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## Shifting the Culture: Implications for Female Coaches

Building on the *Journal's* ongoing dialogue about the status of women coaches in Canadian sport is an article that not only nicely dissects the current situation but draws compelling parallels with other sectors in society, parallels that are too often overlooked in our absorption with our own troubling state.

Where the authors, Dr. Gretchen Kerr of the University of Toronto and Dr. Dru Marshall of the University of Alberta, go on to break new ground is in their recommendations. Their proposition is that increasing the number of women in coaching depends upon shifting the very culture of sport. They call for an end to "superimposing a culture developed by men onto women's sport" as well as "... a broader and more diverse cultural ideology ... a re-examination of the goals and values of sport ... and a shift from the ethic of competition and domination to an ethic of care", which they go on to describe in detail, building a compelling case for change.

"Shifting the Culture" makes provocative reading and challenges all of those who care about creating a more equitable, enjoyable, rewarding, and effective environment for Canada's women coaches and, by extension, for their male counterparts as well. — Sheila Robertson

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## OCTOBER 2007 FEATURE

### Shifting the Culture: Implications for Female Coaches

by Gretchen Kerr and Dru Marshall

#### Introduction

Female participation rates in sport in Canada have increased substantially at all levels, from grassroots community-based programs to international competition. For example, minor hockey has diversified over the past few years to include girls' teams as well as mixed and boys' teams to accommodate the increasing number of girls participating in hockey. Female participation in soccer has increased 43 per cent over the past 10 years. Furthermore, the performance level of women in sport has substantially increased over the years. At the 2004 Olympic Games, 50 per cent of Canada's medals and 53 per cent of the nation's top-8 place finishes were earned by female athletes. At the 2006 Olympic Winter Games, female athletes brought home 67 per cent of Canada's medals. In all the women's Olympic events, Canada's female athletes earned more points than any other country's group of women. However, in spite of the growing participation rates of girls and women in all levels of sport and the successful performance outcomes, the number of women in coaching positions has not increased, and some would argue that it has actually decreased.

According to the Canadian Olympic Committee's 2006 official team list, female coaches represented only 14.7 per cent of Canada's Olympic coaches, indicating that while the achievements of female Canadian athletes have risen substantially, the number of women in coaching positions has not increased at the same pace. Recent coaching data (2004-2006) from Canadian Interuniversity Sport, the Canadian Colleges Athletic Association, the Canada Summer Games, and national and provincial levels of competition in eight sports revealed that few women hold positions of head and assistant coaches. Of 1,564 head and assistant coaches identified, only 511 (32.7%) were female. More specifically, women occupied 19 to 41 per cent of the head coach positions examined, including the women's team sports of rugby (41.2%), basketball (36.2%), soccer (34.7%), volleyball (34.4%), and ice hockey (19.6%). The findings for individual sports revealed the following: 17 to 35 per cent of the head coaches were female in athletics (17.4%), swimming (20.4%), and wrestling (35.3%). Data on women in Canadian Paralympic coaching showed similar results, with women representing 21.7 per cent of the head coaches.

#### Cultural obstacles faced by women in coaching

Challenges women face as coaches have been identified by a number of researchers and include job instability, low salary, conflicts with domestic responsibilities, harassment, and lack of recruitment programs, mentoring programs, and role models. We argue, however, that the culture of sport is responsible for all of these challenges and, furthermore, that until there are changes in the culture, gender equity for women in coaching will never be achieved.

Before focusing on sport specifically, it is important to acknowledge the gendered nature of work in general. A disproportionate percentage of women are found in occupations with low levels of power, authority, prestige, and remuneration. In addition, women make disproportionate contributions to unpaid domestic labour and caregiving. Although women represent the majority in the teaching profession and in school administration graduate programs, they are persistently absent from the highest and most powerful administration positions in public education. In the corporate world, women tend to cluster near the bottom of the organizational charts and have less advancement potential than men. This systemic discrimination or stereotyping that prevents women from moving into top positions — a type of “glass ceiling” — has been well documented. Nonetheless, although it is important to acknowledge the gendered division of labour in society as a whole, the observation that the progress of women in sport is not keeping pace with other professions is worthy of focused attention.

The cultural ideology of sport has been shaped by white men over many years and is now deeply rooted. The existing culture of sport is defined by masculinity, specifically an idealized form of masculinity that is associated with toughness, power, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and domination over others. These values are encouraged from a very young age and are reinforced and celebrated throughout sport even when they are not condoned in other walks of life. The political ramifications of this ideology are substantial; men are privileged and can use this position of privilege to perpetuate their power, protect their interests, and marginalize those who do not fit the ideology.

