

Considerations in Coaching Girls and Women in Sport and Physical Activity Settings

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The number of girls and women involved in sport has risen dramatically over the last several decades. Given this increase, an interesting question is whether or not there are important differences in coaching girls as compared to coaching boys. A search for coaching books published since 1980 with titles suggesting a discussion of gender differences in coaching results in one book focusing on coaching boys and over 30 books that focus on coaching girls. The books that focus on coaching girls include titles like “They Can Do it!”, “Coaching the Female Athlete”, “Issues with Coaching Girls”, “Designing Women”, and “Pregnancy and Other Practical Considerations”. Clearly there is evidence from the popular literature supporting the perception that there is nothing special that you need to know to coach boys, but there is important information you must have if you are going to coach girls. Although the focus of this talk is not on the social issues reflected in this disparity, interested readers should consult a recent content analysis of popular coaching books for an informed discussion of these issues (LaVoi, Becker, & Maxwell, 2007).

The focus of this talk is on the empirical evidence supporting the perception that there are differences in coaching boys as opposed to coaching girls. With regard to physical differences between men and women, there is substantial evidence. However, with regard to gender differences in psychological factors related to sport performance, there is very limited empirical evidence and this evidence has primarily been translated from research conducted in other venues such as educational settings, worksites, or personal relationships. In fact, the majority of the “evidence” for gender differences in psychological factors that are critical for coaches to be aware of appears to come from expert opinion or to be based upon experience and gender stereotypes.

That being said, there is evidence to suggest that there are small differences in communication between men and women (Allen & Valde, 2006). For example, men have been shown to be more “talkative” than women and to use more assertive speech whereas women use more affiliative speech (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). This is consistent with perceptions that women are “rapport” specialists who use communication to develop relationships while men use communication to problem solve and to aggressively focus on task accomplishment. Meta-analytic evidence also indicates that all-female groups prefer a leader who uses a democratic style while all-male groups are more equivocal in terms of their preference for an autocratic or a democratic leader (Foels et al., 2000). There is some empirical evidence of gender differences related to assertiveness and motivations for participation in intercollegiate sport. Men tend to report higher assertion scores than women (Keeler, 2007), and women report that they are less accepting of aggression in sport than are men (Tucker & Parks, 2001). Female athletes report a higher value for the social aspects of sport while

male athletes more highly value the competitive nature of sport (Flood & Hellstedt, 1991).

With regard to physical issues relevant to sport, there is empirical evidence regarding pain perception and tolerance, injuries, and physical attributes. Although pain thresholds and pain tolerance are higher for the general population of men as compared to women (Riley et al., 1998), some evidence suggests that there are no gender differences in pain intensity or affect amongst athletes (Hall & Davies, 1991). In terms of injuries, there are no differences in injury rates between boys and girls participating in youth (7-13 yrs) soccer (Radelet et al., 2002). In contrast, female high school athletes have greater overall injury rates than males in the sports of soccer and softball/baseball (Powell & Barber-Foss, 1999a) and have a greater rate of mild traumatic brain injuries (concussions) in the sports of soccer, basketball, and softball/baseball (Powell & Barber-Foss, 1999b). Importantly, evidence also suggests that women experience greater cognitive deficits and more severe consequences from traumatic brain injuries than do men (Dvorak, McCrory, & Kirkendall, 2007). Additionally, it has been reported that female athletes are 2-8 times more likely to experience an injury to the anterior cruciate ligament, ACL, than are male athletes (Hewett et al., 2005; Yu & Garrett, 2007). Importantly, there are also gender differences in how athletes respond to injuries. When going through the recovery process, women are less likely to talk to a significant other, perceive coaches as being much more negative towards them, and are more concerned about how the injury will influence their future health (Granito & Vincent, 2002). There is also evidence demonstrating differences in physical capabilities between men and women. Women are reported to be approximately 80% as strong as men of the same weight (Laubach, 1976) and to have lower maximal aerobic capacities than do

men (Bouchard et al., 1998). In soccer, these differences in physical attributes are thought to contribute to differences in the game experience that are reflected in a number of ways including that elite male soccer players run more (10-14 km) than elite female soccer players (10.3-10.4 km) in the game and that male teams typically begin successful shooting possessions in both the middle and offensive thirds of the field while female teams begin them in the offensive third (Kirkendall, 2007).

Given the limited research on gender differences in psychological factors that are relevant to sport, the wealth of coaching books suggesting that girls should be coached differently than boys is clearly reflective more of social expectations and gender stereotypes than of empirical evidence. To further complicate this issue, there may be differences in psychological factors that result from teams being managed by a coach of the same gender or the opposite gender. Given that approximately 60% of NCAA women's teams in 2007-2008 were coached by men, this is another intriguing question and one on which there is currently no research. Until empirical evidence supports gender differences in how athletes should be managed by coaches, the use of gender-based coaching practices is premature. The one area where evidence clearly supports gender differences is in physical capabilities and the experience of injuries by athletes who are high-school aged and older. Importantly, boys and girls who have not yet gone through puberty and who are equally physically active are not very different in physical capabilities or injury risk. Future research designed to address injury risks in young men and women and factors related to recovering from injury is clearly mandated and ultimately the development of training protocols to reduce the risk of injury for both gender groups is an important practical direction for this research.