WHERE ARE THE VOLUNTEERS?

Recruiting and Retaining Sport Volunteers in 2026

February 2026



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What you will learn:

- What Happened to the Volunteers?
- Who Coaches & Why They Coach
- Pillars of Recruitment
- How to Retain & Transition Them
- Why they Quit (and how to stop it)
- The Value of Mentorship
- *Secret Hack! – Identity*

And lots of cool data!



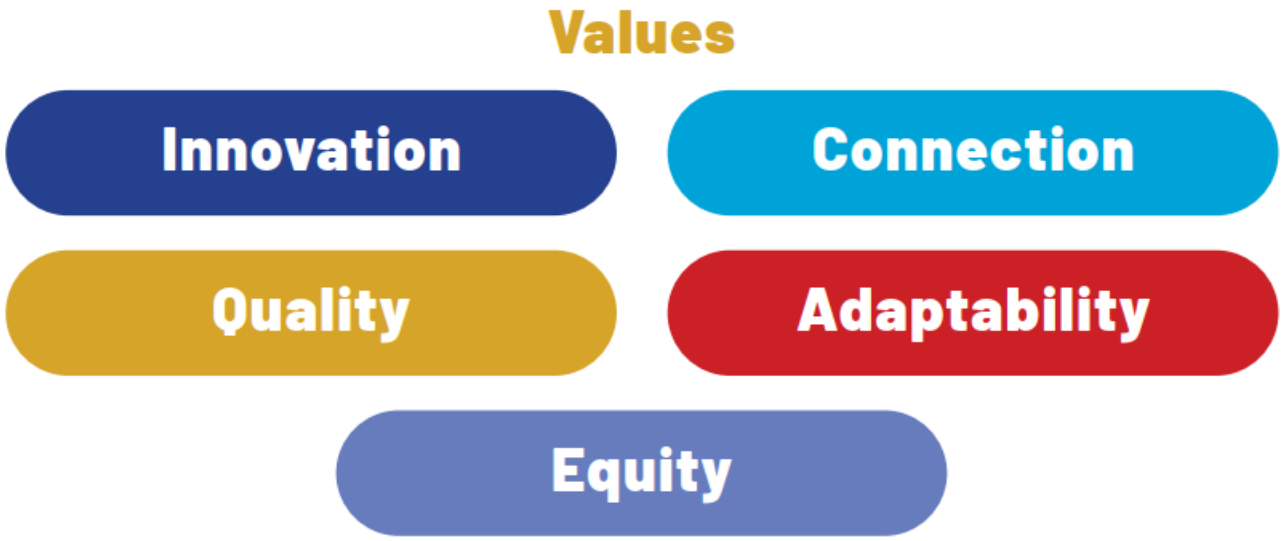
About Me

Stuart McLaren
Senior Lead, Innovation and Program Development
Coaches Association of Ontario

- Sport Administration
- Coach
- Parent
- Athlete
- *Data Science Enthusiast*

About the Coaches Association of Ontario

- The Coaches Association of Ontario (CAO) is an independent, non-profit organization that supports coaches from community to high performance across all sports in Ontario.



The Basics of Volunteer Management

- Recruitment
- Retention
- Recognition
- Support
- *Mentorship*
- *Flexibility*

1. Who What Where Why



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Why we collected this information

How we collected it

What we collected



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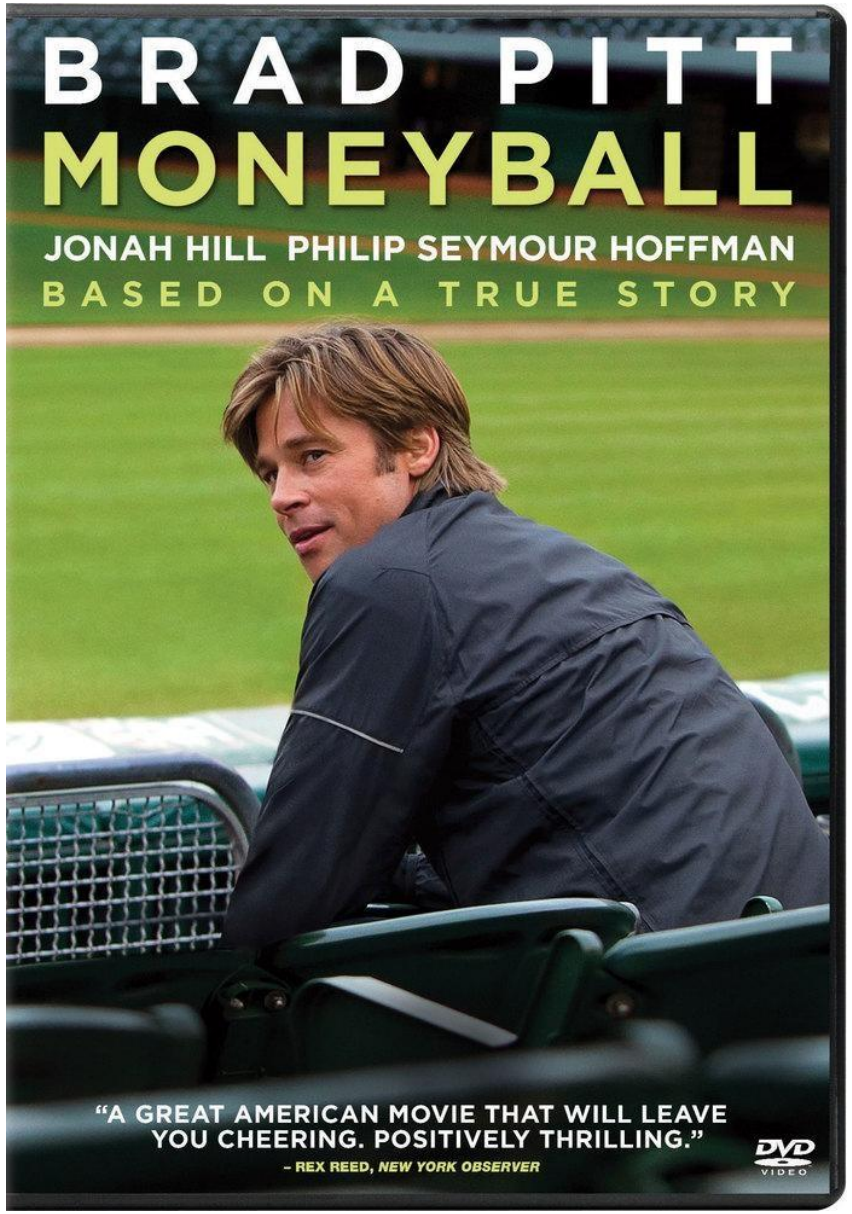
BRAD PITT
MONEYBALL
JONAH HILL PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN
BASED ON A TRUE STORY
"A GREAT AMERICAN MOVIE THAT WILL LEAVE YOU CHEERING. POSITIVELY THRILLING."
– REX REED, NEW YORK OBSERVER
DVD VIDEO

Three Years of Research

- 2000 Ontario Coaches
- 500 Athletes
- 500 Parents



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- 2000 Ont
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- 500 Parer





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100+ Survey Questions over 3 Years

- Who coaches?
- Why they coach?
- Why they quit?
- What do they coach?
- What do they value?
- What are their behaviours?
- How much time do they volunteer?
- What are their biggest challenges?
- ……

Why we collected this information

How we collected it

What we collected



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2. A Challenging Landscape for Those in Need of Volunteers





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What's happening in Canada with volunteers

What's happening to sport volunteers



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You are not Imagining it

- The percentage of Canadians volunteering for nonprofits and charities dropped significantly, from **41%** in 2018 to **32%** in 2023.
- Total volunteer hours dropped to **1.2 billion**, down by over a quarter from **1.7 billion** in 2018 and nearly four fifths from **2.0 billion** in 2013.
- In total, this is equivalent to a decline of roughly **451,000 full-time jobs**.

https://imaginecanada.ca/en/360/new-results-statistics-canadas-survey-giving-volunteering-and-participating

Sport Context

- Pre-pandemic (2020): About **27%** of adults volunteered in sport-related activities, averaging **105 hours/year**.
- Post-pandemic (2024): Only **11%** of adults volunteered in sport, physical activity, or recreation in the past year.
- **70%** of coaches in Ontario are Volunteers



https://cflri.ca/publication/volunteering-in-sport-physical-activity-and-recreation/

What's happening in Canada with volunteers

What's happening to sport volunteers



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3. Who Coaches in Ontario?