The barriers faced by women in particular as a result of this cultural ideology will now be addressed.

**Leadership styles.** Female coaches often report not fitting into the predominant masculine culture of sport. Women have different leadership styles from men; they tend to show more empathy, communicative competence, and willingness to cooperate. Studies in business that focus on leadership and women have found that women have skill sets that include strong communication, team-building, multi-tasking, and high emotional intelligence. One researcher reported that women in business create positive group dynamics through conflict resolution, disciplinary fairness, and group collaboration rather than using an autocratic approach. Openness for learning and listening, which are critical in the field of sport because of time limitations and the management of large numbers both inside and outside the team setting, tend to characterize female coaches. Notably, women use communication rather than power for team- and relationship-building. In comparison, male coaches tend to be more aggressive, authoritative, and keen on demonstrating power. This type of communication is sometimes viewed by young female athletes as the only style of leadership that brings success, because the majority of female athletes are coached by men.

**Family conflicts.** The culture of sport in general does not tend to be “family-friendly”. Most athletes train before or after school and on weekends. For coaches with children, this schedule conflicts directly with family time. Sport organizations are not known for prioritizing or accommodating family responsibilities. For example, child care is typically not provided during training, travel, and competition schedules. Some have suggested that family responsibilities are often viewed by organizations as outside their control and interests.

The “double-shift” or “time-bind” experienced by women has been well documented in several professions. These terms describe the experience of many women who pursue their professional careers while also carrying the burden of domestic responsibilities. Although there seems to be a shift toward men assuming more domestic responsibilities, including staying at home to raise children, the gendered division of labour is still prevalent.

**Informal networking.** Female coaches have reportedly been disadvantaged by not having the informal networking that characterizes the field of coaching for men. Male coaches appear to benefit from having more established connections with other men in sport organizations, sharing information with each other, and providing tips about the profession and about ways to get ahead. This apprenticeship is lacking for women, as there are so few women in leadership positions and as men seem more reluctant to mentor up-and-coming female coaches. Mentoring programs for women in coaching do exist in Canada, but resources for effectively evaluating these interventions are stretched. Compared with the corporate world, amateur sport lacks the funding necessary to develop and sustain support services such as job sharing and the provision of child care.

**Equity policies.** Sport falls behind other sectors of society in terms of gender equity, pay equity, and affirmative action policies. Some would argue that these policies exist to ensure that people receive the message that everyone is valued. However, even where these policies exist, problems arise. Title IX, for example, a piece of landmark legislation passed in the United States in 1972, was designed to increase opportunities for girls and women in athletics and academics in education settings. Acosta and Carpenter (2006) have demonstrated that although there are increased opportunities for female athletes in 2006 compared to 1972, there are fewer female coaches and administrators in 2006 compared to 1972. These statistics question the effectiveness of affirmative action policies in increasing female leaders. There is a business case to be made, however, for diversity in leadership. Mixed groups are better at solving problems than like-minded ones; the breadth of thought available in diverse groups increases creativity.

**Performance outcome focus.** The performance outcome focus that characterizes the sport culture has several implications for women. Female athletes who seek performance excellence tend to prefer male coaches. This makes sense given the lack of high performance female coaches, without which female athletes lack female role models and the confidence that female coaches can facilitate performance excellence. This phenomenon does not appear to be present in the corporate world; female employees do not seek or prefer male bosses. A performance focus also has the

effect of diminishing time, attention, and money spent on progress to advance women in coaching and sport administration. As Whitson and Macintosh (1990, pp. 27-28) wrote, "The federal government's emphasis on high-performance sport, and its preoccupation with institutionalizing a performance support system capable of preparing elite Canadian athletes to compete successfully in international sport, have undercut the pursuit of equity-related objectives." One could argue that this is as true in 2007 as it was in 1990 given recent initiatives such as [Own the Podium](#), which focuses on medal attainment in the upcoming Olympics.

**Positions of power.** Men play a critical role in affecting the progress of women in coaching because they hold most of the positions of power, decision-making, and resource allocation, and yet men tend to have a general lack of awareness of their power and the power structures within workplace organizations. Previous research has indicated that although most male coaches and administrators support the idea of gender equity, few are willing to sacrifice their privileges in order to achieve it.

The following section recommends ways to promote progress for women in coaching.

