

# COACHING FEMALE ATHLETES



**CABC**  
COACHES ASSOCIATION  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

# Introduction

This publication is designed for coaches by coaches to address important issues about coaching female athletes. It was designed as a result of repeated requests for information on this topic. The intent of this publication is to build a positive teambuilding approach to coaching female athletes. It is important to remember that every athlete is different and that an athlete-centered model is the best way to meet the individual needs of all athletes. It is also important to understand which female athletes need to be guided into a competitive program and which female athletes would prefer a recreational program. This resource has information on keeping young women involved as well as meeting the needs of the elite athlete.

Written surveys and focus groups were conducted with athletes and coaches to gain personal insight and practical information. This resource is designed to provide answers to some general questions. Any feedback or comments can

be forwarded to the CABC or Promotion Plus so that we can continue to increase our knowledge base.

Thank you to the coaches and athletes who provided insight for this publication:

Coaches:	Athletes:
Gail Donohue <i>Synchronized Swimming</i>	Jodi Campbell <i>Soccer</i>
Gwen Parker <i>Volleyball</i>	Kyla Hiebert <i>Soccer</i>
Dee Dee Haight <i>Alpine Skiing</i>	Marley Harris <i>Rugby</i>
Spencer Robinson <i>Rugby</i>	<i>Thank you to Elizabeth Pinnington, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia who conducted the focus groups and gathered research for this publication.</i>
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# Encouraging Females to Get Involved & Stay Involved in Sport

Research indicates that girls and women become involved in physical activity and sport for many reasons. Most commonly, females are attracted to sport for the elements of affiliation, skill development, personal improvement, a nurturing environment and a social network (Sturrock, 1999). Therefore, in order to promote and maintain girls' and women's participation in sport and physical activity, coaches need to understand what motivates their athletes to participate and provide an environment that addresses those needs.

Common barriers to female involvement in physical activity and sport are lack of encouragement, lack of opportunity or conflict with other activities, a girl's own belief that they do not have enough skill to participate and parents who perpetuate stereotypes of femininity by associating sport with masculinity (Feltes, 1998).

**QUICK FACT:**  
*Beginning at age 12 girls' involvement in physical activity declines steadily until only 11% are still active at age 16-17. (Hay and Donnelly, 1996).*

**What the athletes said...**

- enjoyment of competition
- an outlet for energy
- team travel, tournaments
- meeting people, making friends through sport
- playing with others who enjoy the sport and who are challenging team mates or competitors

*"I like meeting people through tournaments and trips. I also enjoy playing the higher calibre games on these trips." - Kyla Heibert*

## What the coaches suggest

### for coaching female athletes:

- encourage female involvement through friends and social networks
- introduce athletes to a positive female athlete as a role model
- involve as many girls / women as possible, especially in the design of programs and training
- run programs so girls and women experience success and skill development
- create physical challenges that allow females to positively experience their athletic capabilities
- the fear of being labelled masculine may be sufficient for the adolescent female to drop out of sport altogether. Coaches who know their athletes well, will be sensitive to these changes in behaviour and will support the athlete and provide important information about the female athlete to allay any fears.<sup>1</sup>

### for coaching all athletes:

- creating a fun environment by incorporating fitness and creativity together



- allow for and encourage social interaction and development, in addition to athletic development
- inform parents of team philosophy, stress that both commitment and encouragement are important
- flexibility in training: allow the athlete to have a life outside of the team
- weight training can enhance performance but it is important that new female athletes in a particular sport see that girls who have been weight training for several seasons don't necessarily look "bulky or overly muscular"

"A coach must be able to understand that the athletes do have other commitments that are important to them and require their time as well. Athletes have families, partners, school work, jobs and bad days. I try to have a flexible outlook on issues that may interfere with the training program."

**Margaret Kalaska, Athletics**

## Creating an Atmosphere for Optimal Performance

Optimal performance involves and encompasses both psychological and physical preparedness. Therefore, it is important for coaches to help athletes develop both physically and mentally. Coaches must understand that each athlete is an individual and has a unique set of conditions under which she can perform at her best. Some general suggestions for creating an optimal environment for females include involving athletes in the program design, ensuring the mental and physical safety of athletes while in team situations and reducing emphasis on anxiety-producing situations such as structured fitness testing (Promotion Plus, 1999).

