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***Coaching Girls: Effectively Enabling the Transition from Talented Age Group to Performance Senior***

Although focused on the sport of swimming, *Coaching Girls* provides solid and practical applications for all sports in which girls participate and compete. In writing about a case study that formed part of the final project for a master's of science degree in Sports Coaching, Scottish swim coach Kerry Wood and her course leader Alan Lynn have made an important contribution to the long-standing debate focused on the enigma of high rates of female athlete dropout in the teen-age years. It is a situation that has frustrated and stymied both development and high performance coaches, particularly since so few could find substantiated remedies. By sympathetically and systematically assessing the troubling situation and then developing and implementing criteria aimed specifically at its reversal, she has produced a template that could provide a basis for widespread, meaningful change. While it must be said that it is too early to state conclusively that the areas the authors identify will have an impact on changing statistics at the senior team level, the early results are cause for hope and, we suggest, provide a foundation on which she and other coaches of female athletes can and should build. —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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***Coaching Girls: Effectively Enabling the Transition from Talented Age Group to Performance Senior***

By Kerry Wood and Alan Lynn

**Introduction**

Sports are strongly associated with the cultural construction of masculinity, which historically led to the exclusion of girls (Leaper and Friedman, 2007). If the general consensus across the world of sport is that coaches, clubs, and national-led programs need to take a proactive attitude in order to reverse the trends of early dropout and poor performance in the later teenage years of female athletes, then the current cultural and sociological constraints that are acting on female athletes need to be understood. If parents, coaches, and sports bodies can nurture girls through the transition phase in their sporting careers then the programs, coaching, and resources are in place for them to achieve their full sporting potential.

There has been much research on the gender similarities and differences in socialization into sport (Leaper and Friedman, 2007; Greendorfer, 1992); gender differences in training, coaching

and performance (Ryckman and Hamel, 1995; Weiss, Amorose and Wilko, 2009); and reasons why adolescents, particularly girls, drop out of sport based on social environment and perceived pressures (Brown, 1985; Stratten, 1976). However, there is limited application of this research to coaching and the role that coaches can play in socialization, motivation, and retention of female swimmers while at the same time improving competitive performance.

The rationale behind this study was the fact that girls currently outnumber boys on Scottish Swimming performance development squads (swimmers aged 11 to 16 years) almost 2:1, demonstrating a depth of potential and talent in female swimming in Scotland. At the senior squad level, however, the opposite is true and the numbers of girls achieving selection to these squads and British teams and performing at a high level is significantly less. For example, in 2008/2009, there were 308 female swimmers and 216 male swimmers at the District Regional Programme level, and 51 female and 40 male swimmers at Youth and Youth Development Squad level compared to 17 female and 59 male swimmers at the Senior Squad level.

Internationally, Scottish Swimming has been performing well in the past decade. As part of Great Britain's Olympic Team, Scots have proportionately been over-represented with an average >25% of the swimming team in Athens and Beijing. Males represented a third of the swimming squad and females just under 20%, further strengthening the premise of this article. Exceptional individuals such as freestyler Alison Sheppard, a five-time Olympian and 2002 Commonwealth Games champion, and Hannah Miley, a 2011 world championship silver medallist in 400 metre individual medley, mask what is a worrying trend in female swimming achievement at the top level. Only Caitlin McLatchey, double Commonwealth Games freestyle champion in 2006, and Miley have appeared in the top 25 world rankings since 2008, a period that saw eight Scots men achieve that feat.

Currently in Scotland, more male swimmers are making it through the performance development pathway, thus having more chance of succeeding at the elite level. The issue then appears to be not the inability of coaches and programs to produce high-level female swimmers, but getting more talented young female swimmers through the pathway so that they can fulfil expectations and realize the talent that was identified when they were younger swimmers.

With this situation in mind, there appears to be a need to provide the platform for coaches, clubs, and sport governing bodies to improve the knowledge, capacity, and approach for coaching girls. Three main areas were studied in terms of literature, coaching practice, and coach education in order to generate the proposals, recommendations, and basis for the case study described in this article. These were the social environment relating to sport; gender differences in training and competition; and gender and coaching behaviour. The work for the case study was carried out as part of the final project for a master's of science degree in Sports Coaching and was both theoretical and practical in nature.

