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Political Advocacy in Coaching — Why Engage?

Advocacy, which the [Nelson Canadian Dictionary](#) defines as “the act of pleading or arguing in favour of something, such as a cause”, is an action that few women coaches engage in on their own behalf. Speaking out in support of their athletes, certainly; speaking out in support of themselves, rarely. In “Political Advocacy in Coaching — Why Engage?”, authors [Rose Mercier](#) and [Dru Marshall](#) argue that for women coaches to advance their own cause and “become optimally effective” — and consequently tap into a fairer share of coaching positions with commensurate remuneration, not to mention respect — they must learn to become better advocates of the considerable value they bring to sport. In the male-dominated, politically driven world of sport, no one else is going to do it for them.

As Rose and Dru make clear, the focus of such advocacy is not whether men or women are better equipped to be coaches — clearly such a discussion is as outmoded as women athletes being barred from distance events because of potential damage to the reproductive process. Rather, it is about valuing the differences, especially in the vital area of communication, and recognizing the unique skills and benefits women coaches bring to their athletes.

As well as explaining political advocacy, Rose and Dru provide a system map that guides the reader through the complexities of Canada’s sport system. Understanding the system within which you work is critical to your political effectiveness.

The ability to advocate successfully is generally not an intrinsic aptitude but requires knowledge imparted and skill developed, and to this end, our authors urge that political advocacy be made part of the curriculum of Canada’s coach education programs. It’s a challenge the [Journal](#) supports. Lend your voice and together we [can](#) make a difference. — Sheila Robertson

JULY 2005 FEATURE

Political Advocacy in Coaching — Why Engage?

by Rose Mercier and Dru Marshall

Introduction

Traditionally, coach education programs have focused on improving technical and tactical understanding in coaches and enhancing sport science knowledge, particularly in the physical and mental domains. More recently, coaching process skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and planning have received increased attention in coach education programs. One skill that is not usually included in these programs but that is becoming increasingly important is political advocacy. It is our contention that coaches must learn political advocacy skills to become optimally effective.

Why is political advocacy an important skill for coaches to learn? Quite simply, sport is politicized. Questions such as who receives funding and how much, who gets to use the facilities and when, who receives new equipment, which team has a full complement of support staff, who makes decisions on coach selection, who decides when and where major competitions will occur, and what support is provided when coaches are away with the team are all political. Coaches need to understand the political environment within which they exist and need to know and understand how to advocate for their positions on issues.

Women coaches need to be strong advocates of the value they bring to coaching, the importance of having more women coaches, and the need for a coaching environment that makes more women coaches possible. These topics have been covered frequently and in depth in the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#). In July 2001, [Penny Werthner](#) and [Rose Mercier](#) wrote about the need for coaching models that equally value men and women and ensure that women’s experiences and perspectives are reflected in decision-making. In May 2005, Penny discussed differences between how men and women learn and communicate and the resultant impact on coaching.

None of this is to say that women coaches should advocate that women or men are better coaches; rather, men and women coach differently, and these differences are valuable and necessary for athletes. The life experiences and different world views that women bring to coaching and sport are essential in creating sport that is inclusive.

Although all coaches need to learn advocacy skills, this learning is particularly important for female coaches because sport has been and continues to be, despite many efforts, male dominated. This issue was highlighted in the “Brighton Declaration on Women in Sport”, which was a result of the first international conference on women and sport, held in Brighton, England, in 1994. The conference brought together policy makers and decision makers in sport from both the national and international levels and was held specifically to examine the imbalance that women face in their participation and involvement in sport. In the background to the declaration, the following statements were made:

Sport and sporting activities are an integral aspect of the culture of every nation. However, while women and girls account for more than half of the world's population and although the percentage of their participation in sport varies between countries, in every case it is less than that of men and boys.

Despite growing participation of women in sport in recent years and increased opportunities for women to participate in domestic and international arenas, increased representation of women in decision making and leadership roles within sport has not followed.

Women are significantly under-represented in management, coaching and officiating, particularly at the higher levels. Without women leaders, decision makers and role models within sport, equal opportunities for women and girls will not be achieved. ("Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport", 1994)

This declaration is now over 10 years old, and although some progress has been made, we still have a long way to go. It is clear that if we are to truly change the environment highlighted above, we need both individual and collective action.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is part of a wider continuum of a communication process (McKee, 1992). It involves the selection and organization of information to create a convincing argument or message. When coaches are advocating for an issue, they must have a thorough understanding of the issue and know what they want changed. Advocacy can then be accomplished by structuring a message using three questions (Dorfman, Wallack & Woodruff, 2005):

1. What is wrong?
2. Why does it matter?
3. What should be done about it?

Coaches also need to organize and build their alliances. Well-structured messages alone do not work. People need to be mobilized into action, and therefore the establishment of important and meaningful connections with a network of people is critical if action is to be successful. Finally, it is important for coaches to educate those who are in positions to make a difference by providing them with their well-structured messages. Coaches need to increase awareness of important issues and gain commitment from decision makers. For these to happen, coaches must understand where and how decisions are made. In other words, coaches must understand power itself as well as the power that they hold as individuals and they must have knowledge of who holds the power within their organizations.

