Mentoring Connections Between Coaches and Female Athletes

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"If adequate encouragement and support are not provided, women are more likely than men to retire prematurely from coaching.”
Thorngren (1990)

More and more women are securing leading positions in business, politics, and education, yet the number of women who have achieved the position of head coach lags in comparison to the increase in participation opportunities for female athletes. Why do women who aspire to become leaders in sport continue to face a struggle? Could the connection needed to encourage young women to coach be established through mentoring by veteran coaches? This article will examine the role that mentoring could have in helping female athletes become leaders in their sports through coaching.

Women in Coaching
An increase in opportunities for women to participate in sports has been documented over the years by gender-equity studies and recent media coverage of Olympic and professional women’s sports. The subsequent increase in opportunities to coach women (partly a result of Title IX enforcement) has also been well documented (e.g., by Acosta and Carpenter’s longitudinal study). There is no question that gains have been made in access to athletic competition. Yet, obtaining coaching and other leadership positions has remained a struggle for women.

In 1996, 6,508 head-coaching jobs existed for NCAA women’s teams. This was an increase of 209 jobs from 1994. In spite of this growth, the number of female head coaches actually decreased during this period. By 1998, this trend had worsened, with an increase of 667 head-coaching jobs for NCAA women’s teams, yet a 47.4-percent decrease in the number of women holding these positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 1998). What is the reason for this decline? Do fewer qualified women exist to fill these new positions? Such an argument is greatly weakened by the fact that a new class of college female athletes graduates each year; playing experience, especially at the intercollegiate level, continues to be a highly regarded qualification for coaching. Thus, either fewer women want to assume leadership roles in sport, or the barriers to entering the coaching ranks remain substantial.

Based on the increasing number of women in leadership positions in other facets of the working world, it is difficult to believe that women—especially former competitive athletes—have little desire to assume leadership roles in sport. In fact, many female college athletes tend to seek out positions as youth coaches in recreational programs or assistant coaches for local high school teams once their athletic careers are over. These leadership experiences often motivate them to pursue an advanced degree and gain further experience as graduate assistants to college coaches. Yet, the leap from assistant to head coach is often never made. Therefore, the question remains: what can be done to mentor women who have the skills and the desire to become head coaches?

The Need to Mentor Potential Female Coaches
Empirical research designed to evaluate “motivation and attrition” in coaching has provided some insight into the plight of aspiring female coaches. Stevens and Weiss (1991) approached the issue from a social-psychology perspective. They found that female coaches identified many benefits of their profession, including the enjoyment of working with athletes and seeing them learn new skills and achieve goals; the challenge of encouraging individuals to work as a team; and the fun of coaching itself. However, when the same group was asked to report the costs of coaching, a substantial list was developed that included the extra workload created by teaching and coaching responsibilities, the sacrifice of personal and family time, and inadequate program support. In a study by Weiss, Barber, Sisley, and Ebbecke (1991), novice female coaches who had undergone internships perceived their coaching strengths to lie in the areas of interpersonal communication, motivation, teaching skills, knowledge of the game, discipline, and balance.
of work and fun. However, these interns identified their one key weakness as leadership skill.

In most every study examining the decreasing number of female coaches, the most common themes to emerge have been the lack of leadership confidence and the need for mentoring. Furthermore, there has been repeated agreement that mentors should be used for recruiting, educating, and retaining female coaches (Weiss et al., 1991). To address this need, coaching education programs and workshops have been established in several states. Programs in Colorado (Schafer, 1987), Pennsylvania (Oglesby, Shelton, Demchenko, & Thumler, 1987), and Wisconsin (Fowlkes, Coons, Bonner, & Koppein, 1987) demonstrated positive results by increasing the percentage of female coaches and officials in the respective states. In a similar approach, Weiss et al. implemented a “hands-on coaching internship” in Oregon. While the previous approaches had provided educational interventions and supervised coaching experiences designed to recruit and retain female coaches, the Oregon study was the only one to include post-internship evaluation and assessment of effectiveness. Barber (1989), Hart, Hasbrook, and Mathes (1986), and Stevens and Weiss (1993) all concluded that strategies must be developed for enhancing internship experiences, including careful selection of mentor coaches.

Interventions such as these have proven to be effective. As a follow-up to the Oregon study, 87 percent of the individuals contacted one-and-a-half years after the internship were either coaching or planning to do so in the near future (Weiss et al., 1991). Nevertheless, given the national decline in the number of women in coaching, efforts need to be continued beyond the period of an intervention. While mentoring has been suggested in many of the programs previously mentioned, future programs must develop a deeper understanding of mentoring and the leadership skills women need in today’s sport environment.

