



Sharing Experiences and Advice on Successful Coaching Despite Inequity

After reviewing transcripts of interviews with Coach JoAnne Graf by researchers Brian Gearity and Melissa Murray, Bettina Callary was struck by her perseverance, love of coaching, and success. She decided to share Graf's stories of hardship and triumph, as well as her advice, to empower and educate other women coaches. Despite Graf coaching all her life in the United States, Callary believes, and we agree, that Graf's story offers insight to Canadian coaches, particularly on issues of women's rights, including her frequent refusal to go along with the status quo, which often undermines women coaches and women's sport. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* editor

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Sharing Experiences and Advice on Successful Coaching Despite Inequity

By Bettina Callary, Brian Gearity, and Melissa Murray

Coach JoAnne Graf, a retired head softball coach at Florida State University (FSU), began the interview by talking about Title IX, the 1972 anti-discrimination amendment to the constitution of the United States that provided greater opportunities for women students to participate as athletes in educational setting. However, the changes in women's sport had a negative impact on coaching opportunities for women. A longitudinal study of women in sport in the United States, and a study of intercollegiate athletics in Canada found that girls' and women's participation in sport is at an all-time high, but the percentage of women coaches is at an all-time low. Women coaching women's teams were the norm prior to Title IX. However, after Title IX, the salary and benefits associated with coaching women's teams increased, resulting in more male coaches applying for these positions. The decline in women coaches in the United States is apparent—from 90% in women's sport in 1972 to 44% in 1990. Men coaching men's sport remained at 99% during this time. Canadian statistics are equally low. In Canada, 33% of all sport coaches are women.

Turning specifically to Coach Graf's experiences, the following provides a brief synopsis of her coaching path. As a varsity softball athlete working on her undergraduate degree, Graf determined by the end of her junior year that she wanted to coach and push for equality.

In my playing career at FSU, our varsity team used to practice on the intramural field because we did not have a varsity field back then. When men's intramurals started, we got kicked off the field...I realized that the women were not being treated equally.

Graf then went to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and earned a master's degree in physical education with an emphasis in sport psychology. She wanted to help coach the softball program, but they already had an assistant coach. Instead, she was asked to serve as head coach of the men's and women's swimming and diving team. She had never swum competitively, but took the job. The following year she was asked to be the assistant coach for softball, a position she held for two years. This was a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III team and so the emphasis was not solely on winning, but on educating student-athletes through sport. She said: "I think my philosophy, which kind of got formed at Greensboro, was

that it's about the players; it's about working with the players and getting them to be a level above where they should be." She then applied for a position at FSU and coached there on one-year contracts for 30 years. During that time, Graf won a national title and became the all-time winningest collegiate softball coach. She noted that back at FSU, while conditions had improved for the softball team, it was still not equal to the baseball team.

We got a field, a nice field, but we had no locker room. The baseball team would always have more assistants than we would have. I had a part-time assistant for years who finally had to leave because they would never make her full-time. The male coaches would have cars, but the women would not have cars. The new men's coach who had just gotten here got a car, but I had been here five years [without getting a car].

Graf used these variable experiences to continue learning as a coach, and credits much of her success to this approach. She would watch other coaches at tournaments, talk to coaches, watch a lot of professional baseball on TV, and try different things to see what worked and what did not. She reflected often on her practice. She taught values and ethics to help her student-athletes become good people.

I think that's the one thing that I'm probably more proud of than anything else, that the athletes I coached all seemed to be very successful, very happy, and very confident young women. That means more to me than the championships and the trophies.

Graf's Coaching Methodology

Graf discussed learning to coach and improving upon existing inequities, and provided advice for women to negotiate the coaching profession. The following are her (a) experiences of inequities, (b) advice on how to deal with injustice, and (c) tips that demonstrate how she built a successful practice.

A1. Lack of administrative support

Graf explained that she often did not have support from the administration. She reported being labelled "in trouble", a term concocted by the administration and used always after she had reported a violation or had asked about alleviating inequities. She understood the message quite clearly to be: "You need to just be happy with what you have; just be quiet." Administrators said things such as: "I don't understand why you're not happy because you're winning", "You've got a nice facility: what more do you want?", or "What this other program is doing is none of your business." She attributes her ability to speak out about inequities to her winning record. "We were one of the more successful teams on campus, so it would have been very difficult for an athletic director to get rid of me. Honestly, winning was the only protection I had." She noted that dealing with administrators who did not follow the spirit of Title IX was very challenging, "more frustrating for me as a coach and more stressful than the actual coaching part."

