

# Coaching Women

## Developing Female Coaches

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**This factsheet is one of a series, produced by sports coach UK and the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF), aimed at coaches who coach women or who are interested in coaching them in the future. Each factsheet provides insight into the female athlete and her needs, and guidance as to how better to coach and support her.**

Although the information contained within this factsheet has been academically evidenced, sports coach UK recognises that it is a generalisation. All people are individuals and it is for you, the coach, to contextualise the following information to your own coaching environment.

This factsheet focuses on the reasons for the under-representation of women in coaching and steps governing bodies of sport, national agencies and women themselves can take to address this.

### Why are women under-represented in coaching?

#### Coaching as a gendered role

Traditionally, women involved in coaching have tended to work with younger athletes due to perceptions that they are better equipped to 'mother' and nurture than their male counterparts. This, however, may only serve to enforce the notion that the high-performance environment is 'too tough' for women.

#### Coaching networks

Elite coaching networks tend to be male dominated, leading many female coaches to perceive them as less accessible. Women coaches therefore remain at grass-roots, club or regional level, when in reality there could be a huge benefit in the shared learning and development of being part of a coaching network.

#### The women's role

Coaching is known to be a time-consuming pursuit that may require travel, and weekend and evening work. Quite simply, due to women typically taking on the greater role for domestic responsibilities, their ability to commit to coaching positions at any level is more likely to be questioned compared to their male equivalents.

#### Leadership

The majority of governing body of sport performance directors and senior leaders are male and may themselves have preconceived ideas as to who makes a good coach and which qualities and attributes are desired. These attributes may be seen as 'masculine', which automatically creates a challenge for female coaches.

#### Role models and representation

Low numbers of women coaching in the highest echelons of sport inevitably means fewer role models for up-and-coming female coaches. This is further exacerbated by the fact that, with one or two exceptions, the women involved in high-performance coaching work in sports with a lower public profile, such as diving or judo.



### Sport specific

Some sports, such as tennis or gymnastics, may rely on coach strength or playing ability, which could present perceived challenges for female coaches.

### Coaching qualifications

For many women, professional coaching qualifications are a way of gaining confidence and perceived credibility to progress to higher levels of coaching. The emphasis some women give to these qualifications may, consequently, make attaining them more time-consuming and costly.

### Women creating their own opportunities

Research by Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger and Meaney (2008) shows that women only apply for jobs if they feel they meet 100% of the stated criteria, whereas men will put themselves forward if they feel they meet just 60%; thus perpetuating the problem. This social issue may prevent some female coaches from attaining higher-level coaching positions and being able to develop their skills and knowledge.

## Why is it important for more women to get into coaching?

Women are an untapped resource and will help widen the talent pool for prospective coaches. In many sports, women make up half of our national teams and, given that many coaches have themselves been athletes, we are inevitably losing valuable expertise by not encouraging these women to coach.

The low number of women visible in high-profile coaching positions does little to change perceptions of sport being a male-dominated environment or promote sport as an attractive proposition for women as participants, volunteers, coaches or administrators.

Women also have different life and leadership experiences and qualities; this is something that the corporate world is becoming increasingly aware of and is capitalising on. Sports also need to recognise the attributes women can offer and ensure they consider the experience women can bring to coaching. Women are also well placed to understand the psychological and social pressures female athletes may experience; although this is not to suggest women should only coach women and vice versa.

## How to get more women involved in coaching

The status quo needs to change and there are things organisations can do to encourage more women to work in sport. However, it is important to recognise that many of the structures and pathways within sport have been established for a long time and may, inevitably, have a gender bias. To achieve a fairer system, special measures may be required.

### Developing positive action programmes

In taking on board the information provided in this factsheet, organisations may choose to develop their own positive action schemes or work in partnership with governing bodies of sport or sports coach UK to identify specific opportunities for getting more women involved in coaching.

Obviously, it is also important that appropriate time and resources are committed to any programme if it is to have a positive impact. The following recommendations are drawn from conversations with women working in sport, examples of effective good practice from the UK, and the Coaching Association of Canada's 'Women in Coaching' programme.

### Athlete to coach transition

As a result of female athletes choosing other professions at the end of their playing careers, we are losing considerable competitive experience. Actively promoting coaching as a career option and developing appropriate support programmes may help to address this, as well as helping the athlete manage her retirement from elite competition.

### Support networks

The female coaches that were interviewed said a solid support network was important for their ability to progress and continue working in sport. Peer and family encouragement were highlighted as vital and establishing networks across sport was also recommended.



### Role models

Governing bodies of sport and national agencies need to work collectively to raise the profile of female coaches and their successes. Women coaches also need to recognise that they can inspire others to follow in their footsteps and they are well positioned to help make this happen.

### Policy decisions

There are governing bodies of sport in the UK and internationally who have taken the policy decision to only employ women coaches to work with women's teams/athletes to good effect. This approach enables women to challenge the assumption that the best coach for the job will always be a man and should, therefore, encourage more women to put themselves forward for coaching jobs.

### Ensuring women coaches focus on coaching

It is important female coaches are allowed to focus on coaching. They should not be expected to take on additional roles (eg as chaperone) simply because of their gender.

### Talent identification

Identifying, supporting and encouraging female coaching talent is essential. It is also important to recognise that, as with talent identification and female athletes, support in this area may not mirror that provided to male counterparts.

### Understanding the client group and tailoring support

In addition to formal coach education, female coaches identified a desire for more continuous professional development (CPD), informal learning and mentoring opportunities to help them improve and develop as coaches.

### Creating and promoting opportunities for female coaches to interact and progress

The creation of networks that allow women to learn from and support each other has also been cited by coaches as a way of encouraging more women to progress in coaching.

### The coaching environment

Make sure your organisation has the policies and codes of conduct in place to ensure the coaching environment is free from discrimination or harassment. There should also be effective guidelines in place to ensure grievances can be handled appropriately, sensitively and professionally at whatever level is being coached.

### A call to action

Think about how you could change your approach to your coaching sessions. You don't have to be able to identify with everything on this factsheet, but the differences you will achieve from changing a minor part of your coaching methodology could bring great results.

There are five other factsheets in the series. Each one explores a different area surrounding women in sport, which may help inform your approach to your current coaching practice. The factsheets are:

- Coaching Myth Buster
- Female Psychology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Female Physiology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Coaching Female High-Performance Athletes
- Socially Inclusive Coaching.

For further information about the series, please email [coaching@sportscoachuk.org](mailto:coaching@sportscoachuk.org)

### References

Coaching Association of Canada (2010) 'Women in Coaching', [www.coach.ca/eng/women/index.cfm](http://www.coach.ca/eng/women/index.cfm)

Desvaux, G., Devillard-Hoellinger, S. and Meaney, C. (2008). 'A business case for women', *The McKinsey Quarterly* (4): 26–33.

