

Coaching Women

Coaching Female High-Performance Athletes

Women's
SPORT AND
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FOUNDATION



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.

There is evidence to suggest coaching is still delivered in a way that assumes gender neutrality; ie female and male participants being coached as though their needs are the same. However, very little research exists that describes the female athlete experience and examines whether her needs really are the same as those of a male athlete.

To better understand the female experience, in early 2010, sports coach UK and the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) spoke with a number of female athletes* about their current coaching experiences and what they wanted from a coach. From these discussions, we have highlighted the elements that constitute good coaching experiences and the attributes of a great coach.

What to consider when coaching female athletes

Get to know the individual

As might be expected, athletes have different views on what they want from their coach and how they want to be treated; no two people are ever the same. As such, one of the key requests by female athletes is for the coach to get to know them as individuals. This includes understanding their personalities, what motivates them in their lives and in sport, what their goals are, and which methods will bring out the best in them. This is not to say that all the athletes interviewed wanted their coach to be their friend, but they needed the coach to understand the type of relationship they did want.

The female athletes also wanted their coaches to appreciate that they have lives outside their sport, which they have to juggle with their training. The athletes we spoke to acknowledged they sometimes brought their problems into training, as some said they found it hard to 'switch off'.

Think:

Every athlete is unique. Understand the challenges they face in balancing being an athlete with the other demands in their lives.

Your communication style and approachability

Linked very closely with understanding the individual and her motivations, is how you communicate with your athlete, the frequency at which you meet with her and your coaching style.

Presently, female athletes experience a variety of coaching styles ranging from autocratic and distant to approachable, jokey and easy-going. People will respond to different styles, depending entirely on their own personalities and what motivates them. The female athletes we spoke to wanted to feel like they could talk to their coach about anything. They acknowledged that they often wanted to know 'why' more than male athletes and demanded more discussion.

Sometimes she will bring me off and she will shout her head off at me and there's loads of people watching...that makes me feel a bit insecure...she doesn't do that to older players.

Think:

Get to know the individual athlete and what she wants from you. Develop a personalised communication style with her.

* Background to the research

This research was carried out with 27 female high-performance athletes and basketball players aged 18–28. As such, the findings relate to a specific group of athletes at a particular point in their training careers. We do not assume that all female athletes being coached will have the same expectations and needs, but we believe the attributes mentioned and key concerns discussed will be relevant to most coaches.

Throughout this factsheet, the term 'athlete' is used to refer to all female sportswomen, not just those taking part in athletics.

Constructive and positive feedback

Regardless of the coach's style, athletes want their coach to provide them with personalised feedback. If the athlete does something wrong, she wants to correct it based on her coach's observations. Female athletes don't want constant praise, but they do want to hear it when it is well deserved. Well-placed praise boosts motivation and confidence among female athletes.

Think:

Keep lines of communication open and provide regular feedback, both positive and constructive.



Approach coaching as a joint endeavour

Some athletes described their coach's style as autocratic ('my way or no way'), which can prove frustrating. As a coach, you should never underestimate the power you have in the eyes of your athlete.

Female athletes respect a coach who is in control and leads the team and the training, but this should be balanced with flexibility and some negotiation with the athletes themselves. This is because female high-performance athletes are at a level in their sport where they have developed considerable knowledge and are aware of their bodies' limitations and strengths. As such, they want to feel as though the coach will listen to their ideas and suggestions and contribute towards their training and development.

Think:

Listen to your female athletes and ensure you are involving them in decisions that affect their training and performance. Always keep lines of communication open.



Support the person: the coach as a mentor

For many athletes (particularly younger athletes), the coach can play a significant role in their lives, both in and out of sport. Some athletes talk of being taken to training or helped to find somewhere to live and work. Support like this can be invaluable for many athletes and enable them to continue to take part in their sport. Many female athletes say their ideal coach would also be a mentor; someone they could go to when they had problems and provide guidance in their lives.

But she doesn't just coach basketball, she helps us with problems outside of the court... she'll help us with job applications...you know, pushing us in the right direction if we need help.



The training session

Elite athletes are at a level in their sport where they expect to train hard, but still want it to be enjoyable and varied. In addition, they want to know everyone in the training group is working hard and taking it seriously. Sessions should be well organised and tailored to their current training needs. A good coach will vary the training exercises and environment, and take charge by ensuring everyone is pulling their weight and the sessions have a purpose.

It's very rare we get the same session twice. They like to mix it up. They like to make sure that we enjoy ourselves...they tell us it's going to be hard but, at the same time, we want you to enjoy it.



