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Nobody knows what life will be like when the COVID-19 pandemic is tamed. Far-reaching change is the only certainty, and the Journal is indebted to Claire Carver-Dias for tackling the unpredictable, shifting topic and assessing its impact on Canada's women coaches, many of whom find themselves ambivalent about remaining in the profession. Addressing that ambivalence is vitally important to organizations and institutions which employ women coaches. While in-depth studies within the coaching sphere are yet to be conducted, distressing trends documented in the corporate world suggest that the potential for coach departures must be taken seriously. Wise leaders of sport organizations will pay careful attention to her practical and achievable recommendations. Not to do so risks the loss of the valuable human resource that is the woman coach. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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COVID-19: Challenges and Silver Linings for Canada's Women Coaches

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It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected women around the globe by heightening both the major and minor inequalities women face on a daily basis in the workplace and on the home front. These unfortunate trends are being measured, examined, and well-documented in literature related to women in the corporate workspace, while the pandemic's impact on women in coaching is less clear. This article is a non-comprehensive, early-stage exploration of some of the effects of COVID-19 on the lives and roles of Canadian women coaches and provides high-level recommendations for how to respond.

Has The "Great Resignation" hit sport?

It is suggested that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than are the jobs of men. The McKinsey Global Institute indicates that "One reason for this greater effect on women is that the virus is significantly increasing the burden of unpaid care, which is disproportionately carried by women."¹ With schools closed and stay-at-home orders in place, many parents faced the challenge of caring for children and the household, while also managing the stressors of virtual work. Many individuals, disproportionately women, for whom online work was not an option, were forced to reduce to part-time work or leave the workforce altogether.²

In numerous cases, companies had to reduce their workforce, and women suffered the brunt of those dismissals due to the fact that they occupy a large portion of the lower ranks or part-time positions. Anecdotally, many national sport organizations have reported having to make the difficult decision to furlough or terminate key coaching staff. As the actual numbers become available, it will be interesting to examine the percentage of female terminations relative to the overall termination rate and proportion of women in the coaching population.

Furthermore, the COVID era has prompted many to opt out of their roles in the corporate world. Anthony Klotz, an organizational psychologist at Texas A&M University, recently coined this unprecedented phenomenon as the “Great Resignation”. He claims that the pandemic has made workers re-evaluate what they are actually getting out of their jobs. Barry Pokroy, an executive coach trained in clinical psychology and partner at Farber, indicates that individuals are facing “a crisis of meaning” at work. “For a myriad of reasons, people are asking themselves, ‘What is important in my life?’ and ‘How do I want to spend my time?’” said Pokroy. “In many cases, this self-examination is leading to people making the decision to retire, change roles, or switch industries.”

Are we seeing the same crisis of meaning and high levels of attrition in the sport coaching industry? Once again, it is safe to say that the numbers are not yet in, creating a challenge in quantifying the influence of the coronavirus era on coach departures, whether full-time, part-time, or volunteer. An exception to this dearth of statistics can be found through the Canadian Sport Centre Atlantic (CSCA) that has collected data on coach attrition and the reasons for these departures.

“Our normal annual attrition rates are one or two coaches per year. This year, already ten of the 28 people in paid coaching positions within our region have left coaching,” reported Natasha Burgess Johnson, Director of Coaching for CSCA. The sport centre hired a firm to conduct an audit to better understand the contributing factors. In their collection of qualitative and quantitative data on coaches’ role satisfaction, the CSCA learned that approximately 80% of the coaches surveyed felt their workload was a bit heavy or very heavy. Further, only 16.6% of individuals surveyed agreed that they were compensated fairly. Among the themes in the report, individuals reported feeling that they experience unreasonable expectations around work hours, as well as dubious work-life balance. Two of the seven coaches interviewed for this article indicated that several of their female coaching colleagues, frustrated by the slow pace of progress in addressing legitimate complaints such as the ones listed above, are asking themselves: “Is now the time to leave coaching?”

