

**Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching
Online**

© 2012 Coaching Association of Canada, ISSN 1496-1539
November 2012, Vol. 12, No. 4

Teaching Values through Sport: A Systems Perspective from Women Coaches

In tackling the troubling, puzzling issue of declining participation in sport in Canada, Jennifer Walinga suggests that clues for its reversal may be found in how women coach. As readers familiar with the *Journal* will know, we have been steadfast proponents of the valuable skills and methodologies women bring to coaching and have consistently urged their greater utilization. Walinga goes further, urging “a stronger feminine voice *overall* within the realm of sport.”

Her research into the values of women coaches and their strategies for instilling these values in their athletes revealed linkages “between commitment to sport and commitment to citizenship”; belief in teaching athletes to understand that they are “part of something bigger”; recognition of the importance of capitalizing on “teachable moments”; and acceptance of a dual role – teaching the skills to excel at a given sport and to “thrive in the world” as a contributing member of society.

It is vital, she concludes, to harness the potential of sport to teach life values and skills. We agree. Otherwise, further decline is inevitable. — 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.

**Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching
Online**

November 2012, Vol. 12, No. 4

Teaching Values through Sport: A Systems Perspective from Women Coaches

By Jennifer Walinga

At the 2009 Western Academy of Management Conference, a 15-year old girl presented to a group of academics on ‘*What a girl who plays rugby can teach organizational leaders*’. She spoke of how the ‘scrum’ demonstrates interdependence as “we can’t do battle without supporting one another,” and of the principle of “passing backward in order to create space to move forward,” a concept we need to embrace in our sustainability efforts. Playing on a boys’ team, she learned to “look for opportunities to demonstrate leadership and skill”. Her ability to articulate these learnings did not come naturally; her mother coached her, drawing out insights and helping her organize her thoughts. The learning? Sport can teach life values and skills that apply far beyond the field, but leveraging the power of sport depends on coaching, facilitation, and communication.

By fostering important life values and skills within the individual, Canadians believe that sport participation contributes to the economic, health, cultural, moral, and spiritual development of the broader community (Mulholland, 2008). However, sport participation is in decline, dropping by 60% from 1992 to 2005 (Ifedi, 2008). A key factor is growing concern that community sport is increasingly focused on winning at all costs, leading to an erosion of positive societal values (Decima, 2002). Canadians are calling for action to align sport delivery with these values in order to mobilize sport's potential (True Sport, 2005).

Coaches play an important role in ensuring that athletes learn healthy and socially beneficial life skills, values, and principles through sport. This article explores what values women coaches in particular focus upon, what strategies they utilize to instill values in their athletes, and in what ways they see these values carried forward into an athlete's life outside of sport. Our interest in women coaches as values-based educators springs from leadership trends across society calling for more collaboration, interdependence, and participation, which may come more naturally to women who have typically been enculturated to be 'other centred'.

Values Education through Sport

Current research refers to sport participation as having the capacity to teach values, character, morals, and life skills (Danish et al., 2005; Hellison, 2003). Further, research indicates that sport participation is associated with psychological well-being, positive social development, and higher academic and occupational achievement through young adulthood (Barber et al., 2001; Brunelle et al., 2007; Perks, 2007). Sport is not only seen to provide a great source of fun and recreation, but many believe sport helps to reduce crime and delinquency, bring people together, build community pride, and provide a valued source of local tradition and history (Sport for Development, 2010).

But, while sport participation has the capacity to enhance, it also has the capacity to undermine human and social development (Eccles & Barber, 2003; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2006; Scanlan et al., 2005). The professionalization of sport has created an economic focus within sport to the detriment of promoting key values (Decima, 2002). As well, we have seen increased instances of cheating, violence, yelling at players, referees or coaches, teasing of other players, forcing children to participate, abuse, harassment, inappropriate parental behaviour, and winning at all costs (Decima, 2002; True Sport, 2005). The bottom line for most Canadians is that the sport we have is not the sport we want and that more needs to be done in terms of education and development to align sport with core societal values such as respect, accessibility, fairness, integrity, and trust.

