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Where are the female coaches?

In tackling the perennial conundrum in Canadian sport around the dearth of female coaches, Bruce Kidd also ponders what it would take to raise women in coaching to an issue of priority. Both questions go hand in hand and the author provides compelling answers to both. First, however, he sets the stage through an illuminating historical journey of female sport in Canada, vividly reminding the reader of the fluctuations of the past 90 years. He discusses the importance of “explicitly female-friendly environments”; our failure to tap into the coaching resource that female athletes could and should be; and the ongoing challenge of full integration of girls and women, which, of course, would change the very culture of sport.

Garnering support for fundamental change remains a challenge. Kidd supports a process advanced by a respected female sport leader to “recruit, train, and apprentice female coaches” while they are active as athletes. He calls for adoption of a version of the National Football League’s Rooney Rule, by which minority candidates must be interviewed for all coaching and senior management positions. He urges leading sport organizations, including the Coaching Association of Canada, to make the fundamental changes that will increase the number of female coaches. This, he says, “should be considered the unfinished business of the Canadian sport system.” We agree and support the action that is essential to making this happen.— Sheila Robertson

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Where are the female coaches?

By Bruce Kidd¹

One of the most perplexing contradictions in Canadian sport is the relatively low number of women in coaching during the very times that girls and women have become active participants. Today, there’s not a sport that girls and women do not play, excel at, or attend. The most recent national survey

¹ Bruce Kidd is Warden of Hart House and Professor of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. I am grateful to Beth Ali, Melanie Belore, Peter Donnelly, and Gretchen Kerr for their helpful comments.

(published in 2008²) reported that females outnumber males in six of the 10 most popular sports—swimming, soccer, volleyball, alpine skiing, cycling, and tennis. In soccer, the #1 children’s sport and the only sport to show an increase in participation from the previous survey in 1998, girls’ participation had become identical to that for boys; in ice hockey, girls were quickly closing the gap, increasing their participation three-fold since 1998. The story is similar at the highest levels of performance. Despite fewer events in which to compete, Canadian women have earned Olympic berths in roughly the same numbers as men for two decades and brought home roughly the same number of medals. At the 2012 Olympics in London, Canadian women won nine medals, as did the men. Canada’s only gold medal was won by Rosie MacLennan of Toronto on the trampoline.

Yet this everyday presence of Canadian women as participants and champions is not matched in coaching. Only 19 of 93 Olympic coaches (20%) and two out of 17 Paralympic coaches (8.5%) in London were female.³ That is an improvement over Beijing, where 11 of 95 Olympic coaches (12%) were female, and Athens, where eight of 82 Olympic coaches were female (10%), but it cannot be considered a breakthrough. In Sydney, 16 of 86 Olympic coaches were female (18%).⁴ The data is no different in Canadian universities, which actively encourage the hiring of under-represented groups and arguably provide the best coaching jobs in Canada because they come with considerable security of tenure and good salaries and benefits. In 2011, a study conducted by the Centre for Sport Policy Studies at the University of Toronto found that while there are almost as many teams in Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) competition for women as there are for men, only 19% of the head coaching jobs are held by women.⁵ It’s not much better in other positions of leadership. Only six of the 19-person executive (31.5%) of the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) are female; only five of the 15-person board (33%) of the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) are female; only four members of the 13-member board (30.7%) for the 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games are female. Only 17% of the athletic director positions in Canadian universities are held by women.

What makes the low number of female coaches bewildering is that Canada has had comprehensive federal and provincial gender equity policies for several decades. For more than 25 years, the CAC has provided promising young women professional development grants, scholarships, and internships to increase their employability as coaches. Moreover, the enrolment of women in university and college programs, which provide trained leaders for sport, recreation, health and related fields, have been predominantly female for many years. In 2009, for example, women constituted 71% of the university cohort in those fields Canada-wide.⁶ Most puzzling of all is the fact that according to the most recent national survey, women constitute a slight majority of the coaches at the grass-roots level, more than

² Fidelis Ifedi, ‘Sport Participation in Canada 2005’, Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2008060-eng.htm>, accessed October 20, 2012.

³ Coaching Association of Canada, ‘London 2012—Olympic and Paralympic Coaches’, <http://www.coach.ca/london-2012-olympic-paralympic-coaches-p151190>, accessed October 20, 2012.