While many of these grievances are not new to coaches, during the COVID-era crisis of meaning, they may be enough to prompt departures. The results collected by the CSCA only cover the coaches included in the funded coach scheme, thus don’t provide a full picture. However, such a trend should set off an alarm regarding what may be an impending crisis in the coaching realm. As one publication put it, “This virus excels at taking existing tensions and ratcheting them up.”³ If coaching trends follow those seen in other industries, coaches may feel less connected to their organizations, and choose to *opt out of* rather than *put up with* lingering issues.

Space for self-care

The past two years have presented coaches with many challenges, but there have been numerous silver linings as well, including the change of schedule for many coaches.

“When COVID hit and I was working remotely, there were the new stresses of that change, but it was my first extended period in 40 years that I’ve been at home and not perpetually immersed in sport,” said Kristine Drakich, head coach for the University of Toronto’s women’s volleyball team. “I heard many coach colleagues comment on this phenomenon ... All of a sudden we had time to focus on things like our health, our relationships, and self-care.” The absence of sport-related travel and onsite coaching provided an opportunity for basic long-neglected care and connection for many coaches.

For one woman coach, the lockdown coincided with a devastating medical diagnosis for her spouse. “It was a challenging time for me, but the slowing down of activities gave me the space to care for my husband,” said Vicki Keith, a high-performance para-swimming coach. “The experience and timing caused me to redefine my life and coaching motto ... from ‘Dream, believe, laugh, achieve, inspire,’ to ‘Slow down, be patient, be kind.’ I’m going to carry this lesson and that motto forward.” Keith further reported that the reduction in training intensity, and the need to be creative in the way she coached her athletes (especially those headed to Tokyo for the Paralympic Games) led to better recovery and a reduction in injury rates amongst her swimmers. Notably, it also led to exceptional performances in the pool at the Games.

Space for learning

According to the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), there was a 9% increase in new women coaches taking NCCP sport-specific training in 2020. “We’ve never seen an increase like this,” reported Isabelle Cayer, CAC’s Director of Sport Safety. This boost in training was largely due to the fact that coaches weren’t coaching, so they had time to access training. Other contributing factors included the CAC’s agile move to develop a NCCP Online Delivery task force and, with its partners, train over 800 learning facilitators across Canada. The partners modified content and delivery to an online format. Provincial/Territorial partners also offered the NCCP multi-sport training modules for free, removing any financial barriers for coaches.

Coaches also had the flexibility to attend a range of virtual conferences and learn from other coaches. This access to a variety of educational and networking experiences enabled knowledge-sharing across geographic lines and eliminated the often prohibitive elements of timing and costs of travel for live events. “Women coaches who, under normal circumstances because of the many demands on their lives and time, weren’t able to access training and mentoring, had a window of opportunity to access learning and even to network,” said Cheryl Jean-Paul, the head coach of women’s basketball at Trinity Western University.

Jean-Paul also indicated that the change of pace of coaching during the pandemic allowed for minority groups to connect online and launch important initiative. She was able to focus more time and energy on advancing her work with the Black Canadian Coaches Association (BCCA). “COVID gave many of us the opportunity to pursue things we’ve never pursued before,” said Jean-Paul. “Now, as we return to normalcy, whatever that looks like, will we be able to maintain any momentum we built over the past two years?”

The return to sport: Grappling with new burdens

Jean-Paul’s question is echoed by other women coaches grappling with the busy-ness of the reintroduction of regular training and competition. Now that most areas across the country have resumed in-person sports and competition, coaches are finding that there is a lot to celebrate, and several new challenges to manage.

“There is a pervasive sense of relief amongst the coaches and athletes. It’s wonderful to be together and set goals again,” said Drakich. “At the same time, we have to move slowly to get

athletes back into the swing of things. They are competing for the first time in ages, and then there's the academic load, plus some individuals aren't in the same physical condition they were in pre-COVID." Drakich and other coaches are paying even closer attention to the mental health of their athletes. Likewise, they need to be creative about adding in intentional social touch points. Building back athletes' physical, social, emotional, and mental health and fitness can be overwhelming for coaches.

