

Perceived Barriers to Achieving Gender Equity in Canadian Interuniversity Sport: Perspectives of Athletic Directors

By Gretchen Kerr and Beth Ali

Introduction

The dearth of women in coaching in Canada has been the focus of study and discussion over the past 20 years. Despite increasing numbers of female participants at all levels of sport (Demers, 2004), the percentage of female coaches tends to hover around 30% (Coaching Association of Canada, 2002) with even fewer women coaching at the highest competitive levels (Kerr, Marshall, & Stirling, 2006; UK Sports Council, 1993). This is not just a Canadian phenomenon; in fact, the trend is observed internationally. Furthermore, the growth observed in the numbers of women in such domains as business, law, and government (Carver-Dias, 2011) has not been matched in coaching.

Today, almost 40 years after the implementation of Title IX, and over 25 years after the *Sport Canada Policy on Women in Sport* in 1986, multiple explanations have been offered for the declining representation of females among the coaching ranks. As Lyle (2002, p. 221) writes, opportunities and access to coaching have been denied to women through “a combination of overt, structural and hegemonic discrimination.” A substantial body of literature exists supporting the notion that sport is a male-dominated sector of society (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Scraton & Watson, 2000) and one that is reproduced in favour of the dominant (male) group. Lyle (2002, p. 232) further notes: “A taken-for-grantedness has been established in which coaching is perceived to be a male enterprise and early socialization into the coaching role is not an expectation for women performers.”

Existing literature cites obstacles such as job insecurity, low salary, conflicts with domestic responsibilities, harassment issues, lack of recruiting and mentoring programs, lack of role models, lack of informal networking and social support, male control of the sport, stereotypes of women’s inability to hold elite coaching positions, and employers’ reluctance to run the risk of hiring a female coach (Demers, 2004; Kerr & Marshall, 2007).

Any factor that decreases the number of people entering the coaching profession is of concern, particularly as the number of sport participants increases. Under-representation of women in coaching in particular is important because this leaves female sport participants without role models or role exemplars to encourage recruitment into coaching as a profession, thus perpetuating the cycle of male dominance in coaching. Further, any type of institutional or structural discrimination calls for intervention.

Given the importance of having women in coaching positions, along with the apparent, continuous decline in the number of female coaches at various levels of sport, the need for ongoing investigation into the root of the problem persists.

The purpose of this article therefore is to examine the perceived barriers to attaining gender equity within the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) system. The CIS was chosen because gender equity policies within universities have been in place for some time. Furthermore, many full-time coaches are found within Canadian universities. Consequently, we propose that the CIS is an important indicator of gender equity within the profession of coaching.

Methods and Procedures

Part 1

To ascertain the current state of gender equity in leadership positions, we reviewed the websites of the CIS member institutions. We were interested in the percentages of women and men in the positions of athletic directors as well as head and assistant coaches. These data were confirmed by the second author who is an athletic director within the CIS.

Part 2

To explore the perceived barriers to achieving gender equity within the CIS, six athletic directors, both male and female, were interviewed.

Once ethical approval was obtained, the athletic directors were interviewed in a semi-structured manner via telephone for between 30 and 60 minutes. We began with inquiries about gender equity policies and whether these policies were specific to the athletic department or fell under the university's umbrella policies. We asked about the challenges associated with implementing the gender equity policies with specific foci on the recruitment of women into the application pool and subsequent hiring and mentoring practices. Although a set series of standardized questions were used to ensure some uniformity to the interview process, opportunities were provided throughout and at the end of the interview for the athletic directors to take the interview in directions other than those we anticipated.

The interview data were analyzed using inductive processes by looking for common themes. Divergent comments were also noted. To maintain confidentiality, the names of athletic directors and institutions have not been used, and in some cases, the particular sport has not been identified.

Results and Discussion

Part 1

These data reveal that in 2011, females represented 15% of all head coaching positions within the CIS, a drop from 20% in 2005. Of all CIS assistant coaching positions, 26.8% are held by women. Conversely, men account for 85% of all CIS head coaches and hold 73.2% of the assistant coaching positions of women's teams. These findings confirm the under-representation of women in coaching and perhaps more importantly, the declining trend since 2005.

From the current demographics, nine (17.3%) athletic directors of CIS member universities are female and 43 (82.7 %) are male. Furthermore, institutions with male athletic directors have 8.4% more male head coaches of women's teams than schools with female athletic directors.

Part 2

The interview component of this study indicated that all six of the participants expressed concern about the lack of women within the CIS coaching ranks. When asked about the presence of equity policies, four athletic directors stated that their institution's athletic program was guided by its equity policy. In two cases, the athletic department has its own equity policy, in addition to the university's, which makes specific references to inter-university sport. In all cases, the gender equity policies refer to adoption of the principle of equity and a commitment to adhere to this principle in all activities.