Commit to the athlete and her goals

Female athletes want to believe their coach is committed to them and believe they have what it takes to improve and develop. For some athletes there will be times in their sporting careers when they experience self-doubt and lose confidence, so they will look to their coach for support. Athletes want to know their coach sees their potential and has high, yet achievable, expectations of them.

Think:

Vocalise your commitment and belief in your athlete. She wants to be supported as a person and a player.



Think:

Make training sessions varied, fun, structured, challenging and tailored.



Balance the needs of the team and the individual

Team sports

Tensions may arise within the team for a number of reasons. For example:

- players may feel that certain teammates are getting preferential treatment
- some teammates may not be pulling their weight
- an individual might be seen as being treated comparatively harshly
- the quality of skills within a team could be diverse and individual players may feel there are hierarchies or that the coach has favourites.

Coaches need to be aware of these potential divisions and tensions as they can affect the cohesion of the team. A good coach will make sure each player receives the level of support she needs. Be aware that an athlete may require an explanation as to why she is being treated differently to another player.

Each individual will have different motivations and goals; the coach needs to be able to manage all of these and get the team to work towards one goal.

“ I think the coach needs to make sure that we’re there for that goal and he has the same expectation of people. Half our team weren’t really there for the basketball, they were there more for socialising. ”

Think:

Understand that the needs and goals of the team and the individuals may be different. This will help you identify potential conflict before it occurs.

Individual sports

Even within individual sports, athletes will often train with other athletes – sometimes their competitors. This can potentially lead to tension. A good coach will acknowledge this and ensure all athletes feel as though they are receiving personal treatment.

“ I remember one session where he had a favourite girl in the group because she was really successful... it was kind of a little bit like, why are you just coaching her? That’s not fair! ”



Tell your athletes about your continuous professional development (CPD)

Having a coach who is well trained, knowledgeable and who can pass this knowledge on is obviously crucial. Some athletes like the idea that their coach has performed at the highest level or has coached great athletes, but to have achieved this is not a necessity. Athletes have considerable respect for a coach who continues his or her coach education and is prepared to try out new techniques.

New ideas are coming in all of the time as he has picked these up seeing other coaches around the world and brought them in to us; and they are great. I use both; the old and the new techniques.

Think:

Ensure you continue your CPD for your own development and pass on your learning to your athletes, explaining to them any new approaches. Female athletes will feel more comfortable if they understand why a training method has changed.

I hope [the coach] would guide me and tell me how to do it, but then let me have some input in, if I think that's the correct way to do it or not.

The significance of the coach's gender

From the athletes we interviewed, there was a general preference for a male coach. When asked to consider why this might be, the following explanations were provided:

- Their preference for a male coach was due to their lack of experience with female coaches
- Male coaches may have performed at a higher level than female coaches
- They associated 'good coaching attributes' with masculine traits (ie dominant, controlling and inspiring respect). However, these traits are not exclusive to men; female coaches can also apply them to their coaching.

Similarly, the female athletes acknowledged that female coaches can bring other qualities to coaching, such as sensitivity or empathy and open communication, and that a good coach does not necessarily have to have played at the highest level.

She was brilliant, different to a male coach in the fact she had an emotional side. Even though Jack, my first coach, had an emotional side, it wasn't shown that often.

Think:

You may need to acknowledge and manage your athletes' perceptions of your ability and qualities in relation to your own gender. Try bringing both male and female coaches into training sessions to offer athletes a more rounded view and approach to coaches.



The significance of the athlete's gender

Many athletes see themselves as athletes first and women second. They want to be pushed as hard as male athletes and demand the same expectations. That said, the athletes we spoke to acknowledged that women are different to men; for example, women can be more emotional, they will talk more and are more inquisitive. As such, the coach may need to tailor the way he or she communicates with the athlete or team to meet these needs, but still train them as hard and with the same technical rigour.

Ultimately, I'm a basketball player and that's what I want to be seen as. I don't want to be seen as something, but I think gender always comes into account. There's no way of getting around it, no matter how much you try.

Think:

Understand the significance of gender for your athlete for how it impacts on her approach to training and performance.

What makes an ideal coach?

Someone who:

- is highly qualified and continually learning
- is organised and in control
- respects and listens to the athlete
- provides regular feedback, both constructive and positive
- supports the individual as an athlete and as a person
- understands what makes their athletes tick and what motivates them
- can adapt the training to an athlete's needs
- makes training sessions hard, but fun and varied
- is committed to the athlete and the athlete's goals
- has high expectations of the athlete and challenges them
- can be a role model
- can be a mentor.

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
- Developing Female Coaches
- Socially Inclusive Coaching.

For further information about the series, please email coaching@sportscoachuk.org

