

## COACHING – DO FEMALE ATHLETES PREFER MALE COACHES?

---

It is often heard from male and female athletes that he or she prefers a male coach. Eighty percent of all coaches at the high school and college level are male. At the collegiate level, only two percent of the coaches of men's teams and less than half of the coaches of women's teams are female. (Acosta, Women in Intercollegiate Sport, 2002) When members of disadvantaged groups are admitted into fields in which they have, historically, been the victims of discrimination, there are many subtle and overt barriers to achieving equal footing with members of majority advantaged groups. It's important to take a careful look at the myths and misconceptions being voiced and, as educational leaders, commit ourselves to educating the media, our athletes and the general public about the insidious impact of historical discrimination against women in employment as coaches.

**MYTH #1:** "Look at the records. Female coaches aren't winning championships. This proves that male coaches are better."

Even in sports when there is a 50-50 ratio of males and female coaches, male coaches are more likely to have the highest paying jobs, the status positions at major institutions and therefore the budgetary, facility, recruiting and staffing resources to maintain their successful and advantaged positions. It is not surprising, when you consider this information, to hear that female coaches are less likely to win national championships than male coaches. Statistically, the odds would predict such an outcome.

**MYTH #2:** "Women are less intense. They aren't as demanding of their players. They aren't strong enough."

Athletes and others must recognize is that it is one thing to say that "Coach Jane Smith is not an intense or demanding coach" and entirely another thing to say that "Female coaches are less intense and demanding than male coaches." Attributing broad

attributes and characteristics to any large group of people is the root of discrimination. There are those who would say that all stereotypes impart essential truths. If we believe this premise, then there must be some truth in:

- football players are dumb
- African-Americans have rhythm
- female athletes are lesbians
- Jews are wealthy but frugal
- and the white man can't jump

We must know and teach our young people that any statement that imparts a specific characteristic to a group as a whole is false. Stereotypes are the product of ignorance and discriminatory bias. We should all question the understanding, motive and experience of those who falsely generalize individual characteristics to large and diverse groups of people.

**MYTH #3:** “Women turn other women off. It’s easier to take coaching from a man.”

Even though stereotypes are wrong, our culture teaches them. Unfortunately, parents and grandparents who grew up in different eras oftentimes reinforce behaviors and beliefs which position men and women as fulfilling their stereotypical roles (i.e., men are outgoing, confident, strong, competent, aggressive, etc. and women are quiet, subservient, weak, passive, etc.). It is then easy for a young person to grow up believing that men are supposed to instruct women, to tell them what to do and women aren't expected to play this role. It is extremely difficult for young athletes to recognize and overcome these deep influences. It is an educator's responsibility to talk about these influences and assist young people in questioning such beliefs.

It is also important for young athletes to recognize that there are many styles of coaching and teaching. Some coaches ask that athletes just do what they are told to do. Some coaches never tell athletes what to do; they want athletes to be able to think about why they should make one choice over another. Some coaches yell and are psychologically abusive. Others are quiet and subdued. How a coach gets an athlete to perform to his or her potential varies considerably and varies as within gender as well as between genders. Often coaches will use different methods with different athletes because different personalities respond to different teaching methods. What is important for athletes to understand is that other than teaching methods demonstrating basic respect for the individual, there is no one right way to coach or teach.

Another common way for athletes to use stereotypes of various coaching styles inappropriately is to assume that the methodology of one successful coach is the preferred style of coaching. For example if the male coach of a team that wins the national championship yells at his players and practices for five hours a day, then players should assume that to win a national championship requires (a) a male coach, (b) a coach who yells and (c) a team that commits to practicing five hours a day. Experience and common sense should tell us that such assumptions are very wrong.

**MYTH #4:** “We want a male coach for our team.”

It's not unusual to encounter situations where male or female athletes express a preference for male coaches, especially after a well-liked or successful male coach leaves a program. There are several reasons for such statements and beliefs. First, when change happens, the athlete wants the situation returned to the way it was, or as close to what it was as possible. It is not uncommon for athletes in such situations to experience anger and betrayal. It is important for both student-athletes and educational leaders to understand common reactions to change such as fear, anger and discomfort. Likewise, it is important to talk about all of these feelings and their sources. Women and members of minority racial and ethnic groups would never be able to overcome discrimination if making sure people were happy and comfortable was more important than doing the right thing.

We also know that research shows that female athletes who have never had a female coach believe that male coaches are better than female coaches. Male and female athletes who have been taught to devalue the athletic abilities of females may really believe that females cannot coach as well as males. There may also be male students who believe their friends and opposing teams will make fun of their female coach. Indeed, because so few females coach men's teams, this is a different and new situation which makes athletes uncomfortable. Again, choosing to do the right thing should take precedence over making sure a group feels comfortable with a decision.

**MYTH #5:** “Older female coaches simply don't have the skills and knowledge to coach highly competitive programs. Today's female athletes in top notch programs who are now being coached by males will be better qualified and will get good jobs.”

Look at “older” coaches such as Pat Head Summit of Tennessee and Jody Conradt of Texas in women's basketball. Age discrimination is as insidious as gender discrimination. We must confront any belief that younger means better. It is not right to

attribute the characteristic of better to any large class of people. Such beliefs also play into the hiring of young and inexperienced female coaches into lower paying positions because of the absence of a track record of successful coaching.

**MYTH #6:** “You don’t have to worry about the coach being a lesbian when you hire a male coach.”

This statement implies that lesbian coaches are sexual predators – that they sexually harass their athletes. There should be zero tolerance of such behavior on the part of any coach, male or female, gay or straight. This statement also advances the stereotype that all female coaches are lesbians – an untruth. Homophobia (fear of homosexuality) and lesbian stereotyping should be addressed with any group of young people who raise the issue.

The bottom line is that educators have a responsibility to directly confront all of these myths with parents, athletes, the media and the general public whenever such issues are raised. Every coach, male or female, must be judged on his or her individual teaching credentials and employment record.

Research and general demographic information tells us that, in the 21st century, business, politics and all social institutions will be diverse. The traditional “face of leadership” will be changed, even more so than today. To interact and compete successfully in that new world requires ease and comfort with being lead by a woman, a differently-abled person, or a racially different person. We know that sport can teach a lot of life lessons; here is yet another. We all must be wise and strong enough to insist, however, that young people have the opportunity to be lead by qualified non-traditional coaches, teachers and administrators.

Founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King, the Women’s Sports Foundation is a charitable educational organization dedicated to advancing the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. The Foundation’s Participation, Education, Advocacy, Research and Leadership programs are made possible by individual and corporate contributions. The Foundation is located in Nassau County, N.Y. For more information, please call the Foundation at (800) 227-3988.