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Why Female Athletes Decide to Become Coaches — or Not

A perennial dilemma in Canadian sport is the scarcity of women coaches. Theories abound, but solutions remain elusive. Young female high performance athletes are an obvious source of coaching talent. Interested in unravelling what attracts, or dissuades, this talent pool and curious about the impact of role models on their decision, [Guylaine Demers](#) interviewed 18 female athletes and their four female coaches.

Some of what she unearthed comes as no surprise; other findings startle, particularly the lack of confidence some expressed in their skills and abilities to perform coaching tasks despite performing well at a high level. Of importance is the fact that the female coaches, despite being keenly aware of the drawbacks of their chosen profession, remain committed, so much so that they are enacting measures designed to encourage their female athletes to carefully consider a coaching career. These include taking on graduating students as assistant coaches; recruiting their athletes as coaches at their clubs' summer youth camps; presenting a variety of existing family life models to the athletes to show it is possible to be a coach and a mother; and being on the lookout for athletes with coaching potential and referring them to clubs and schools looking for coaches.

"Why Female Athletes Decide to Become Coaches" is an important first step to understanding, and possibly reversing, the under-representation of women in the coaching profession. — Sheila Robertson

JULY 2004 FEATURE

Why Female Athletes Decide to Become Coaches — or Not

by Guylaine Demers

Introduction

The idea for this article came from the findings of coaching studies showing that women are under-represented in the coaching profession (Acosta and Carpenter, 2000; Sport Canada, 1999). Women make up 28 per cent of active coaches in the various sport federations in Quebec (Sports-Québec, 2000) and 31 per cent in Canada as a whole (Coaching Association of Canada [CAC], 2002). Female coaches are fewer in number than male coaches, and generally spend fewer than five years in the job (Hart, Hasbrook and Mathes, 1986).

A review of the literature shows that the few women who choose a coaching career face many obstacles, yet there is little information available to help us understand why. The studies conducted on the subject, of which there are just a handful, identify the reasons why women take up or, conversely, leave coaching. All of the studies administered questionnaires to active coaches; in some cases, the coaches were asked what factors might prompt them to leave their coaching positions (Doherty and Casey, 1996; Hart, Hasbrook and Mathes, 1986). Since I did not find any studies focusing on what happens to junior female coaches who decide to become a coach, this became my starting point for exploring the process of how women are drawn into coaching.

This article is the first stage of my exploration and is the result of group interviews conducted with potential coaches for the purpose of understanding what would induce them to become coaches.

Current Knowledge of Under-Representation of Female Coaches

The literature may be broken down into two categories: research on choosing coaching as a career, with an emphasis on under-representation of women in the profession, and research on the impact of role models on female athletes' decisions whether to become a coach.

Choosing coaching as a career

In recent years, interest in the coach's role and the reasons why people do, or do not, choose coaching as a career has been growing steadily (Gilbert, 2002). Interest in coaching as a career for women parallels the rise in the number of girls involved in sport — they now make up about 45 per cent of participants in federation-governed sports. This increased participation has in turn generated greater demand for people to coach girls. Based on this demand and the ongoing under-representation of women in the coaching ranks, some researchers have launched projects aimed at understanding and explaining the processes involved in recruiting, retaining, and losing women coaches. Most of the studies concern high performance coaches who have been active for a number of years (Acosta and Carpenter, 2000; Sport Canada, 1999) and unearth the factors working against or contributing to the involvement of women as coaches and the main reasons why they drop out.

Factors working against women's involvement include male control of the sport, the lack of role models for girls and women, the success enjoyed by old boys' networks, the lack of time due to family responsibilities, stereotypes and preconceived ideas about women as coaches, employers' reluctance to run the risk of hiring a female coach, and the lack of careful career planning by female coaches themselves.

The main factors contributing to their involvement are skills and abilities, family and peer encouragement and support, interest in a coaching career, previous positive experiences, personality, and a variety of situational and demographic factors such as being single or not having children.

Marshall (2001) identified the main reasons why women drop out of coaching as burnout, no financial incentive, lack of experience, family conflicts, discrimination, conflict with the old guard (made up of men), and high expectations of success.

Impact of role models

Most authors agree that the lack of coaching role models is one of the factors explaining the shortage of women going into the profession. Surprisingly, I found no article reporting on actual measurement of the impact of role models. A number of questions remain unanswered: What is the real impact of the role model on the recruitment of female coaches? How do female coaches influence their athletes to become coaches themselves? What is female athletes' assessment of the impact of having a female coach on their decision to become coaches? What is female coaches' assessment of their impact on the recruitment of new coaches?

