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### **Examining the Benefits of Female-to-Female Mentorship as a Result of Participation in a Female Coach Mentorship Program**

As was noted in the January 2016 issue of the Journal (<http://www.coach.ca/canadian-journal-for-women-in-coaching-p154726>), mentorship was a pervasive theme of “The 2015 Conversation on Women and Sport” that took place in Quebec City in June 2015 (<http://www.coach.ca/canadian-journal-for-women-in-coaching-p154726>). Delegates agreed overwhelmingly on the need for well-structured mentorship programs that meet the needs of both the mentor coaches and the apprentice coaches.

Such a program is running successfully in Nova Scotia through its Department of Health and Wellness. A unique program in Canada, the Female Coach Mentorship Program (FCMP) is specific in its goals: to increase the number of qualified women coaches at the performance level and to support community and provincial coaches in improving their coaching skills, enhancing their coaching experience, and attaining higher levels of coaching certification.

This article reports on a study of the first apprentice coaches to have completed the FCMP. As authors Madeline Belding and Ann Dodge discovered, the FCMP goals are being met to such an extent that “mentorship can be confirmed as having a significant positive impact on the experiences of the women coaches ...” It is to be hoped that this Nova Scotia success story will encourage other jurisdictions to take similar action. — Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

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### **Examining the Benefits of Female-to-Female Mentorship as a Result of Participation in a Female Coach Mentorship Program**

By Madeline Belding and Ann Dodge

Despite increases in funding and opportunities for women to participate in sport, there remains a substantial gender gap in coaching in Canada, with men far outnumbering women; the discrepancy is especially apparent at higher levels of sport. Based on data from 2013 across all sports in Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), women occupied 17% of head coach positions and 22% of assistant coach positions. Focusing solely on CIS women’s sports, 32% of head coaches were women, a 2% decrease from the 2011 data, and just under half of assistant coach positions were occupied by women (49%).

In attempting to identify the barriers women coaches face, researchers commonly cite the ‘old-boy network’, a term that describes an informal system of support and friendship through which men use their positions of influence to provide opportunities to other men based on gender rather than experience or qualification. Consequently, women often find themselves on the outside looking in, excluded from information, and blocked from available coaching positions and opportunities for advancement. As they recognize the exclusionary nature of coaching, women are often deterred from pursuing the already limited coaching positions available to them.

In recent years, various sport organizations have created mentorship programs in order to increase the number of women coaches. Such programs are seen as an effective method of supporting aspiring women coaches. Gaining access to female role models and seeking their support and connections has enhanced the desire to coach and pursue coaching at higher levels. Women who have been coached by a woman often perceive the coaching profession as less intimidating than those coached by men. Seeing successful women reinforces the belief that women can succeed at the elite levels.

This article draws on a study that examined a specific program to determine whether participation in a female coach mentorship program is advantageous for women coaches. It explores the potential benefits gained through such involvement. It argues that establishing a supportive 'girls club' through involvement in a mentorship program can supply women with the same benefits as the old-boy network provides to male coaches.

The program under review is the Female Coach Mentorship Program (FCMP), an ongoing initiative supported by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness. The FCMP was established to address the dearth of women coaches in sport in Nova Scotia, particularly in the performance pathway, which encompasses coaches who aspire to coach at high levels of sport. The FCMP supports and empowers women coaches who are pursuing coach certification, specifically advanced National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) certification in their chosen sport. In addition to receiving support, encouragement, and networking opportunities from their mentor coach and others, participants receive financial support during the FCMP. For their part, coaches commit to attending professional development sessions that focus on developing their coaching philosophy, examination of ethical coaching practices, effective communication, and potential challenges and barriers they could face as practicing coaches. Each segment of the FCMP runs for 12 months.

Coaches are assigned a female mentor coach who provides ongoing support throughout the 12 months. The mentor coaches are current high-level coaches in the province who have vast experience in their respective sports and who expressed interest in mentoring young or less-experienced coaches. The role of the mentor coach is to provide support, impartial advice, and feedback throughout the duration of the program. The mentor coaches and mentees are paired based on involvement in the same sport if possible; however, in most cases, the mentor and the mentee come from different sports.

### **Methodology**

Through a province-wide selection process, 19 candidates were identified by their respective Provincial Sport Organizations (PSOs) for participation in the FCMP. Of these, eight coaches expressed interest in being involved in a study of their experiences with the FCMP (which forms the basis for this article). The coaches, whose ages ranged from 17 to 29 years, have different levels of coaching experience from youth and recreational sport participants to Canada Games athletes. The candidates were novice coaches involved in a variety of sports: hockey, rugby, judo, soccer, waterski, track and field, and synchronized swimming.

