

## Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching

Online

### Making the Case for More Women Coaches in Disability Sport

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As our society grows more aware of and receptive to first challenging and then overturning stereotypical conceptions of participants in disability sport, so does the necessity of attracting qualified women coaches to this field become essential. Numerous studies, as well as anecdotal evidence, support women coaches' qualities, skills, and qualifications as being vital to non-disabled athletes' success, including "multitasking, effective communication, and empathy." These same attributes are no less relevant for women coaches of athletes with disability, as the authors compellingly contend. - Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor.

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An overarching aim of coaching is to provide quality sport experiences to athletes on a physical, psychological, emotional, and social level. A robust coach-athlete relationship often mediates this. This relationship, in many ways, has to do with understanding players as athletes and people. Thus, understanding what athletes value and how they identify themselves as a person are critical areas for success.

Identities are complex biopsychosocial phenomena that require reflection, compassion, and active listening on the coaches' behalf to understand how they are conceptualized, and how they interact within sport relationships and performance. Historically, sport has been unidimensional in its outward portrayal of identity, largely showcasing straight, white, non-disabled males in high performance sport. Today, however, efforts have been made to highlight the needs of diverse athletes' gender, abilities, sexuality, and culture and provide a first step towards a more inclusive and accepting sport arena. However,

what has not yet been sufficiently considered is the role women coaches can play regarding effective coaching for disability sport. Thus, our purpose is to inform women coaches and relevant stakeholders about the potential opportunities for, and benefits of having women engaged in the disability sport context.

## **Disability Sport Currently**

Disability sport refers to sport for athletes with physical, intellectual, sensory, and learning disabilities. Participation ranges from recreational sports such as a wheelchair basketball league in a local community centre to the Paralympic Games, which has reached over 4,000 athletes competing in 22 sports.

While the number of women competing in the Olympic and Paralympic Games has increased recently, fewer women than men compete in the Paralympic Games although, at the Tokyo 2020 Games, 42% of athletes were women, an 11% increase from Rio 2016. As has been reported, at the high performance level, being a women athlete with disability has been considered a “double whammy”, where athletes may deal with stereotypes due to masculinity and femininity (for example, media asking men to discuss their tactical racing strategy versus asking women about their relationship interests), as well as stereotypes of ability and disability such as societal perceptions of fragility or passiveness due to disability. These issues trickle down to the grassroots level as evidenced in the Canadian Women and Sport’s 2020 Rally Report as girls with disability are less likely to participate in sport than their non-disabled counterparts. Women coaches might possess a relevant set of skills to address the issues women athletes with disabilities face, thereby acting as role models.

## **The Need for More Women Representation**

In many cases, sport organizations in Canada will have the intention or desire to be equitable across marginalizing groups, yet do not necessarily have the knowledge of *how* to achieve this aim. For this reason, various sport organizations, such as Curling Canada, have begun designing programming to help sport become more gender equitable. Increasing the number of women role models in sport leadership is a well-established strategy.

One of the most prominent disability sports competitions in Canada is Défi sportif AlterGo (DS-A) which offers competitions at the local, national, and international levels with over 8,000 athletes competing in a variety of sports, including athletics, baseball, basketball, boccia, cross-fit, rhythmic gymnastics, ball hockey, and swimming. Tackling barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities by providing adapted sport opportunities is at the forefront of their organizational mission.

A recent study funded by the E-Alliance Research Hub for Gender+ Equity in Sport explored the impacts of gender on the sport experiences of girls and women with disabilities in the DS-A. Efforts were clearly made by DS-A to be intentionally equitable in their recruitment and communications materials as well as to provide opportunities for

women leadership in the form of ambassadors: high-performance women Para sport athletes who were present and vocal at the event. One athlete/coach ambassador we spoke to highlighted the need for more role models for young girls with disability:

*“I can just imagine being a kid born with a disability, seeing and getting to hang out with this woman in sport, me, who is number one [in the world] and now I see, and really truly believe that importance of having representation. You can see it on these kids’ faces”.*

At all levels of sport, but particularly within the disability sport context, there is a clear need for greater representation of women in leadership positions. A 2021 scoping review revealed that the majority of disability sport coaches identified as able-bodied men from Western countries, demonstrating a distinct lack of diversity. Women Paralympic athletes have described their desire to work with women coaches throughout their careers and recommended that more women be involved in Para sport to provide this opportunity for the next generation of women athletes with disability.

Karen O’Neill, CEO of the Canadian Paralympic Committee, reiterated this point recently:

*“We need more women throughout our system, and our system is not naturally built to help support women to become involved at all levels, particularly with a disability. Often times if you don’t see yourself or there’s not an opportunity or someone there to create a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment, then when you’ve got other choices, you’ll take those.”*

Even in organizations like DS-A where the primary goal is to increase the number of athletes with disability, there remains a lack of both women coaches and women athletes with disability, resulting in a general lack of potential role models. Although greater representation of women in leadership and role modelling positions is needed in disability sport, it is equally important to provide women athletes and coaches with adequate support to succeed in these roles. Today, several resources are available to coaches and organizations for disability sports such as the Coaching Association of Canada’s (CAC) e-learning module *Coaching Athletes with a Disability* (CAWAD), the Steadward Centre’s Para Ready Framework, and numerous formal and informal mentorship opportunities such as the Coach 2 Coach Parasport Mentorship Program and various CAC mentorship programs for women coaches. We urge sport organizations to purposefully facilitate women leaders’ engagement in such programs.

