



# Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online >>>>>

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## What We Know About the Experiences of Women Beginner Coaches

Every piece of information gathered from women coaches helps in developing a comprehensive, realistic picture of their working lives, their reactions to their working conditions, and their coping mechanisms. Until recently, such information was scarce indeed. Thanks to the work of researchers such as **Guylaine Demers**, **Marie-Hélène Audet**, **Dru Marshall**, **Gretchen Kerr**, and others, a picture is beginning to emerge that, the *Journal* hopes, will lead to practical initiatives for recruiting and retaining growing numbers of women to the coaching profession. From the currently reported study on the experiences of women beginner coaches, it is early days to draw definitive conclusions. Nonetheless, the more we understand the realities of women coaches, the better position organizations such as the Coaching Association of Canada will be in to recommend effective policies and procedures for achieving the vital goal of more women coaches. — Sheila Robertson

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## DECEMBER 2007 FEATURE

### What We Know About the Experiences of Women Beginner Coaches

by Guylaine Demers and Marie-Hélène Audet

#### Introduction

This article builds on “**Why Female Athletes Decide to Become Coaches – or Not**”, which was published in The Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching in July 2004.

The first article presented the preliminary stage of a larger research program initiated with women coaches, particularly those at the beginning of their careers. We are now able to present preliminary data collected from women beginner coaches in the sport of artistic gymnastics. These data show that launching a coaching career is not always easy. They also show that women coaches are not always adequately prepared to face the challenges of their profession. However, there are successes, and those successes may be the starting points for recruiting women coaches and retaining them for longer periods to time.

#### New Data on Under-representation of Women Coaches

Since 2004, new data have become available on women coach participation. Unfortunately, the numbers are not encouraging.

First of all, statistics show that the Canadian delegation at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens consisted of only 10 per cent women coaches; it was only 15 per cent at the 2006 Olympic Winter Games in Turin.

In October 2007, the *Journal* published an article by Drs. Gretchen Kerr and Dru Marshall that provided statistics for eight sports (athletics, basketball, ice hockey, rugby, soccer, swimming, volleyball, and wrestling) on the numbers of women in coaching positions at the national, university, college, provincial, and Paralympic levels (“*Shifting the Culture: Implications for Female Coaches*”).

Results show that women hold 33 per cent of head coach positions on women’s teams – 41 per cent in rugby, 36 per cent in basketball, 35 per cent in soccer, 34 per cent in volleyball, and 20 per cent in ice hockey. In athletics, 17 per cent of head coaches are women; in swimming it is 20 per cent, and in wrestling the number rises to 35 per cent. Data on participation in Paralympic sports in Canada reflect similar percentages, with women accounting for 22 per cent of all head coaches.

A just-completed study on the participation of women in sport in Quebec (Secrétariat Loisir et Sport, 2007) reveals that women coaches make up 14 per cent of all coaches in the province, a two-per-cent improvement over 1999. As usual, women are found at the bottom rungs of National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) certification and are chiefly in Introduction - Competition. More detailed analysis, however, shows that women focus on training and specialization and, in fact, account for a very low percentage of coaches who do not complete training.

The issue of under-representation of women within the coaching ranks remains critical. It is therefore justified – indeed, imperative – to continue studying this population and to try to understand the causes of under-representation in order to reverse this undesirable situation. It is with those objectives in mind that we present the preliminary results of our study.

### Study Objectives

Our study aimed at gaining a better understanding of these coaches as they experienced the first years of their careers. The various studies upon which we based our project were key in describing the precarious situation of women coaches and in attempting to provide an explanation. However, these studies have not been successful in suggesting initiatives that would enable women to improve their position in the sport environment or to increase their participation as coaches.

Given that no study has dealt with beginner coaches, our findings specifically aim, first, to draw an entry-level profile of women who choose to go into coaching and, second, to identify the issues and successes they experienced during their early years in the profession.

### Project Participants

The participants were six artistic gymnastics coaches between the ages of 16 and 25. They were selected solely on the basis of the number of years of experience they had as coaches; that is, all were in their first or second year of coaching. Their athletes were primarily girls aged four to nine. Only two coaches were working with teenaged girls aged 14 to 16, and there were only two boys in the 11 groups of athletes represented.

### Athletic background

Each of the coaches had themselves been gymnasts for between two and eight years. The majority still practised the sport, either recreationally or competitively. The others were involved in related activities such as diving or the circus. All but one, who competed at the national level, had competed on the provincial artistic gymnastics circuit. For most, gymnastics was their only competitive sport.

To gain a fuller perspective on women who elect to go into coaching, we asked the coaches to complete a questionnaire on career choice (Doherty and Johnson, 2001), which provided insights into their motives for becoming coaches.

## Results

The results focused on the choice of a coaching career and the coaches' daily experiences.

