



Changing The Androcentric World Of Sport Introduction

Why, when the sporting world is frequently a negative place for girls and women, do we continue trying and wanting to be part of it? What must change to ensure a healthier, more caring environment? In this sixth issue of the Journal, consultant Rose Mercier and sport psychologist Penny Werthner demonstrate that it is possible for sport to evolve from an androcentric environment — preoccupied with men and the activities of men to the exclusion of women — to one that is inclusive and satisfying.

Consider the realities they describe:

- The "one size fits all" concept, which the market-driven sporting good industry is abandoning through necessity, survives and thrives in other aspects of sport.
- The number of women coaches at the national level is incredibly low, and will remain so unless there are widespread organizational and institutional changes.
- Male professional sport, and increasingly sex and drugs, dominate the North American sport scene, so how can it present itself as an attractive option for girls and women?
- Fitting women into the existing male model of coaching leads to isolation, limits opportunities, and results in a very high dropout rate.

Among the attainable and practical solutions the authors propose to challenge the established order:

- Develop coaching models that equally value female and male lives.
- Follow performance review models that go beyond androcentric definitions of coaching competencies.
- Involve women in leadership in significant enough numbers that their voices are heard and their experiences and perspective are reflected in decisions.

"Changing The Androcentric World Of Sport" is provocative. Penny and Rose are intent upon charting a course that could lead to sport — that "wonderful and important form of personal expression" — occurring in an environment that is "welcoming, respectful, and enjoyable" for girls and women. All that is required is the will on the part of all of us who value sport. — Sheila Robertson

Changing The Androcentric World of Sport

By Rose Mercier and Penny Werthner

Most readers of this article are probably involved in sport in several different ways — playing, participating, coaching at various levels, enjoying aspects of sport at a recreational and fitness level, and perhaps ensuring that your child has ample opportunity to participate. Your numbers are relatively small. What is it about the sporting world that so severely hinders many more women from participating and enjoying those experiences, and from becoming coaches and leaders?

Seeking answers, we will

- look at the context of the world of sport as it presently exists
- critically reflect on some of the policies and programs in place that encourage girls and women to be part of this world
- present some of the research and thinking that has attempted to examine and explain the issues and context
- suggest possible ways to begin to create a new sporting world that is inclusive for all.

As women attempting to understand, and then moving on to questioning the world around us and ultimately bringing a deeper analysis to this world of sport, we can begin by looking no further than our own personal experiences. Take a moment to think of your own experience in sport, perhaps as a coach or a participant, or as someone who dropped out of this world. Ask yourself what has hindered you from greater development or more joy in participation, in being physically active, or having an opportunity to compete. One of the authors, a former Olympic athlete, experienced first-hand the discrepancies between what young women and young men were allowed to do in her sport of athletics. Early in her career, it became clear that there were limitations in her sport that were based on her gender. A male could compete at the Olympic Games in 1500m, 5000m, 10000m and the marathon; the longest race distance in which she could compete, for a number of years, was the 800m. (The 1500m for women became an Olympic distance at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Prior to that, it was said that women could not run that far without severely damaging their ability to have children!)

Similar stories abound in every sporting discipline. To this day, in canoe/kayak, at the Olympic level, women only compete in 500m races, while men compete in 500m and 1000m. Caroline Brunet, the two-time Olympic silver medallist in the women's 500m kayak, has said: "Women should have the same right to race the same distances as men ... it's time to grow up. This is 1997 and women should have the same rights as men."

It's not just at the Olympic level that the male norm has made it less inviting for women and girls to engage in sport. Ask any female hockey player about the difficulty of finding correctly fitting equipment. Many sports have needed female trailblazers to challenge assumptions about equipment. Georgina Terry, an engineer, pioneered many of the changes to the construction of bicycles when she began to build bicycles that were designed to fit the female anatomy. If you have ever ridden a bicycle that had a top tube that was too long for your upper body, even after making all possible adjustments, you will appreciate the many advances that have been made. In fact, probably more progress has been made in adapting equipment and clothing to women's sporting needs than adapting sport and sporting professions to women's lives. The "one size fits all" concept, which the sporting goods industry is moving away from, survives and thrives in other aspects of sport.