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Who coaches in Ontario (Demographics)

Commitment level of coaches

The three lifecycle stages of coaches (and sport volunteers)



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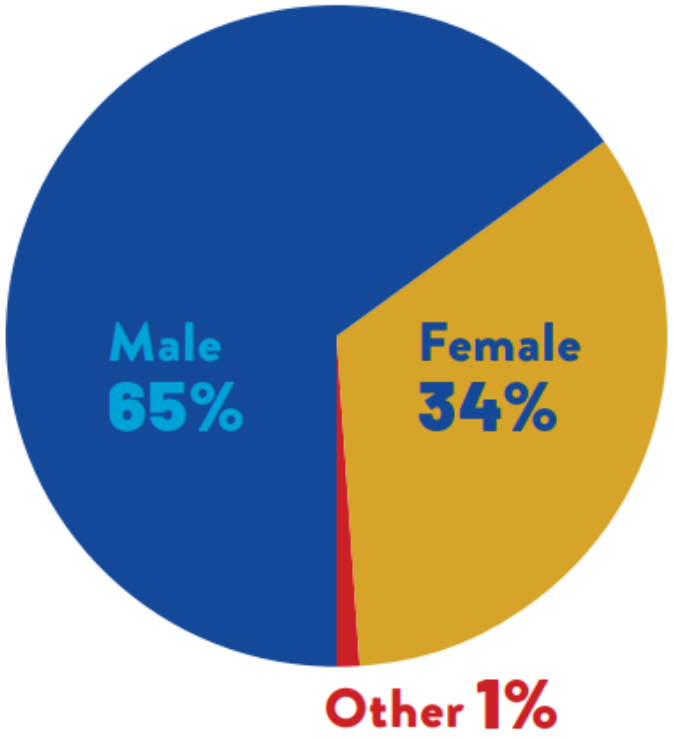
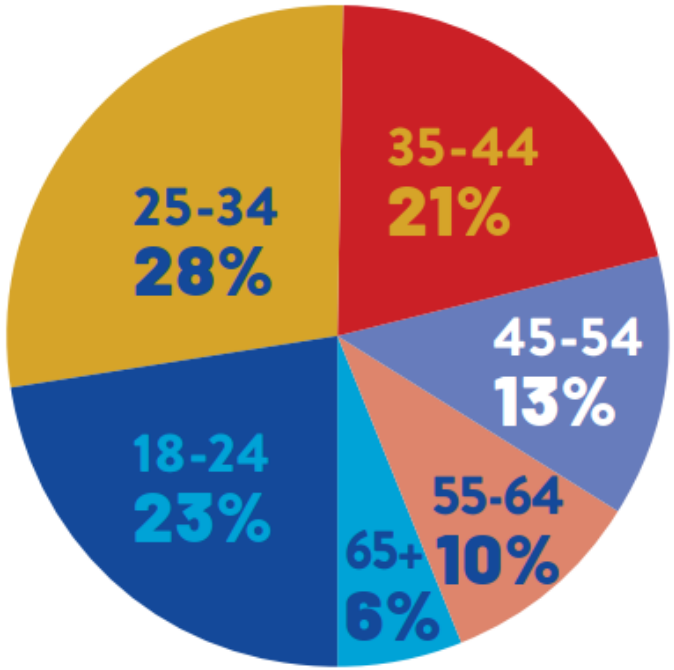
Ontario Coaches

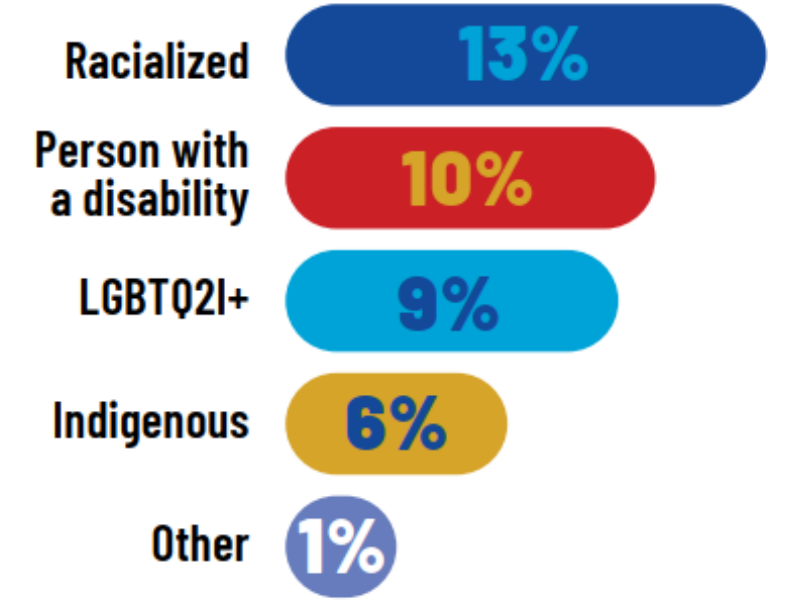
Gender



Age



34% of coaches identify as part of an equity deserving group



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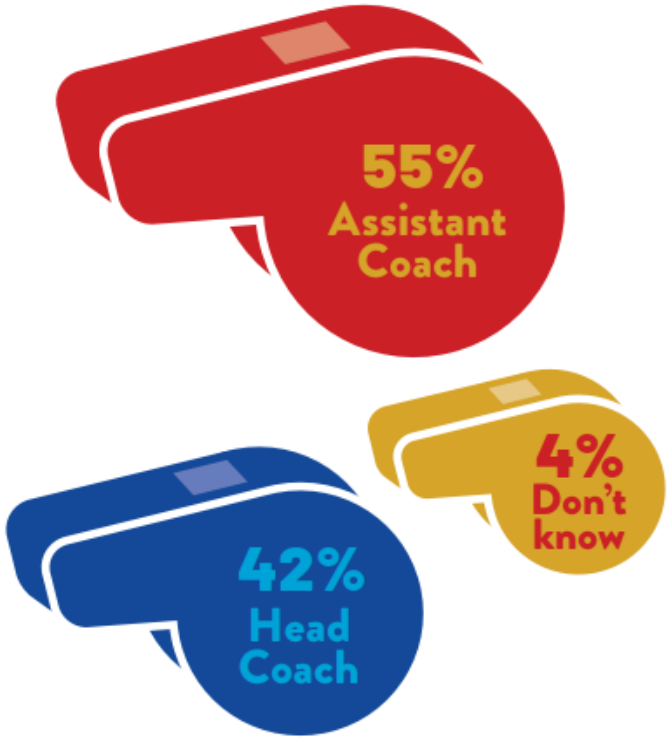
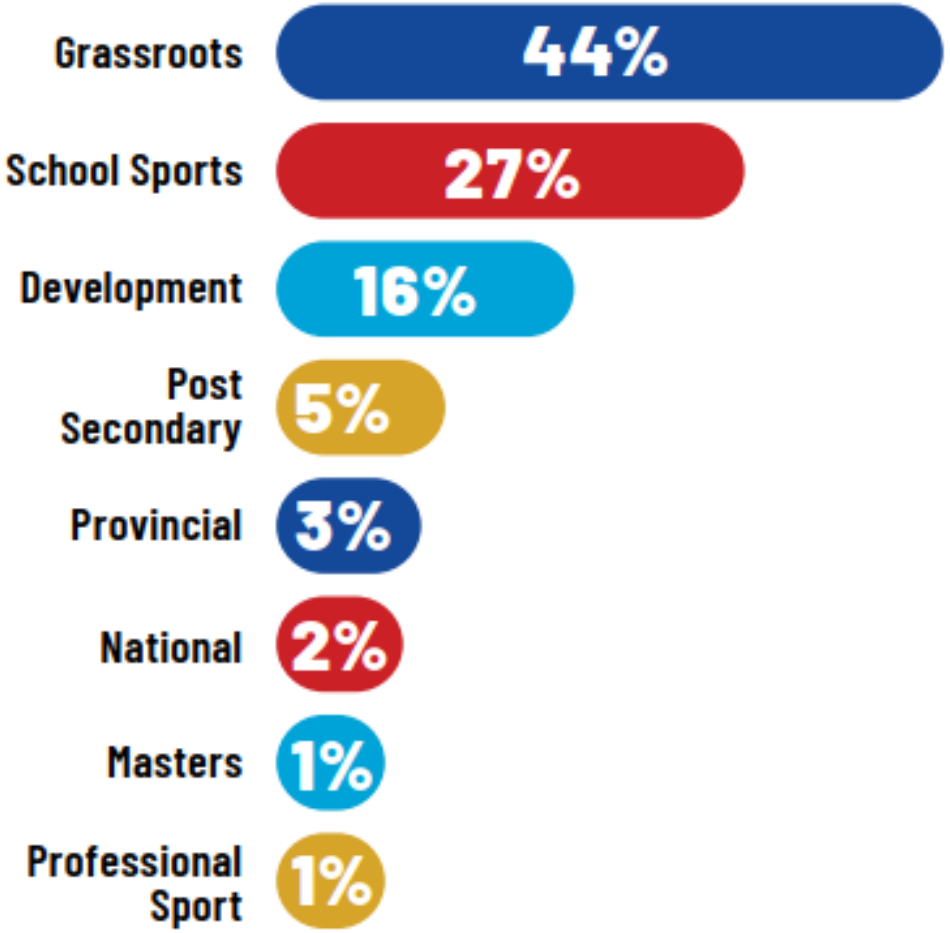
Primary Coaching Role