### The choice of a coaching career

The career-choice questionnaire clearly showed that the coaches involved in this research had had highly positive experiences as athletes. However, they reported that their level of competitive success was average. It thus appears that the quality of their experiences (generally very positive) was more important than winning in motivating them to become coaches. It should be noted that the participants had all been coached by women and had all felt that the impact of their coaches was critical.

Their level of confidence when we considered one coaching ability at a time varied from low to very high. Areas of less confidence were first-aid and injuries, planning training, and stress management. Nonetheless, on a scale of one to nine, they assessed their overall confidence at seven, which is fairly high. Therefore, they seem to be reasonably confident in their coaching skills as a whole.

None of the coaches identified any professional obstacles as directly linked to being a woman. This is probably due to their environment, where women are in the majority. Another possible explanation is that they are coaching at the initiation level where there is often a lack of coaches and little competition for positions.

When the women were asked what most influenced their decision to become coaches, three factors stood out. In order of importance, these factors are as follows:

1. "The club's director specifically asked me to become a coach" [a factor mentioned by each coach].
2. "My family encouraged me to become a coach."
3. "My friends encouraged me to become a coach."

### Daily experiences

As mentioned previously, no study to date has enabled a description of what happens to women beginner coaches from the moment they make the decision to become coaches. Yet an understanding of those women's early coaching experiences seemed critical, given that they had been in their positions for only a short time (less than four years). It appears that the first few years of coaching play a key role in whether a woman coach will continue or abandon her career. Given this, we wanted to know more about their daily reality through a description of their first two years of coaching.

**Method for studying daily experiences:** Coaches have to acquire knowledge in disciplines such as physiology, nutrition, teaching, and sports psychology. Many, however, receive only minimal training. Moreover, questions have been raised about the impact of training programs (especially the NCCP) on the actual work of coaches (CAC, 1996). As a result, some

researchers, including Gilbert and Trudel (2001) have asked the following question: How do coaches acquire their professional knowledge?

Gilbert and Trudel's work highlighted the issues confronted by coaches in exercising their duties. Although their study involved experienced coaches (with an average of 10.7 years of experience), it is reasonable to assume that novice women coaches also face numerous issues. We therefore decided to describe their weekly, real-life experiences on the basis of the issues they confronted. Since we have reason to believe that they will also experience successes, we asked them to include positive events. What follows are the results assembled over a period of eight weeks.

**Problems experienced:** Analysis of negative events that took place during training sessions shows that they can be grouped under two main headings: athlete-related and coach-related (table 1).

**Table 1. Problems experienced**

Athlete-related problems		
Affective	Cognitive	Motor/Technique
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes who are afraid</li> <li>• Athletes who are off task</li> <li>• Athletes who don't follow the rules</li> <li>• Athletes lacking motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes who do not listen to explanations, who are inattentive</li> <li>• Athletes who do not understand certain elements of the sport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes who are unable to perform techniques correctly</li> </ul>
Coach-related problems		
Teaching	Organization	Affective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Out of ideas on how to teach certain technical aspects</li> <li>• Difficulty managing discipline during training sessions</li> <li>• Difficulty adapting session to athletes (for example, fatigue)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much time lost in transitions between exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of injustice because some athletes require a lot of attention, thus less time for others</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction with own performance as coach</li> <li>• Feeling inadequate and afraid athletes sense it</li> </ul>

**Successes experienced:** As was the case for negative events, analysis of positive incidents during training sessions led to grouping results under two main headings: athlete-related and coach-related (table 2). The differences are at the sub-category level, which show some differentiation.

Table 2. Successes experienced

Athlete-related successes		
Affective	Motor/Technique	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive influence of athlete on others (adoption of appropriate behaviours)</li> <li>• Realizing athletes are happy because they have successfully performed a technique</li> <li>• Realizing athletes are happy to be training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes succeed with a technical move for the first time</li> </ul>	
Coach-related successes		
Affective	Teaching	External support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success in making athlete express her fear</li> <li>• Finding strategy to help athletes overcome fear</li> <li>• Sense of being useful because athletes are progressing</li> <li>• Gaining confidence of athletes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success with explaining a biomechanical principle to athletes</li> <li>• Finding techniques to make athletes succeed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assistance of mentor to know how to teach certain elements (sharing exercises and teaching strategies)</li> </ul>

**Common experiences:** A detailed analysis of all incidents, both positive and negative, enabled identification of elements common to all coaches.

**Fair distribution of time:** The coaches unanimously expressed discomfort when they were forced to spend considerable time with “off-task” athletes whose actions disturbed the coach or other athletes. They reported that this type of situation was unfair to others because the coaches then could not apportion their time equally between athletes. They added that the entire group should not be neglected for the sake of a few off-task athletes.

**Understanding off-task behaviours:** The majority of the coaches closely associated the off-task behaviours of some athletes with their fear of performing certain technical moves. It is interesting to note that the coaches wanted to understand the reason for the improper behaviours rather than simply penalizing the athlete. Some coaches even saw an athlete expressing fear as a positive event that allowed the athlete to take on appropriate behaviours and eventually perform the challenging techniques.

