

## Black Women Coaches: Building Skills and Community Through Mentorship

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**By Janelle Joseph**

### Overview

Mentorship programs have been shown to help underrepresented women navigate their environments, but little research has been done on underrepresented women coaches in Canada. The first of its kind, the Black Female Coach Mentorship Program (BFCMP), caters to racialized women historically excluded from coaching. Created by the Black Canadian Coaches Association (BCCA,) in partnership with the Coaching Association of Canada, the inaugural BFCMP welcomed 27 mentors and mentees in 2020/2021.

Funds from a SIRC Match Grant were used to match an academic supervisor, Dr. Janelle Joseph, a graduate student, Alex I. McKenzie, and a sport organization, the BCCA, to mobilize a research project that aimed to understand the experiences of Black women coaches in their sports, their organizations, and the BCFMP.

The methods included interviews with 15 mentors and mentees and observations of three mentorship education sessions. The findings presented in this article suggest that participants benefit from mentorship because of the opportunities to share stories, build skills, and develop a community, making them feel less alone. Both mentors and mentees prospered from the relationships they were able to form. A recommendation for sport administrators is to foster opportunities for relationship-building among coaches with similar lived experiences.

### Understanding the Experience of Black Women in Coaching in Canada

Black women sport coaches face intersectional, structural, and interpersonal racial and gender inequities that constrain their career progression. Rather than evidence of a lack of interest or talent, the disparities in representation of Black women among coaches in comparison to their representation in the broader society signals intersectional oppression and access discrimination, resulting in limitations in hiring and promotion.

It has been asserted that women of colour are invisible and silenced in sport, which often results in their exclusion from access to sport opportunities as participants and coaches, and marginalization within sport-related institutions, including high schools, colleges, universities, and professional leagues. A combination of racism and sexism creates “othered” experiences, particularly in the pursuit of leadership careers in sport whereby all women face barriers. Even less value is given to Black women’s work ethic and accomplishments, and Black women

coaches who are included are held to higher standards compared to their White and male counterparts.

Access discrimination negatively impacts not only the Black women seeking leadership roles in sport, but also players and coaches around them, and the sport organization as a whole, meaning that everyone 'loses' when Black women are excluded. Historical and contemporary practices of exploitation and exclusion reflect the larger social power relations and oppressive work climates that result in few Black women attaining coaching positions across various sport contexts.

The marginalization of Black women in coaching creates vertical discrimination that limits the advancement to upper-level positions within sport organizations such as head coach or athletic director. Research indicates that the perception of a 'glass ceiling' results in few avenues for success for Black women in professional sport occupations and a perception that coaching is not a reasonable goal.

In many traditionally White institutions, Black women lack peer or senior administrators and coaches with whom they can identify and often feel as though they are the only ones going through struggles. The 'glass ceiling' effect hinders the recruitment, promotion, and retention of Black women coaches and thus has downstream effects on Black women athletes. The call to action by Akilah R. Carter-Francique and Joyce Olushola is clear: Creating avenues for Black women coaches to succeed is imperative to redefine hegemonic coaching narratives that privilege White men over racialized people and women in sport. ([Inequalities for Black Women in Coaching, Mentorship and Academia - WiSP Sports | conversations from the world of women's sports](#)). One such avenue is exclusive mentorship programs.

### A Step Forward: The Black Female Coach Mentorship Program (BFCMP)

In 2020, the BFCMP invited participants from across Canada to join in learning and community, to advance professionalization and skill sets, and to increase accessibility, support, and leadership for Black women in sport. Research featured online interviews with nine mentors and six mentees of the inaugural 27 participants in the program and observations of three online mentorship education sessions. Education included discussions about fostering mental health, coaching certification processes, and building confidence. Findings revealed consistent patterns in what was important to the participants. All mentioned they were excited about the opportunities to share stories that allowed them to get to know one another's accomplishments and struggles, thereby building friendships, community, and specific skills related to sport coaching and to equity. The key was to use mentorship to feel less alone, which was important for both mentors and mentees.