## **Background**

A report by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008 proposed three reasons why some girls who played sport regularly decided to stop: peer group and societal values, lack of enjoyment, and low confidence. Young athletes are influenced by the social and cultural environment in which they live and by the social development challenges they face during childhood and adolescence (USA Swimming, 2010). Patrick, Ryan, Alfeld-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda and Eccles (1999) found that girls are more likely than boys to highlight the pressures of peer conformity and social costs as reasons for dropout and decreasing participation in sport. There is an argument that the recognition of athletes as individuals, and

developing an understanding of how identity, in this case gender, affects performance, should be a key aspect of the coaching process and represent a shift away from the traditional coach education programs that in the past have presented athletes as a standardized group (Jones, 2000). The suggestion then is that female athletes are different and this should be taken into consideration by coaches and sport leaders, especially as adolescents are particularly susceptible to external influence from significant others and the media in terms of their sporting identity (Jones, 2000).

Discussion with several UK-based high performance swimming coaches on the topic of coaching female swimmers identified four common themes:

- The specificity of the training program
- Developing the social environment within programs
- Encouraging competition
- The importance of recognizing gender differences

The most important view of all the coaches was the belief that coaches need to know their athlete, whether male or female, and what motivates them, and that ambition is an essential part of any program that is going to produce top-level competitive swimmers. It is clear that coaches and coaching behaviour have a significant role to play both in the development of athletes and the likelihood of young talented swimmers transferring to the senior elite level. The recognition that girls are different and how to build this into appropriate and effective coaching behaviour within the constraints of programs appears to be one of the main challenges facing swimming coaches today.

Weiss et al (2009) hypothesized that female adolescent athletes who perceive greater frequency of positive and informational feedback from coaches following successful performance and skill errors, lower criticism in response to skill errors, greater emphasis on effort, persistence, and improvement (mastery climate), and lower emphasis on a performance climate will exhibit higher competence perceptions, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Raastad (2004) shows that negative coaching feedback appears to damage the self-confidence of girls more than boys, resulting in negative expectations that, in turn result in low self-esteem and poor self-confidence. High levels of self-confidence enable athletes to make the most of their ability and skill and provide the confidence to believe in and achieve goals (Raastad, 2004).

DeBoer (2006) believes that behavioural differences in male and female athletes are a combination of predisposed characteristics and of being trained to respond differently to training and competition. By looking at how boys and girls behave when not being coached, it is possible to draw some theories and conclusions. While not always the case, boys will choose competitive play and girls will choose cooperative play when selecting unsupervised interaction. Similarities can be drawn to swimming as often boys choose to race unprompted during training whereas girls are more likely to swim side by side or “chat” while kicking. For girls, the performance and winner-orientated values traditionally associated with sport can be difficult to fit together with the needs for a socially secure environment and an inclusive community (Raastad, 2004). Thus, for coaches there is a challenge both in terms of role and responsibility in order to offer programs for girls that both create a winning, competitive environment and allow for the development of social values important to adolescent females. The studies of Weiss et al (2009), DeBoer (2006) and others support the need to look at coach behaviours and motivational climate simultaneously as a way of potentially explaining female athletes

psychosocial and behavioural responses, and highlight the importance of giving consideration to the multiple dimension of coaching feedback.

It is easy to review the literature and gain information from reputable sources in order to form opinions and theories as to why girls drop out of sport before reaching their peak, but coaches need practical options and suggestions in order to reverse this trend and create the ideal environment for adolescent female swimmers to be empowered to remain in the sport and achieve their potential. Following the research stage of the case study, similar themes and areas were identified:

- Develop and change the social environment.
- Develop competitiveness.
- Work with the swimmers to set goals.
- Achieve a psychological advantage by creating a change in training.
- Above all, recognize that female swimmers are different from male swimmers.