A fundamental premise of the research is that sport coaches and leaders have the greatest potential to ensure that the power of sport participation is fully leveraged to enhance human and social capital in Canada (Bales, 1998; True Sport 2005). This article's focus on women coaches in particular is an effort to investigate the call for a more feminine values framework to counter the predominant and more typically 'masculine' culture of winning at all costs in sport. A meta-analysis* of gendered leadership models demonstrated that women leaders are typically more democratic and participative in their approach than men, who lean toward autocratic, command, and control models of leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

**Meta-analysis is a statistical technique for combining the findings from independent studies.*

Possibly the crisis in sport participation and reputation is a product of an enduring culture of dominance, individualism, and independence. Women coaches may offer an alternative values framework that includes collaboration, interdependence, and democracy. As Werthner, Culver, and Mercier (2010) ask: "If women's voices are not heard, and their experience not factored into decisions, how can sport reflect a more inclusive perspective?" While Werthner and colleagues call for more women coaches in general, this article calls for a stronger feminine voice overall within the realm of sport resulting from in-depth interviews with eight female coaches that explored their approach to values education through sport. The coaches came from basketball, rowing, track, soccer, field hockey, and swimming and coached at a variety of levels, including middle school, high school, and university.

A Systems Perspective from Women Coaches

The interviews revealed several core themes:

- Worldviews guiding the coaches' values frameworks
- Values they strive to teach through sport
- Strategies for facilitating the learning of these values
- Transfer of these learnings to life outside of sport.

Worldviews

Each of the coaches, in describing the values they strived to instill through their coaching, presented a more overarching worldview which governed their values framework. For instance, the coaches described the link between commitment to sport and commitment to citizenship. As one coach explained: "If you show me that you want to be better at this sport, it tells me you also want to become a better person because sport automatically demands of you skills and values such as teamwork, dedication, support, initiative, leadership, and respect that will ensure you are a strong citizen and community contributor ...". A drill, while helping the athletes to become better by learning or developing a skill, also demonstrates a core value such as 'support' or 'communication' or 'trust'. At the same time, a drill in and of itself illustrates how to be 'a better human being' by demanding that athletes put aside their individual goals for the sake of the improvement of a fellow player or of the team overall.

Another common worldview was the idea of being part of something bigger. "They need to realize that they are part of a bigger picture. Yes, one person needs to score that basket or goal, but ultimately that success is part of a number of successes on the field, court, or ice up to that point." Another coach referenced the importance of "understanding everyone's role within and value to the team", which speaks to the grander idea of strength in diversity and uniqueness. As one coach so aptly put it: "It's more than just you right now, there's everyone here." Utilizing a systems approach to sport would make explicit the power of sport to foster human and social development, and thereby offer policy makers and programmers the confidence and insight to design sport programs and resources with a stronger and more intentional values orientation.

Values

The values the coaches shared were linked to the collectivist worldviews they expressed and included camaraderie, initiative, dedication, support, trust, team roles, diversity, passion, collaboration, and respect. While not all mentioned all of the values, the common thread continued to be a systems perspective. For instance, passion was an important value they sought to convey, but as a means to sustainable performance for the athlete with the broader purpose of sustained commitment and contribution to the team and ultimately society: "You have to love the sport to stick with it and be your best. Everybody wins when the individual is

doing what they love and contributing all they can.” The concepts of roles and teamwork were also placed within the larger perspective of community building:

“You need all kinds of leadership, one isn’t better than the other, one isn’t more needed than the other but they all have value. I think if (athletes) can understand that at the end of the day, whatever they go into in life ... they can contribute ... it can be a meaningful experience for them.”

“For me, it’s understanding roles because I think that just transfers over into everything in life, you go into a situation, a work environment, or a family environment and figure out how you can best serve yourself and the people around you.”

As the coaches described the values they sought to instill in their athletes, the recurring theme was how these values ultimately served to build the individual with a view to building society.