Coaching Position Type



Coaching Contexts



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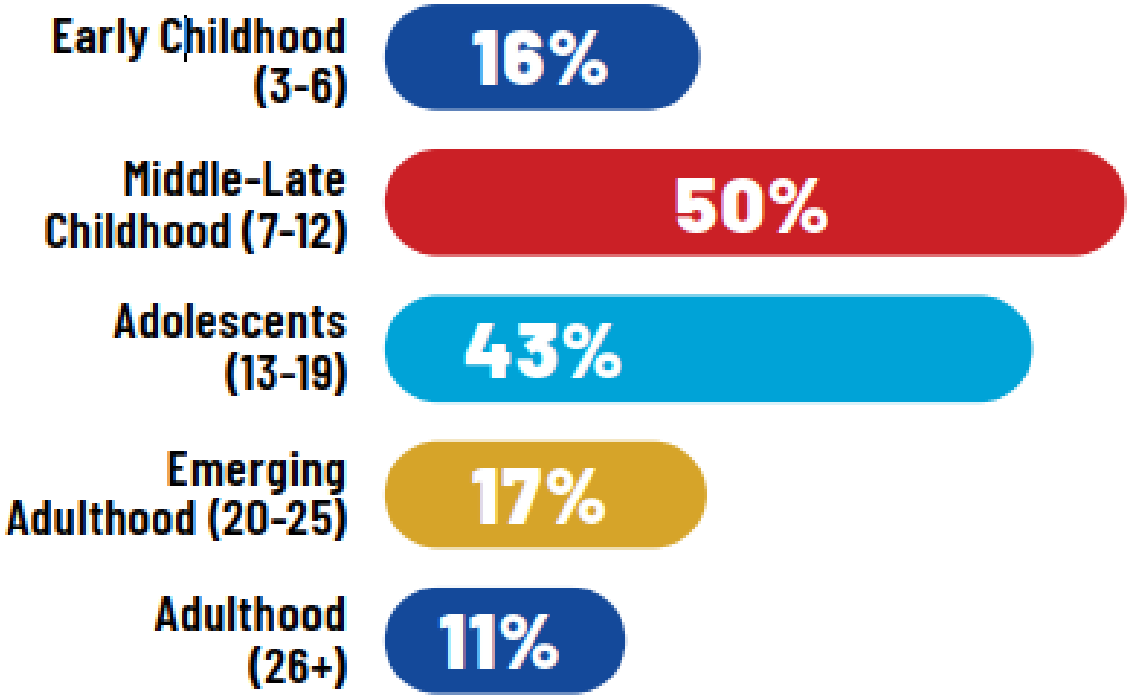
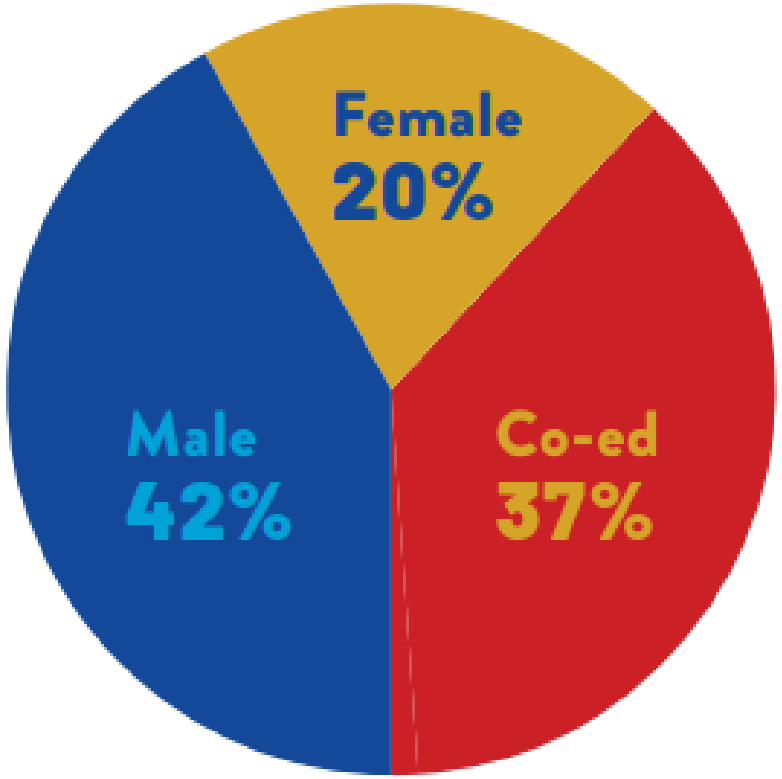
Age Coached



Genders Coached



The majority of coaching takes places in the grassroots context, for athletes age 7-12, and by a coach with less than 6 years' experience

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Commitment

- Across all sports, and all contexts, coaches spend an average of **350 hours** per year on coaching.
- **600 million hours** are spent each year by Ontarians in sport coaching, sport instruction, or sport mentorship.*
- **98.1 hours** each year are spent on coach development by coaches (on average).

- **40%** of coaches are coaching one of the top 4 most popular sports:

 **Soccer**

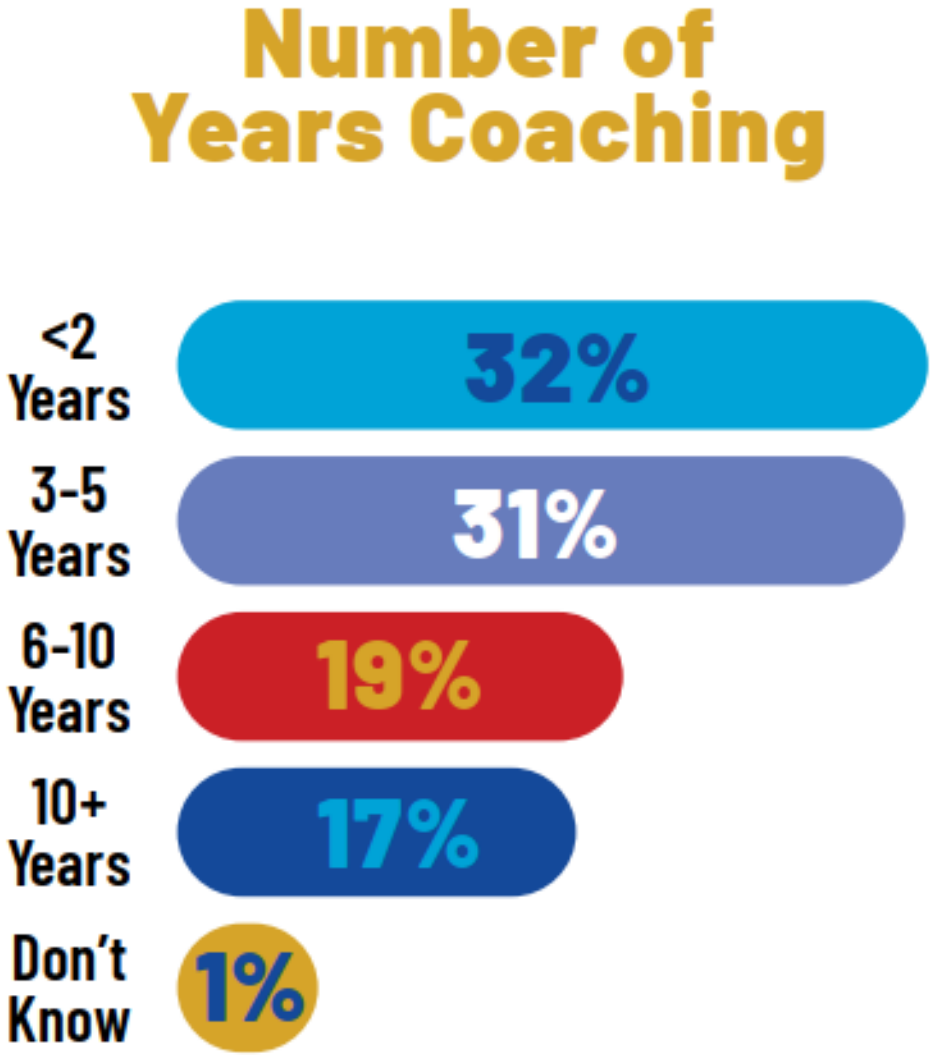
 **Basketball**

 **Baseball**

 **Ice Hockey**

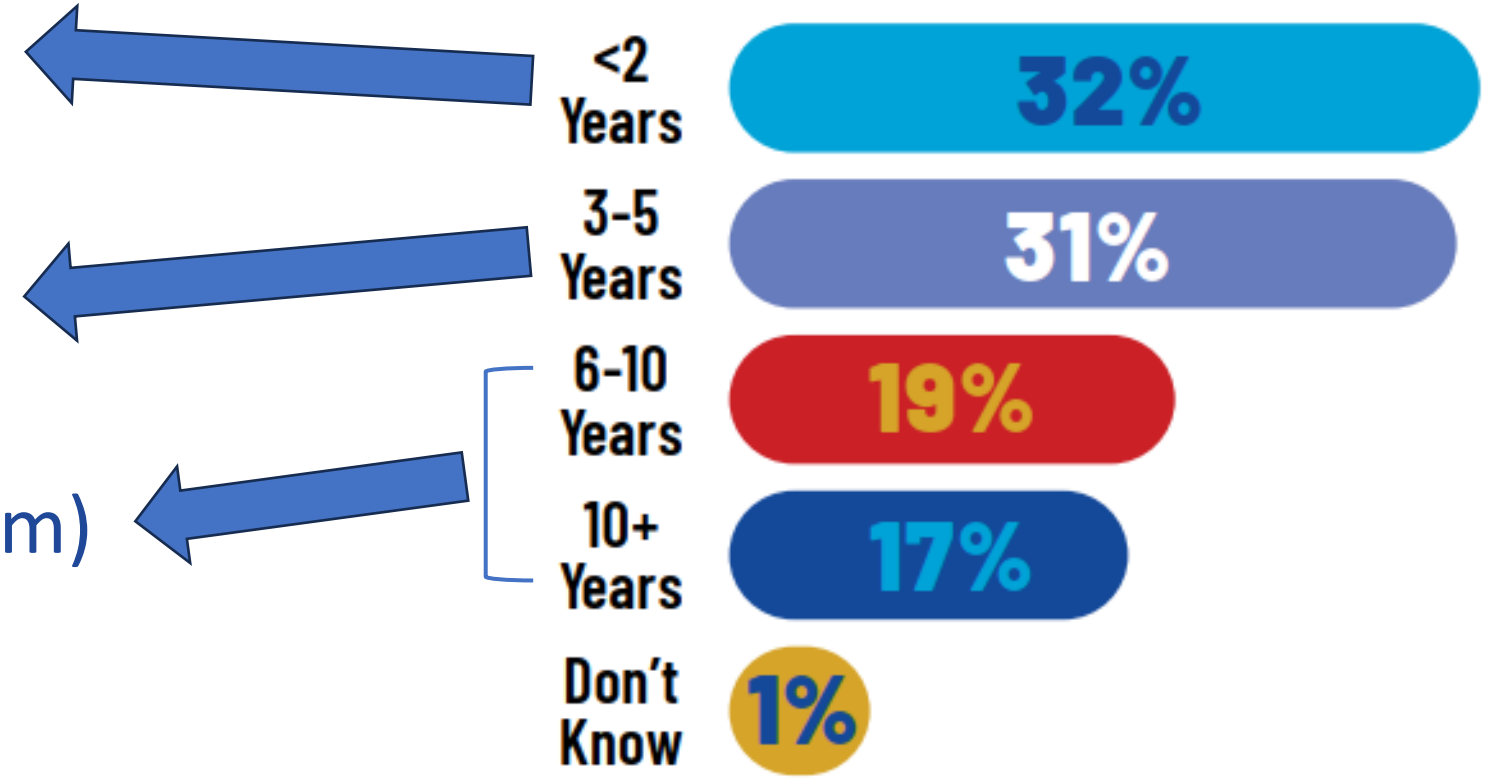
Coaching Lifecycle

- Only **1 in 3** coaches are still coaching after 5 years.
- *= Attrition is high!*



Three Lifecycle Stages

- New (0-1 Years)
- CORE (2-5 Years)
- Leaders (Long term)



Three Lifecycle Stages

Because it's harder to recruit volunteers in 2026, retaining a greater percentage of your volunteers year over year is your best strategy to meet your volunteer needs.



4. New Coaches/Volunteers





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Where new coaches come from

Why they volunteer

What they need to stay (transition)



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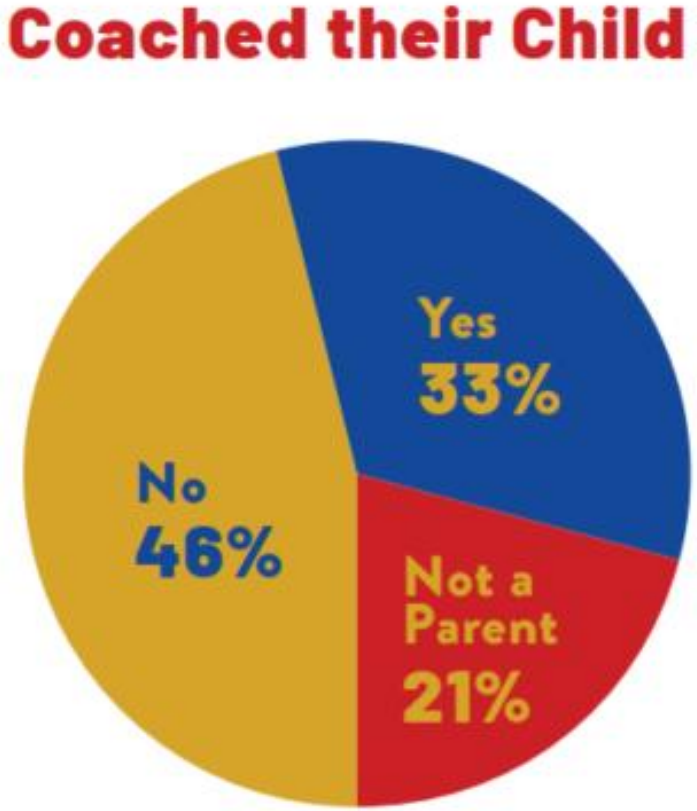
Where do Coaches Come From?

- Parents
- Transitioning Athletes
- Sports Enthusiasts

Parents make good coaches



98% who coach their own child say it is a positive experience

6 in 10 athletes say playing their primary sport is the highlight of their day.

When coached by a parent or guardian this number goes to **8 in 10**

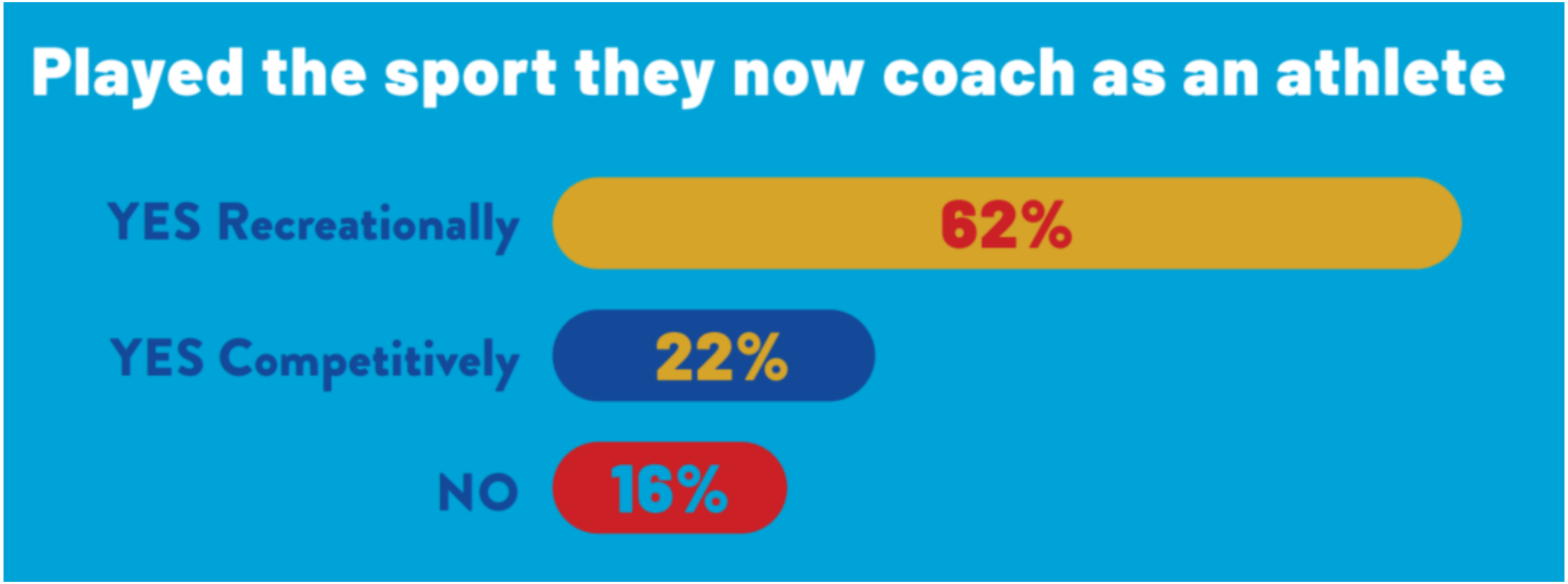
Parents make good coaches

1 in 6 athletes are coached by a parent or caregiver, and **1 in 3** parents have coached a sport in the past