If we look at sport from the coach's perspective, we find an incredibly low percentage of women coaches at the national level in 2001. Only a handful of national sport federations are able to meet the federal government's expectation of having women as 25 per cent of their coaches. There have been programs designed to increase the number of women coaches at national levels and several sports have introduced their own initiatives. But the statistics have told the same story for many years now. Most programs have been short term, usually lasting a single fiscal year. One strategy for increasing the impact of such programs is to ensure they are of sufficient duration. The Women in Coaching program run by the Coaching Association of Canada is showing the way by introducing multi-year programs designed to facilitate the movement of women coaches into national coaching positions. This is a promising and important innovation; however, such programs will only achieve optimal results when combined with other organizational and institutional changes.

Over the years, a variety of explanations have been offered for the differences between men's experiences and women's experiences in competition or in a career in sport. Among the arguments you might still hear are these:

"Women don't want to coach at the national level. They don't have the expertise or the motivation."

"Women will eventually get pregnant and leave, so why bother?"

"We want the best person for the job."

"There just aren't as many women competitors."

"There are too many events in the Olympics as it is."

What's the starting point for change, with such age-old arguments reverberating in our heads?

We suggest beginning with the word androcentrism, which comes from the Greek aner/andros meaning "male human being." Webster's defines androcentrism as "a preoccupation with men and the activities of men to the exclusion of women in human affairs." Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *She Who Is*, defines androcentrism as "a pattern of thinking and acting that takes the characteristics of men to be normal for all humanity, alienating women and children and those who do not fit the standard."

If we examine the nature of definitions, we have a starting point. We have a framework for thinking about a sport world that has as its basis many norms that are based on men's characteristics, lives, and experiences. Sport is not alone in having such a framework.

If we look beyond the boundaries of sport, we begin to see the prevalence of androcentrism in other domains. In *Thinking Critically about Research on Sex and Gender*, Paula and Jeremy Caplan provide numerous examples of how androcentric research has historically dominated many fields of research. This research has subsequently significantly influenced both the ways in which we view our world and the ways in which we act and behave. One of the more powerful examples of androcentrism noted in their book is that of the influential work of Lawrence Kohlberg on the stages of moral development. One of his conclusions was that not everyone reaches the higher stages of moral development and that, in general, females' moral reasoning tended to be halted at a lower stage than that of males. Carol Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice*, noted a serious flaw in Kohlberg's conclusions: the participants in his study, upon which his conclusions are based, were all 12-year-old males! What is even more tragic and, at the same time, profoundly telling, is that Kohlberg's research findings are still extensively cited to this day. Many fields, including medicine, economics, science, and education, yield their own examples of the profound impact of an androcentric perspective on women's lives. For example, the medical research that led many North Americans to ingest an Aspirin a day was founded on research done on an entirely male population. As we have learned more recently, women and men have very different patterns of susceptibility to heart disease and present symptoms very differently.

We need only look as far as our local and national newspapers to see what androcentrism in the sporting world looks like. On Monday, May 28, 2001, the Ottawa Citizen carried six pages of sport news – all professional and, for the most part, male and American – covering the NBA, the Memorial Cup, the Indianapolis 500, the PGA, and so on. There was a small sidebar on Canadian cyclist Lyne Bessette winning the prestigious Tour de L'Aude in France. Other amateur sport was covered in a sidebar on a decathlon world record and a local lacrosse result – both by men. The Globe and Mail on that date carried similar content, but also provided a headline and article (on page eight) on Bessette's win in France. Better, but we need to ask why such an important international win in cycling wasn't on page one. As Laura Robinson pointed out in a Globe and Mail article on May 16, 2001, even when women win they get little or no coverage. When Colleen Jones won the world curling championship, we heard and read more about the men's rink missing out on a medal than about the women's dramatic victory. Similarly, NHL coverage dominated the sports pages even as the national women's ice hockey team won the world championship for the seventh time in a row! Page one of the June 5th sports pages of the Globe and Mail headlined the story of sex being bought for Toronto Raptors basketball players!! And we wonder why young girls and women of all ages do not want to have any part of the competitive sporting world. Seeing and reading about their own sport experiences would have a powerful impact on the possibilities in sport that girls and women can imagine for themselves.

The media is but one example, albeit a pervasive and powerful one, of the inherent nature of the world of sport in North America – a world dominated by male professional sport at best and at worst, by sex and drugs. While we are seeing more and more women participating, playing, and competing in more sporting activities, they are still doing so within a sporting world that is created and dominated by a male perspective. Is it any wonder that we lose girls from sport and that we lose, or in fact rarely have, women in leadership and head coaching positions at the national level? More often than not, it is a world that, over the long term, does not fit for many women.