### What the athletes said...

- state expectations up front
- explain mistakes, rather than just saying "you did it wrong"
- coaches need to be approachable if athletes want to talk about the sport, or something in their personal lives that may be affecting their performance or attitude
- maintain a positive attitude and treat players in a positive way ►

### QUICK QUOTE:

*"Children learn to feel good about themselves through accomplishment. The crucial element of self-worth is not consistent success, but the experience of progressing, becoming better, succeeding where you've failed." (Zimmerman & Reavill, Raising Our Athletic Daughters, 1998).*

- challenge athletes mentally and physically; help them realize what they are capable of
- get to know the limits of your athletes
- use positive motivation, both with the whole team, and with individual athletes
- help athletes learn new skills (this helps them feel more confident on the field)

“The coach’s first words set the tone for the whole season.” **Kyla Heibert**

“I was lacking consistency and consistency comes from having the confidence that you can perform certain skills. I want a coach or mentor to bring me to the next level and work with me on a personal level.” **Marley Harris**

## What the coaches suggest

### for coaching female athletes:

- avoid ‘watering down’ sports for females; respect their abilities
- understand the different personalities of your athletes; certain tactics that motivate some will negatively trigger others
- avoid formation of ‘cliques’ by mixing groups, pairing girls/women up differently
- spend equal time and attention with athletes in order to avert charges of favouritism

- women respond to exercise and training with the same physiological adjustments as their male counterparts and can cope as well, if not better, with intense training<sup>1</sup>

### for coaching all athletes:

- cross training; in order to maintain interest, avoid overuse injuries, have fun and provide a change of atmosphere
- allow athletes to make mistakes in their decisions to encourage independent learning
- support athletes in their training decisions; help them deal with pressure from parents to perform
- show professionalism at practice: be on time, challenge the athletes but always listen to feedback from players
- set the stage for the work ethic early
- collaborative goal setting where the athlete and team/coach set and reset goals together

“Favouritism is a huge concern for female athletes. If one girl has a lot of talent and the coach spends a lot of time with her, the others will think this athlete is getting too much attention. Conversely, sometimes athletes who are doing well don’t seem to require as much help and get neglected. It’s really important to balance your time between athletes so they perceive equity and fairness.”

**Dee Dee Haight, Alpine Skiing**

# Self Confidence, Self Esteem & Body Image

Physical activity is one of the best ways to increase self-esteem (Active Living Canada, 1994). Unfortunately, many females, beginning at an early age, underestimate and undervalue their capacity and potential for competency in physical activity (Dahlgren, 1988). Coaches can have a great effect on females’ development of self-confidence, self-esteem and healthy body image.

### QUICK DEFINITION:

**Body Image is:** *The picture of our physical selves that we hold in our mind’s eye. Often this image does not resemble the way we actually look and competes with unrealistic weight or fitness expectations. Our emotions also affect our perceptions of our bodies.* (Association for Anorexia and Associated Disorders [ANAD], 1999)



### What the athletes said...

- body image effects everything, including your performance
- coaches should be open and supportive, much like a friend
- coaches should help athletes develop fitness programs and healthy diets, and then keep a close eye on the athletes to make sure they are alright
- coaches should not let athletes get down on themselves
- allow athletes to develop skills at their own pace, explain that everyone has different strengths and areas that they need to work on
- coaches should use encouraging words, positive feedback and honest comments
- give your athletes reasons why they've been given their positions and amount of playing time and, if they choose, explain what they can do to alter their situation
- be open and professional with athletes about menstruation; sometimes humour helps ease tension around the issue and makes athletes more comfortable discussing it with a coach
- do not assume that because an athlete is having a tough practice or game that they are having "women's problems"
- female athletes will make up stories about why they are not feeling well if they do not feel comfortable discussing their menstruation with a coach
- female athletes are more likely to internalize emotional issues while males are more likely to voice their opinions

"What I think is really important is that coaches have to emphasize that performance in sport doesn't define your self worth." **Marley Harris**

"I set unrealistic goals for my body image and my fitness level. I developed an eating disorder trying to stay the right weight and the right fitness level. I was eating what the coaches said I should be eating. Eventually it just became too much. I became malnourished and it started taking a toll on my body. My coaches picked up on this problem right away and helped me realize that I did not have to be better than someone else, just be the best that I could be. I had to learn that I needed to give myself time to achieve certain goals."