### Changing the culture

Although previous researchers have proposed recommendations at the individual, group, and organizational levels of sport as ways to increase the number of women in coaching, we focus on shifting the culture as the avenue for change. In many ways, sport is recognized as masculine with values of competition, domination, and control. Many women experience conflict between their own philosophies, values, and leadership styles and those of the predominant (male) sport culture. Simply superimposing a culture developed by men onto women's sport is unlikely to attract and maintain the participation of women leaders. Instead, the dominant and singular culture of sport that normalizes and prioritizes traditional notions of masculinity needs to be changed. A broader, more diverse cultural ideology that emphasizes and rewards combinations of competition and partnership, emotional toughness and sensitivity, teamwork and individual expression, and performance and personal excellence would be more inclusive of men and women alike. It should be noted that while our focus has been on women, the traditional masculine ideology of sport also marginalizes those of various ethnic, cultural, racial, sexual, and ability backgrounds.

An integral part of changing the culture includes a re-examination of the goals and values of sport. A shift from an ethic of competition and domination to an ethic of care would, we propose, enhance the sport experience for males and females alike. An ethic of care reflects values and practices that prioritize the holistic health and well-being of participants, above and beyond performance attainment. Although an ethic of care has usually been applied to athletes' experiences, a broader application to include coaches is needed, especially in light of the existing rates of turnover and burnout in coaching. A culture characterized by an ethic of care emphasizes the personal growth and self-actualization of the person and the values of cooperation and mutual benefit, values that are more congruent with women's interpersonal styles. For coaches, such values may enhance the networking and mentoring that are paramount to the advancement of women. As women advance, more women will be identified as role models and younger women will start to see coaching as a career opportunity.

Consistent with an ethic of care, child care should be provided for coaches with children in attempts to facilitate the work of both female and male coaches. Funding for child care will be a challenge for sport organizations, but the cost of losing female coaches and recruiting and mentoring new female coaches is likely to be greater.

Women who are juggling professional and domestic responsibilities may benefit from job-sharing arrangements. The field of coaching has not fully explored this possibility, but it has existed for some time in the professions of medicine and dentistry. If senior and junior coaches were matched in a job-sharing arrangement, a mentoring program would also result.

Progress for women in coaching will depend heavily upon receiving equitable training time and facilities as well as funding for recruitment, training, competition, and mentoring. Previous suggestions have been made to require gender equity policies within sport organizations with associated reporting of gender equity data on participants, coaches, and resource allocations annually. One could go a step further and recommend that a criterion for funding to sport organizations be demonstrated progress in gender equity data.

Changing the culture will also require proactive leadership and participation from men, given that they currently hold most of the positions of power, decision-making, and resource allocation. Proactive educational programs for all sport participants, both male and female, that challenge the traditional power structures and ideology in sport, and address violence and harassment prevention, may help to produce a more welcoming environment for women. When new power structures emerge, leaders must be diligent in ensuring that all voices are heard.

In conclusion, sport has a long tradition of an ideology of masculinity, specifically an idealized form of masculinity that is associated with toughness, power, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and domination over others. The current ideology of sport today is narrow, monolithic, and resistant to the progress of women (and other groups). The barriers and obstacles faced by female coaches have been explored and well-documented. We propose that these barriers, ranging from inequitable resources and domestic responsibilities to a lack of mentoring and networking, are the result of the dominant culture of sport. It follows, therefore, that the situation for women in coaching will not improve until there is a shift in the culture of sport. A broader, more diverse cultural ideology that emphasizes and rewards combinations of competition and cooperation, emotional toughness and sensitivity, and performance and personal

excellence would be more inclusive. Further, it is suggested that a culture characterized by an ethic of care would enhance the health, performance, and career satisfaction of female and male coaches alike.

### About the Authors

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**Dr. Gretchen Kerr** is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean at the Faculty of Physical Education and Health, University of Toronto. Her research addresses the psychosocial health of girls and young women in elite sport and the promotion of an athlete-centered approach to sport delivery. Dr. Kerr transfers this research knowledge to the field in her roles as a sport psychology consultant and Harassment Officer and Chair of the Ethics Committee for Gymnastics Ontario.

#### Dr. Dru Marshall



**Dr. Dru Marshall** is Deputy Provost at the University of Alberta. An exercise physiologist, she is a scholar in the area of childhood obesity and children's fitness and also has a keen interest in women in coaching. Her coaching career at university, provincial, and national levels spans more than 25 years. An NCCP Level 5 certified coach, she served as head coach of the University of Alberta's Pandas Field Hockey team from 1981 to 2001, as head coach of the national women's junior field hockey team from 1986 to 1996 and the women's national team from 1996 to 2001. Dru continues to make an outstanding contribution to the development of women's sport in Canada through teaching and research, mentoring coaches at all levels of the sport continuum, and serving on numerous provincial and national advisory committees. She is the author of numerous peer-reviewed articles and is a frequent presenter at academic conferences.