1 in 8 male athletes (13%) are coached by their dad

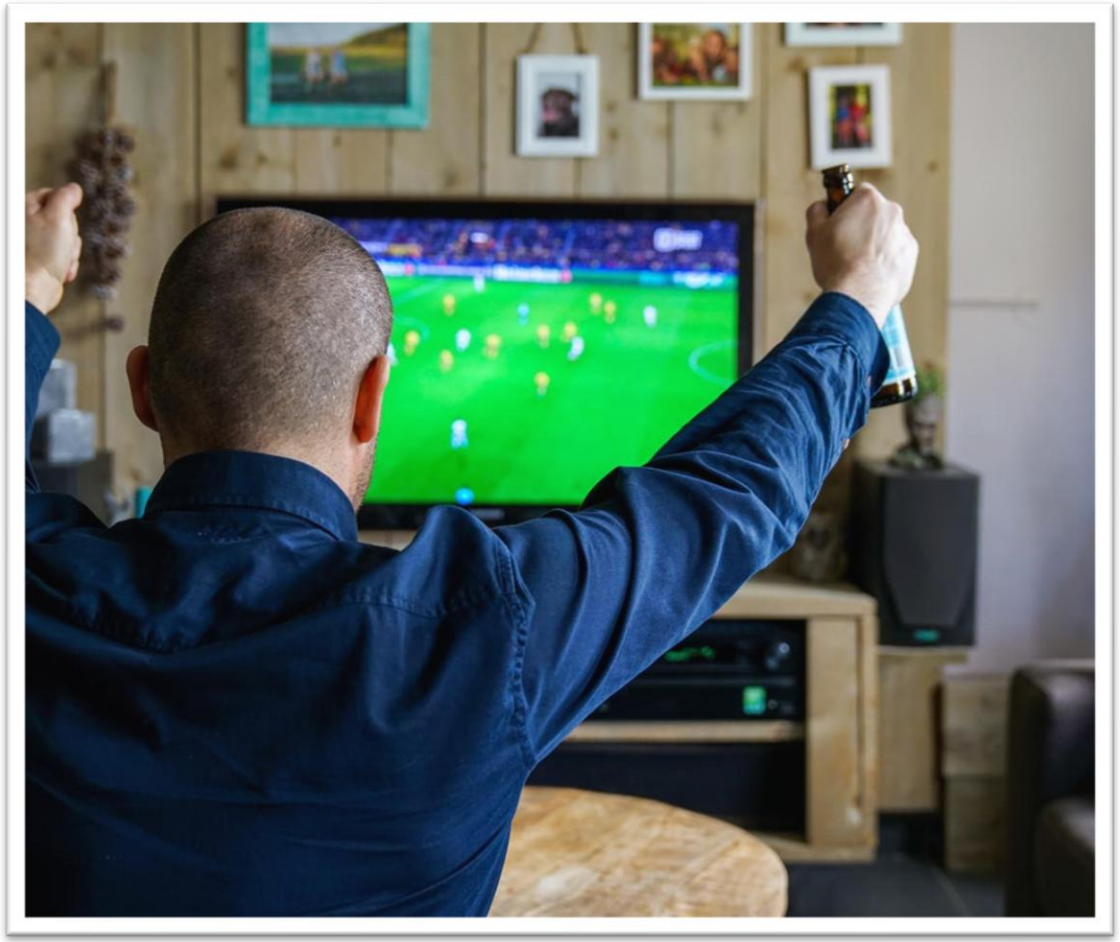
Only **1 in 100** female athletes (1%) are coached by their mom

Transitioning Athletes



Sport Enthusiast

Returning to the sport after a time away



Where do Coaches Come From?

- Parents
- Transitioning Athletes
- Sports Enthusiasts

Next: Why they coach

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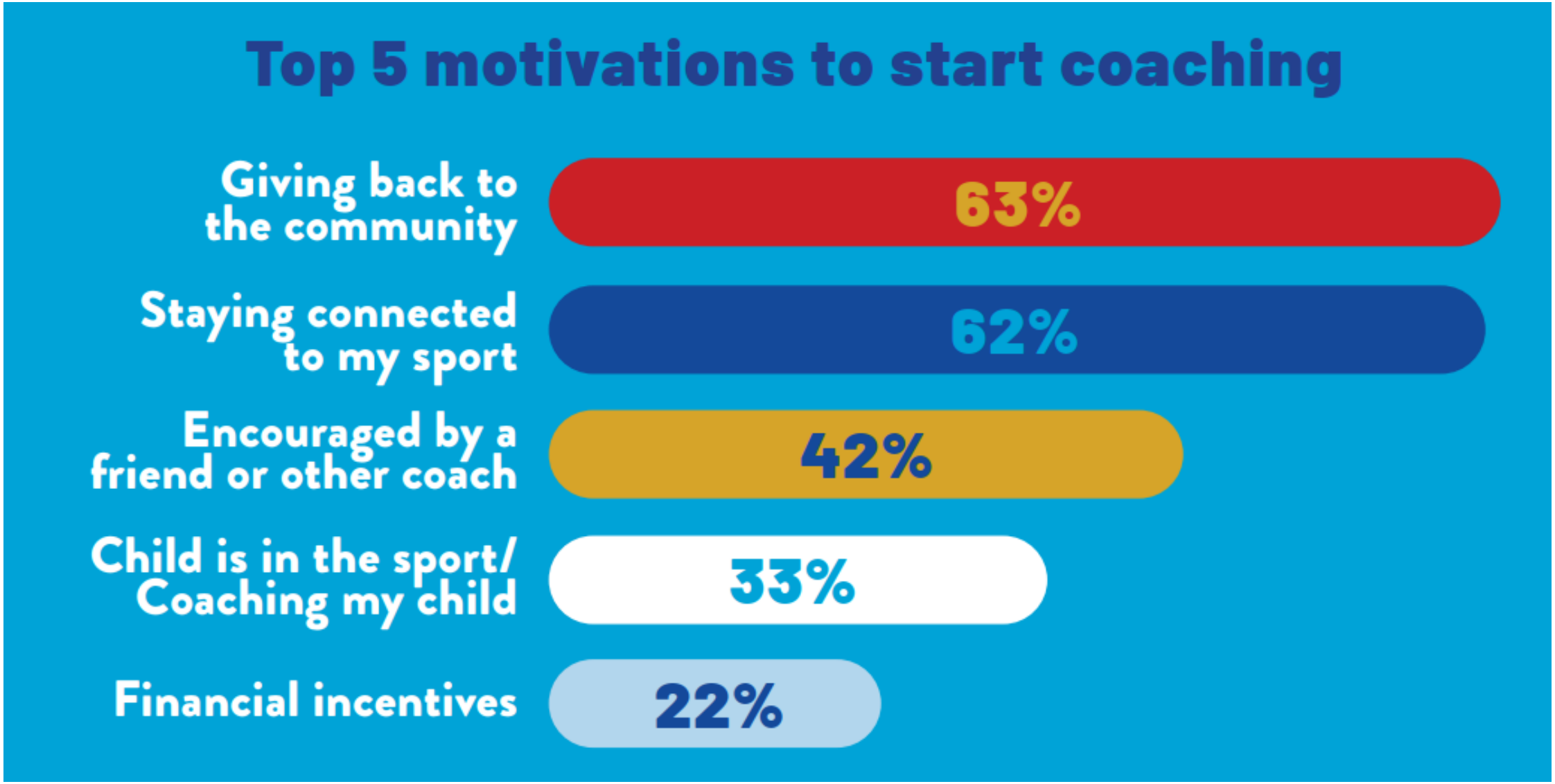
Top 5 motivations to start coaching