## **Developing Effective Coaching Behaviours**

In many ways, effective coaching strategies and behaviours are applicable to both athletes with and without disability; however, disability sport presents unique considerations for coaches. Notably, Paralympic athletes have called for their coaches to be knowledgeable, both about their disability and their sport. However, building

disability sport knowledge has historically been a difficult task as coaches are mostly required to obtain this information through their own initiative, with limited resources available to guide their learning.

For example, 'Jenny' described how she built her knowledge for coaching adaptive sailing by patching together her learning through the multitude of experiences along her pathway. One avenue for helping coaches learn from and through their experiences is by participating in a community of practice. Women leaders, administrators, and coaches have benefitted from participating in communities of practice such as shown through the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program. Communities of practice emphasize co-creating knowledge from personal experience and the experiences of others, an approach also successfully used in the context of wheelchair curling. The development of intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge is often one outcome of participating in communities of practice.

### **Women, Care, and Coaching Athletes with Disability**

*"There is reason to believe that women are somewhat better equipped for caring than men are."* (Noddings, 1995, p. 24)

Arguably, the work of a coach in disability sport involves nurturing, caring work, which is often performed by women and can be undervalued or 'taken for granted'. In this section, we explore how women may have an advantage for effective coaching of disability sport considering their propensity for nurturing, caring work.

People with disabilities are at a higher risk for mental health challenges such as depression. A 1988 longitudinal study found evidence for the positive potential of interventions targeting social support and mastery for alleviating depression. As such, positive experiences in disability sport and strong coach-athlete relationships would seem particularly important for the mental wellbeing of athletes with disability. Therefore, we argue that women are very well suited to be effective coaches for disability sport. Effective coaches rely on three types of knowledge: professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. As regards the latter of these two, in the analysis of the CAWAD module, it was suggested the multisport module should focus more on intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge as opposed to purely professional knowledge (such as techniques and tactics), since these are essential no matter the sport-specific aspects of coaching a sport for people with disability. There is a clear need for more women coaches to become involved in disability sport to provide role models and representation for the next generation of women with disabilities.

In addition to women being potentially better equipped than men for caring work, women are also known to be superior when it comes to multitasking. Many disability sport programs are underfunded and under-resourced in terms of personnel, leaving their coaches to play multiple roles well beyond that of a coach in an equivalent sport

program for non-disabled people. For example, in a study of novice adaptive sailing coaches,

*“Several coaches [mentioned] additional tasks such as volunteer training and management, sailor recruitment, equipment maintenance, event and outreach planning, and administrative tasks ... [They] worked alone at their programs, and thus were required to manage all aspects of their programs.”*

While this description of the many varied tasks required of coaches in disability sport might not be a compelling argument to get involved in disability sport coaching, participants in a 2013 study reported that women coaches’ strengths of multitasking, effective communication, and empathy made them potentially excellent coaches for women, and we suggest also for athletes with disability. A coach who possesses these qualities is likely to be effective, and will therefore experience less frustration, and indeed more satisfaction with their work, as reported by many coaches working in disability sport. Additionally, developmentally, women and men tend to evaluate the moral orientations of justice and care differently. For women, the main force of their moral perceptions is that they evaluate the situation by seeing who people are and their relationships with others. In this vein, the social-relational model was developed in response to previous medical and social models of disability and is now considered the appropriate approach for working with athletes with disability. Proponents of the social-relational model argue that people are individual and social beings and there is a need to work “with” people with disability rather than “on” them.

Research has shown that many athletes prefer women coaches for their empathetic style of communication which allows them to establish strong coach-athlete relationships. From this perspective, women are an excellent choice to infuse their disability sport coaching with the social-relational model. Moreover, research has established the importance of coaches of disability sport being able to establish strong, trusting relationships with their athletes because athletes are *experts* on their own capabilities. As noted earlier, such relationships are built upon a coach having a good understanding of their athletes as people, in this case living with disability. We, therefore, deduce that the empathetic communication skills of women in general hold much promise for the effective coaching of athletes with disability. As the number of women athletes with disability increases at the Paralympic level, sport organizations should purposefully encourage and support their women Para athletes to make the transition to coaching.

To achieve this, we recommend

- offering free coaching courses.
- mentoring women athletes with disability.
- nurturing communities of practice to help these athletes in their transition to coaching.

A well-supported pathway will increase the number of women coach role models to inspire young women and girls with disabilities to participate in sport. Increasing sport participation for women and girls with disabilities is important for physical and mental health, and responds to Sport Canada's aim to have sport be inclusive and accessible to all Canadians.

## About the Authors

**Diane Culver** is a full professor at the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa in sport pedagogy and psychology. She was a senior coaching consultant for the CAC before entering academia in July 2007. Her research interests are coaching and coach development including for Para sport, social learning theory, and women in sport leadership. Her previous working experience includes coaching for the Canadian National and New Zealand Olympic ski teams. She consults with athletes and coaches and often uses social learning spaces to build learning capability in sport networks and communities of practice.

**Siobhan Rourke** is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa in sport pedagogy and psychology. She is also a certified mental performance consultant working with athletes and coaches to enhance performance. Her research interests are centered around providing girls with better sport experiences. She works with coaches to develop more gender responsive coaching practices primarily utilizing social learning strategies and concepts. She has a passion for teaching and learning especially in developing communities of practice to address knowledge to application gaps.

**Danielle Alexander** is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Ottawa in the School of Human Kinetics studying the intersection of gender and disability in sport. Her research interests extend to identifying effective coaching strategies and behaviours in the parasport and Special Olympics context and how to improve sport experiences for children and adults with disabilities across Canada. Danielle is a Certified Mental Performance Consultant through the Canadian Sport Psychology Association and has experience helping athletes and teams optimize their mental game at recreational and high performance levels.

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## References Available Upon Request