Jill Mallon, associate head coach, track and field at the University of Toronto, agreed that there is much more for coaches to consider and manage now. She noted that many athletes need extra support and understanding that the progression timeline they were on previously may have changed. She emphasized that the starting point is *now*: "Timelines went out the window with COVID. There were changes to the team, and now it's very young...even the more senior athletes are less seasoned because of missing so much time. Part of the coach's job now is to help athletes deal with these unexpected changes and their consequences."

The double-edged sword

As discussed above, the pandemic period offered coaches the schedule flexibility to engage in neglected self-care or other care, connect with family and friends, embrace learning activities, and launch important initiatives. While acknowledging that many coaches faced exceptional challenges during COVID, the coaches interviewed for this article expressed gratitude for the unexpected benefits of the period. However, as this new phase of the pandemic dawned, coaches returned to the many demands of working in sport in addition to new challenges and lost some of the schedule flexibility they enjoyed over the past two years.

One woman coach, who asked not to be named, indicated that the slightly slower pace of working from home and her rediscovery of better life balance juxtaposed with the new demands of caring for overwhelmed athletes has her contemplating early retirement. "Many athletes did not return to sport. A disproportionate number of those were female. Will we see the same trend among coaches?" she asked.

Ali Bowes, a senior lecturer in the sociology of sport at Nottingham Trent University, has conducted research into the impact of COVID on women's sport in the United Kingdom, and found that whereas men's sport returned faster, women's sport struggled to afford equipment, and due to the gender pay gap and responsibilities at home, many women coaches and athletes have had to seek alternative employment: "There are absolutely concerns that women will walk away and we've seen that already with some examples in a number of sports where it's been too difficult for them to continue."⁴

Recommendations

In a gender-regressive "do nothing" scenario, sport could be headed for a coaching crisis. To prevent departures from coaching, organizations that employ and support coaches will need to find creative ways to learn from COVID-era experiences. Recommendations include

- collecting and examining trends in coach employment across Canada.
- providing extra support for women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) coaches serving diversity and inclusion in sport.
- considering ways to preserve a measure of the balance some coaches experienced during COVID such as careful consideration of working hours, self-care funding, and time allocated for this.
- continuing virtual coach training and conferences.
- sourcing additional funding for coach training and conferences.

- providing mental health support for coaches and athletes to manage the added pressures of the return to sport.
- developing family-friendly policies, including flexible programs or part-time programs, to support coaches experiencing an increased childcare burden during the pandemic and beyond.

If coaching does indeed follow the alarming trends studied in the corporate world, we may see the rolling back of decades of progress towards gender equity in coaching and a rapid decline in the coach population. As Jean-Paul suggests: “We need to grieve what we lost during the pandemic, examine what we gained, and look closely at what we went through as a way to accelerate our growth and learning as coaches and athletes.”

About the Author

Claire Carver-Dias is the lead communications consultant and founder of Clearday Communications. She specializes in helping business leaders become more effective leaders and communicators. She had a 15-year high-performance sport career that earned her an Olympic bronze medal, two Commonwealth Games gold medals, two Pan American Games gold medals, and over 30 international medals. Claire is a past president of AthletesCAN; has served on the board of directors for the Coaching Association of Canada and the Canada Games Council Sport Committee; and is a director on the board of Commonwealth Games Canada. She led Team Canada as Chef de Mission at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. A published writer, she holds a BA with distinction from the University of Toronto, a MA in English from McGill University, a PhD in English (Writing/Communications) from Bangor University (Wales), and a MBA from Queens and Cornell Universities.

¹ *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects* July 15, 2020. McKinsey Global Institute. Online.

² Ibid.

³ Bateman, Nicole and Martha Ross. “Why has COVID-19 been especially harmful for working women?” www.Brookings.edu. Online.

⁴ Morgan, Kate. “COVID: Many female athletes 'may walk away' after pandemic.” *BBC.com*. 6 May 2021. Online.