What do we find when we move to the world that most of us are probably considerably more familiar with – the world of amateur and Olympic sport? In 1990, Sport Canada published "The Gender Structure of National Sport Organizations." In this report, the authors, Ann Hall, Dallas Cullen, and Trevor Slack, discussed two points of view in research about making changes to the under-representation of women in leadership roles. The first of these, "the person-centred or individualistic approach, attributes women's limited representation ... to factors that are perceived to be internal to women themselves. In other words, women are assumed (in actuality or in the perception of themselves and others) to lack the proper training, motivation, and skills to succeed. The research and literature focuses on

- delineating these stereotypes and their implications for personnel decision-making and career development; and then either
- demonstrating that women and men do not, in fact, differ in their abilities; or
- showing women how to acquire the necessary attitudes, skills, and motivation to succeed. In the person-centred perspective, the primary focus is on how women must change to fit the organization with little question as to the organization's role. The organization is a given into which everyone – both men and women – must fit. Men, because of their socialization, fit better than women do. Women, if they want to participate, must change to fit the system."

If you apply that person-centred perspective to coaching, you would have to conclude that we are currently doing all that can be done to increase the number of women in national and international level coaching positions. We look hard for every opportunity to prove that men and women do not differ in their abilities to coach if they are in similar roles. We identify the types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that it takes to become a successful national and international coach. We provide programs that accelerate the learning process. And yet ... there has been no appreciable difference in the numbers of women coaching at that level over several years of focused effort. Some women succeed, so it is said that there's nothing wrong with the system.

Is the only conclusion then that most women must not really want to coach at that level?
Or is the answer more profound?

Hall, Cullen, and Slack go on to state: "The second perspective, the organization-centred perspective, focuses on changing the organization itself, rather than the women (or men) in it. This perspective ... argues that people's behaviour is shaped by the organizational structures and systems in which they find themselves ... Differences in men's and women's behaviour can be attributed to the fact that women are more likely to be found in positions of low opportunity and low power, and are likely to be proportionately under-represented, or tokens, in decision-making. In this perspective, the focus of change, and the entity that must change, is the organization itself. Behavioural change in both women and men will then follow from the changes made within the organization."

The report goes on to provide sport leaders' analysis of the lack of women in leadership roles. The explanations are depressingly familiar:

"The lack of qualified women with the right experience is the key factor in women's under-representation."
"It's a matter of being the right person in the right place at the right time."
While these perceptions may reflect individual experience, the authors state that "this orientation can also lead to a passive and dysfunctional approach to correcting the problem."
If there is ever to be a real change in the number and involvement of women in coaching, we need to move beyond thinking that women are the problem or that men are the problem.

We need to understand that the structure of an organization is not neutral, that organizations are structured through an invisible gender-biased view of reality, and that individual solutions will not result in sustainable changes for women in coaching and leadership roles in sport. If we ignore or deny the need for organizational structures that coordinate work and family in such a way that males and females could easily participate in both and if we assume that the ideals we have set up are gender-neutral, then we cannot fashion real solutions. We must be willing to examine the deepest assumptions we hold when we describe the process and skills of coaching.

Recently, one of the authors of this article worked with a group of women coaches to examine the reasons for the lack of women coaching at the national level. The women worked very hard to question the roots of this continuing problem and identify the factors that reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. (Interestingly, one of the main factors identified was an androcentric coaching model.) At the end of the weekend, the coaches were evaluating the work they had done and one noted that the best aspect of the session was hearing the voices of other women coaches – voices that she noted were a silent minority when they gathered at coaching association meetings.

If women's voices are not heard and their experience not factored into decisions, how can sport reflect a more inclusive perspective?

We know from research that women's voices only begin to be heard when they make up 30 per cent of the group. In fact, women need to comprise 40 per cent of the group before their perspectives and experiences are fully incorporated into decision-making and planning. At 20 per cent, women not only remain tokens; their actions are closely scrutinized and their behaviours interpreted as being reflective of all women.

It's interesting to reflect on the fact that gender was not considered a factor of any note in the study of leadership until the 1970s. The leadership theories that emerged at that time were based solely on the study of male executives. It is these leadership theories on which North America and western Europe founded work and organizational structures.

There is a shift occurring in our society's ideas about leadership that can have important ramifications for our current coaching model. The traditional view of leadership was founded on male-oriented values of rationality, competition, and independence. The assumptions that everything must be based on reason, that only the strong survive, and that it is every man for himself are so deeply embedded in our political and social institutions that they are invisible. They have shaped the culture of our organizations, and sport is no exception. The organizational view that assumes the male model to be the norm does not work well for women. Some of the most basic tenets, which we take for granted, come from these assumptions. And when we simply try to fit women into this existing model, they often, and yet not surprisingly, are isolated, receive little support, have limited opportunities, and do not stay around, thereby perpetuating the prevailing thinking that women cannot "take the pressure."