Strategies

A common theme among the coaches was recognizing and highlighting a life skill or value as it was demonstrated by an athlete: “I purposely recognize those athletes who did not make that initial or last assist, but rather made that play that started out in the backfield and made it possible for that assist, shot, and goal to happen.” Coaches also sought ‘teachable moments’ or ‘unexpected opportunities’ to emphasize or make an example of a specific value they sought to teach. In order to capitalize on such opportunities, it is important for the coach herself to have a clear set of core values and goals. As Pasteur says, “Chance favours the prepared mind.” This values work on the part of the coaches enables them to respond to opportunities while also responding to the needs of the athletes in terms of their level of expertise, age, and social or emotional needs.

Transfer

Each coach echoed the belief that her role was to prepare her athletes for the wider world, for citizenship, and for community contribution. Each felt it was her job to equip her athletes not only with the skills to excel in their sport, but the skills to thrive in the world as a human being. The importance of having access to the athletes beyond their school years or the sporting arena, as an educator, a family friend, a mentor, was critical to ensuring transfer to life. One high school coach spoke of phone conversations and dinners with her alumni after they had left her program and the opportunity these interactions provided to make reference or linkage to the life skills and values they had learned and developed within their sport: “Hopefully the lessons I teach you ... will help you in life. I was dealing with one of them last night at 12:30 a.m. She’s 21 now!” The transfer or linkage tends to happen outside of the sport:

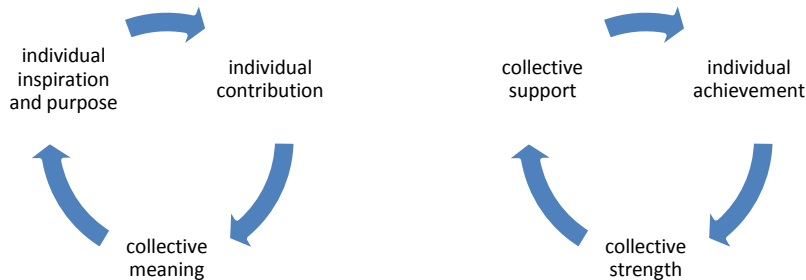
“Riding home in the car with my daughter, whom I coach, I was able to listen to her reflect on why she had done so well in this one task in basketball practice. She reflected on how the other girls had been so nervous, but that she was able to stay calm and just focus. She said, ‘I sure had butterflies, but I just let them flutter while I focused on the hoop.’ I saw an opportunity and asked her if she was able to use this skill anywhere else in her life... she remarked on how it was ‘just like a math test!’”

Facilitating such a linkage seems to require time within, insight into, or knowledge of the athletes’ worlds outside of sport.

The Core Values of Sport

Even when individually focused, the values and strategies the coaches described linked back to the more overarching purpose of the 'whole' as well as the inextricable link and interaction between the individual and the collective. The cycles of interdependence between the individual and the collective or whole are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Cycles of Interdependence



The team, or collective, benefits when the individual is strong; the individual derives purpose and meaning from contributing to the collective; the collective supports and therefore enables the individual's pursuit of personal excellence in a cyclical, iterative manner. While community sports are widely seen as an important source of influence in the development of today's youth, if we do not learn to harness the potential of sport participation to teach life skills and values, we will not only lose the potential advantages of sport participation, but we will destroy existing social support for sport. What these women coaches have taught us and offer the world of sport is a unique insight into the importance of a systemic worldview in facilitating values education through sport and therefore leveraging the true power of sport to enhance human and social development.

References available upon request

About the author

After teaching English for 20 years, Dr. Jennifer Walinga combined her passion for communication and athletics in pursuing a master's degree in Leadership where her research focused on the impact of experiential training programs on organizational performance. She went on to earn her PhD in Organizational Studies from the University of Victoria where she developed a problem-solving intervention called Integrated Focus that she applies with individuals and organizations from a variety of realms.

In designing communication, change, and performance interventions, she blends theories from organizational, educational, and sport psychology. As a facilitator, educator, and consultant, she draws heavily upon her experience as a member of Canada's Commonwealth, world, and Olympic gold medal rowing teams from 1983 to 1992. She is the mother of three and is an active member of the athletic and educational communities in Victoria.