What types of power exist?

Possibly one of the easiest types of power to develop as a coach is expert power. Becoming knowledgeable and skilled in the strategy, tactics, science, and history of a sport establishes credibility, an essential element of being your own advocate. It is unlikely that expert power will be sufficient for coaches to have optimal impact in their sports; therefore, they need to develop an awareness and understanding of different types of power.

Women coaches can also develop power through a deep understanding about the importance of having women coaches. The topic will invariably come up, mainly because women are still under-represented in the coaching ranks and because strategies to recruit and develop women coaches continue to be introduced. Coaches can use different sources of information to increase their understanding of the many aspects of a situation. One of the best sources is the Women in Coaching website (<http://www.coach.ca/WOMEN/e/index.htm>). A primer that is invaluable is the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) resource that was produced four years ago. Take a look, for example, at the answer to the question "Why should we be trying to increase the number of women coaches?"

First, women represent an untapped resource in many sports. Although female athletes constitute as much as 50 per cent (and sometimes more) of the membership of many national teams, the percentage of women who coach at that level is significantly lower. With so many women having a successful high performance competitive experience, the fact that so few enter coaching means there is a huge loss of knowledge and potential coaching expertise for any sport.

Second, it is well documented that women have different life and leadership experiences, values, and attitudes. One of the reasons that corporations have focused on advancing women into leadership roles is to ensure that they have a full range of perspectives available to confront business challenges. Sport, too, should be more active in tapping into the experience and expertise that women can bring to coaching.

In addition to increasing the number of women coaches, we should examine our current models of coaching. Accepted ideas about leadership are changing. The traditional view of leadership was founded on male-oriented values of rationality (everything must be based on reason), competition (only the strong survive), and independence (every man for himself). These assumptions have shaped the culture of many of our organizations, including sport. When we simply try to fit women into this existing leadership (coaching) model, they often are isolated, receive little support, have limited opportunities, and do not stay around, thereby perpetuating the prevailing thinking that women "cannot take the pressure."

Often, power is thought of in negative terms because it is associated with those who use the power that they have — as a result of being in a specific position — to their own advantage. And yet, this type of power — positional power — can be used toward positive ends just as easily. It depends upon the intention with which this type of power is exercised. This is

A System Map : Directions



the first important lesson about power: in and of itself, power is neither positive nor negative. The nature of power depends upon the way it is used. Power is useful when it is gets things done, brings about change, or chooses what will happen. If coaches want some control in their coaching careers, it is useful to cultivate the types of power that will enable them to accomplish their goals. Coaches have positional power. They use it to make positive choices for their athletes. Coaches also need to recognize positional power in others and how important it is to cultivate relationships with those individuals who hold positional power within their organizations.

Early in a coaching career, coaches need to develop relationships with a wide variety of people in many different facets of sport. Coaches should identify the people in their sports who are decision makers or who know the decision makers. Coaches need to take advantage of opportunities and seek out occasions where they can meet people who play different roles in sport, even if they are not directly involved in the current coaching environment. These activities take time and attention and should be done in an

intentional manner. Developing associative power pays dividends at different points in a coach's career. Coaches can use the sport system map contained in the next section of this article to think about the different people with whom they may want to develop connections.

Another type of power that will help coaches to be effective in advocacy involves developing the skills to speak to important issues in simple language that helps others quickly understand issues. Developing the abilities to analyse a situation and use language effectively will help coaches to challenge the way that things are currently done, to name issues that need to be addressed such as inadequate competition opportunities and unfair coach selection procedures, or to offer equally valid alternative explanations. In advocating for themselves, their athletes, and their sports, coaches want to be in the position where they are naming what is important in a situation and not leaving such naming to others.

Another type of power that coaches need to develop is enabling power — that is, the ability to help athletes make good choices, often related to their team's or an athlete's goals. This type of power involves enabling or empowering others, making use of appropriate positive and critical feedback and celebrating the accomplishments of athletes and staff. As advocates, coaches can empower others by treating them and their ideas with dignity and respect, by developing mutually beneficial relationships, and by facilitating the successful resolution of conflicts. Empowering others requires a wide variety of skills. Coaches should plan to develop or refine skills that will help them empower others. Developing facilitation skills will help coaches to understand and create processes for helping groups accomplish goals together. Becoming a skilled communicator helps a coach to hear what others are really saying as well as to express her own ideas such that others understand. Enabling power is an asset in any situation that involves groups of people trying to work together, and therefore it should be nurtured.

Coaches are more effective advocates if they have developed the personal power that comes from a deep commitment to a vision for their team or organization and clear and demonstrated values. We can influence others when our beliefs and values, personal commitment, and self-confidence are evident. Although a few people can rely on their natural charisma, most of us need to work on creating a source of personal power by clarifying our values and aspirations for the future.

