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What Women are Saying About Coaching Needs and Practices in Masters Sport

As the Coaching Association of Canada notes*, “Masters sport is booming, and more and more masters athletes are seeking coaching guidance as they strive to learn new skills, improve their performance, or compete successfully.” This boom is providing fresh and fertile ground for coaches to practise their profession.

While exact numbers are unavailable, anecdotal evidence points to ever larger numbers of women competing in virtually all masters sports. This, inevitably, leads to the question of coaching. In particular, are traditional methods of coaching young girls and women readily transferable? The answer is “no”, according to research currently underway by authors Bettina Callary and Bradley W. Young. This article is an important first step in understanding the particular and unique coaching needs of women masters athletes, needs that are indeed distinct from those of younger athletes. — Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

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What Women are Saying About Coaching Needs and Practices in Masters Sport

By Bettina Callary and Bradley W. Young

In the July 2015 issue of the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#), Vicki Harber argued that coaches may be unwittingly delivering programs that are developmentally inappropriate for young female athletes. She argued that modifying the training environment was essential. She wrote about injury prevention, but this concept can also be applied towards tailoring coaching appropriately for athletes’ wants and preferences. The notion that coaching approaches should align appropriately with females’ needs, but particularly female adult athletes’ needs, warrants more consideration.

While the cohort of Masters athletes (MAs, over the age of 35 years) is growing quickly in Canada, very little is known about how they prefer to be coached, and there has been an assumption that coaches can take their knowledge of coaching youth and apply it to adults. However, our research is improving our understanding of what MAs want from their coaches and what coaches are doing with their MAs. They are unequivocally saying that coaching approaches used with MAs are not the same as those used with youth athletes.

Women MAs make up roughly 35 to 45% of the cohort, yet their voices are not often heard. No research has specifically investigated their preferences. In this article, we explore data from interviews with one female dragon boat Masters coach who is 22 years old and whom we will call Julie, and one female dragon boat Masters athlete who is 58 years old whom we will call Maria, in order to give a snapshot of what a woman coach does with her MAs, and what a woman MA wants from her coach.

The coach, while young, had been coaching female MAs for six years and had attended eight national and international events with her female athletes. She had her Level Two Dragon Boat Canada certification (Competitive Dragon Boat Coach), an undergraduate degree in kinesiology, and was pursuing a master’s degree in sport psychology. A lifelong competitive paddler, the MA’s coaching experience was with males. While both Julie and Maria were involved in international-level competition, they came from different clubs in different cities and did not know one another. Nonetheless, what they said in many respects was strikingly similar.

The two women were interviewed using a case study approach. Their voices are part of a larger research program involving many MAs and coaches, yet their voices represent poignant female interpretations on themes we find in our broader program. We have analyzed the current data in conjunction with wider findings, but have done so while staying true to these two women's narratives. We encourage you to take from the stories what you feel is relevant to your practice, while understanding that this is based on two individuals' points of view. We know that more research is needed in this area, yet it is our hope that this article contributes to growing dialogue among practitioners about how to enrich the coaching of adult women in sport.

The MA was interviewed about her experiences and preferences with coaches, and the coach was interviewed about her way of coaching MAs. Each interview lasted approximately two hours, resulting in 50 pages of single-spaced transcription. Interviews were analyzed using an adult learning model called "andragogy", the art and science of helping adults learn. It suggests that adults learn effectively when six principles are followed:

- when they know why, what, and how they are learning
- when they are able to be self-directed in what and how they learn
- when their past experiences are taken into consideration in their learning
- when the demands and responsibilities in their lives are accommodated, making them ready to learn
- when they take on a problem-centered orientation in learning, especially related to the rest of their life experiences
- when they are internally motivated to learn.

