

Gender Issues Related to Males Coaching Female Athletes

David C. Gosselin, Director of Coaching
Lincoln Spirit Soccer Club
Lincoln, Nebraska

Introduction

On June 23, 2002, Title IX, the law that prohibits discrimination based on gender in athletics and academics celebrated its 30th anniversary. This law has made huge differences in the participation in women's team sports. In 1971, the year before Title IX became law fewer than 300,000 girls participated in high school sports ([WSF,2002](#)). In the 1999-2000 school year 2,784,154 girls participated ([WSF,2002](#)). Corresponding to the increase in High School Sports, pre-adolescent participation has also increased. For example, 12.67 million females six years old and above participated in basketball in 1999 (SGMA, 2000, in [WSF,2002](#)). Between 1990 and 1998, female participation in AAU basketball tournaments increased 264% (SGMA, 2000 in [WSF,2002](#)). In 1999, 7.3 million females six years and older participated in soccer, a 20 % increase over 1987 (SGMA, 2000, in [WSF,2002](#)).

As the number of athletes have increased, there has also been a corresponding increase in the demand for coaches. An examination of most youth sports programs, high schools and colleges indicates that currently there are generally more male coaches than there are female coaches. Regardless of what gender the coach is, he or she must recognize the specific needs of their athletes and develop a detailed understanding of the unique perspectives that female athletes have. The purpose of this paper is to outline gender related issues that male coaches will have when coaching female athletes.

“Always remember the tremendous power you have as a coach to help another human being maximize their potential; pursue this awesome responsibility daily with intensity and integrity.”

Dr. Harvey Schiller, Former Executive Director, U.S. Olympic Committee

Are the Sexes Different?

When it comes to the response of their bodies to exercise, males and females are created equal in terms of the types of bodily responses, but the magnitude of the responses are different (Croce, 1996). Here are some of the distinctions between men and women. This information was derived from Croce,(1996) and DeWitt (2001).

Physical Attributes

Blood and Circulation:

Women have 30 percent lower concentration of hemoglobin, which is the primary mechanism by which oxygen is transported through the body. Because of this, a women's cardiovascular system is 30 percent less than a man's.

At the onset of puberty and the women's menstrual cycle begins, 25 percent of women become iron deficient.

Generally smaller blood vessels in women slows the circulation of blood through the body. This results in a cold feeling. In addition, a women's body temperature fluctuates over the course of the menstrual cycle.

Muscles and Fat:

Muscle growth is regulated mainly by testosterone, which is about 10 times more prevalent in men than in women. In general, women have less than twenty percent less muscle mass; However, when strength is measured in terms of lean body weight this difference is reduced. Testosterone also leads to wider shoulders.

Estrogen is produced in much greater amounts in women and results in wider hips and increased amounts of fatty tissue. Women generally have 20 to 26 percent fat tissue and men have 15 to 20 percent. The extent to which you retain fat is related to the amount of exercise one gets. Women's fat tissue is preferentially distributed around the buttocks and breasts. These fatty areas retain the heat and other parts of the body will generally feel colder.

Bones:

Women generally have smaller, less dense bones and begin growing two years earlier than men because of female hormones.

Sweat:

Men produce more sweat and start sweating earlier during activity than women. This may be an advantage for men in a hot, dry environment. However, dehydration is also a potential problem.

Performance:

Comparison of the purely physical attributes of men and women indicate that men have an advantage because of greater muscle mass, heart and lung capacity, and aerobic capacity. These characteristics generally give the average man more strength, power, and speed than the average women. Women are superior in flexibility and buoyancy.

It was once thought that women were not capable of performing at the same level as men, but there is growing evidence that with proper training women can approach the aerobic capacity of trained men. The greater muscle mass that males possess allows for greater strength and power. Although prior to the onset of puberty men and women are similar, its onset exacerbates the differences.

“...those who have seen a women experience natural childbirth know that the myth of women as the weaker sex is simply that - a myth.”

Pat Croce, President, Sports Physical Therapists Inc.,

Psychological Differences

Prior to puberty, girls and boys probably play sports for many of the same reasons. They want to have fun. They need to belong to a group, have a desire to compete, and are interested in mastering skills involved in the sport of interest. However, even at the pre-school level there are differences in the way in which male and female children interact. Garcia (1994) showed that pre-school girls interact in a cooperative sharing manner while boys interacted in a competitive, individualized, and egocentric manner when learning fundamental motor skills. In addition, both boys and girls tried to maintain their gender style of interaction when dealing with the opposite sex. These differences in behavioral styles become increasingly more apparent with the onset of puberty and the continued process of maturation. These behavioral differences must be taken into account by coaches as their players grow older. The following section deals with the significant differences that exist between girls and boys after the onset of puberty.