In summary, here are actions that coaches can take to enhance their power quotient:

- Develop a strong network based on solid personal relationships.
- Polish your skills in analysing situations.
- Practise expressing your ideas in a clear and compelling fashion.
- Use an inclusive approach whenever practical.
- Improve and refine your facilitation skills.
- Get clear about your personal values and coaching vision.

What is the circle of influence in sport?

Just as an understanding of power is important for advocacy, understanding the sport environment in which a coach operates is equally critical. Depending on their situations, coaches need to be aware of the many different dimensions that they need to think about to become politically effective.

We developed this system map for a leadership seminar for federal/provincial/territorial Canada Games apprenticeship coaches. It has proven a useful tool for coaches in creating a plan of action.

There are five dimensions in this map. Coaches need to become familiar with the different dimensions that affect not only where they coach currently but also their coaching aspirations.

The Single Sport Organizations dimension includes those organizations that follow one sport. Typically, this dimension features a hierarchical nest of organizations from international to club level. Each level in the single sport organization is typically linked through membership to the next level.

The Multisport Organizations dimension includes organizations that serve many sports, such as the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) and the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES). This dimension is generally characterized by a looser association of organizations at different levels that are associated through the service they provide.

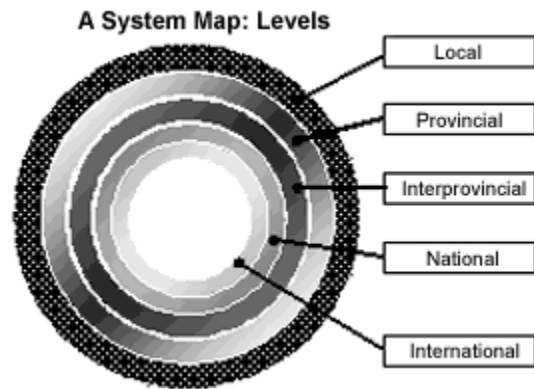
The Educational Sport Federations and Related Agencies dimension incorporates institutions and organizations that characterize the sport environment of coaches working in an educational sport setting (for example, Canadian Interuniversity Sport). This dimension features both the hierarchical nest of organizations and the associated organizations.

Government Organizations and Programs is the dimension that includes various levels of government that are involved with funding, programming, and facilities.

Games Organizations encompasses those organizations, such as the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), which are the franchise holders and organizers for the different Games.

Each of the five dimensions can be viewed from five different levels. Coaches can create a map of the different organizations and individuals that need to be included in their sphere of connection by considering the different levels of a dimension or by examining all dimensions at one level.

Different types of organizations can be found at each level. The following chart is not intended to be an exhaustive list. Coaches may consider adding other organizations that are important in their unique situations.



Local	Coaches, clubs, leagues, municipal recreation departments, school athletic associations, local school boards, individual educational institutions with teams, sport schools, multisport events or clubs, local games or event organizers
Provincial	Provincial coaches, provincial coaches associations, provincial sport organizations, provincial ministries responsible for sport, provincial/territorial coaching coordinators, provincial sport federations, provincial multi-sport organizations, regional/provincial sport centres, provincial games societies, provincial university athletic associations, high school sport athletic associations
Interprovincial	Provincial sport organizations' presidents' councils, inter-provincial games societies, Inter-provincial Sport and Recreation Committee
National	National sport organizations, Sport Canada, Canadian Heritage, CAC, Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, CCES, Canada Games Council, COC, Canadian Paralympic Committee, Canadian Professional Coaches Association, Commonwealth Games Canada, Canadian Interuniversity Sport, Canadian Colleges Athletic Association, Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
International	International Federations, Council of Europe, UNESCO, Commonwealth Ministers of Sport, General Assembly of International Sport Federations, World Anti-Doping Association, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, International Olympic Committee, International Paralympic Committee, Commonwealth Games Federation, Pan American Sports Organization, Comité international des Jeux de la Francophonie, FISU

Coaches do not necessarily need to understand the full scope of organizations and individuals working at all levels, but it is useful to develop an appreciation of the myriad of relationships and jurisdictions that come into play in sport. Being effective advocates in sport requires coaches to understand where decisions that affect them get made, to be aware of who makes those decisions, and to appreciate the context of a decision. None of these happen without intentional action on the part of the coach.

Conclusion

Political advocacy is an important process for coaches to understand, particularly female coaches because sport is male dominated. To be effective advocates, coaches must be informed about issues, understand the personal and organizational contexts within which they are working, develop a strong network, and appreciate the goals and vision that they have for their athletes and program (Richey, 1991). We would argue that advocacy lessons should be taught in

coach education programs. Advocacy takes courage, strength of character, and brains — and it is not optional if we are to change the current landscape in sport.

About the Authors

Rose Mercier established her independent consulting business after a 20-year career in the management and leadership of sport. An experienced facilitator in leadership and organizational development, she works with a wide variety of organizations within and outside sport. Her clients include Speed Skating Canada, Volleyball Canada, the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association, the Aboriginal Sport Circle, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, Swimming/Natation Canada, Water Polo Canada, the Canadian Child Care Federation, the Coaching Association of Canada, and Sport Canada. She has served on various national committees and is a member of the board of the Social Planning Council of Kingston.



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