Options for change and different ideas for training and coaching girls based on these themes, personal applied study, and other sports interventions were proposed within three areas of discussion:

1. Applying change to the training program
2. Coaching Practice
3. Girls Squad/Camp Concept

The following case study presents each of the above areas in a practical setting. Based on Wood's current coaching situation, the discussion is taken from a swimming point of view. The aim is to stimulate thought and demonstrate that if the theories and research are applied, then change is possible and girls can be encouraged, motivated, and coached through adolescence and make the jump from talented age group swimmer to senior performance swimmer.

## **The Case Study**

As part of the master's of science Sports Coaching course, Wood undertook an independent study project linked to the area of coaching girls and tested an alternative training plan for the 2009/2010 swimming season. The decision to change the emphasis of training was made following 18 months of stagnant competitive performances in spite of improved training performance. While the main objective was to improve performance, there was acknowledgement that the girls were at the age where dropout, as a result of these poor performances and resulting lack of enjoyment, was a high potential. The main aims were to increase swimmer enjoyment of the sport, improve motivation and conditioning, and ultimately get the girls to swim faster. Following the research for the project, these aims are in accordance with the key themes identified to avoid dropout and improve retention and transfer.

The case study was centred on key aspects of the periodization of the annual training plan: pool training, land training, lifestyle, and psychology. Each area was evaluated for change and an alternative plan was devised, agreed with the swimmers, and implemented during the 2009/2010 season. A summary of the key changes in each area is outlined below.

### ***Pool Training***

Swim volume was reduced during the study by 30% and the focus shifted to low-level aerobic,

speed, and race pace training so the female swimmers either swam at base aerobic level or lactate tolerance and lactate production levels. The main difference from previous training programs was that the study group did not train at VO2 Max/threshold in the pool during the 22-week period. In order to monitor progress, key swimming sets were repeated and speed testing was carried out three times during the cycle.

### ***Land Training***

The land training program was increased in terms of both volume and intensity with the main focus being to improve the physical conditioning of the swimmers and make them strong and fast with high levels of muscular endurance. In addition, targets to reduce body weight and increase lean muscle tissue using a mix of swim-specific exercises and general cross-training were included. The land training was separate from the male swimmers in the squad for the first time, meaning the female swimmers were not intimidated or self-conscious in the gym.

### ***Lifestyle***

The main work done was on nutrition and hydration. A nutrition plan given to all of the swimmers provided timings for eating and drinking in relation to training and included examples and quantities of food types.

Time management was another area of focus to prevent missing sessions as much as possible. The swimmers were encouraged to keep a training diary and a life diary alongside each other, plan in advance, and highlight any dates that might pose potential problems.

The concept of adequate sleep and recovery was also discussed and linked to managing training, study, and social life balance in order to maximize training results as well as to enable the swimmers to enjoy themselves.

### ***Psychology***

As the swimmers were lacking confidence in their swimming ability, work was done on goal setting in order for them to have realistic short-, medium- and long-term season goals. This was done at the start of the season in the individual coach/swimmer meetings and also as a group so that control and ownership of goals and targets were taken by the swimmers. By creating a small, cohesive training group, the swimmers bonded more so than previously, which was highlighted by the team support both at competitions and the New Year training camp as well as socially away from the swimming environment.

Measurement for purposes of the case study was midway through the swimming season and, as significant improvements were already apparent (87% of swims were either short course personal best times or short course season best times and 75% of swims were either long course personal best times or long course season best times), the decision was made to continue with the training program for the full season. At the Scottish National Championships in June 2010, all of the girls involved in the case study achieved personal best times. In addition to improved racing performances, there were other obvious changes: squad morale and team spirit was improved; the girls were in better shape physically, being leaner and more athletic; and the attitude to and motivation for training and racing were better.

Reflecting on the process and results led to the following conclusions:

- Swimmer ownership, belief, and confidence in the program and the coach are as important as the training program itself.
- The group of girls responded positively to the changes implemented and to doing something

different. How much of this was due to the fact that a change was made rather than the actual changes themselves cannot be determined solely on the results of this case study.

- The swimmers highlighted the themes of feeling more positive about swimming, enjoying the training program, and noting positive changes to lifestyle especially with regard to nutrition.

