

Striving for Gender Equity in Coaching: Female Athletes' Perspectives on Pursuing Coaching as a Career

This article builds on the considerable body of scholarly work of the past decade that promotes coaching as a desirable career choice for female athletes. The authors' confirmation that these women continue to make other career choices is troubling. Commonsense and attainable recommendations complement well numerous others found throughout past *Journal* articles and elsewhere, notably in the work of University of Toronto professors Bruce Kidd and Peter Donnelly on gender equity in Canada's interuniversity sport system. The *Journal* urges a unified effort to creating an environment where female athletes perceive and pursue coaching as an attractive career option. — *Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor*

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Striving for Gender Equity in Coaching: Female Athletes' Perspectives on Pursuing Coaching as a Career

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The dearth of women in coaching at all levels of sport has been consistently highlighted in Canada and internationally; in fact, the pursuit of gender equity in coaching has been an ongoing concern for over 50 years. Although numerous important recommendations have been proposed previously to address this concern, we focused specifically on the recommendation to re-consider the recruitment process. Various authors have proposed that competitive female

athletes represent an untapped resource from which to recruit potential coaches. A recent study of Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) athletic directors indicated an interest in learning more about whether or not graduating female athletes consider coaching as a career, and if not, why? As a result, we sought to examine this important question as well as to better understand female athletes' perspectives on coaching as a career option.

Nine current and recently retired CIS female athletes were interviewed about their perspectives on a coaching career. Interviews aimed to stimulate discussion about their vision of a coaching career, perceived benefits and challenges associated with pursuing coaching, whether they were actively pursuing a coaching career, and whether or not they saw coaching as a viable career option. Three main findings emerged:

- None were considering a career in coaching. Each gave the same bold response: "I am not considering coaching as my career." "I never seriously considered it, no." "It's not a traditional career." "I have definitely thought about it, just not as a full-time career."
- The reasons included wanting to pursue careers in the areas in which they were studying academically and had academic and professional interests aside from sport, the deterrents of perceived male dominance, and a perceived lack of financial resources in coaching.
- If presented with an opportunity to coach, they would pursue it.

Alternative Career Aspirations

The most commonly reported reason for not actively pursuing coaching as a career was to follow their university academic interests professionally. One athlete said: "I really enjoy the sport, but I wouldn't want it as a career, I like it more as a hobby than teaching it ... and when I'll be done [with sport] I'll be done [with sport]."

Another athlete agreed and explained that when she finishes her CIS career, "I would like to move somewhere else with my focus." The 'other' focus for most was their academic interests. Since the athletes interviewed were all working towards completing a university degree, or had recently graduated with a university degree, their career interests were primarily situated in their academic



field of study. For example, one athlete said: “As of now, I really love kids; I would love to be somewhere like a [hospital] where it’s rehab or working with kids with developmental delays or something like that. That’s more of where I see myself.” It is curious that this athlete, with an interest in working with young people and those with special needs, would not contemplate a coaching career where there is a high demand for working with such young people.

Also noteworthy were the athletes who currently coach as a part-time job throughout their university education and who are willing to give up their coaching positions to pursue their academic interests. For example, one athlete explained: “At first I was really liking coaching and coaching was a really good job, but after my second year at university, a lot of my friends started to get jobs in their fields and I thought ‘Okay, I want to do something like that’. Maybe it’s because of that mindset that I didn’t enjoy coaching that much anymore.”

It is also perplexing that the athletes hadn’t considered coaching as a potential career option given the current landscape of a competitive job market and difficulties acquiring positions in one’s academic field of study. Furthermore, it could be argued that given the paucity of women in coaching, they could be far more competitive applicants for coaching positions.

Male dominance of sport acts as a deterrent

The athletes said that a male dominant culture in sport was a perceived barrier to pursuing coaching as a career as well as a contributor to leaving current coaching positions. One athlete described her notion of what it might look like for a female coach in a male-dominated sport setting, stating: “If you’re a player [and] you played at the women’s level ... [Guys] would for sure say ‘Well, you don’t get it’. For example, if you made a decision, they would say ‘That’s the wrong decision’.” This athlete perceived female coaches as being viewed by male coaches as being less knowledgeable and credible.

Another athlete discussed her current frustration working with males in her sport environment saying: “I get frustrated with a lot of males [in the coaching profession]. For example, my boss, I had to hunt him down to give me my schedule, hunt him down to get paid, hunt him down to respond to emails ...” She added: “It’s kind of a demeaning environment, and there’s a lot of men in it. Just

the feeling that the guys would always think ‘I know more than you’ and not state that, but act that way. When I was younger, I knew I didn’t know anything because I was young, but now I have been in coaching for five years and I’ve seen things that work, I’m a player myself. I’m not perfect ... but a lot of times I feel patronized.”