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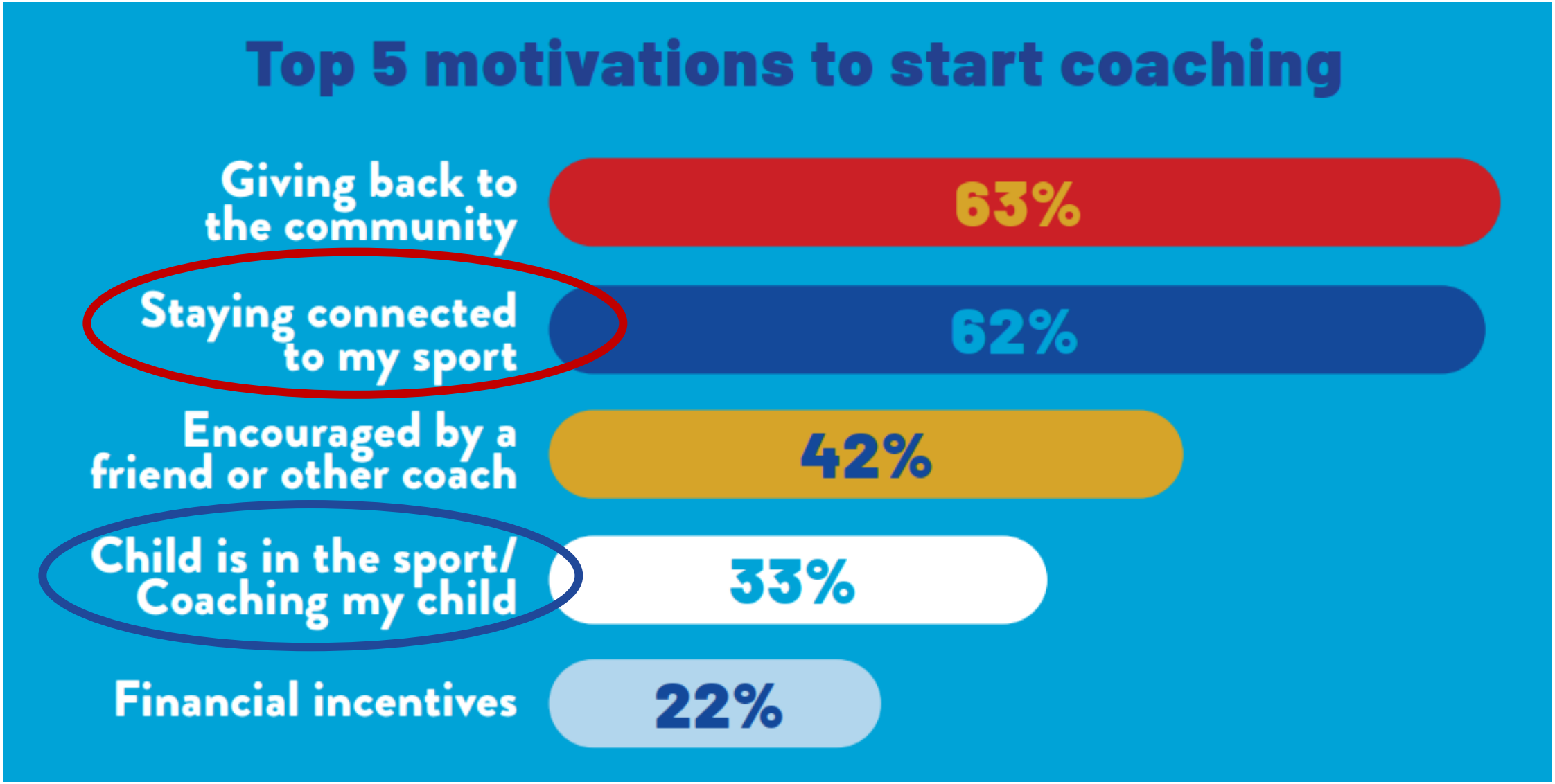

Recruitment

Different motivations require different approaches

- Parents
- Transitioning Athletes
- Sports Enthusiasts

Key Idea: Think of these three groups separately.
Your recruitment strategy needs three branches.

Recruitment

Parents

- Value to their child, extra connection, role modeling

Transitioning Athletes

- Resume/Leadership skills, staying in their sport, etc.
- Start while they are still athletes

Sport Enthusiasts

- Reconnecting with their sport, getting active, community

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9 in 10 (89%) feel that coaching has benefited them in areas of their life outside of sport

> **“Coaching helps with my depression and gives me a sense of self worth.”**

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Life benefits to coaching:





Next: Why they continue

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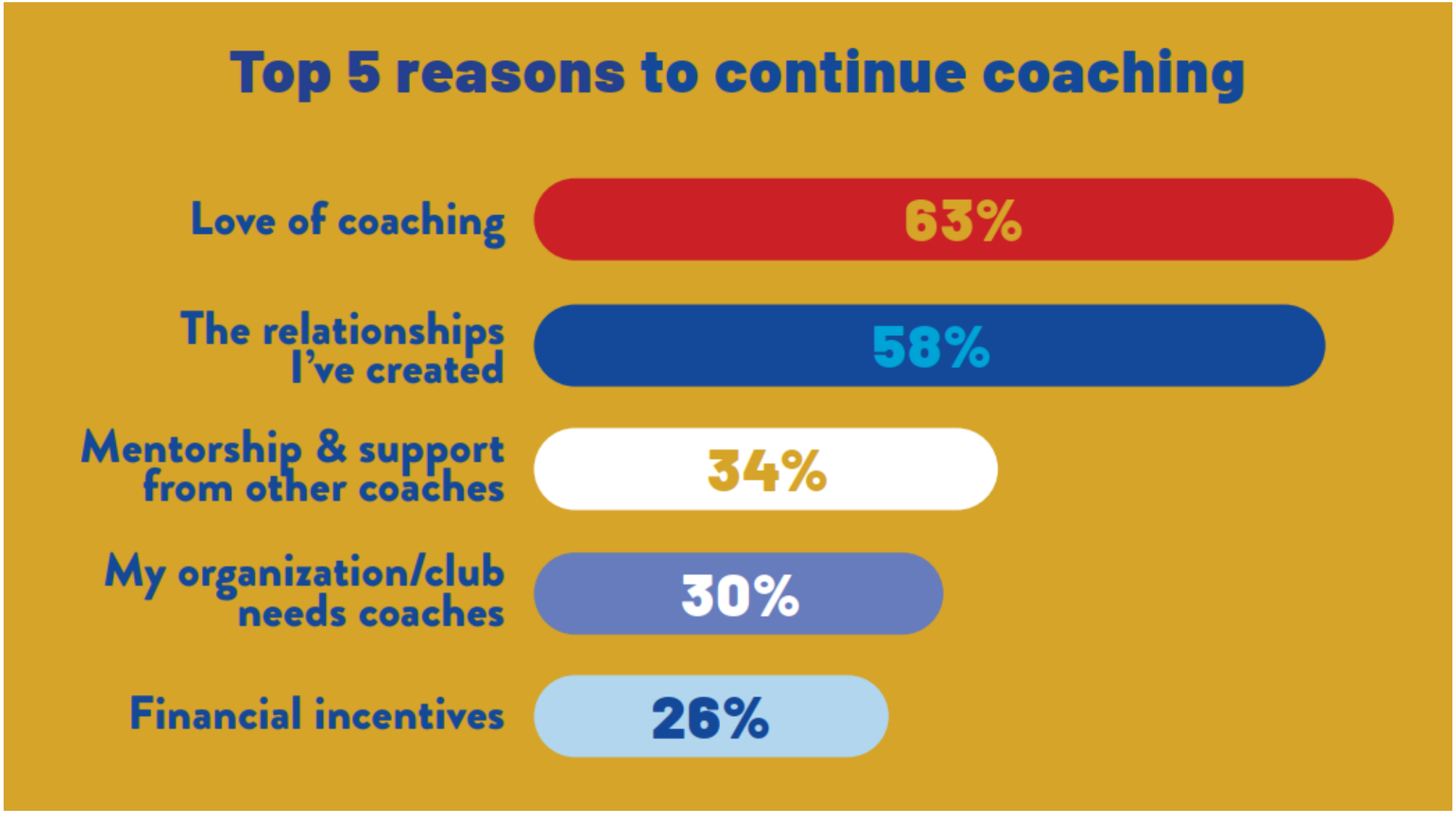
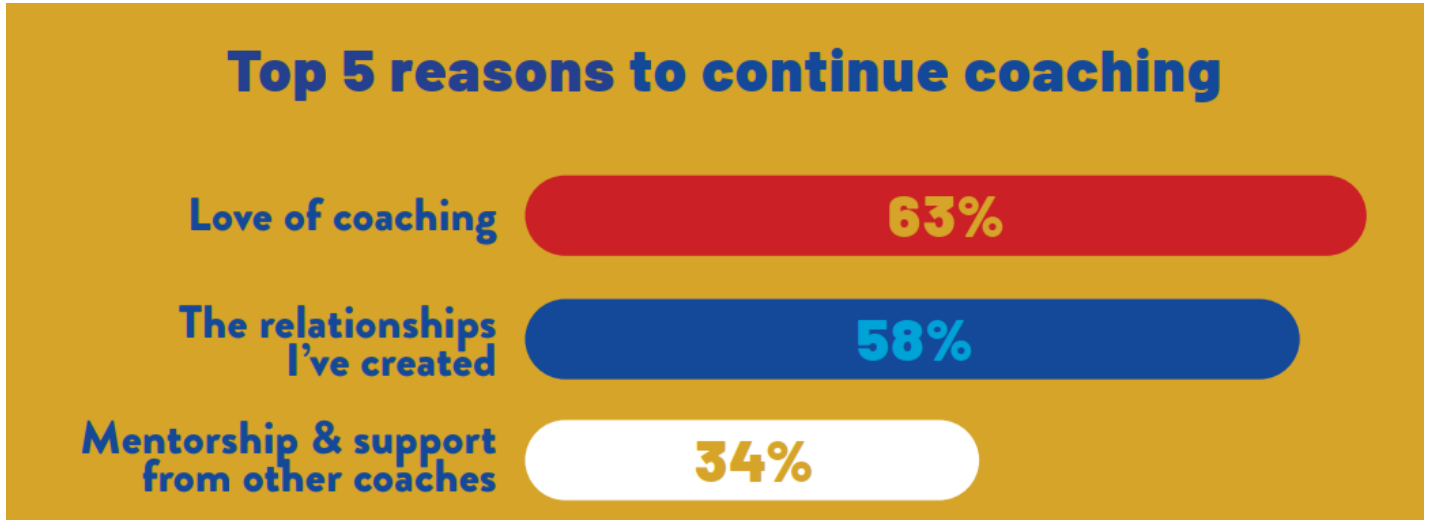