Self Esteem:

A 1990 study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) showed that 60 percent of elementary school girls are “happy the way I am”, only 29 percent of high school girls feel the same way. Support for this study was provided by a 1992 AAUW study that found that as children progress through schools boys do better and feel better about themselves and girls’ self esteem, opinions of their sex and scores on standardized achievement tests all decline. Girls place a greater value on what others think than boys do.

Values:

Related to self esteem issues are the extent to which girls value relationships. Because girls place a greater value on what others think of them and how they fit within the group, considerable satisfaction is gained from the relationships that they form on a team. Girls see

their teammates as friends. Team chemistry is very important to female athletes. Girls tend to hold grudges longer which will influence their interaction with each other and negatively influence team chemistry. Boys, on the other hand, view their teammates as people with whom they play a sport. Boys tend to be more individualistic. Boy's teams function well even if the players are not friends and can put their personal relationships on hold when competing. Girls place their performance in the context of team performance. Boys, however, have a tendency to externalize their performance from that of the team and are more likely to place the blame on others for the team's performance than to take responsibility for it themselves.

Motivation:

In general boys play sports for the individual need for competition. They must be appealed to on the basis of how they will individually benefit from their effort and work. On the other hand, girls tend to be motivated by pleasing others. They must be motivated by showing how their work affects the rest of the team. Because girls are more relationship oriented, it is important, as a coach, that you separate how you view the player as a person, from their activities and abilities on the playing field. Motivating girls is very strongly tied to the coaches relationship with them. If you do or say anything that negatively effects your relationship with them, you may have difficulty motivating them.

The leadership style that you use to motivate men and women are distinct. According to Anson Dorrance (1996), who has extensive experience coaching men's and women's soccer at the University of North Carolina, female athletes want to experience a coaches humanity. They need to know that they have connection with the coach and that the coach cares about them personally. Whereas with males, the consistently successful men coaches usually have strong personalities who lead with a powerful presence and will. Leading males typically involves using intimidation that involves the power and force of the coaches personality. A coach of males has to convince them that their vision is correct. Whereas with women, they are at least willing to consider a coaches vision and then try it before judging it. With males you do not need a personal relationship as long as there is respect, but with women a personal relationship is absolutely necessary.

“You basically have to drive men, but you can lead women...the way you coach women is a more civilized mode of leadership.”

Anson Dorrance, Head Coach, University of North Carolina Women's Soccer Team, and Former UNC Men's Head Coach

Gender and Relationships: Implications for Coaching Female Athletes

“You and me we come from different worlds.”

Hootie and the Blowfish

A key to males coaching female athletes, especially during adolescent, is to keep in mind the above quote because although boys and girls may be raised in the same household and what is

apparently the same cultural environment, they are influenced in many subtle ways to the point where they may come from different worlds. As pointed out in the book, *The Gendered Society*, Kimmel (2000) indicates the seeds of gender differences are first established in the family. This is where boys and girls are first exposed to the meaning of being a man or woman or boy or girl. Although they may not realize it, parents possess a set of gender-specific ideas of what their children need and have certain beliefs about what girls and boys should be like at various ages. There is a large body of research that documents the expectations related to how each gender should be treated that leads to different behaviors by parents and other adults towards male and female children. An interesting outcome of these behaviors is that, in general, boys are encouraged to be independent and are played with more roughly whereas many more limits are placed on the acceptable behavior of girls and that they are treated more delicately and gently. In addition, the societal and cultural environment, which includes interactions with other children during play-time, the media, and schools in which the child is raised, influences their perceptions of males and females. Lott (1987) argues that toys for girls encourage dependency on others, while toys for boys stress independence and problem solving. Girls are rewarded for their looks and being attractive, while boys are rewarded for their physical performance and for being active. Girls are taught to capitalize on their external features and seek approval from others. Whereas boys discover that athletic ability and individual performance are what are important to succeed as a male.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the factors that influence gender identity, it should be apparent it leads to some inherent psychological differences between male and female athletes. The question is, should males coach women differently because of these differences. According to the Women's Sports Foundation's Parent's Guide to Girls Sports, worries about coaches who have not coached the opposite sex are unnecessary. Jan Smisek (1996) indicates that all players, male or female, must "possess a combination of knowledge of the game, skill, ability, fitness and impact." In terms of team management, there should be no distinction between male and female athletes. General team management guidelines indicate that all athletes respond best to positive feedback, constructive criticism, appropriate opportunities to build self-esteem and self-confidence, along with well-organized, fun, and challenging practices. Silby (2000) indicates that a specific athlete may respond better to a male while another may respond better to a female coach. It is not a male versus female coach issue. From Silby's perspective it is important for coaches of both genders to understand what she refers to as the female sports perspective. The following quote from Silby (2000) highlights this perspective, "Coaches, whether male or female, should be aware that female athletes...want to develop personal relationships with them and prefer coaches who communicate openly and are empathetic. Female athletes value friendship and like to focus on team unity...They place a high value on personal improvement and prefer not to have their confidence attacked."