We need to look at sport and coaching differently. We need to ask some hard questions. And then, we would suggest, we need to fundamentally alter the models of our sporting world.

Why do we, almost without exception, continue to have only one head coach of many of our national and provincial teams?

Why do we continue to resist new models of team coaching or co-coaching?

Why are so many coaches reluctant to share their knowledge with others they perceive as not their equals? Are they afraid that someone will sweep by them in the race that goes only to the swift?

Why do we continue to perpetuate the thinking and behaviours that say emotion and intense feeling are to be avoided in the coaching process and confine ourselves to the tangible quantitative measures and scientific research?

Why do we continue to hire coaches on the sole basis of technical expertise, while almost universally ignoring the importance of effective interpersonal skills. Such skills are crucial in enabling young children to enjoy their sport experience, helping keep athletes at all levels involved throughout their lifetime, and creating the kind of environment that allows young adults to excel in competitive sport and high performance athletes to achieve international success.

What values underlie such thinking?

As we continue to rethink leadership, values, and the profession of coaching, the attributes and characteristics of the traditional masculine model of leadership most certainly need to be re-evaluated and altered. The emerging form of leadership will be characterized by empowering oneself; enabling other coaches, colleagues, and one's athletes; fostering self-confidence; and developing an organizational vision that embodies the goals, needs, and values of both leaders and followers, of both girls and boys, women and men. This will require, without a doubt, organizations to adopt new values and act in new ways. A wonderfully informative example of one woman's quest for freedom through sport is that of Hassiba Boulmerka, the extraordinary Algerian middle distance runner who won the gold medal in the women's 1500 meters at the 1992 Olympic Games. William Morgan wrote about her in a chapter in Genevieve Rail's book *Sport and Postmodern Times*. Boulmerka claimed that her international athletic experience provided her with a powerful chance to express herself and, by speaking out, she could not only extol the values inherent in excelling in sport, but could use her visibility to attempt to create and promote the more secular and democratic Muslim culture that, for a time, allowed her to excel as a woman athlete and as a Muslim woman. She spoke out about the possibilities for women in her country and within the sporting world. Difficulties arose for Boulmerka when a more fundamentalist form of Muslim culture rose to power and she became a target of great criticism, illustrating for us the difficulty in trying to make change solely as an individual.

Just as one woman's words and breakthrough achievements cannot reframe the profound religious and political world view in Algeria, androcentrism in sport cannot be remedied solely through individual solutions. It will take visionary organizations and individuals within those organizations to rethink how coaching can equally fit the life patterns and needs of both women and men.

How can we go about challenging the models that presently exist in sport and begin to create a better sport environment that is inclusive of young female participants and athletes, older women, and women coaches at all levels of play and competition?

Here are a few starting points:

- Develop coaching models that equally value female and male lives and offer alternatives to both women and men.
- Follow performance review models that go beyond androcentric definitions of coaching competencies.
- Involve women in leadership in significant enough numbers that their voices are heard and their experiences and perspective are reflected in decisions made in sport organizations.
- On an individual basis, continuously challenge those aspects of coaching that are anchored in androcentric values or models.
- Ensure there are opportunities for women coaches to speak at your conferences and workshops.
- Ask women coaches to write articles for your newsletter or magazine.
- Propose that there be female and male co-chairs for workshops, conferences, and committees.
- Ensure balanced visual evidence of women and men coaches in newsletters and media guides and on Web pages.

You might wonder if it is really possible to change anything ... in your lifetime anyway! And you may well be asking by now that if the sporting world is such a negative place for girls and women, why continue trying and wanting to be a part of it? Why not just opt out, as so many other girls and women have? The simple answer is that sport can be a wonderful and important form of personal expression. Being physically active is instrumental in each individual's well-being. A strong sense of fitness leads naturally to the desire to begin to compete, to challenge oneself in a new way. There are too many powerful positives that are available through sport. We need to create an environment in the world of sport where that environment is welcoming, respectful, and enjoyable for women.

In *Women, Men and Power*, Hilary Lips writes: "It will take ferocious creativity to do the restructuring so as to arrive at a society where both female-male equality and important communal values are protected, where the economic structure is designed with consideration for the needs of female and male employees and their families. Nothing is more certain than that such a goal will never be reached if women are the only ones who change."

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