Above and beyond the conventional wisdom regarding the impact of a female coach model with whom the athlete can identify, it is essential, in my view, to examine how the role model actually exerts influence.

Questions

The various studies on which this article is based were of considerable help to me in describing and endeavouring to explain the precarious situation of female coaches. However, the studies have not yet enabled women to increase their involvement as coaches. The latest Canadian statistics show that women hold only one-quarter of coaching positions (Sports-Québec, 2000; CAC, 2002). Given the continuing under-representation of women in Canadian coaching, the specific goals of this article are to

- describe female athletes' perception of the profession of female coach in terms of the positive and negative aspects they see in the job
- describe why some female athletes are planning to become coaches and others are not
- describe female coaches' assessment of their impact on their female athletes' decision whether to become coaches.

I conducted four group interviews with high performance female athletes who could eventually become coaches. I also conducted four one-on-one interviews with their female coaches.

Interviewees

The interviewees were 18 athletes who are members of university teams and potential coaches and four women who coach these athletes. Three types of sport are represented: 10 athletes and one coach are in basketball (segregated team sport), six athletes and one coach are in badminton (mixed sport, doubles), and two athletes and two coaches are in triathlon (mixed multi-discipline sport). The athletes were selected on the basis of the following criteria: old enough to be a coach (at least 18 years of age), a high-performance athlete and therefore possessing solid technical and tactical knowledge, and coached by a woman.

Who are the athletes? Fourteen of the 18 athletes have already acted as coaches when in high school or junior college. They do not coach at university because the training demands are too heavy. Nonetheless, 10 coach at summer sports camps run by university clubs. Note that the summer camp context is different from the typical coaching context in that camp coaches supervise different groups of young people each week and all the planning is in the hands of the camp director. They focus on developing technical skills, have no planning responsibilities, and do not have to deal with the pressure of competition because all games and events are "exhibition".

Who are the coaches? The basketball coach has been head coach for 18 years, has a master's degree in education, played five years at university, and was twice invited to national team selection camps. The badminton coach is in her 11th season with the team. She has a bachelor's degree in physical education and played for five years on the team she now coaches. The triathlon coaches are assistants. One has four years' experience as a university athlete and two as a coach. The other has 10 years' experience as an athlete and two as a coach. At the time of the interviews, they were in charge of the beginner athlete group.

Structure of interviews

Each group interview with the athletes was in three parts. The first focused on the athletes' overall perceptions of the profession of female coach. They were asked to indicate what they thought of female coaches' roles and responsibilities. It was at this stage that they stated the positive and negative aspects of the profession. The second part focused on the difficulties they might face if they wanted to become coaches and once they actually were coaches. In the third part, they were given an opportunity to make suggestions on what structures could be set up to help them become coaches and describe what the ideal situation for female coaches might be.

Each one-on-one interview with the coaches was in two parts. First, I questioned them on their sports background and coaching experience. Then I asked for their assessment of their impact on their athletes.

What the Athletes Said

The athlete responses can be grouped under four themes: their concept of the profession of female coach; the factors that might prompt them to become, or not to become, a coach; perceived difficulties facing the female coach; and the impact of having a female coach on their desire to become one.

Concept of the profession

The athletes talked about both the professional and the personal aspects of the female coach's life.

A demanding profession that gets little recognition

All agree that the female coach's lot is not an enviable one and gave many explanations. First of all, the profession is not recognized by society at large and, as a result, is poorly paid. Therefore, a woman has to be passionate and dedicated, devoting many hours a week to the job. The athletes listed tasks that a coach must fit into her work week, including management tasks such as planning training sessions, making funding arrangements, and drawing up the competition schedule. Tasks performed during the training sessions themselves include managing discipline, personalizing the training, helping athletes reach their full potential, and making sessions interesting and stimulating. In the athletes' opinion, the investment in time makes it very difficult for a female coach to have children and a full personal life. They saw the female coach's job as an exhausting one in which she worked at a frantic pace.

Another issue is the pressure to achieve very good results in competition. Each athlete said that she is ill at ease with the requirement to "perform." This requirement is one of the obstacles to the involvement of female coaches.

Giving priority to personal development

The athletes feel that the female coach makes a significant contribution to developing the whole person. One said that the coach is there to "launch the athlete into adulthood". In their view, the coach plays a number of roles in support of the athlete. She gives social and psychological support, acts as the athletes' confidante, manages their personal problems, and keeps them motivated. They stated very clearly that female coaches are more strongly focused on interpersonal relations and are "more human than men are".