**Jodi Campbell**

### What the coaches suggest

#### for coaching female athletes:

- know about your athletes' menstrual cycles; they are a normal part of females' physicality and may affect their activity; try to be open, sensitive and professional in order to develop trust and rapport with your athletes on this issue
- understand that females often internalize comments about their bodies, taking them as reflections on their personalities or self-worth rather than motivations
- build self confidence by providing athletes with a chance to progressively develop and master skills (this is essential when coaching females); if they don't see progress they may not want to continue
- focus more on the process of becoming physically fit than on the outcome; females may be less concerned with the final outcome
- try clear, performance-based feedback; females cannot improve unless they have specific feedback, i.e. focus on specific technique rather than just saying "good try"
- understand that weight gain is a normal part of puberty and adolescence for females; your athletes may feel self-conscious about their bodies already ►

- allow girls and women to have a say in their uniforms for competition; this could have an impact on their participation and may deter them from competing if they feel uncomfortable in the uniforms
- the most important assistance coaches and friends can offer is to help them develop positive self-images and balanced lifestyles, both of which are conducive to better athletic performances and greater female participation. "In coaching women I reinforce their self-image, their assessment of themselves and the significance of what they are doing".<sup>1</sup>
- become familiar with signs and symptoms of an athlete struggling with disordered eating and be able to refer her to the appropriate agency (hospital or disordered eating clinic); often team mates know before the coach does; disordered eating in athletes is a much more prominent issue than most coaches realize

#### for coaching all athletes:

- conduct periodic individual meetings with athletes for evaluation and open discussion
- help your athletes set reasonable, attainable goals and be open to adjusting them if necessary
- invite professionals to run team seminars on self-esteem, sport nutrition and mental preparation, as opposed to tackling that yourself
- censor comments that will hurt an athlete's self esteem; use constructive criticism or encouragement if something needs to change

"Every coach needs to recognize the effect of his or her comments on athletes. Sometimes, with really young athletes, comments will go right over their heads, while the teenage athlete can be crushed by the same comment."

*Gail Donohue, Synchronized Swimming*

## Social Interaction and Team Dynamics

Team members spend a lot of time together over the course of a season. Indeed, it is this camaraderie and social networking that attracts many females to participation in sport (Promotion Plus, 1999). Team cohesion can greatly enhance the enjoyment athletes experience through participation, as well as their performance. As a result, it is important for coaches to encourage the development of positive and energy-enhancing team dynamics, even in sports where athletes compete individually.

#### QUICK QUOTE:

*"Give girls the opportunity to socialize; girls need this component more than boys."*  
(Gordon Sturrock, "It's Not Just for Boys Anymore", 1999)

#### What the athletes said...

- often, one's closest friends are team-mates
- when coaches allow for some social time, the overall focus of the game or practice is better
- cliques have the power to destroy a season
- coaches must take responsibility for managing the social dynamics of the team
- team building is essential
- doing activities as a team, outside the sport, allows athletes to get to know each other, which helps them work together as a team
- the confidence level of a team increases when the athletes know each other well, when they all know each other's abilities
- good coaches help athletes learn not to judge one another based on their sporting abilities

*"The team bond is very important to help them rise to the next level; everyone moves together. Attitude controls motivation; motivation controls success; there is no 'I' in team; this is how we stay united."*

**Jodi Campbell**

## What the coaches suggest

### for coaching female athletes:

- allow some unstructured social time at the beginning of practice; females are more likely to enjoy the social aspect of sport
- incorporate games into practice to make the atmosphere fun and enjoyable; females may become uninterested if practices aren't fun
- welcome newcomers; a safe, supportive environment is key to encouraging new girls and women to join or to stay involved

### for coaching all athletes:

- hold social events outside of training, examples: hikes, attending athletic events, team meals, attending movies
- allow athletes to joke and feel relaxed in a training atmosphere

#### QUICK QUOTE:

*"Keeping females on task is the same as keeping males on task." (Gwen Parker)*

## Maintaining Focus

In every sporting season or physical activity arena, there will inevitably be a time when it is difficult to maintain focus as a team, or with an individual athlete. Rather than viewing this time as a 'slump', coaches and athletes can use this period to re-evaluate goals, a particular performance, or the development of a specific skill. If approached with understanding, rather than frustration, what seems like a roadblock in a season can actually become a positive turning point.