What they need to stay (transition)

- **Love Coaching** > Positive Experience
  - Positive Environment, Skills, Confidence
- **Relationships** > Feeling part of the community
- **Mentorship** > Mentorship, Support



What they need to stay (transition)

- Awesome onboarding process for new coaches/volunteers
- Get them a mentor ASAP (even just a community buddy)
- Engage them in your club/sport community right away
  - Go to them, don't wait for them to come to you
- Support with skills development right away
- Recognize them in their first year
- Tell them how valuable they are to the club (often)

Where new coaches come from

Why they volunteer

What they need to stay (transition)



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“I Like Coaching”



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5. CORE (2-5 Year Coaches)





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Challenges of retention

Investing in these coaches

Mentorship (Both Roles)

Identity: Transitioning them to lifetime coaches



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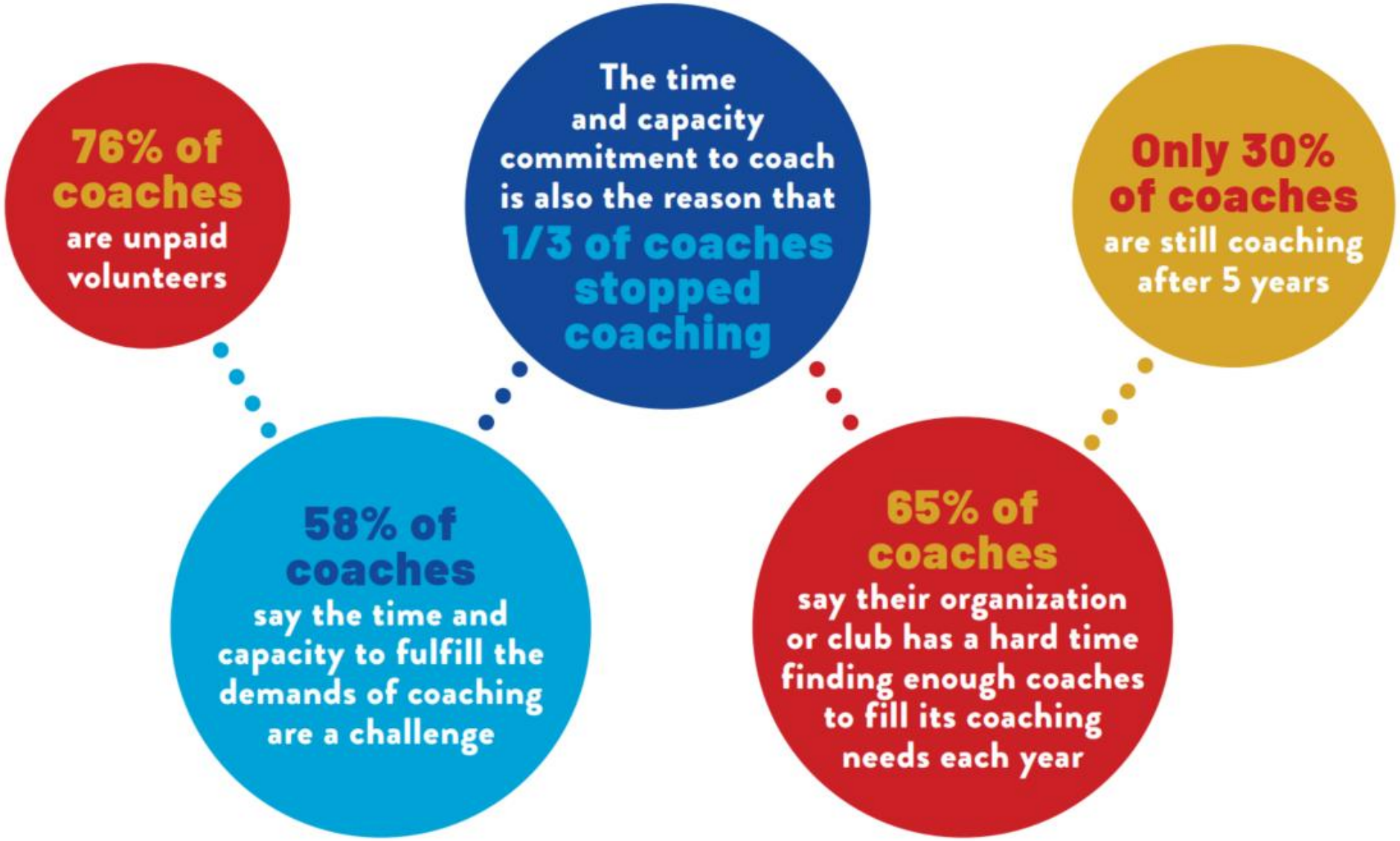

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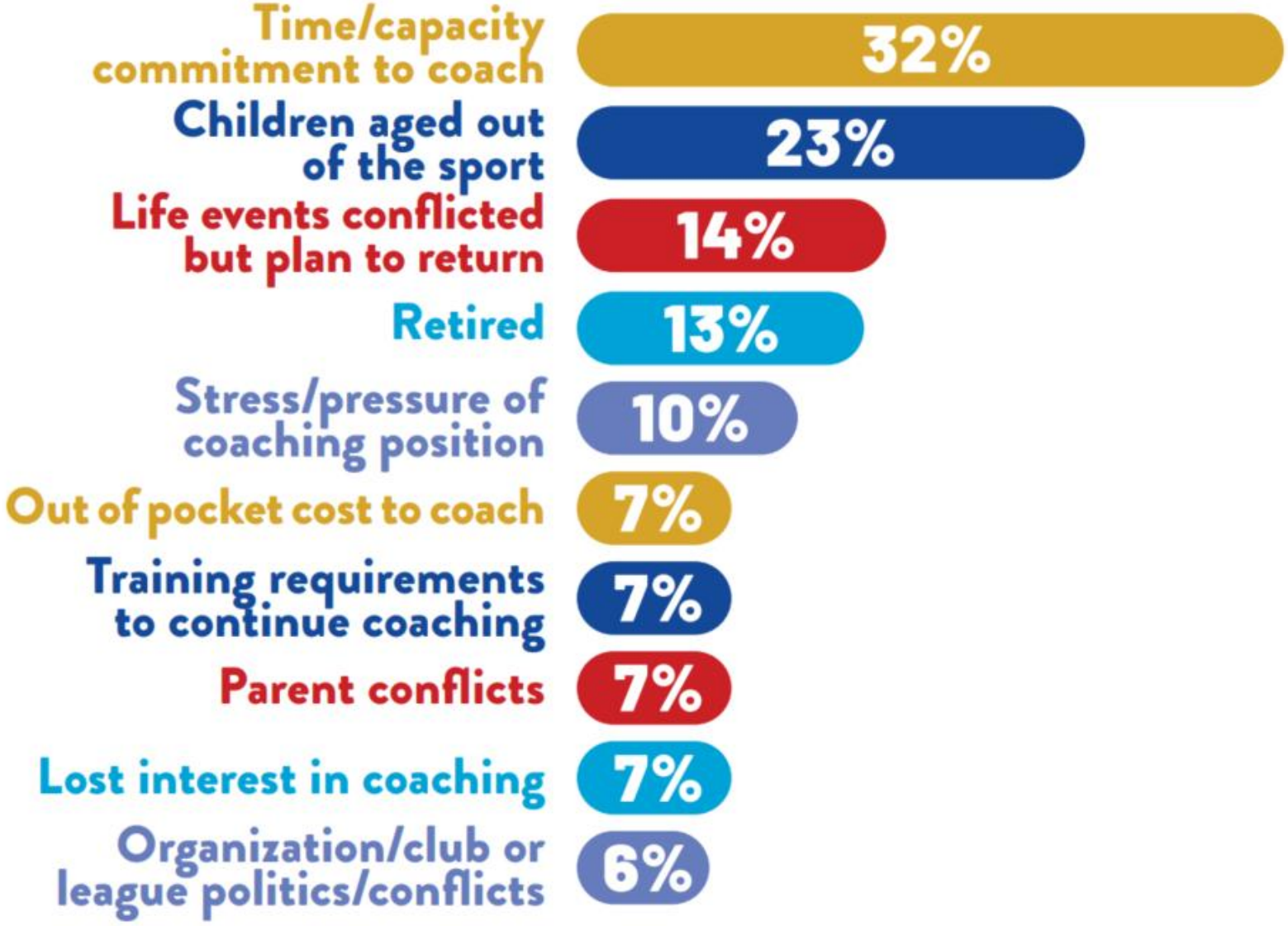
Top 10 Reasons why coaches stop coaching