⁴ Coaching Association of Canada, ‘Women in Coaching Program December 2008’, http://www.coach.ca/files/Women-in-Coaching_2008.pdf, accessed October 20, 2012.

⁵ Peter Donnelly and Bruce Kidd, ‘Gender Equity in Canadian Interuniversity Sport: A Biannual Report’, Centre for Sport Policy Studies, https://physical.utoronto.ca/Libraries/CSPS_PDFs/CIS_Gender_Equity_Report_2011.sflb.ashx, an earlier study by colleagues Gretchen Kerr and Beth Ali found that number as 15%.

⁶ Statistics Canada, ‘Postsecondary Student Information System’, Table 2, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100714/t100714a2-eng.htm>, accessed October 24, 2012.

four times what their contribution represented in 1992.⁷ Yet at the highest levels of competition, female coaches are still the exception.

“It’s something we talk about all the time,” says Melanie Belore, coordinator of community development for Ontario Basketball. “I see a chill against female coaches throughout our sport.” A former intercollegiate star—she was team captain at the University of Waterloo—Belore began coaching in a public high school. “It feels like I’m invisible. I’m often the only woman at meetings and usually ignored. At games, other coaches and refs will address the assistant coach, who is male, not me.” Belore feels that the dearth of female coaches blocks growth in the sport. “I am convinced that we will not be able to increase participation by girls and young women in certain communities, especially those with a high proportion of recent immigrants, without strong female leadership, but it’s hard to find.”

What’s especially disturbing about these comments is that they are identical to the complaints raised by female coaches a generation ago. Has there been no change at all? Or was there progress in the 1990s and now, in these more conservative times, are opportunities sliding back? These concerns have been raised repeatedly during the last decade—in the pages of coaching journals⁸, in the mass media, and at public forums like the annual Petro-Canada Sport Leadership sportif conference – but seem to have had little traction. What would it take to raise women in coaching to an issue of priority?

The lessons from history

The scarcity of female coaches is an unintended consequence of the popularity of liberal feminism (as opposed to other variants such as radical and socialist feminism) within second-wave feminism in Canada and the United States during the last few decades, and the blind spot of the sport community to the gendered nature of sport itself. In earlier, first-wave expressions of feminism, the most widely held belief was that girls and women should have their own ‘separate sphere’ in sports. The Women’s Amateur Athletic Federation of Canada (WAAF) campaigned under the slogan: ‘Girls’ sports run by girls’. It sought to create women-only clubs and organizations, its own system of events, championships, and awards, led by female coaches, organizers, and officials. First-wave feminist sports leaders believed that women’s sport should take the particular needs of girls and women into consideration, even if it meant different rules, events, and sports from those of males. In the popular team sports of softball and basketball, for example, there were distinctly ‘girls’ rules’. In track and field, WAAF required that competitors throw the javelin, shot, and discus with both hands, with total distance to count, in an effort to develop upper-body symmetry among athletes. Although not every region of Canada adopted ‘girls rules’ and not every coach was female, most first-wave feminists fiercely believed that female-specific events and female coaches were best suited to provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for girls and young women.⁹

⁷ ‘Sport Participation in Canada 2005’, p. 44.

⁸ E.g., Gretchen Kerr and Beth Ali, ‘Perceived Barriers to Achieving Gender Equity in Canadian Interuniversity Sport: Perspectives of Athletic Directors’, *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*, 12 (2), April 2012; Katie Kilty, ‘Women in Coaching’, *The Sport Psychologist*, 20, 2006, pp. 222-234; Ian Reade, Wendy Rogers and Leanne Norman, ‘The Under-Representation of Women in Coaching: A Comparison of Male and Female Coaches at Low and High Levels of Coaching’, *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching*, 4 (4), 2009; and Cindra Kamphoff, ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy: Former Female Coaches’ Experiences and Their Decision to Leave Collegiate Coaching’, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 81 (3), 2010, pp. 360-372.

⁹ Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and M. Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game: a history of women’s sport in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002). There were, however, two small male-only delegations in London, Nauru (two athletes) and Barbados (six athletes), but these NOCs have entered women before and hold no ideological objection to their participation.