## Learning Best Practices Through Storytelling

When participants gathered for mentorship sessions, they spent a lot of time getting to know each other. This extended visiting allowed space for sharing stories and challenges of being a Black woman coach. Tiffany, a provincial basketball coach and program mentor, notes:

*“The biggest challenges would be limit[ed] staff capacity to meet demands and lack of representation at the leadership level to understand the complexities marginalized communities face.”*

Tiffany carries the burden of supporting many racialized athletes and doesn't want to have to explain the complexities they face in order to mobilize change from a mostly White leadership.

For the first time, in the mentorship program, Tiffany could strategize with a group of coaches who understood her challenges based on shared identities:

*“The best part was connecting with women who look like me, learning best practices, and celebrating everyone's accomplishments.”*

Celebrations were not only convivial; they were instrumental as well. For example, one coach was successful in getting her organization to pay for babysitting so she could travel with her team and her young children. Another coach shared that she had volunteered to be on a provincial committee, which brought attention to her illustrious career and created valuable networks that proved essential for future roles. Without knowledge of such accomplishments, some Black women coaches may not ask for what they need, nor would they recognize the unanticipated value of volunteering with mainstream organizations.

Ella, also from basketball and a program mentee, describes being transformed through the relationships she was able to form, and the stories she heard and shared, especially because her sport organization was bereft of Black women leaders to engage with and conversations across sports and across senior roles were scarce:

*“[The mentorship program] changed me tremendously through the wonderful conversations I had with the mentees and mentors, as it gave more understanding and comprehension about myself, the world, and [the] perception the world [has] towards Black women in sport. Through their mentorship, they assured me with great words of wisdom on how to tackle the negative perceptions and how to leverage my identity as a Black woman in sport to get through the doors of opportunity. I felt like I found a group of women who, with all unique stories, were able to impact my life tremendously, and I never would have guessed that I would be taking so much out of the mentorship.”*

In the BFCMP, many of the conversations about coaching homed in on how to navigate sexist and racist environments. Learning about equity, including the vocabulary of *micro-aggressions* (subtle identity-based slights and insults) and *misogynoir* (anti-Black misogyny) was just as important as demystifying complex national coach certification processes and sport-specific

workout strategies. All these learnings allowed the participants to name the discrimination they had experienced and build their skills to improve at their next opportunity.

## Building confidence through relationships with role-models



Tara Mrakic  
Flag Football  
Quebec



Christa Eniojukan  
Basketball  
Ontario



Cheryl Jean-Paul  
Basketball  
British Columbia



Safiya Muharuma  
Ice Hockey  
Ontario



Tenicha Gitten  
Basketball  
Quebec



Leslie Estwick  
Track and Field  
Ontario

Every participant described feeling like an imposter at some point in her career. Mentors recognized that beyond “pointers on how to coach particular event[s], or some exercises, or some drills,” their mentees really needed “a professional development exercise” that included a focus on developing oneself as a whole person, including mental health and mental strength through “self-development, self-perspective, self-confidence.”

Lisa, a national and provincial athletics coach and program mentor, normalized conversations about building confidence as a

practice, not as a one-time endeavour. Though she had deep experience in a single sport, she had limited exposure to Black women coaches of other sports. Building those relationships across sports was important to learn how to ‘be’ in the sports world:

*“I don’t really have a lot of contact with full-time varsity coaches, so the opportunity to talk with these people about their perspective and what they go through from their point of view, I think was really valuable.”*

Because there are so few head coaching jobs and no Black women role models to draw from, Lisa had considered a head coach position an ‘impossibility’ before she met BFCMP members who were in head coach roles:

*‘I have never had any hope of being a full-time coach ... It’s not even, you know, reasonable to dream of that because there just are no opportunities ... [But] they’ve accomplished this and it’s like ‘Wow!’ you know? What you had to do, the hoops you had to jump through to get this [full time coaching position]. It was impressive.’*

Having a role model she now considers a friend allows Lisa to set her aspirations even higher.