Andragogy has been popularly cited and employed by teachers who facilitate adult education, but has never been studied in sport, until now. Our reason for linking it to sport, and in this case, to women in sport, was because in interviews with Masters swimmers, many talked about how important it was for coaches to have "people skills" and knowing when, how, and to whom to give feedback on a very individual and situationally-dependent basis. This fits well with Jennifer Walinga's suggestion in the January 2014 issue of the *Journal* of a "feminine approach" to sport, highlighting cooperation and caring approaches, as well as with the National Coaching Certification Program's values of lifelong learning, fostering positive attitudes, and respect, its core competencies of interacting, problem-solving, critical thinking, valuing, and leading, and instructional design based on adult-learning principles and problem-solving methodology.

The women's voices

In the following section, we provide quotes that outline how Maria wanted her coaches to use andragogy, and how and why Julie did so.

Regarding an adult's *need to know* what they are learning, Maria said: "When I'm on the water, I like to know that I'm paddling correctly and I want the coach to tell me where I can improve and how to improve it. My favourite coach could do that."

Julie spoke more of her MAs' interests in knowing why they were doing something: "Maybe this is just my experience coaching teenagers; if you tell them something, they're going to do it. If you tell them to jump, they're going to say 'how high'? And a 40-year old is probably going to say 'how high', but they're also going to ask 'why'? They want that explanation."

As far as coaches structuring the learning environment in ways that allow adults to be *self-directed*, Maria said: "The coach asks for feedback from us. If we find we're not working hard enough, we'll tell him and he'll make it harder. If we're working too hard and we're all tired, then he'll change it accordingly. It's a constant back-and-forth."

Both athlete and coach noted that the coach gives MAs latitude to direct their efforts within broad expectations outlined by the coach. Julie commented: "We say at the beginning of the year that if you want to be in the 'A' boat, then this is what you're going to have to do. But then the onus is on them. If they don't show up to practices, if they don't do the fitness tests, if they're not training on their own, they won't be in the 'A' boat, but if they're ok with that, then that's fine."

The third adult learning principle notes that adults have *prior experiences* that may be used as a resource for learning

or that could also be a barrier if adults resist learning something new because of what they already know. Coach Julie noted: “I find adults, more so than teenagers, are very stuck in their ways sometimes. So, if you say something, it’s not necessarily going to click the first time. These little tips or adjustments, they need to be said again and again.”

Maria acknowledged MAs’ prior experiences in terms of their successes, suggesting that coaches must take care to address MAs with respect. She said: “Most of the athletes are very successful in their professions. The coach has to respect that they’re talking to a person who has achieved a lot in their life. The coach can’t treat them as if they’re some subordinate individual that has no say in anything that they do.”

The fourth principle relating to adults’ *readiness to learn* depended on the task and adults’ responsibilities. Adult female athletes are busy people, often with jobs and family obligations that make it difficult to find time for sport. Maria explained: “My favourite coach is always conscious that everyone is an adult and many have children so everyone’s managing [responsibilities]. He offers suggestions and is supportive so that the athletes don’t feel like they’re short-changing any of their roles. We have women who are maybe doing their workout on a Friday evening instead of [the scheduled] Thursday. He just wants to encourage them to complete the workouts that are assigned in any way that they can. He puts a lot of trust in the athletes to complete the routine but he knows that not everyone always does.”

Julie expanded that as a coach, she is mindful of her female adult athletes’ outside obligations and that she needs to structure the training to accommodate flexibly for these other priorities: “Jobs and families are big factors. A lot of times they can’t make it to every practice or every regatta because they have a family obligation. I just have to understand that and be willing to work with them through that. They want to be great athletes and dedicate as much time as they can to their sport, but they also have to provide for themselves and their family, so those are definitely aspects I have to consider.”

We note that coaches better sensitized to accommodating women’s responsibilities, and finding effective strategies to do this, may encourage more women to readily do adult sport.

Another principle is that adults have a *problem-centered orientation* to learning. They learn effectively when they perceive that their learning can be clearly applied to help them perform tasks or accomplish goals. Adults want to take an active part in this learning, as described by Maria: “We were working on our finishes because our finishes weren’t as strong as the other parts of our race. And we actually came up with a different plan. So if the plan is not working, we come up with a different plan that does work.”

Coach Julie explained how she took into account her female MAs’ goals: “Coaches of MAs need to have a plan and make sure the plan fits with the athletes’ goals. That’s the key to it. You have to find out what the athletes want to do.”

