being the most likely to have a coach

dismissed. Girls' soccer presents a slightly different scenario. Despite being one of the most commonly offered sports, it ranked lowest in the percentage of dismissals. It is interesting that girls' soccer was identified as being among the most difficult sports for which to find a head coach.

The results of this nationwide study indicated that winning was not the primary determinant of interscholastic coaches maintaining their positions. Rather, ADs stated that dismissals resulted due to (1) inability of the coach to maintain good player discipline, (2) misconduct (nonsexual) on the part of the coach, and (3) poor coach relations with the administration and parents. It is curious to note that only five percent of the ADs in this investigation cited failure to win as the primary reason for dismissing a coach. In two previous studies, failure to win was the commonly reported reason for dismissal of coaches (Lackey, 1986; Miller et al., 2005). The latter belief is also often expressed in the media, such as a *U.S. and World News* article in which a high school football coach who had just been hired perceived that he would be fired just as his predecessor had been if he did not win (McGraw, 2000).

Our results, however, imply that winning is not the most important factor determining job security. Rather, poor management and ineffective communication appear to be the primary reasons for coach dismissals. Yet, it is unclear whether coaches who had been fired for not maintaining good player discipline, misconduct, and poor relations were winning. In other words, had they been winning, would they have kept their jobs?

Improper conduct of a nonsexual nature was also cited as a reason for dismissal. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies (Lackey, 1977, 1994; Miller et al., 2005; Scantling & Lackey, 2005). It is important for coaches to understand that they occupy a position second only to parents and guardians in influencing and instilling character attributes during a young person's formative years (Devine & Gillies, 1997). At the youth level, the most effective coaches are not those with the best win-loss record or those who have won the most championships; rather, the best coaches are those who treat each child as an individual and display concern, understanding, and patience for the young person's development and well being (Tutko & Burns, 1976).

The third major reason for dismissal identified by ADs in this study dealt with coaches having poor public relations with the school administration and parents. This finding is also consistent with other investigations (Lackey, 1977, 1986, 1994; Miller et al., 2005; Scantling & Lackey, 2005). Some coaches tend to live in the vacuum of their sport, often isolating themselves from perceived (or real) external forces (i.e., the administrators and parents). Without the appropriate support that can be created by positive public relations, coaches may put themselves in a position to be dismissed. In effect then, coaches should understand the need to devote time and energy to the development of a positive image not only in the sporting realm but with other constituencies as well.

Obviously, some coaches leave the profession voluntarily. Results indicated that the annual median number of coaches voluntarily leaving per school equaled almost one. The most commonly reported reason for voluntarily leaving coaching over the past five years was to take a new position. It is unclear as to whether those who left did so to take another coaching position or to take another position outside the coaching profession.

Additional reasons for coaches voluntarily leaving paralleled the reasons given for dismissals. For example, not wanting to deal with parents, and conflicts with athletes and parents, resemble the dismissal categories of “inability to maintain good player discipline” and “poor relations with administration and parents.” In essence, then, coaches who leave voluntarily may do so for similar disabilities as those who have been dismissed.

### Limitations and Recommendations

A limitation of this study deals with the accuracy of ADs ability to recall the specific details of coaching nonrenewals over the past five years. It is not certain how thorough ADs were in providing accurate details. While it is quite possible that some ADs simply reported the nonrenewals from memory, it is hoped that they consulted their human resources department to provide an accurate account of the nonrenewals. Another limitation exists in that our sample relied on volunteer participants rather than on a random sample. Therefore, generalizing the results of this study to the national coaching population must be regarded with some skepticism.

Despite these limitations, the nonrenewal results of this study do provide “snapshots” into the interscholastic coaching profession. Interscholastic coaching, as depicted in this study, is insecure at best in comparison to the teaching profession in general. While it is vital that interscholastic coaches have an in-depth knowledge of the sport and the education to teach it in order to win, it is apparent from the results of this study that they need to prepare themselves in other ways.

The authors recommend that future interscholastic coaches possess the knowledge and ability of how to conduct themselves in a professional manner and develop an understanding of positive public relations and conflict resolution. These topics are often discussed in management or business-related university classes. It appears that departments housing the preparation of future coaches may want to consider offering classes that directly deal with these topics as well. Regardless of which department offers the class, the authors of this study strongly encourage those who intend to enter the high school coaching profession to take university classes that address the aforementioned skills to supplement their coaching knowledge.

### Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the National Federation of State High School Associations for providing assistance and expertise

in completing this project. We could not have completed a project of this magnitude without their assistance.

### References

CNN.com. (2005, April 7). Coach shot at Texas high school. Retrieved September 29, 2005, from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/04/07/canton.shooting/>.

Coakley, J. J. (1994). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies*. St. Louis: Mosby.

Devine, J., & Gillies, C. (1997). *Victory beyond the scoreboard: Building winners in life through youth sports*. Wilsonville, OR: Book Partners.

Edwards, H. (1973). *Sociology of sport*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press

Lackey, D. (1977). Why do high school coaches quit? *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 48(4), 22-23.

Lackey, D. (1986). The high school coach, a pressure position. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 57(3), 28-32.

Lackey, D. (1994). High school coaching: Still a “pressure cooker” profession. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 65(6), 68-71.

McGraw, D. (2000, August). Winning is the only thing. *U.S. News & World Report*, 129(8), 46-48.

Miller, G., Lutz, R., Shim, J., Fredenburg, K., & Miller, J. (2005). Dismissals and perceptions of pressure in coaching in Texas high schools. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 76(1), 29-33.

Pennington, B. (2005, June 28). As stakes rise, more parents are directing rage at coaches. *New York Times*, sports section, p. 1.

Scantling, E., & Lackey, D. (2005). Coaches under pressure: Four decades of studies. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 76(1), 25-28.

Tutko, T., & Burns, W. (1976). *Winning is everything and other American myths*. New York : MacMillan.

.....

Glenn A. Miller ([Glenn\\_Miller@baylor.edu](mailto:Glenn_Miller@baylor.edu)) is a professor, Rafer Lutz ([Rafer\\_Lutz@baylor.edu](mailto:Rafer_Lutz@baylor.edu)) is an assistant professor, Jaeho Shim ([Joe\\_Shim@baylor.edu](mailto:Joe_Shim@baylor.edu)) is an associate professor, and Karen Fredenburg ([Karen\\_Fredenburg@baylor.edu](mailto:Karen_Fredenburg@baylor.edu)) is an associate professor, at Baylor University, Waco, TX 76798. John J. Miller ([john.miller@ttu.edu](mailto:john.miller@ttu.edu)) is an associate professor at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409.

---

### Faigenbaum

*Continued from page 30*

and intensity of activity of third-grade children in physical education. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 157, 185-190.

Thacker, S., Gilchrist, J., Stroup, D., & Kimsey, C. (2004). The impact of stretching on sports injury risk: A systematic review of the literature. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 36, 371-378.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Healthy people 2010* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

.....

Avery D. Faigenbaum ([faigenba@tcnj.edu](mailto:faigenba@tcnj.edu)) is an associate professor in the Department of Health and Exercise Science at the College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ 08628. Patrick Mediate is a physical education teacher at Greenwich High School, Greenwich, CT 06830.