Following analysis of the results, it becomes clearer that changing the emphasis and focus for this particular group of girls made the difference. Not only were they enthusiastic and energized about trying something new and different, they felt special and responded well to being trained differently from the boys in the squad. The girls were provided an environment that was challenging but not threatening; they were able to further develop social aspects and friendships within the squad without male constraints; and there was a change in the coaching style that both motivated the swimmers and focussed on them as individuals.

The success both in terms of swimming performance and swimmer satisfaction has encouraged further study in this area to develop Wood's coaching expertise, but has also resulted in the maintenance of many aspects of the case study as part of her training program. The girls continue to have separate land training sessions from the boys and the focus remains on creating athletic swimmers who feel part of a program that is designed to meet many of the social motivations as well as allowing them to remain in swimming and achieve the goals they created when they were young age group swimmers.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear that it is important to recognize gender differences in sport as these have an influence on athlete role and identity, expectations, and motivations that are ultimately linked to continued participation and performance.

This might be achieved in many different ways, from minor changes in coaching behaviour to a major shift in the focus and direction of girls' training programs and environments. Any plans or programs need to address the key reasons for athlete withdrawal in order to be successful.

The potential benefits of this are numerous. Female swimmers would have the opportunity to train and be coached in an environment and way that encourages, motivates, and guides them through the swimmer pathway rather than being solely focussed on performance-related outcomes. Coaches would be able to further their expertise and develop coaching skills beyond the swimmer and coach relationship, and have the knowledge and information not only to retain female swimmers, but also to maintain their love of the sport and competition. Sports and programs would learn from one another and transfer ideas and practices in order to create the ideal training and competition environment for female athletes.

The three main areas studied — socialization, gender differences and athlete retention — all provide interesting comment and direction as to the future of swimming coaching and programming for adolescent female swimmers. There is a need to educate swimmers, parents, and coaches on the key themes related to female athlete participation in sport in order to reverse the trend of dropout and poor performance. Coach education has an important role to play in the recognition of the difference in coaching male and female swimmers. The media, along with significant others, can play a part in promoting the role and identity of the female athlete as something for young girls involved in sport to aspire to rather than be turned away from. Clubs and sport governing bodies have a responsibility to provide the social and developmental environment that encourages and motivates female swimmers as well as improves their sporting performance.

In order for swimming coaches and programmers to help female athletes through the transition phase from talented junior to performing elite swimmer, there needs to be a shift in thinking and attitude as well as the recognition that girls are different and appear to respond well to different coaching and training environments than boys. The sporting environment must cater to the aspirations and expectations of all involved and for girls, it seems that the personal and social facets of competitive sport rather than only the competition need to be emphasized (Coakley, 1992). With this and the other socialization pressures, constraints, and influences, it is clear that sport for girls needs to be planned, managed, and coached in a way that will enthuse and encourage them to continue participation and enable breakthrough to high- level senior sport.

## **References Available Upon Request**

### **About the Authors**

**Kerry Wood** is the Stirling Integrated Swimming Coach for Scottish Swimming and coaches a squad comprised of high performance disability swimmers, junior national squad swimmers from the local club, and senior national level- university swimmers. She is also a teaching assistant for the School of Sport at the University of Stirling.

As a swimmer, Kerry first represented Great Britain at the 1993 European Sprint Championships before going on to represent Scotland at the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur in 1998 and Manchester in 2002. As a coach, she has coached swimmers to Scottish and British Age Group medals and disability swimmers to European and world championship medals and has been a member of the coaching staff on Scottish and British Teams.

In 2011, she graduated with a master's of science degree in Sports Coaching from the University of Stirling.

**Alan Lynn**, Senior Teaching Fellow, University of Stirling, is a vastly experienced coach and coach educator. He has coached Olympic Games finalists and world-class swimmers in his 25-year coaching career and was technical director for Scottish Swimming before his present role in Higher Education. He is the senior coach education tutor for British Swimming and is currently the course director for the master's coaching programs at Stirling University. Still an active coach, he also mentors performance coaches across several sports. He has authored three successful books on performance swimming and a fourth book on effective coaching. Alan is also the creative force behind the "Coaching Matters" CPD programme for performance coaches, funded by sportscotland.