**Wanting everyone to succeed:** It was clear that the coaches got more satisfaction when all their athletes were able to perform the various technical skills. The coaches were truly focused on the success of all and worked toward that objective at every training session.

**Finding effective strategies:** The constant desire of the coaches to find effective teaching strategies was impressive. They were strongly centred on athlete learning, and when athletes did not learn, they automatically asked themselves what they could change in their teaching strategy to promote learning.

**Appreciating the help of a mentor:** Some of the coaches had access to a woman mentor. First of all, they felt privileged to be able to rely on the advice of a more experienced coach. Further, they felt that the support they received contributed in a major way to improving their

coaching abilities. Also helpful was the fact that the assistance involved teaching strategies and the sharing of an exercise bank to be used for teaching certain techniques.

## Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that the issues discussed in this article represent preliminary results from a larger study and draw on the experiences of a small number of coaches. Rather than drawing general conclusions applicable to the overall context of beginner coaches, the objective is to start from the experiences of some of those coaches and draw as much as is possible from them to promote the position of women in coaching. A sequel to this article will be written when we have data from a greater sample of women coaches from different sports.

The conclusions that may drawn at this time fall under three headings:

1. women coaches
2. coach training
3. support to beginner coaches

## Women coaches

Since the inception of this project, we have noted points that are common to beginner and experienced coaches, points that relate more to women than to men. First of all, let us recall the characteristics mentioned in the July 2004 edition of the [Journal](#):

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.

An analysis of the successes and challenges experienced by beginning coaches showed that they were also focused on the human aspects of coaching, more specifically on the athlete’s affective side. They took responsibility for any issues and gave credit to the athletes for success. Here is an example to illustrate this conclusion: In the current study, an athlete was having difficulty performing a technique. The coach’s spontaneous reaction was to say, “I can’t get her to understand what she is supposed to do. I have to try other ways,” rather than, “My athlete can’t perform the move correctly.” The coach took on the athlete’s failure, preferring not to blame the athlete herself.

Another finding was that the coach’s self-esteem is based on her athletes’ success. The following quotations speak volumes in this regard: “Seeing my girls develop means that I can tell myself that, in the end, I am not useless.” “A coach’s quality is measured in great part by the way that the gymnasts train.”

It should be said, however, that the study did reveal a paradox. The results of the career-choice questionnaire indicated that the subject coaches were fairly confident in their coaching skills, but the events they reported for the project led us to believe that that is not necessarily the case: “I feel powerless and ineffective. I don’t feel competent in my job and I’m afraid that the athletes are beginning to realize it.”

## Coach training

Although this research is only in its initial stages, identifying successes and especially challenges has provided excellent leads in terms of the training of women beginner coaches. It appears, in fact, that their training should include a component on handling discipline. This is not surprising in and of itself, because young coaches often work with younger groups of athletes. Moreover, given that gymnastics is an early-specialization sport, entry-level athletes are especially young.

Another aspect to consider deals with managing fear. This relates to all the coaches in the study. Given that gymnastics involves a large number of technical elements to be performed by athletes in an unfamiliar and complex environment (beam, bars, spring board), they all tend to experience fear. This means that coaches have to be well prepared to deal with that emotion. Finally, the need for teaching strategies and access to a varied exercise bank appears critical to training women beginner coaches. It is to be expected that with a larger number of them involved in more and more sports, we will be able to develop more suggestions for directions in which training might go.

## Support to beginner coaches

All of the coaches who benefited from the support of a mentor stated that this assistance was extremely useful and necessary. This is not the first time that mentoring has been touched upon in the *Journal* ("[Mentoring as a Development Tool for Women Coaches](#)", Vol. 2, No. 2), and this study confirms that mentorship support should also be available to beginners. The differences appear to relate to the objectives of the mentoring. Experienced coaches need more support to overcome obstacles having to do with the fact that they are women, while beginners seem to need more technical support, such as educational strategies or examples of exercises to apply.

In closing, we can state that the coaches appreciated, and continue to appreciate, opportunities to record their successes and challenges. As one said, "It feels funny describing negative events; it gets them out of your system." They are increasingly sensitive to their experiences, and their descriptions are becoming more refined over time. This approach seems to hold potential for working with women beginner coaches. At the outset, asking for written descriptions of positive and negative experiences was only for research purposes, but we quickly realized that this could become an extremely useful instrument for different reasons. First, for monitoring: giving the coaches time to reflect on their experiences allowed them to realize that they were doing some things well. This has had a direct impact on their self-confidence in coaching. Second, for support: because the coaches had to identify specific challenges they were facing, it became easier to target the areas where we can help them through mentoring and by identifying what is missing in their training to better prepare them to face those challenges.

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