The study used semi-structured interviews that targeted motivations, coaching experiences, and personal views on mentorship. The coaches were able to express in depth what they had experienced. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded using the constant comparison method identifying descriptive and interpretive codes.

### **Benefits of the FCMP**

Four main themes emerged as benefits of participating in the FCMP: 1) the opportunity to share coaching experiences and strategies between coach and mentor; 2) the importance of female role models; 3) networking; and 4) social support from the mentor coach.

#### ***1. Sharing Coaching Experiences and Strategies***

Having the opportunity to share experiences and strategies is the most highly valued benefit of the FCMP. The coaches were able to connect with each other and share their different perspectives. They were also paired with a mentor coach who provided a wealth of information.

The mentors helped the novice coaches with duties such as organizing practices, scheduling games, and developing year-long training schedules. The coaches were able to seek advice about “behind the scenes” situations in addition to advice about how to coach. In some instances, mentors also provided advanced training opportunities and guided the coaches through the process of gaining coaching certifications.

*To have a high-level female coach to go talk to about the other stuff is definitely very helpful. Even though our mentor doesn't necessarily play the same sport or coach the same sport as us, I find that we talk more about the behind the scenes stuff as a female ... If I had just a general coaching question, right now I'm trying to build my coaching philosophy, so I've asked her a lot of questions about that and how did she come up with hers and when did she realize it and a lot of stuff crosses over from sport to sport. (Coach 5)*

It became clear that many of the problems and challenges that arise in coaching are apparent across all sports. Most of the coaches were paired with mentors from different sports yet found they were able to connect in terms of coaching strategies and similar challenges they have experienced.

*Say, for example, an injury happened and you need to make an ethical decision of whether that athlete should play or not. You can call up another coach and ask, “How long did you sit that player out? What did you demand of her?” Those are just simple examples that I've been able to use. (Coach 8)*

Most of the coaches also stated that they enjoyed hearing various perspectives because problems they had in their sport also had an impact on women coaches in other sports.

*You know, what I struggle with in my sport, maybe someone else has a similar struggle, but in a different way and I just thought the different opinions and experiences I got to hear were so valuable. (Coach 3)*

*It's really cool to hear her {mentor} talk about her experiences and just watch how she can relate to me and how she cares about problems we have with our sport. It's nice to have other coaches to talk to about their experiences and how they've dealt with problems that they've been having and just to get another opinion and perspective. (Coach 6)*

## **2. Importance of Female Role Models**

It became clear that role modelling is an important reason why the coaches pursued coaching. Not only was the possibility of being a positive influence on their athletes highly valued, but most also stressed the importance female role models have had on their own sport experiences and their desire to coach. They stated that their desire to give back to their sport and become role models themselves was fostered directly through their experiences with their own coaches and that they would never have pursued coaching without the support of a prominent woman coach in their lives.

*I don't think I ever would have gone into coaching if I hadn't had coaches say: “Hey, do you want to come out and help me with this team?” I don't think I ever would have gotten involved with it. (Coach 1)*

Furthermore, being able to see women coaching at high levels was greatly valued by the coaches. Having women as role models showed these coaches that they are able to coach and are capable of succeeding at higher levels. Having a woman mentor created feelings of similarity and relatedness between the mentor coach and the mentees, which increased their belief that they could successfully coach at a higher level.

*It was really nice to get to sit down and talk with her and find that she went through some of the same stuff that I'm going through now, and to see a successful woman coach as definitely someone like a role model to look up to. (Coach 5)*

## **3. Networking**

As part of the FCMP, the coaches were able to connect with their mentor coach, but were also encouraged to engage and connect with their fellow coaches during sessions. Networking has been shown to be one of the most

influential factors in terms of coaching success and often women are at a disadvantage because of the lack of women coaches with whom to connect and network. While many of the coaches in this study said that having a connection with a male mentor can also provide opportunities, they also recognized the existence of the old-boy network. For this reason, the coaches stressed the importance of creating networking opportunities in order to connect with other women coaches.

*It was a really great experience and I learned a lot. I was really glad we got to do that, because I don't think I would be this involved if I hadn't of gotten involved in this FCMP, honestly. It's opened a lot of doors for me. (Coach 4)*

In particular, one coach described how her mentor provided her and a fellow woman coach with the chance to attend a coaching clinic that would better qualify them for certain coaching positions as well as open up new coaching opportunities.