I didn't get along with administrators who wouldn't fight for women's rights...I really had some issues with them because they were in positions to help women's rights and yet chose not to.

A2. Societal norms

Graf noted that society still thinks of men as authority figures, more controlling and demanding, and therefore, better coaches. Further, women who have never been coached by women think of coaches as male, which promotes the norm that all coaches should be men.

There's a societal norm that male coaches are better coaches than women and that women don't deserve as much money because usually women's sports are not as well attended as men's sports...we continue to pay the male coaches more and yet most coaches are doing the same amount of work.

She explained the no-win job situation women coaches experience:



Women are shying from male coaching jobs and now they're shut out from approximately half of the women's coaching jobs. We really lose those strong female role models, which then discourages women from going into coaching. There have been situations, for example, with the softball national team, where they've had all male coaches and the women finally quit applying for those jobs saying: "This is stupid. They keep hiring men and so I'm not wasting my time anymore." A lot of very qualified women quit applying for those jobs.

She also explained that she witnessed male coaches being paid more than women coaches for the same sport.

Because the women's golf coach had been here longer than the men's golf coach, [when they combined the two programs] they had to make the women's coach [who was female] the head coach, so they made the men's golf coach the director of golf so that they could pay him more money. Now they've done the same thing with the volleyball coaches.

A3. Family first

The literature on women coaches suggests that women may choose not to remain in coaching because of family concerns. Graf was quick to rebut:

I don't really buy that argument...A lot of single women want to coach...There are many women who don't have children who want to coach...I'm sure there are male coaches around this country who have children. I find it really interesting that we tend to think that women aren't going to go into coaching because they have kids...If you want to say that women are more nurturing, I buy that, but I think there are so many single women who want to coach so let's just take that out of the equation...I've known too many women who want to get into coaching who aren't getting the opportunity because men with lower qualifications are getting hired.

A4. Fear

Graf spoke at length about times when she would speak up against inequality, protected from retaliation because of her winning record. She said that fear is a major obstacle to equality:

When coaches speak out about inequities, they fear a loss of job...I think that when you're successful, you can speak out a little bit more than if you're not successful. Some coaches would not speak out because they were not quite as successful, and they didn't want to get fired. They felt that they were on that line where they were winning enough to keep their job but they weren't winning enough that they couldn't be replaced.

She explained that she had the opportunity to learn from a strong role model:

Dr. Billy Jones was a tenured professor and she didn't get paid to coach. But because she had tenure, she was able to speak up without fear of losing her job, and she did so. She would always push to try to get things done, but it took a long time...If you don't have protection, then basically when you raise questions about things that are unfair, administration just gets rid of you and then you lose your livelihood. I think that's a real fear, especially today, with the economy being so bad.

B. Dealing with inequities

Graf offered several ideas about dealing with inequities:

- **Document everything.**



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I think documentation is one of the things that helped me. That may sound kind of negative, like you are anticipating problems, but documentation just gives you a paper trail to protect yourself. Use statistics from your conference, the school in your region, big rivals of yours, or other national calibre schools. That protects you a little bit because you're really just stating facts.

- **Get administration to commit.**

I had an AD (athletic director) who wanted me to recruit more in-state. Well, the reason that he did was financial, because in-state scholarships are significantly less expensive than out-of-state scholarships. And I asked him, "Do you still want me to compete for a national championship?" ... Well, he did. And I said, "Okay then I still have to recruit out west." And so he backed off. Getting your administration to make a commitment to you is really important. Where do they want your program to go? I think you have to put it on their shoulders a little bit and get them to commit to you where they want you, and then fund you accordingly.

- **Find an advocate within the athletic department/team.**

For example, if there is a high-profile parent and their kid plays on your team and, for example, you don't have a locker room, the parent can go to the AD and say, "Look, I have a problem with this" and they bring it up, not you... You deflect a little bit...

- **Lawsuit**

The last resort, of course, is a lawsuit. Those have not been very successful and I think if you get to that point, you have to be ready to probably either get fired or have to leave the situation.

