



## The Female Athlete Perspective on Coaching

ADM & LTAD (Long Term Athlete Development) focuses on the physical, cognitive, mental and emotional development of our players. Women are not men and children are not small adults. One size does not fit all. When coaching females a coach may need a slightly different approach compared to the male athlete. All coaches should consider the psychological and sensitive needs of their players.

*“with women, your effectiveness is through your ability to relate. They have to feel that you care about them personally or have some kind of connection with them beyond the game...to be an effective leader of a men’s team, you don’t need personal rapport as long as there is respect. That’s the extent of the relationship. That’s all that’s really required. But in a women’s team, respect is only part of it, and it is derived from a relationship. Women have to have a sense that you care for them above and beyond their (athletic) abilities.” Anson Dorrance comments on motivating females.*

Michele Amidon, Female ADM Manager, speaks to 2010 Olympian Karen Thatcher regarding some of the best coaching strategies for communicating and motivating female athletes.

### What are some affective coaching strategies used when working with female athletes?

From personal experience as a coach and a player, I would say the number one most important strategy when working with female athletes is COMMUNICATION! Girls are notorious for wanting to know “why?” This extends to the sports realm as well. I believe Nietzsche, in all his brilliance, had a very good point when he stated: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” (Although, I do believe it should read “she who has a why...” ) If you give female athletes a WHY, that is, a defined purpose and direction for what they are doing, the results are staggering. Communicate to female players what their role is, why we are doing this, what is the purpose of this team system, etc. They may not always agree with you, but if they understand that you do have logic and a purpose behind whatever is happening, they will respect it and be more effective in whatever task you are asking of them.

Furthermore, it is important to respect female athletes as people and athletes separately, and coach in this manner as well. Females respond a lot better when you treat them fairly and with respect as people first and foremost.

### **What are some of the least affective coaching strategies used when working with female athletes?**

Embarrassing or degrading her in front of her teammates is the worst strategy with a female athlete. It does not motivate the athlete to improve; instead, it encourages her to feel poorly about herself and may cause her to be fearful to even attempt to improve. Female athletes also tend to emotionally carry this type of experience along with them, leading to perhaps inhibiting her develop in the future as well. This strategy often causes more harm than good.

### **How do you, as a female athlete like to get feedback from a coach?**

I like when a coach talks to me. I usually know when I do something wrong (don't we all?) as it did not "work." So, I enjoy when coaches do not simply tell me what I did wrong (I already knew that!), but give examples of how to do it next time. Yelling about the mistake does not seem productive to me, and I don't consider that constructive feedback.

### **What are some of the assumptions male coaches have made about you (or your teammates) as a female athlete?**

I have been fortunate that my male coaches have not been ones to make negative assumptions about myself or my female teammates. Usually, male coaches who are involved in women's hockey are involved because they are impressed with the athletes and love the sport. I experienced more assumptions from players and parents of players on boys' teams that I played on or against, but not usually from the coaches. These assumptions included that I wasn't tough enough or good enough, or that I must be older than the boys (when in fact I was younger). Or, worst of all that I was taking the place of a boy in a male world.... the assumption that I just did not belong. I, however, always had the support of my coaches and this helped me persevere. I realize in talking to others in the sport that I was extremely fortunate in this regard.

**Sometimes I feel that female coaches are harder on the female players and that female players are harder on female coaches. Do you agree with this statement?**

Yes. Absolutely. Female players tend to accept male coaches and male players automatically as being “legitimate.” Conversely, female players have to “prove themselves” to each other. And female players expect their female coaches to “prove themselves” as well. I do not know to what to attribute this, but I have observed it mostly at the highest level in the sport. Perhaps it is due to the sport not being widespread or strong at the grassroots level, and so high-level girl hockey players are used to other girls “not being good enough” to challenge them, and boys being where they found challenge. Thus, this typecast stuck with them, leading to female coaches and other female players having to prove themselves before they are accepted as legitimate sources.

***Do females hold their own gender more accountable or are they just willing to approach certain topics that make male coaches uncomfortable?***

I believe females hold other females accountable in different ways than they would males or that males do with other males. I believe this has a lot to do with the way that females process information and experiences and the way that we attach emotion to our world. Females have a need to be “seen, met, and heard” as a person; that is, they want to understand their own emotions and feel that you have an understanding of where they are coming from as well. This is “respect” to a female: to acknowledge their emotional standpoint, explain your own, and help them understand the situation as a whole. I have found that men have trouble and are uncomfortable attaching emotion to experience within a professional setting, such as coaching. Females, conversely, view emotion as a natural and necessary component of any situation. Thus, I think the way that females approach situations and their view of emotions differ vastly from that of males, and this leads to notion of varying accountability and male discomfort.

*Karen Thatcher graduate Summa Cum Laude from Providence College in 2006, a member of the 2010 Silver medal Olympic Team and currently is an assistant coach of the women’s team at Providence College.*