Experience as an athlete

All agreed that it is important for a female coach to have experience as an athlete. It gives the coach credibility, which in their view is essential if she is to win the athletes' trust. Credibility is also a function of the level of performance achieved by the coach in her athletic career: the higher the level and the better the results, the greater the credibility.

Essential leadership skills

The interviews clearly brought out the inextricable link between the profession of female coach and the concept of leadership. The athletes emphasized the fact that the female coach must show very good leadership skills. At the same time, they pointed out that the coach's leadership style must be centred on respect for the athlete. This specific leadership requirement is consistent with their perception of the coach's work outside the training session and competition. The coach has to be available for a considerable amount of time outside regular coaching hours to help athletes achieve their performance goals and also to help them overcome difficulties in their personal lives.

In spite of everything, a stimulating job

Despite their rather negative perception of the profession of female coach, they acknowledge that the job is very stimulating. It gives the women an opportunity to learn and discover new things all the time, to pass on their knowledge, and to help their athletes make progress and achieve new heights.

Reasons for becoming, or not becoming, a coach

An analysis of the interview content brings out the factors that would prompt the athletes to become, or not to become, coaches. The factors can be broken down into five categories: feeling competent to do the job, type of job and compensation, work schedule, adequate training and supervision, and love of the sport. These factors are consistent in several respects with the athletes' perception of the profession.

Feeling competent to do the job

Surprisingly, most of the interviewees feel that they do not have the skills and abilities required to become coaches and they lack self-confidence. Yet, as noted earlier, they have experience as athletes and are currently competing at a very high level. Overall, they think that they still have much to learn about coaching. They feel that they could be assistants, but not coaches. They have grave doubts about their skills and abilities; this was particularly the case with the triathlon and badminton athletes, mixed sports in which female coaches must prove their competence to male athletes. One of the badminton athletes expressed her frustration as follows: "I always had to prove to the guys that I could play badminton ... As far as they were concerned, a girl does not have the ability to do the job ... I played against them just to shut them up." The interviewees involved in basketball, a segregated sport, expressed fewer doubts.

Although 16 of the 18 athletes have been coaches, they feel that their world view is still that of an athlete and that they do not have a good overview of all the requirements of the profession, especially when it comes to the tactical aspects of their sport. Some said they would be willing to coach young athletes because their knowledge of the basic techniques was sound, but they were in the minority. Yet three said they were definitely ready to become coaches because they are in the teacher education program and felt their university training in this field is also preparing them for coaching. Furthermore, since they will be working in an educational institution, it should be easy for them to get a coaching position.

Type of employment and compensation

The athletes are perfectly aware of the fact that most existing coaching positions are part time. There are few full-time positions held by women, and the athletes are sure that those coaches are poorly paid. One said that she would not become a coach "because it does not pay enough". Most believe that they cannot make a decent living from coaching alone because the job is poorly paid. At the same time, they agree that a good salary enabling them to coach full time would be a major incentive for them to become coaches.

Work schedule

The athletes believe that they do not have enough time to be coaches. They referred to their current coaches' schedules — six- or seven-day work weeks — and said that they do not want to spend their lives just coaching because they have other interests. At the same time, those who are hesitant to become coaches would be much more tempted to choose a coaching career if the work schedule allowed them to lead full personal and family lives.

Adequate training and supervision

One factor that would prompt the athletes to become coaches is the availability of adequate training. This need ties in with their feeling that they are not competent enough to perform all the coach's tasks adequately. Instruction in the planning and management of athletes' training and in leadership skills would be a major incentive to become coaches. In addition, it would be easier for them to enter the job market if they could work with mentors, start off as assistant coaches, and coach athletes at lower levels first and then progressing to higher levels.

Love of the sport

The desire to give something back are major reasons why some of the female athletes are planning to become coaches. These athletes also say that they like "being with young people and teaching them new things". As stated earlier, the athletes who want to become coaches made it clear that they would only take up coaching if they could deal with young athletes. They want to start at the bottom with secondary school students.

Perceived difficulties facing the female coach

Were the athletes to become professional coaches tomorrow, they would face a number of difficulties. At least, that is what they said in the interviews. The difficulties are related to being a woman, finances, and to the present generation of athletes.