Coaches as Mentors
Of course, mentoring is not a new concept; the original Mentor can be traced to Greek mythology as the man who helped Odysseus’ son Telemachus develop leadership qualities. Today, mentoring is a process that links an experienced individual with someone who needs support and guidance. It can facilitate career development and expand opportunities for those who are traditionally hindered by organizational barriers, such as women and minorities (Gunn, 1995). Even though mentoring is not new, the idea of women in sports serving as mentors to other women in order to help them along the leadership path is a relatively novel one, as is the notion of implementing formal mentoring programs for this purpose. If progress is to be made in the training and retention of quality female coaches, then these approaches need to be employed.

Creating successful mentoring relationships for female coaches will require the inclusion of specific qualities that appeal to women. Gilligan (1982) used the concept of “a different voice” to explain women’s development and the value they tend to place on connectedness. The basic understanding that women and men differ in their approach to communication illuminates the notion that women approach leadership differently as well: “Women’s way of leading emphasizes the role of voice over that of vision” (Helgesen, 1990, p. 222). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) noted that “a vision, which involves seeing, is a one-way process, unlike speaking and listening, which involve dialogue, interaction, and connectedness” (p. 18). While a leader needs vision, it is the voice that serves as the means of getting the vision across. By communicating and sharing their vision, female leaders can experience the connectedness that inspires their leadership abilities.

Thus, one barrier to women developing into leaders in sport may be the type of leadership that they are exposed to as athletes. Without female leaders in coaching positions to serve as teachers and mentors, the inherent skills of communication and connectedness may be lost in the process of preparing to win. While the connection between female team members may be nurtured by male coaches for a cohesive team performance, the modeling of leadership traits characteristic of female coaches will most often be absent. Certainly, male coaches have been successful in creating winning women’s teams. Yet, with the continually decreasing number of women in coaching, it appears that they are not motivating their athletes to pursue coaching careers.

This is not to say that male coaches or leaders never exhibit traits that are considered characteristically female, such as voice and connection. In fact, the most successful male coaches often preach these very qualities. As one high-profile male coach stated, “Soccer is not that important to [my players]. Connection is” (Price, 1998, p. 89). As a true tribute to this coach’s success, many of his former players are now successful coaches of their own teams. This example strengthens the argument that female athletes need coaches who can also serve as mentors—mentors who feel authentic to them as women and nurture their sense of connectedness.

The unique strength of the “coach as mentor” relationship is that it is not an artificially contrived situation. A coach already has many of the same responsibilities as a mentor. By definition, a mentor’s role is that of guide, adviser, coach, motivator, facilitator, and role model within a contextual setting” (Kerka, 1998; also see Galbraith & Cohen, 1995; Haney, 1997; Kaye & Jacobsen, 1996). According to Kerka, mentoring “just happened” in the past, “as experienced people recognized and developed new talent or as beginners sought” their counsel. Today, many organizations are using formal mentoring programs, often “geared specifically to women and minorities as a way of helping them break into the ‘Old Boy Network’ and through the ‘Glass Ceiling’” (Kerka).

In sport, the need for mentoring is

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just as critical as it is in the corporate world. However, the most obvious opportunity to mentor future female coaches is often lost in the traditional "win at all costs" philosophy that places more importance on victory than on the development of individual athletes. In a team environment, the coach teaches athletes yet often limits the scope of their learning to their individual position or role. By considering each player as a potential protégé who needs the knowledge and skill to make decisions, a coach can effectively serve as a mentor for future coaches.

Constructivist theory suggests that "learning is most effective when...new knowledge and skills [are] used and individuals construct meaning for themselves...within the context of interaction with others" (Kerka, 1998). In this case, women learn to be coaches while competing as athletes. Coaches serve as experts who "facilitate learning by modeling problem-solving strategies [and] guiding learners in approximating the strategies while learners articulate their thought processes" (Kerka). A coach can model effective leadership by encouraging dialogue from athletes that will eventually lead to superior understanding and improved performance. The opportunity to voice thoughts and contribute to the team in a meaningful way may be the link that female athletes need in order to see coaching as a future career option. See table 1 for a list of the various steps that coaches can take to initiate such a mentoring relationship with an athlete.

**Strategies for Mentors**

Typically, a mentor "focus[es] on the person [being mentored], their career, and support for individual growth and maturity, while the coach is job-focused and performance-oriented" (Starcevich, 1999a). A coach is given the unique opportunity to build a working relationship with each athlete. The initial steps of a mentoring relationship may begin while the athlete is actively competing. However, a true mentoring relationship cannot be established until the athlete acknowledges an interest in pursuing coaching as a career.

