

# Women in high performance coaching

**This factsheet focuses on the under representation of women in high performance coaching, the reasons for this, and what NGBs, national agencies and women themselves can do to address this.**

Women in coaching is an area of longstanding interest for WSFF. In 2005 and 2007 we delivered positive action schemes aimed at getting more women involved in coaching in conjunction with partners and our recent work with NGBs continues to highlight the low levels of female representation in coaching, especially within the high performance environment.

With this in mind, in March 2010 we invited a number of NGBs to a session that focused on this issue and was supported by input from a number of women involved in high performance coaching.

The key findings and recommendations from the session with existing research on women's under representation in high performance coaching have been combined to produce the following information and recommendations;

## **Considerations - Why women are under represented in high performance coaching**

### **Coaching as a gendered role**

Traditionally women involved in coaching tend to work with younger athletes due to perceptions that they are better equipped to "mother" and nurture than their male counterparts. This, however, may only serve to enforce the notion that the high performance environment is "too tough" for women.

### **Player pathway**

Promising young athletes usually move on to "adult" training groups with more experienced coaches. Coaches not being developed alongside athletes consequently has an inevitable impact on the numbers of women working in high

performance sport as it is more difficult for them to move out of the "development" coach role.

### **Coaching networks**

Elite coaching networks tend to be male dominated, leading many female coaches to perceive them as less accessible, when in reality they could be a huge benefit in terms of shared learning and development.

### **The women's role**

High performance coaching is known to be a time consuming pursuit that may require frequent travel and weekend, evening work. Quite simply due to women typically taking on greater responsibility for domestic responsibilities their ability to commit to high performance coaching roles may be questioned compared to their male equivalent

### **Leadership**

The majority of NGB performance directors and senior leaders are male and may themselves have preconceived ideas as to who makes a good high performance coach and the qualities and attributes desired. These attributes may be seen as "masculine" automatically creating a challenge for female coaches.

### **Role models and representation**

Low numbers of women coaching in the highest echelons of sport inevitably means fewer role models for female coaches coming through. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the women who are involved in high performance coaching, with one or two exceptions, work in sports with a lower public profile.

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**Sport specific**

Some sports such as Tennis or Gymnastics may rely on coach strength or playing ability, which could present perceived challenges for female coaches.

**Coaching qualifications**

For many women, professional coaching qualifications are a way of gaining confidence and perceived credibility to progress to higher levels of coaching. The emphasis that some women give to these qualifications may consequently make it more time consuming and costly for them to reach the top levels.

**Sporting experience**

Many of those coaching in the high performance environment have themselves been elite athletes. As the performances of elite male athletes are often seen as superior to those of women this can present an issue, with male coaches who were athletes being perceived as superior to females with a similar background.

**Coaching opportunities to support progression to higher levels of qualification**

In some sports, coaches will need to demonstrate they are already working with high level performers as part of attaining higher levels of qualifications. This criteria may prevent some coaches developing their skills and knowledge. Research by Hewlett Packard shows that women apply for jobs only if they feel that they meet 100% of the stated criteria, whereas men will put themselves forward if they feel that they meet just 60%, perpetuating this problem.

**Lack of "informal" learning opportunities**

It is recognised that informal learning opportunities are incredibly important to a high performance coach. It is important that women can access these and that networks are proactively opened up to women.

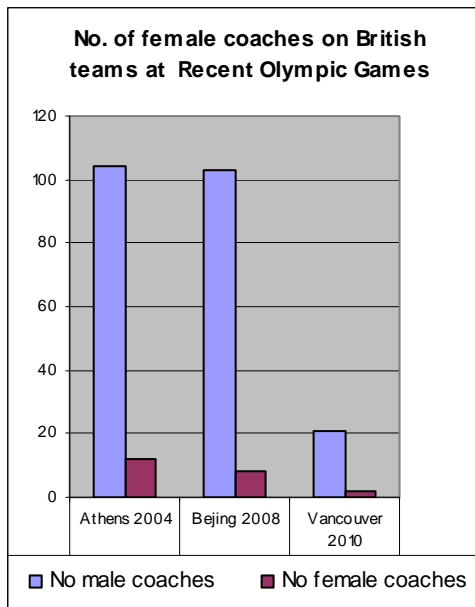
**Rationale - Why is it important that more women get into high performance coaching?**

Women are an untapped resource and will help widen the talent pool for prospective high performance coaches. In many sports half of national teams are made up of women and given that many coaches have themselves been athletes we are inevitably losing valuable expertise by not encouraging these women to coach.

The low numbers of women visible in high profile positions in coaching does little to change perceptions of sport being a male dominated environment and to promote sport as an attractive proposition for women as participants, volunteers, coaches or administrators.