The final adult learning principle stipulates that while adults are responsive to extrinsic motivators, the most powerful *motivation* for them is *intrinsic*. MAs are committed to sport because of a desire for improved performance, involving pursuit of personal goals and mastery of skills and self-competition, such as beating one’s own previous marks, quality of life, self-esteem, or social interests. Both MA and coach asserted that adults participate in the sport because they inherently want to. Coach Julie stated: “I love coaching MAs because I know they want to be there. They’re not being forced there by anybody.”

Maria corroborated this belief: “Younger athletes, maybe their parents have them going. But MAs made a conscious decision to train: ‘I love doing this sport. I want to excel doing this sport and I want to do everything I can to achieve that.’”

Julie and Maria noted that female dragon boat MAs are motivated to perform and win, but they also enjoy the social aspect offered in the training environment. Finally, Maria described how she was motivated when she saw that her coach was wholly dedicated and engaged: “A coach who models commitment to the adult program, reciprocally motivates me and others to commit as well.”

Tips for coaching women MAs

We ask you to consider these tips based on what these women have said, and think about whether they resonate with the way you coach. We surmise that these tips, framed in adult learning principles, and derived from data regarding MAs' preferences and needs, are also especially relevant for women MAs. They may also represent a natural way for women coaches to facilitate learning opportunities for MAs because they line up well with women's interests and motivations as athletes and coaches, as well as with taking a cooperative and caring, reciprocally committed, and respectful approach to coaching.

To accommodate your female MA's interests in knowing why, how, and what to learn:

- Explain to her why she is learning something.
- Prior to dedicated work on skills, use personal performance assessments as an 'up front' tool to elucidate what and why she needs to learn in the context of where the skills will be applied.

To help your female MA feel like she has some autonomy in training:

- Allow her to make her own decisions and choices with regards to training.
- Involve her in collaborative planning of her training.

To take into account the wealth of experiences that a female MA has:

- Listen to comments about past experiences to inform how you set up her training and help her examine unhelpful habits and biases.
- Try not to feel impatient with the amount of time she may need to grasp various concepts, or how long it takes to see progress.

To get the most out of your female MA's readiness to learn:

- Consider how to accommodate her when you set up practice/competitive schedules.
- Be sensitive to demands on her life outside of sport.

To take a problem-based orientation to your female MA's learning:

- Ask her about her goals and how she hopes to achieve them. (While this may seem intuitive, our research shows that coaches often neglect goal-setting with MAs.)
- Use questioning techniques in various learning situations so she is challenged to think about the task at hand, and to connect it to larger meaningful tasks in her sport.

To help your female MA's motivation to train:

- Set up opportunities for her to experience success in practice, using criteria for success such as improved health, mastering techniques, enriching the social fabric of the club that can be interpreted in ways that are consistent with her motives for being in adult sport.
- Set up competitive activities for her during practice, emphasizing self-referenced forms of competition and encouraging her to better or "beat" her previous marks.

Across the spectrum, common themes most MAs want in coaches include:

- Sharing information from your own professional coaching development.
- Purposefully displaying your serious commitment to your female MA's program.
- Taking measures to better understand what each woman wants in terms of coaching feedback.

About the Authors

Dr. Bettina Callary is an assistant professor in the Department of Communities and Connections, within the area of Sport and Physical Activity Leadership at Cape Breton University. Her research interests include coach education, learning, and development pertaining to a wide range of coaches, from high performance to community coaches and instructors, women coaches, and coaches of older adult athletes. Further interests include coaches' understanding of the Long Term Athlete Development model and qualitative research methods.

Dr. Bradley W. Young is an associate professor in the School of Human Kinetics in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. His research considers the psycho-social aspects of participation in sport across the lifespan, and specifically examines the various agents and influences in the social environment of Masters athletes

that facilitate prolonged sport commitment. He examines topics that relate to the promotion, programming, and coaching of adult sport.

References available upon request

***For more information:** http://www.coach.ca/files/Coaching_Master_Athletes_FINAL_EN.pdf