- **Leave and go to another institution.**

If you're not getting the things you need to be successful, or you're not being treated fairly, then you can leave. I think [women's loyalty] hurt women in coaching quite a bit. I've talked to many female coaches, they've all said that we don't leave and the men will leave... Women do not 'float'; that is, "Hey, I am being interviewed by so-and-so. I need a raise." And I think men coaches have done that very well.

C. Tips for building a successful practice

Graf said, "A lot of people ask me 'how are you successful in coaching'? I don't think it was any kind of magic formula." She gave advice on being successful while explaining what she thought made her successful:

- **Start in a place where there is less pressure to win.**

When I first started coaching there wasn't any outside pressure to win...if I made a mistake, nobody worried about it too much. As coaching changed, I was changing with it. So I was acclimatizing along the way...If all of a sudden coaches are going from playing to recruiting and coaching year-round and working on the weekends, then they haven't had time to acclimate. So starting in a division three school, I think, was one thing that kind of helped me.

- **Love what you do.**

I really loved it...I loved it because it was a challenge. It was fun. I loved watching games...I think loving what you do is a key to success. If you are going to work in athletics, you know you make sacrifices. You do not get the vacations that a lot of people get. You do not get the time at home that a lot of people get because you are travelling, you are working hard for the sport.



- **Recruit well and manage the talent.**

You can get talent, but can you make the talent better? Can you get talent to work together and have the same goals and challenge them to be better? We did that. But if I had been a bad recruiter, I would not have been as good a coach...The quality of our athletes raised everybody up because you couldn't rest on your laurels. If you did, the kid behind you was going to bump you off.

- **Play against the best and work hard.**

We played a national calibre schedule. I would try to play the best teams in the country that I could afford to play...I put in a lot of time working with the athletes, building up their confidence and challenging them, making practice fun so they liked coming, and recruiting those kids who loved the sport.

- **Hire great assistant coaches as staff.**

Having good assistant coaches is a big key for helping you be successful, as well as having a good staff to help you and be loyal to you.

- **Keep your priorities straight.**

Students had their priorities straight and that was education first and then athletics second...I always expected my athletes to go to class. I always tried to recruit athletes who were actually good students...I think to convince the women that they need to do well academically was not so hard because they don't have much of a future in professional sport...if women had the opportunity to make millions of dollars [in sports, like men do], I don't know that the women would finish their four years either. But we don't have that temptation.

- **Explain "why".**

I think a lot of coaches don't want to take the time to explain the "why" to people; they just want to tell them what to do and have them do it. But if athletes understand the "why" then they can self-analyze and then when they're doing a drill by themselves and nobody's over there watching, they can self-correct.

- **Reflect.**

How are you going to beat the other team at some point? What are you going to do strategy-wise to neutralize their strengths? How are people beating them? Then try using some of those things...just try to become more knowledgeable as a coach.

- **Do not take shortcuts or cheat.**

Be competitive, but in the right way, and know there are no shortcuts. If you cheat, you are going to eventually get caught.

- **Coach to your personality.**

Be true to yourself. Your philosophy needs to be consistent. I cared. I think I was fair to kids. I listened. I never held grudges. Everything has to be in alignment with what your philosophy is. Learn from those who are successful that you admire.

And finally,

- **Prepare for what you are going to do after you get out of coaching.**

Graf went back to school and earned a PhD so she could teach at the university. Her message is that you should know your strengths and work on developing them in order to have other potential plans when you decide to retire from coaching.

Graf's successful coaching career was built on hard work, standing up for inequities, striving for excellence and success, and searching for knowledge and development. Her experiences can help both Canadian as well as American female coaches to further understand how to deal with injustices and inspire coaches to be successful in their own practice.

References available upon request.

About the author

Bettina Callary, PhD, is an assistant professor in the department of Community Studies, Sport and Human Kinetics, at Cape Breton University. Her research interests include coach learning and development, especially marginalized coaches or coaches of marginalized athletes, coach education and professionalization, and coaches' understanding and implementation of LTAD. She is an alpine ski coach with a National Coaching Institute certificate in High Performance Coaching.

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Melissa Murray, PhD, is also an assistant professor at USM and the program coordinator for the Sport Coaching Education program. She has three years of collegiate coaching experience, is a Level 1 ASA Softball Coach, and a Certified Consultant through the Association of Applied Sport Psychology. She serves on the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance's Sport Steering Committee as a Coaching representative. Her areas of research include coach development through the internship and coaching ethics.