Women also have different life and leadership experiences and qualities, something that the

corporate world is increasingly aware of and is capitalizing on. Sport also needs to recognise this and ensure that it looks at the experience that women can bring to coaching. Women are also well placed to understand the psychological and social pressures that female athletes may experience. (Although this is not to suggest that women should only coach women and vice versa).



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**Solutions - Getting more women involved in high performance coaching**

If we want the status quo to change and to see more women working in high performance sport, there are things that we can do. It's important to recognise that many of the structures and pathways within sport have been established for a long time and may inevitably have a gender bias. To achieve fair system special measures may be required.

**Developing positive action programmes**

In taking on board several of the recommendations provided in this factsheet, organisations may choose to develop their own positive action schemes or to work in partnership with others like UK Sport or sports coach UK to identify specific opportunities to get more women involved in high performance coaching.

As with all projects and programmes it is important that;

- A clear strategy is developed outlining what you want to achieve. This strategy then needs to be communicated clearly.
- You set targets and goals at the outset of the project or programme.
- You are clear about stakeholder/ partner responsibilities and the role mentors etc. will play.
- You are clear as to what you expect from the women on the programme
- You have a clear and transparent recruitment process for the programme
- You manage participant expectations

Obviously it is also important that appropriate time and resources are committed to any programme if it is to have a positive impact.

The following recommendations for NGBs, national agencies and women themselves are based on conversations with women working in high performance sport, examples of effective good practice from the UK and from the Canadian Coaches Association's "Women in Coaching" programme.

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**Athlete to coach transition**

A large proportion of coaches working in high performance sport have themselves been elite athletes. However, as a result of female athletes choosing other professions at the end of their playing careers we are losing considerable competitive experience. Actively promoting coaching as a career option and developing appropriate support programmes may help to address this as well as helping the athlete with managing retirement from elite competition.

**Support networks**

Coaches that we spoke to said that a solid support network was so important to their ability to progress and continue working in the high performance environment. Both peer and family encouragement were highlighted as vital and establishing support networks was recommended even if these need to be across sport,

**Role models**

NGBs and national agencies need to work collectively to raise the profile of female coaches and their successes. These women also need to recognise that they can inspire others to follow in their footsteps and that they are in a position to help make this happen.

**Policy decisions**

There are NGBs in the UK and internationally who have taken the policy decision to only employ women coaches to work with women's teams/athletes to good effect. This approach enables us to challenge the assumption that the best coach for the job will be always be a man and should therefore encourage more women to put themselves forward for coaching jobs.

**Ensuring women coaches focus on coaching**

It is important that coaches are allowed to focus on coaching. They should not be expected to take on additional roles as chaperone etc. simply because they are female.

**Transparent recruitment**

As in all professions it is vital to ensure equal opportunities for all. A positive recruitment process should help to ensure the best coaches are recruited to all available positions.

**Talent ID**

Identifying, supporting and encouraging female coaching talent is vital. It is also important to recognise that as with talent identification and athletes, support in this area may not mirror that provided to male counterparts.

**Understanding the client group and tailoring support**

In addition to formal coach education, female coaches identified a desire for more CPD/informal learning/ mentoring opportunities to help them to improve and develop as coaches.

**Coach education content and provision**

Coach education at the high performance end of the spectrum needs to focus on performance issue-based learning not just generic topic-based learning. Whilst this is important for all coaches, given that we know women see attainment of qualifications as so important to their credibility as coaches, ensuring formal education is as good as it can be, becomes all the more important.

**Create and promote opportunities for female coaches (to interact and progress)**

Creation of networks that allow women to learn from and support each other has also been cited by coaches as a way of encouraging more women to progress in high performance coaching.

**Support women to create environments that enable them to operate as high performance coaches**

Mentoring and advice on "lifestyle" management, similar to that provided for performance athletes, may also assist more women meet the challenges they will face along their journey into high performance coaching.

**Coaching environment**

Make sure that you have the policies and codes of conduct in place to ensure that the coaching environment is free from discrimination/ harassment etc. And that there are also effective guidelines in place to ensure grievances can be handled appropriately, sensitively and professionally.

**For further information on the issues highlighted in this factsheet or advice on implementing any of the recommendations, please contact [sport@wsff.org.uk](mailto:sport@wsff.org.uk)**

**WSFF would like to thank Sam Whale UK Sport, Sarah Cohen and Sergio Lara Bercial, sports coach UK and Olivia Murphy, Pam Richards, Rowena Birch, Sue Lawton and Lindsey Fraser for their assistance in developing this factsheet.**



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