There are many challenges that male coaches have in trying to understand this perspective. As male coaches, we are to varying degrees products of the environment in which we were raised similar to what Pipher (1994) points out about fathers in *Reviving Ophelia*. As a product of our environment, we have certain expectations about how athletes should perform and what it takes to motivate them. Males also communicate differently than females (Gray, 1992). A mistake many male coaches make is they try to motivate with the intensity of their own personalities (Dorrance, 1996). As males we have all experienced, aggressive, loud in your face, motivational exhortations from our coaches or constant yelling in which we are consistently being told what we have done. Although this approach is not advocated for either male or female athletes, male athletes will respond to this type of motivational strategy. This, in turn, leads to the assumption that if it worked for me it will work for them. Unfortunately, this

communication style is generally counterproductive when it comes to female athletes. Because female athletes are more relationship oriented, this motivational approach may be interpreted as a personal attack and the female athlete will feel that their relationship with the coach has been effected by their play on the field. This feeling eventually evolves into the female athlete developing a sense that there is a personal distance between them and their coach because of their apparent athletic failure. If this situation is not remedied, the coaches leadership abilities with their female athletes will be compromised. According to Dorrance (1996), "it's crucial when you are coaching women to use the correct tone and body language to communicate, or at least have some sort of positive approach even if you are being critical."

Although recognizing the importance of relationships between themselves and their players is important, male coaches also need to recognize the challenges that female athletes may have relating to each other. This is especially true among sixth to eighth grade girls. Wiseman (2002) describes a social hierarchy among girls that develops as girls strive for popularity during their transition from girls to women. Relationships mean everything to adolescents, especially girls because of the significant internal struggles they have with self-esteem among many other issues. Both boys and girls can be very mean and just as aggressive, but in different ways. Boys tend to be physically mean, whereas girls lash out with words and body language. Wiseman (2002) describes some girls as "queen bees" and others as "wannabes". Status is acquired in a variety of ways including the use of exclusion of some while showering favor on others. The overall behavior results in a very interesting dynamic among young girls that includes the formation of cliques. Boys have similar types of hierarchical structures, but their athletic performance is not as dependent upon relationships with each other as they are with girls. Male coaches need to be very cognizant that this type of hierarchical system can develop on a team and they need to take steps to minimize its effects.

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Caroline Silby, author of *Games Girls Play*

Final Thoughts

Male coaches, just like the best fathers with their daughters, can have a tremendously positive influence on a female athlete's life that goes well beyond the sport. Male coaches, first and foremost, must coach the athlete and not the gender in the context of the skills, knowledge of the game, mental abilities, and fitness, among others. Female athletes are capable of great things. To assist them in their path to success both on and off the field, it is important that we, as male coaches, recognize that there are inherent challenges in communicating with and understanding what motivates female athletes. We must be very cognizant of our female athlete's feelings and our relationships with them. Because of our cultural environment, this is not necessarily an easy task for males, but we need to confront the challenges to help our female athletes have a great experience while playing for us and create an environment where they can be as successful as they want to be.

“As the coaches of adolescent girls, we have a great responsibility, beyond coaching soccer and winning games. We need to work hard to increase self confidence and improve self esteem. Their participation in youth soccer should be a stepping stone to becoming self assured, confident women.

Dr. Jack Levine, pediatrician and youth coach, Great Neck, New York

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