Such a relationship involves several stages, as illustrated in figure 1. Initiation of a mentoring relationship may be formal (e.g., through the organizational structure of an athletic program) or informal (e.g., when an athlete seeks the counsel of a former coach). In either case, both parties must be comfortable with the mentoring process. Desire and readiness to be mentored are crucial on the part of the aspiring coach.

Once an agreement has been formalized, a goal-setting session should be conducted to provide clarity and direction for both the mentor and the protégé. Next, action steps should be established. Each goal will typically include several steps towards achievement. The mentor can assist in measuring progress and providing feedback. Reflection and learning should follow. Mentors need to keep in mind that they are "facilitators and teachers" in this process, "allowing the protégé to discover [her] own direction" (Starcevich, 1999a). Asking questions and helping the protégé find her own solutions is the best method of mentoring.

The final step in the process is closure. Once the stated goals have been achieved, the mentor will need to assure the protégé that the process is complete. A successful mentor might expect to hear reports such as "[my mentor] built my confidence and trust in myself [and] empowered me to see what I could do" (Starcevich, 1999a). Closure assures the protégé that she is capable, qualified, and ready to take on new challenges.

Mentors must also keep in mind that mentoring can have a positive effect on them. As Starcevich (1999a) put it:

The mentoring relationship is reciprocal. There is a learning process for the mentor from the feedback and insights of the protégé... The relationship is a vehicle to affirm the value of and satisfaction from fulfilling a role as helper and developer of others.

A coaching mentor also has the satisfaction of contributing to her sport on a distinctly different level.

**Conclusion**

Substantial barriers remain for women in sport leadership. Many women have

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<th>Table 1. Steps to Initiating a Mentoring Relationship</th>
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<td>1. Model leadership traits needed to coach effectively.</td>
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<td>2. Communicate the need for women in coaching.</td>
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<td>3. Share the positive aspects of coaching.</td>
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<td>4. Accept the natural mentoring role of a coach, including:</td>
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<td>• providing guidance,</td>
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<td>• instilling motivation,</td>
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<td>• facilitating opportunities for learning and practice,</td>
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<td>• acting as role model, and</td>
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<td>• serving as a career advisor.</td>
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<td>5. Encourage and acknowledge connections between athletes.</td>
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<td>6. Consider athletes as potential protégés who need knowledge and skill to make decisions.</td>
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<td>7. Provide opportunities for athletes to contribute in meaningful ways.</td>
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<td>8. Allow athletes to articulate their thought processes when they are solving problems.</td>
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<td>9. Encourage dialogue in order to facilitate understanding and open communication.</td>
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<td>10. Provide an avenue for athletes to communicate their desire to pursue coaching once their competitive career is complete.</td>
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succeeded as coaches, thus overcoming some of these barriers. Their leadership and visionary thinking is now needed to mentor the young women who will be the future of women's sport. By taking time to share their love for sport, their knowledge of the game, and their voice, these coaches can take the first step towards reversing the decline of women in coaching that has continued for too long. Female athletes witness firsthand the struggles faced by their coaches. Yet, these struggles do not need to be deterrents; instead, they can serve as opportunities for “mentor-coaches” to educate their athletes. Encouraging and empowering young women to make meaningful contributions to sport may be the link that has been missing in the progression from female athlete to female head coach. Giving young women the voice they need to feel connected and mentoring their leadership skills will eventually create “wins” for all women in sport.

References
Oglesby, C. A., Shelton, C. M., Dem
Continues on page 46
Final Thoughts
Choice can be a powerful tool for physical educators when used within the contexts discussed above. The notion of choice day as free day is noticeably absent from the pedagogically appropriate practices that we have provided. Choice day should incorporate meaningful instructional formats that place the student at the center of decision-making and keep the teacher active in the instructional process.

Choice day will be a positive learning experience for students if it includes activities that have specific goals, choices, and boundaries, and if students and teachers are held accountable for learning. Providing students with the opportunity to practice making appropriate choices is an important step in developing self-responsibility. The use of structured choice-day activities can facilitate this development.

References

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Pagnano
Continued from page 40

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Lough
Continued from page 33

Price, S. L. (1998, December 7). Anson Dorrance, the legendary North Carolina women's soccer coach, is sure he understands what makes a female athlete tick, and he has 15 national titles to prove it. Sports Illustrated, 88(48), 86-103.

Additional Resources
The Diversity Training Group: http://diversitydg.com
Women Sports Careers Professional Development Center: www.womenssportsrareers.com
Women's Executive Network: www.thewen.com/wen_mentor_program.cfm

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