Difficulties related to being a woman

The athletes are very aware of the fact that, as female coaches, they will have to fight to prove that they possess the skills and abilities needed to do their job well. This seems to be particularly the case for those in mixed sports such as badminton, who would have to coach boys as well as girls, and who already assume that they will get little respect from the boys. Another issue concerns starting a family. They say that it will be very hard to reconcile their lives as professional coaches with their family lives, especially one involving children. Given the work schedule and pace of life of the coaches whom they know, they do not see how a coaching career and a personal life can be reconciled.

Difficulties related to finances

Not surprisingly, the athletes are afraid that they will have to work at two jobs if they want to be coaches because, in most instances, it is impossible to live on a coach's salary alone. The other financial issue concerns the requirement to solicit funding and sponsors in order to finance sport club activities. They feel poorly equipped to organize funding activities for this purpose.

Difficulties related to the present generation of athletes

Even though their coaching experience is limited, the athletes noted differences between their own generation and the next. In their view, the new generation will present major problems because the young athletes of today have a poor attitude and lack the motivation to train. They therefore anticipate having to invest a considerable amount of time and energy in motivating these athletes to give 100 per cent.

Impact of having a female coach

At first glance, it would be tempting to conclude that the female athletes' responses are diametrically opposed to the findings in the studies and, indeed, all the athletes answered spontaneously that it is not having a female coach, but the coach's personality that would prompt them to choose a career in coaching. However, closer analysis of the interviews shows that the role model does exert an impact, but very subtly. For example, the athletes said that their coaches had shown them, through their words and actions, a different, more human way to coach, one that focused on the athlete as a person. They also said that their coaches were better models than the male coaches they had had previously — models in the sense that education comes before performance. What is clear from this view is that the athletes have found in their coaches values and practices matching their own concepts of the coach's role. From this perspective, having a female coach does seem to affect the recruitment of new female coaches, because female athletes identify more closely with their coach's style. In that context, a career in coaching is definitely feasible.

In short, having a female coach seems to play a role in the recruitment of future female coaches, but we need to study the role further to gain a good understanding of it. If we are going to continue emphasizing the importance of having more female coaches to be able to recruit new ones, then we must be able to explain the underlying dynamics to take maximum advantage of it.

I should point out that I found some of the athletes' statements somewhat incongruous. For example, some questioned the importance of having female coaches; others thought it was not a good idea to have female coaches in certain sports such as triathlon; some thought it was quite normal to have more men as coaches; and others believed that a female coach exerts less influence than a male coach on athletes, particularly older ones. This clearly shows that female athletes are not very aware of or informed about the real situation of women in sport. This may well be a worthwhile area for future investigation and action.

What the Coaches Said

The coaches' responses can be broken down into three themes: positive and negative aspects of their work, their impact on their athletes' desire to become coaches, and actions taken and planned to encourage more female athletes to become coaches.

Positive and negative aspects of their work

The positive aspects primarily involve human qualities and relationships. All four coaches said that they particularly appreciate "seeing people grow through sport." They also emphasized the importance that they attach to developing the whole person, including helping them to achieve academic success. In addition, they find it enriching to be able to work with a number of different individuals: this is very rewarding personally and professionally. The sport community is like a family: it gives you an opportunity to socialize with people who share your values.

The primary negative aspect concerns the status of women who coach other women. The coaches find that women's sports do not enjoy the recognition they deserve. Sports administrators devote more time and energy to men's sports. Women's sports are constantly being compared with men's sports, and this is one reason why the two sides are always competing with one another. Then there is the oft-repeated argument that women's sports do not sell as well as men's sports. The interviewees believe it will be difficult to reconcile these two "worlds": on one side are female coaches who focus on education, and on the other, male coaches who focus on performance.

The coaches also highlighted the difficulties they face in getting their skills and abilities recognized. One remarked by way of illustration:

"During an international event, the referee automatically spoke to the team physiotherapist because he was the only man on staff. At the international level, officials show little consideration for female coaches. There are very few female coaches at this level, and that is a definite drawback."

The coaches also noted that, in many sports clubs, female coaches are given the younger athletes, who compete at a lower level. This situation is both frequent and considered normal. Even the female athletes interviewed assumed that they would be coaching at lower levels.

Another major irritant is the lack of recognition enjoyed by the coaching profession. The lack of recognition is reflected in the statements and actions of their own administrators and the general public and in the unstable employment and low pay in coaching.