Similarly, Nora, a provincial basketball coach and program mentor, had limited confidence as an individual but is buoyed by the resilience of the community she found through the mentorship program:

*“I was always second guessing myself, but now I have the confidence to ... bounce this idea off someone else or ask [another Black woman] coach ... so I feel more comfortable attacking these situations and it's giving me, like I said, more confidence. Just like now I speak out against stuff, [I] may be more vocal about, you know, my passions and the things that I believe in.”*

Nora explains that seeing other women be leaders, learning how they are transforming their institutions, and seeing how they are refusing to remain quiet, gave her the confidence to do the same.

Nika, from basketball and a program mentee, recognizes that the mentorship program has been “incredible,” “impactful,” and “inspiring” because of the lack of role models throughout her childhood and coaching career. Through the BFCMP, however, she met women who are doing exactly what she hopes to accomplish.

*“Growing up [it] has been hard to even imagine myself in these powerful roles because of the fact that I'm like, wait, there's no one like me so I don't even know if I can even do that. So I think having been surrounded by so many powerful Black women, so many successful Black women, has been very inspiring and very uplifting. It has definitely built up my confidence more, [built] in a sense of my self-worth ... I've learned to stay true to myself, stand in my own shoes, and speak up for myself more too ... There's so much going on in my life this year, so it was kind of like my safe haven. It was just very impactful in so many different ways ... Having a Black female in that position that I dream to be in is incredible.”*



The importance of having role models who are also accessible to ask questions and uplift another Black woman was re-iterated again and again by players aspiring to be a coach, coach mentees, and even fellow coach mentors who relied on each other for support.

The BFCMP extends research on Black women coaches and details the wide range of reasons mentorship programs are so important in Canada. Few Black women coaches have been previously coached by Black women or have readily available access to coaches who share their experiences and identities in their sport or their organization.

Because coaching in Canada is dominated by White men, Black women need to learn from each other how to navigate systems that were not designed by or for them, and how to best support their racialized athletes as role models. The results of the SIRC-funded research project with the BFCMP show that participants in mentorship programs feel empowered through the information they learn about self-care, speaking up, building confidence, as well as the importance of friendships, relationships, and a networked community. Black feminist scholarship has focused on the value of intergenerational and intersectional solidarities as essential to the survival and success of differently positioned Black women. This research

highlights that formal mentorship is a significant means of developing key leadership skills and competencies necessary for Black women coaches in Canada to be successful in sport (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fspor.2022.884239/full>).

### Three Key Recommendations for Sport Administrators

1. Foster opportunities for relationship-building among coaches with similar lived experiences. These should allow space and time for storytelling to form connections, share successes, and strategize how to navigate sport systems.
2. Enhance the representation of Black women in coaching through targeted recruitment. Increase visibility for these important role models by identifying and challenging potential areas of access discrimination in your organization's structure and practices.
3. Learn about anti-racism in order to support Black women who are potential and current coaches. A good place to start is the Coaching Association of Canada's Anti-Racism in Sport eLearning Module [https://coach.ca/anti-racism-in-coaching?gclid=Cj0KCQjw1tGUBhDXARIsAIJX01IQWOxVzp8dxTo2JIIsjTRk6jtxA6b2vk5ODIyThIUJXoFVn1rxHLEaAiKTEALw\\_wcB](https://coach.ca/anti-racism-in-coaching?gclid=Cj0KCQjw1tGUBhDXARIsAIJX01IQWOxVzp8dxTo2JIIsjTRk6jtxA6b2vk5ODIyThIUJXoFVn1rxHLEaAiKTEALw_wcB)

### About the Author

Janelle Joseph is the founding director of the Indigeneity, Diaspora, Equity and Anti-racism in Sport (IDEAS) Research Lab in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, at the University of Toronto. Dr. Joseph is an associate editor for the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, the Director of Research for the Black Canadian Coaches Association, and the Co-President of the Black Canadian Studies Association. She is the author of *Sport in the Black Atlantic: Cricket, Canada, and the Caribbean Diaspora* and co-editor of the first undergraduate textbook to focus on a wide range of historical and contemporary sporting racisms: *Race and Sport in Canada: Intersecting Identities*.

References available upon request.

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