*My female mentor has helped me out so much by figuring out the pathway I need to follow in order to become a better coach, and generally when it comes to just [my sport]. [...] And then also, she was involved in getting my friend and I, another coach, to Toronto to get our NCCP Level 2s. (Coach 4)*

Many of the coaches said that they would not be in their current position if they had not reached out to certain people and inquired about coaching. Coach 7 stated that due to her participation in the FCMP she was provided with additional coaching opportunities. She added that she would never have coached at Canada Games without the mentorship. Furthermore, she noted that being part of the FCMP provided her with increased confidence in her ability and gave her the tools to connect with other coaches.

#### **4. Social Support**

In terms of their ability to succeed in coaching, the coaches stressed the importance of having support and encouragement from their mentors. Many said they were able to turn to their mentors for advice and felt supported by their mentors when they became uncertain about potential decisions.

Creating a connection with a mentor and being able to comfortably reach out for help was also shown to be a benefit of the FCMP. Many coaches stated that relatedness between coach and mentor is important in creating a safe and comfortable environment in which to discuss their opinions and experiences.

*The biggest thing I learned is that the barriers aren't necessarily barriers, they can be just challenges [...] there is support there for us to get over those challenges and not let them become barriers to stop coaching. (Coach 5)*

#### **Conclusion**

Coaching remains a male-dominated facet of society that tends to benefit males and exclude females. The proclivity of men to create opportunities for male coaches leaves women coaches at a disadvantage. Despite being qualified, they remain on the outside looking in, unable to enter or advance in the coaching realm.

Mentorship has been shown to be effective in rectifying the disadvantage that aspiring women coaches face by providing them with support, encouragement, and the skills to advance through the coaching ranks. Based on this study, mentorship can be confirmed as having a significant positive impact on the experiences of the women coaches involved in the FCMP. The mentor role was significant not only for the support provided, but also because of the advanced training opportunities that the more experienced coaches facilitated. The FCMP was also effective in terms of fostering a positive environment in which the coaches felt comfortable sharing ideas and collaborating with one another. The FCMP provided the opportunity for the coaches to connect not only with their mentor, but also with their fellow coaches, something many said was the most important benefit of the program.

#### **Recommendations for Best Practice Based on the Study**

1. The abundance of male coaches and the absence of women coaches, especially at the higher levels of sport, maintains and reinforces the stereotype or perception that women cannot be or are not effective coaches. For this to change, women coaches need to be supported by those with authority within their

sport and should be provided equal opportunity, regardless of the type or level of sport. Job opportunities are often through word of mouth. Therefore, it is the responsibility of sport organizations, both national and provincial, to provide these opportunities to all of their coaches, regardless of gender.

2. Women mentors and coaches are significant role models for many of the coaches in the FCMP, often being the reason they entered coaching in the first place. Therefore, providing more exposure to those few women coaches in positions of authority could be influential for young women who might want to pursue coaching.
3. Although coaches were expected to reach out to their assigned mentors, little emphasis was placed on mentors contacting mentees. Furthermore, mentors in the FCMP were given no formal training related to the mentoring role they were to provide. So while the mentees noted great benefit from being paired with a mentor, more emphasis should focus on training mentors so they can more fully assist the young coaches they are assigned to help.
4. Many of the coaches said they created close connections with male coaches, which perhaps indicates that the most important part of mentorship is the aspect of social support and the opportunities for networking. However, woman-to-woman mentorship is thought to provide coaches with an added level of understanding and connection based on similarities. This could be beneficial as women mentors may be more approachable and more apt to provide guidance to young women coaches who are starting their coaching careers.
5. Both the social support provided through mentorship as well as the opportunity to share experiences and strategies extend beyond the tactical side of sport, indicating that successful mentorship relationships do not always have to be within the same sport. However, providing coaches with access to mentors within the same sport could have benefits for women coaches. Connecting with successful women coaches who have already navigated the sport and coaching pathways provides novice coaches with information regarding new opportunities to enhance technical knowledge, improve tactical skills, and gain greater experience.

To learn more about the FCMP visit <http://www.coachingns.com/en-us/womenincoaching.aspx>

#### **References available upon request**

#### **About the Authors**

Madeline Belding, who has a bachelor of kinesiology degree from Acadia University, is currently studying for a master's degree in kinesiology at the University of British Columbia focusing on Coaching Science. Her interest in understanding the experiences of women coaches and the impact of mentorship stems from personal coaching experiences as well as a passion for promoting women in sport. Currently, she is a provincial-level basketball coach in New Brunswick.

Ann Dodge has been involved with sport as an athlete or coach for much of her life. As a former member of the Canadian National Canoe/Kayak Team, she competed in many national and international events, including four world championships and the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. Ann holds a bachelor of physical education degree from Acadia University and a master's degree in sport management from the University of New Brunswick. For the past 21 years, she has served as a lecturer in the kinesiology program at Acadia University. Her teaching and research focuses on gender equity, sport ethics, coaching, and wellness.