In the context of an individual practice, the same principle of situational re-evaluation can be used to redirect athletes' attention and energy when there is a lack of focus.

- enjoy each other's company as a team when together
- have a sense of humour
- avoid the temptation to set the program around one athlete with great potential
- avoid 'rookie' events that emphasize disparity between team members
- understand which athletes are recreational and which are more elite so that you can meet individual needs
- try not to base your confidence as a coach on your athlete's performances
- work on team building in both practice and through social events

*"At the beginning of the season we went on a team hike. It was a challenging walk and gave us a chance to work together in a setting out of the gym. At the end of the hike we had a team talk about the challenges, the negative and positive aspects of the hike. The discussion progressed to thoughts about the season. It was a really nice project and it set the tone of our year together."*

**Gwen Parker, Volleyball**



### What the athletes said...

- have athletes fill out goal sheets
- establish a routine to get athletes to game level
- encourage athletes to keep a training diary to keep track of workouts and their feelings about training
- challenging athletes in practice, when you sense that they can handle the work
- if an athlete has a bad game or gets emotional, respect her space, but be available to encourage and support her in a positive way when she is ready to talk ►

“Some coaches treat girls like china dolls. If you are out there playing, chances are you are not going to be worried about breaking a nail.”

*Jodi Campbell*

## What the coaches suggest

### for coaching female athletes:

- be prepared and allow for variety and flexibility to keep girls and women interested and enjoying practices
- allow girls and women to have input and suggestions to ensure that they stay involved and interested
- allow yourself to ease up when you sense that athletes need a break, even when it feels like you should be progressing at full steam
- try to reduce athlete's anxiety around competition; try reducing focus on the score or the outcome and focus on their individual performance; although many female athletes enjoy competition, many girls and women do not and it is important to stay in tune with individual needs

### for coaching all athletes:

- as a team, develop key motivational phrases to refocus at specific times
- use verbal contracts and cooperative player-coach evaluations to give the athlete ownership of their goals
- work with your athlete to set realistic and flexible goals, and re-examine them throughout the season
- keep yourself on track; this will keep your athletes on track
- incorporate 'down' weeks or 'down' days into the training schedule
- allow athletes to work on a skill, take a break and then come back to that skill
- be in tune with your athletes in the context of individual practices as well as the point in the season

“Don't focus on winning; focus on playing well. Take the scoreboard away. A good performance is the goal.” *Spencer Robinson, Rugby*



## Additional Resources

Following are some suggested resources for further information:

- Gender Equity in Coaching, 1994 Coaching Association of Canada (\$9)
- Self-Esteem, Sport and Physical Activity, 1992 CAAWS (\$10), free abridged version
- Making Informed Decisions about Girls Participation on Boys Teams, 1995 CAAWS (\$10)
- On the Move, 1997 CAAWS (\$10)
- Evening the Odds, 1995 CAAWS (\$10), free abridged version
- Just For Girls, 1999 Sandy Friedman (\$35)
- Eating Disorders in Sport: Practical Tips and Strategies, 1993 CAAWS (free)
- Resource Kits on the following topics from Promotion Plus: (\$3) ea.

- Self-Esteem, Sport and Physical Activity
- Body Image and Eating Disorders
- Harassment and Abuse in Sport
- Gender Equity in Physical Education
- Women and Coaching, Women and Leadership, Women and the Media

### For these or other resources contact:

- Promotion Plus online at [www.promotionplus.org](http://www.promotionplus.org)

### For additional coaching resources contact:

- Coaches Association of BC online at [www.coaches.bc.ca](http://www.coaches.bc.ca)
- Coaching Association of Canada online at [www.coach.ca](http://www.coach.ca)
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity online at [www.caaws.ca](http://www.caaws.ca)

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Taggart, J., *Coaching Female Athletes*, Australian Coaching Council Incorporated, 1991.



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