Without exception, the athletic directors spoke at length about their desires to recruit and retain more women in the coaching ranks. They also spoke freely and passionately about the difficulties experienced in attracting women into coaching positions. Although all were committed to pursuing gender equity within their department's coaching staff, they believed the most significant barrier to attaining this was attracting women to apply for coaching positions. The participants cited numerous potential barriers faced by women in coaching, but had strong convictions that the most crucial obstacle was indeed encountered at the application stage. "We can't get women into the pool of candidates" and "the biggest problem is that women are not applying for the positions" are examples of athletic directors' reports.

The participants cited instances in which there was an explicit intent to hire a female coach for a women's team and yet the applicant pool consisted primarily or exclusively of men: "Of 30 applicants for the women's team, two were women, and of 20 applicants for the head coach of the women's team, none were women." "We were determined to have a female coach for our women's team, but we couldn't recruit even one woman to apply for the position."

The athletic directors provided numerous examples of making concerted and strategic efforts to recruit women to apply for advertised positions, only to be unsuccessful. As one reported: "For postings of coaches for women's teams, we do lots of external digging, we use personal solicitations, and strategic discussions with potential applicants." Another stated: "We actively recruit female coaches... but very few even apply for the position."

Previous researchers have cited the importance of expectations in attracting people to a specific profession. In this case, girls and young women may not have the conscious and unconscious messages conveyed to them to suggest that coaching is a viable profession for them (Lyle, 2002). This is exacerbated by the lack of female coaches who may serve as role models and examples that women can coach and excel in these positions. As a result of a lack of expectations, females may be less likely to make a commitment to preparing themselves for a potential coaching role by gaining experience or forming relationships with other coaches, some of whom may serve as mentors. Thus, even when a position becomes available for a female coach, they may be less prepared and/or perceive themselves to be inadequately prepared.

Two of the athletic directors spoke about the difficulties experienced in finding qualified women, noting that there are far more qualified men available for a position than qualified women. They elaborated on the absence of mechanisms at the structural and personal levels

needed to nurture females into coaching. One athletic director, who actively solicited women into the application pool, spoke about some potential female applicants, believing they needed more experience before applying to a CIS position. Interestingly, this athletic director reported that in reality, the potential female and male applicants had equivalent experience, but the males applied and the females did not. Previous literature supports the finding that women have lower perceived confidence with respect to their coaching abilities. Again, without role models, support systems, and mentors, it is not surprising that females report lower confidence levels, at least at the point of entry into the profession of coaching.

Almost every athletic director had either failed to recruit a strong female candidate or had lost a female coach due to pregnancy and/or child-rearing responsibilities. Most coaching occurs early in the morning, after typical school hours, and on weekends, thus placing restrictions on the potential time a coach can spend with his or her family. Furthermore, the travel required in coaching often means less time to devote to one's family. To address potential conflicts between coaching and family, several athletic directors implemented very innovative and aggressive strategies to retain women once they had been hired into a coaching position. As one said: "My job is to take the barriers away." In another case, the athletic director hired a female coach while she was pregnant and used departmental funds to provide child care while she was coaching "so she didn't need to choose between coaching and having a family." This athletic director also said she had provided child care for young male coaches with a family. Other statements included: "I want to make pregnancy a non-issue" and "I needed to show the athletes that women can coach and have a family."

Concerted efforts were also reportedly made to provide professional development opportunities for coaches. The athletic directors described being strategic about the provision of professional development opportunities and appointing mentor coaches for junior coaches, both males and females. In many cases, departmental funds – outside of the team's budget – were used to hire assistant or mentor coaches to support new, female head coaches.

More than one athletic director reported a perception that strategic and dedicated efforts to have women coach women's teams have dissipated over the past decade or so. When asked why they believed this trend was occurring, they pointed to the ever-increasing demands of coaching and the seeming lack of success in previously implemented strategies to recruit and retain women. They referred to the implementation of programs to attract and mentor young female coaches which, in their view, had not been successful.

All of the athletic directors emphasized the importance of having gender equity policies; however, they lamented the difficulties associated with implementation of the policies when they could not attract women to apply for positions in the first place. The importance of translating policies into day-to-day practice was also highlighted by many: "... gender equity must be more than a policy; it has to be a day-to-day responsibility ..." and "... having a policy is good, but we need the resources to implement it and structural/systemic models to support its implementation."

Athletic Directors' Recommendations

The athletic directors presented numerous recommendations for attracting more women to coaching through research and practice. Several expressed a need to learn more about why

women don't aspire to a CIS coaching role. They wondered whether graduating varsity athletes considered coaching as a profession and if not, why not? Some recommended that we identify female varsity athletes who are interested in coaching early and then, when they graduate, keep them involved in the program and create opportunities for them to develop skills and acquire experiences in the club and provincial systems. Similarly, Lyle (2002) identified the need to recruit from competitive sport in order to get more women into coaching. Marshall, Demers, and Sharpe (2010) also emphasize the importance of identifying and developing female athletes with coaching potential. According to Lyle (2002), recruitment strategies need to be more focused on identifying those with the predisposition to become coaches at competitive levels.