The report data suggests that despite intrinsic rewards, coaching is often a demanding, costly, stressful, and challenging commitment for what is usually an unsupported volunteer position.

Goals for CORE Coaches/Volunteers

1. **Keep them engaged over the medium term** (2-4 years)
    - Investment & Support
    - Mentorship (as apprentice)

2. **Transition them to Lifetime Sport Leaders** (like you!)
    - Identity
    - Mentorship (as mentor)

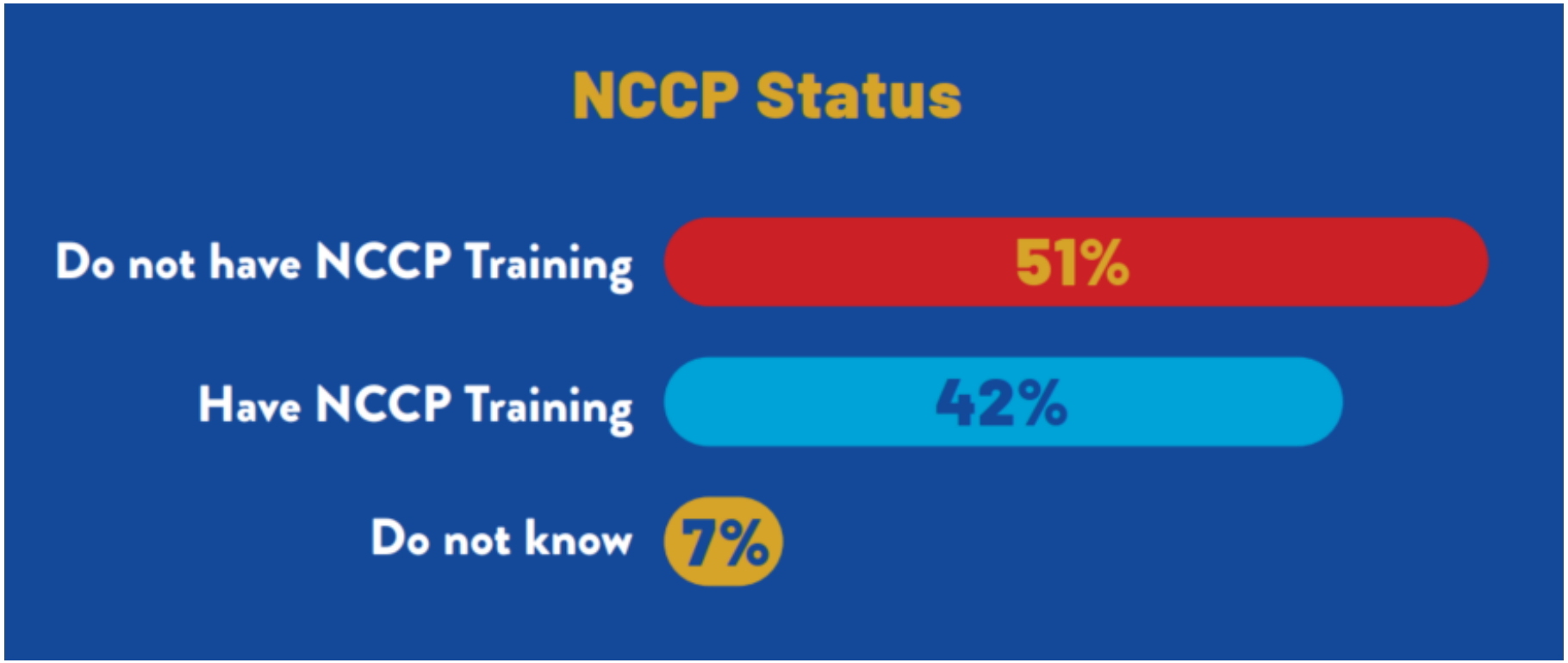
Investing in Your Volunteers

52% of coaches say that out-of-pocket costs to coach were challenging

- **45%** of coaches say their coaching duties create interference with other aspects of their life (e.g., family, friends, etc.).
- **35%** of coaches say when they coach, they often feel overwhelmed and stressed.

> **"It would help to have more volunteers to assist me so I can delegate some of the non-coaching tasks."**

Investing in Your Volunteers



Recognition

- Nothing secret here, just do it, do it often, and **not just your top people**
- Make a system/schedule so it doesn’t fall through the cracks.
- Dedicate someone to just this task

Mentorship

- “most youth coaches who remain coaches for numerous years found that being an assistant coach or having a mentor was vital to their longevity.”(1)
- A study on coach mentoring found that mentored coaches reported **higher satisfaction and stronger coach-athlete relationships**, which are predictors of long-term engagement.(2)

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354094845_Effects_of_a_Mentor_Program_for_Coaches_on_the_Coach-Athlete_Relationship/fulltext/6124ecc81e95fe241af14929/Effects-of-a-Mentor-Program-for-Coaches-on-the-Coach-Athlete-Relationship.pdf

Mentorship Resources



Mentor Guide

Download the Mentor Guide



Sport Administrator Guide

Download the Sport Administrator Guide



Mentee Guide

Download the Mentee Guide

www.coach.ca

Identity

- The shift from **role-based involvement** (“I am coaching”) to **identity-based involvement** (“I am a coach”) is a major factor in retention.

- Coaches who integrate the role into their self-concept are more likely to stay, invest in development, and resist burnout.

Identity

- Coaches who internalize coaching as part of their **core identity** (e.g., “I am a coach”) show **greater persistence and resilience**, compared to those who see it as a temporary role (“I am coaching”). (1)

- Identity-based commitment is linked to **higher satisfaction, stronger sense of purpose, and lower dropout rates**, because coaching becomes part of their self-concept rather than an external task. (2)

1. https://www.journalofcoachingethics.com/joce/article/view/10
2. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mariya-Yukhymenko/publication/357920660_The_role_of_coaching_identity_and_life_purpose_orientations_in_holistic_athlete_development/links/626b30bcd99ac24cc472aeab/The-role-of-coaching-identity-and-life-purpose-orientations-in-holistic-athlete-development.pdf

“I Like Coaching”



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“I am a Coach”



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Challenges of retention

Investing in these coaches

Mentorship (Both Roles)

Identity: Transitioning them to lifetime coaches



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6. Conclusion



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The Big Ideas

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is not a given anymore

You need a dedicated volunteer strategy

- Does your club have positions for Volunteer Recruitment? Retention? Recognition?
- Do you have an awesome onboarding process?
  - Fine, or Meh probably isn't going to cut it
- Are you supporting you coaches sufficiently?
- Do you have a mentorship program?
  - You should get one!
- Do you recognize your coaches/volunteers often?
  - Once a year is probably not sufficient anymore

The Big Ideas

Treat each stage of volunteerism separately

- New Volunteers
- CORE Volunteers
- Lifetime Volunteers

Be intentional about transitioning them through the lifecycle

The Big Ideas

Because it’s harder to recruit volunteers in 2025, retaining a greater percentage of your volunteers year over year is your best strategy to meet your volunteer needs.



7. Q&A

2025 Report



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