Impact

The coaches' responses were consistent with those of their athletes. They find it difficult to define precisely what kind of impact they might have on their athletes' interest in coaching. In their view, their impact on recruitment may be derived not so much from their status as female role models as from their personalities, philosophies, and values. Some of them feel that they might have an impact as female coaches, but only very indirectly, in that having a female coach shows female athletes "that there are women in coaching and that coaching is an option for them". This realization could instill in some athletes a belief that a career in coaching is a real possibility.

The interviewees gave four possible reasons why few women go into coaching: the present generation of athletes does not really know what direction to take in life and does not know what it wants; the present generation seems to lose interest as soon as problems arise; there are limited opportunities for full-time positions; and girls attach greater importance to education than boys do.

In short, the female coaches believe that their impact is based more on their personalities than on being women.

Actions

The coaches interviewed do not place much stock in their impact as female coaches on the recruitment of new female coaches. Therefore, it will come as no surprise that they are taking deliberate, specific measures to encourage some of their athletes to take up coaching as a career. The measures that they are taking or are planning to take include the following:

- Take on graduating students as assistant coaches
- Recruit some athletes as coaches at their clubs' summer youth camps
- Present a variety of existing family life models to the athletes to show that it is possible to be a coach and a mother at the same time
- Be attentive to athletes with coaching potential and refer them to clubs and schools looking for coaches
- Set up coaching clinics for women only
- Get involved with their sport federation in developing female coaches through, for example, mentoring programs.

Conclusion

Before I present my conclusions, it is worth reiterating that the issues discussed in this article are based on interviews with 18 high performance female athletes and four female coaches. Thus, my goal is not to draw general conclusions applying to every aspect of the female athlete's and coach's experience. What I want to do is to take the situation of a small group and extract as much information from it as possible to advance the cause of female coaches. I also intend to call in question some commonly held beliefs on the issue of the shortage of female coaches. Finally, I will identify potential measures to promote the involvement of women in coaching. Again, my intention is not to be all-encompassing; on the contrary, I am in favour of moving ahead one step at a time.

The article grew out of issues I had with the concept of the role model in sports coaching. I found that the equation **female coach = more female athletes becoming coaches** was a very popular notion, but was not supported by facts.

Based on all the interviews, I believe that, although it is constantly being referred to, the role model does not operate the way people think it does. The role model does have an impact, but it is very subtle. Both the coaches and the athletes attach more importance to the coach's personality than to his or her gender as a factor influencing them to take up coaching. However, closer analysis of the athletes' statements shows that they appreciate qualities more closely associated with women's coaching style — human qualities, dedication and commitment, and the focus on the athlete's personal life. Can we imagine a male athlete making such statements? Based on this finding, I have to conclude that having a female coach does indeed encourage some female athletes to become coaches: their coach embodies qualities that they appreciate and values that they share, and such attributes are found more often, though not exclusively, in female coaches. In my opinion, if we want women in coaching positions to exert more impact, then we must devise means to make their role in recruiting new female coaches more visible and explicit. Having a female coach does not in and of itself guarantee that more female athletes will take up coaching. In this context, some of the recruitment measures mentioned by the participating coaches seem to be very promising.

With respect to the athletes' desire to become coaches, I was shocked to find how much these high performance athletes doubted their ability to perform coaching tasks. Their responses confirm the results of studies in the sociology of sport, which indicate that girls' experience of sport is very different from that of boys. According to the literature on the subject, girls' experience of sport boils down to a fear of failing, of being incompetent, and of not being able to meet expectations. Social influences are one explanation for this. Unlike boys, who are constantly being encouraged by family, friends, and teachers to participate in sports, girls receive less support and encouragement from the adults around them. As a result, many girls develop few of the leadership skills required for coaching. Most of the athletes interviewed stated on several occasions that "leadership is a male thing" and that, "if you need more leadership, you have to bring in a man." This shows the extent to which leadership qualities are associated with stereotypes and identified as being male.

Having more female coaches will not automatically produce more young female coaches. We must institute specific, practical measures for female coaches and future coaches. Future female coaches must be prepared for their role as recruiters. This could probably be done by including in their training a module focusing specifically on the importance of encouraging more female athletes to take up coaching. Current female coaches must be given practical recruitment tools. It is not good enough to say that they are doing a poor job of recruiting; on the contrary, they must be supported in their recruitment efforts, which — it bears repeating — come on top of the many responsibilities they already assume! I invite you to share your recruitment tips and success stories with the *Journal* by contacting [Anna Mees](#), director of CAC's Women in Coaching Program. We will be pleased to consider your ideas to advance the cause of women in coaching.

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