Some of the athletic directors encouraged a broader perspective on the problem of under-representation of women in the university system and raised questions about the development of coaches in Canada more broadly. They noted, for example, that female coaches are also missing at the grassroots level. As one commented: "I think we have to be asking more questions of the women who coached at a high school level or a club level or had initially shown an interest in coaching as a career. We need to find out from them why they're not looking to move further. I don't think we've asked enough of those questions." And, as others elaborated, when a coach expresses an interest in grassroots coaching, that interest has to be nurtured. At that initial stage, the coach needs mentoring and introduction into a system that will foster her skill development. According to the athletic directors, such a system is not firmly established in Canada.

They made specific recommendations for a more integrated system between universities and the broader Canadian sport system. References were made to an apparent contradiction in which the CIS relies on the broader sport system to develop coaches while the sport system looks to the CIS to do so. This perceived disconnect between the university sport system and the organizations responsible for the design and delivery of high performance sport has, in their view, contributed to the slow development of high performance coaches in general and female coaches in particular. The university sport system has the building blocks to enhance the design and delivery of high performance sport – facilities, sport medicine, sport science, academic programs, and a commitment to full-time coaching. Universities are one of the largest employers of full-time coaches in Canada and as such are major contributors to the professionalization of coaching. However, until recently, there has been little integration between the high performance sport system in Canada and the university system. As such, opportunities to link university coaching assets with the high performance system have not been realized. Some athletic directors recommended a full discussion about the role of universities in producing coaches. If the gap between universities and the high performance system could be bridged, there would be an opportunity to create a new model to enhance the development of female high performance coaches. Recommendations were also made to combine university studies in kinesiology/physical education programs with coach mentors and national and provincial sport organizations.

Another recommendation called for the establishment and/or maintenance of full-time, permanent coaching positions in universities as a way to recruit and maintain coaches in general and women in particular. Most expressed concerns about the growing trends to hire university-level coaches on a contract and/or part-time basis. Although there is a common understanding in broader society that job security is important for the recruitment and retention of talented people and that an effective way to achieve this is through full-time positions, the participants

expressed frustration that this view is not transferred into the profession of coaching. Given the conflicts that coaching presents for family life, there was the sense that applicants are willing to make necessary accommodations only in exchange for job security. They also emphasized that part-time and/or contract positions inherently mean greater turnover in staff, thus negatively affecting the development and stability of the sport program. As one athletic director stated: “there’s a danger in part-time appointments ... because these coaches lack security, if something more secure is presented to them, they’ll move ... they also can’t take advantage of the same professional development opportunities and experiences if they have another career going.” It was noted that to ensure that full-time, permanent positions are effective, there must be concomitant professional development programs to keep coaches current.

Summary

Our study sought to examine the perceived barriers to achieving gender equity in interuniversity sport and the challenges faced by athletic directors in implementing existing equity policies. Equity policies have been in place in universities for some time now and yet the under-representation of women within CIS-level coaching persists and, in fact, is worsening. The interuniversity system continues to experience large discrepancies in the gender ratios of head coaches, assistant coaches, and athletic directors.

The six athletic directors indicated strong desires to have more women within their coaching staff; they also described the implementation of strategic interventions to retain and develop female coaches once hired. The predominant challenge was clearly the dearth of women in the application pool for coaching positions. Despite existing gender equity policies with respect to hiring as well as the implementation of aggressive recruiting strategies, attempts to attract women to apply for positions seem to have been largely unsuccessful.

The athletic directors were consistent in their views that a more formalized system is required to develop coaches in general and women in particular. One recommendation was to identify female athletes nearing the end of their careers as well as female coaches at the grassroots level and integrate them into a system that fosters their interests and develops their coaching skills. Recommendations were also made for a more integrated system between universities and the broader Canadian sport system, including clubs, high schools, and provincial and national sport organizations, geared to the development of coaches.

About the authors



Gretchen Kerr, PhD, is a full professor and the associate dean in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. Her research addresses the experiences of women coaches and the psychosocial health of young people in sport. Her specific interests in harassment, abuse, and bullying within sport have led to numerous publications as well as leadership positions and advocacy work within the gymnastics community as a harassment and ethics officer.



Beth Ali is the Director of Intercollegiate and High Performance Sport at the University of Toronto. A coach for over 25 years, she represented Canada at Commonwealth and Pan American Games as well as numerous World Cup and Olympic Qualifiers. She was a member of the Women in Coaching Apprenticeship Program, served as Field Hockey Canada's Director of High Performance, and was chef de mission for the 2011 FISU Games in Erzurum, Turkey.