One athlete dropped out of coaching because of frustrations with the male dominance she experienced. She explained: “I think the problem is that [sport] is run by a lot of males and, sorry if this sounds mean, but a lot of dumb males and people who haven’t been to university ... All of these middle-aged men who think they know everything, meanwhile they are spelling things wrong in their emails, not giving you your schedules on time ... that environment has really turned me off from [coaching] ...” Each athlete expressed concern, directly or indirectly, about a lack of professionalism in the coaching ranks.

There’s no money in coaching

Low income was perceived as an unattractive aspect of a career in coaching. About barriers, one athlete said: “Probably income. To start off coaching ... to get the experience you need to make a career of it, it would have to be all volunteering at first. So if you want to 100% pursue [coaching], well, you’re not getting paid at first so making a living off would be hard.”

Many athletes agreed: “Finding a job that pays, that pays enough, is a challenge. I don’t think you would be able to find one that pays enough to solely coach.” One athlete made the interesting point that coaching is not a traditional career, which she found to be off-putting. She added: “Nobody talks about how to make money off of it.” Athletes’ perceptions that coaching positions are poorly paid is consistent with the university female athletes’ views from a similar study conducted in 2004. However, the 2014 athletes suggest there is also a lack of conversation that may help to educate female athletes on how to achieve financial stability in the coaching profession. A conversation with female athletes about the financial aspects of coaching may improve recruitment.

But when opportunity knocks ...

Given that these athletes were not considering coaching as a viable career option, it was interesting that they would pursue coaching if presented with an

opportunity. One athlete admitted: “I think if [a job] was offered to me, I would take it ...”

Another said: “If there were more opportunities for me in [my sport], I would pursue [coaching]. If I could in a perfect world be a full-time coach for a club, university, or provincial team, I would do it, for sure. I would take the required courses, I would get my levels, and I would pursue it. That would be my motivation for sure.” She explained that there are few opportunities right now and people who are taking up coaching positions are not leaving them, resulting in limited opportunities for young people like herself to enter the profession. It was clear from the findings that these athletes were not considering coaching as an option in large part because they did not perceive there to be opportunities for them.

Guiding female athletes to a fulfilling career in coaching

It is informative that while these graduating/recently graduated female athletes are not currently considering coaching as a career, they claim they would pursue coaching if an opportunity was presented, despite perceived barriers such as male dominance and uncertain financial rewards. One may deduce that these athletes are not pursuing coaching as a career because they do not perceive opportunities to be available to them. The challenge, therefore, is to convey to females while still athletes that opportunities exist and that coaching is a viable career option.

In addition, female athletes would benefit from further information and guidance about ways to pursue these coaching opportunities if we hope to see more women in coaching. Implementing such a career structure would have to begin while the female is still competing as an athlete so as to not lose her to alternative interests or career pursuits. CIS athletic directors support this recommendation and propose, “An intentional formal process to recruit, train, and apprentice female coaches during [their] intercollegiate or Olympic careers ...”.

The intentional preparation of current female athletes for future careers in coaching should be created through opportunities to work with more senior or experienced coaches. This would involve providing opportunities for female athletes to assist mentor coaches, work with youth athletes, or work with

developmental squads while still competing as athletes. Issues specific to female coaches should be addressed, such as those identified in the literature, including male control of the sport, lack of role models, lesbo-phobia, job insecurity, low salaries, gender-based violence, work-life balance, employer's reluctance to hire female coaches, and stereotypes of women's inability to hold elite coaching positions. Such a career structure would allow female athletes to gradually acquire both the practical and theoretical knowledge as well as the insight required to enter and successfully navigate the coaching profession.

Creating opportunities for women in coaching, guiding female athletes in particular to these opportunities, and mentoring them while they're taking advantage of these opportunities have implications for the structure of sport and coaching education. Integrating coaching education and opportunities within university kinesiology/physical education/sport studies programs seems intuitive given the disciplinary knowledge disseminated in growth and development, sport psychology and physiology, and pedagogy, all of which have relevance to coaching. Furthermore, many CIS female athletes complete degrees in kinesiology-related programs. As such, there appears to be a wealth of untapped expertise currently in existence. If these university programs formed partnerships with provincial and national sport governing bodies to provide practical coaching experiences, the professional preparation of female athletes into the coaching career would be enhanced.

If opportunities are what female athletes require in order to pursue coaching as a career, it seems incumbent upon sport governing bodies and university sport programs to work together to design, implement, and deliver a purposeful career structure that provides these opportunities.

Our Recommendations

Our findings suggest that the following steps would enhance the recruitment of female athletes into coaching:

- Develop recruitment strategies that focus on female athletes with the predisposition to become coaches.
- Recruit male coaches and administrators as supporters and mentors of young female coaches.

- Delineate and communicate the path towards a career in coaching for female athletes.
- Offer opportunities to apprentice within the coaching role.
- Partner practical coaching experience with offers of formal theoretical training in the form of courses, workshops, and seminars.

About the Authors

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References available upon request