In its heyday during the 1920s and 1930s, WAAF governed seven national sport federations and won the right for Canadian women to compete internationally in both the International Olympic Committee's Olympics and the Fédération sportive féminine internationale's Women's Olympics (later the Women's World Games). Women's sports enjoyed huge public followings and extensive media coverage. Some historians still refer to the interwar years as the "Golden Age of Women's Sport". As female attendance in high school and university started to climb, and young women took up sports in record numbers, many school boards and universities created physical education and athletic departments for those young women. Virtually all of those departments were headed by women, who hired female physical educators and coaches in the same mould. Exact data are unavailable, but up until World War II, the overwhelming majority of coaches in girls and women's sport were female. Although women's sport died out in many communities after the end of that war, the result of the 'get women out of traditional male occupations and pastimes' spirit of post-war reconstruction and the television-led growth of the male-sport privileging sports media complex, women-only departments survived in many schools and universities. While often ridiculed, marginalized in inadequate facilities, and woefully underfunded, they kept the traditions of women's leadership alive. As late as the 1960s, the majority of the coaches in women's sport were still women.

The ambitious young sportswomen who led second-wave feminism in Canada had no time for 'separate spheres' and 'girls' rules'. They knew from the civil rights movement in the United States that 'separate was not equal' and they wanted the very best for themselves and other girls and women. They were impatient with women-only programs, knowing that the best opportunities to train and compete, the best financial support, and the best rewards belonged to the men. They found 'girls' rules' restrictive and uninteresting, and wanted to play 'men's rules' instead. They wanted to try out for the many events from which they were excluded, such as distance running, the triple jump, and pole vault in track and field. While there were many debates about the best way forward, the liberal, gender-blind ideal of equality—'same as'—tended to triumph. In step with liberal feminists in many other spheres, they framed their demands for access to better opportunities, facilities, funding, and honours in terms of strict equality with those enjoyed by men. These ideas empowered the major policy initiatives and test cases that advanced women's opportunities in sports, and they continue to hold sway today. The fact that the final barriers to female Olympic participation fell in London in 2012— women competed in boxing and the last National Olympic Committee that had refused to enter female competitors, the fiercely patriarchal Saudis, included women on their team – is testament to the enduring power of these ideas.

But liberal feminism legitimized the integration of men's and women's sport organizations and athletic departments without protecting women's leadership. While feminists found ways to safeguard female participants in such mechanisms as one-way integration (in cases where male programs were much better resourced) and women-only programs, there was little support for quotas or affirmative action programs that would ensure women received a proportional share of the jobs. As a result, in an age of the unrelenting pursuit of the podium, results-based funding, and 'the best person gets the job', males benefitted disproportionately from the new jobs created by the increase in women's participation as athletes. In intercollegiate sports, the number of coaching jobs in women's sport has more than doubled

in the last 40 years, but the percentage of female coaches has fallen sharply – from an estimated 60% in the 1960s to 40% in the 1980s to the 19% reported last year.¹⁰

Despite the much publicized Title IX, the job loss among female coaches in the United States has been just as grim: between 1975 and 1980, the number of positions in intercollegiate women’s sport increased by 37%, while the percentage of women holding jobs fell by 20% and the percentage of men holding those jobs increased by 137%. When Title IX was passed in 1972, women held 90% of the coaching jobs; today that percentage is 42.8%¹¹.

It looks like we’re going backwards.

Yet history reminds us that the current situation is neither ‘natural’ nor inevitable, but the result of deliberate decisions in specific historical circumstances. One cannot turn back the clock, but there is still possibility for further change. History also reminds us that modern sport as we know it began in mid-19th century industrializing Britain as an explicitly masculinizing form of socialization for upper-class boys and men, to prepare them for new roles at a time of bewildering social change. As sports spread, by emulation, trade, military conquest, and the popularization of the new mass media, those kept out of sports—working class boys and men, girls and women, people of colour, and the subordinated populations of the colonial world—fought for their own opportunities to play them and to refashion them in their own interests. Not surprisingly, given the joys and benefits of sports, the battles over access and meaning have been ongoing, one of the constant features of modern sports. They continue to be fought out to this day, as evidenced by the current struggles for barrier-free access to facilities, the right to play in a hijab, and gender self-determination and against gender-based violence, race-based taunting, and skyrocketing user fees in after-school sports and municipal recreation centres readily illustrate. This may be a quiet time for feminist activism, but it’s time to make women’s coaching a priority. As long as men continue to monopolize the best positions, the equity agenda is incomplete.

Why it matters

Enabling more women to coach at the upper levels of Canadian sport, on both women’s and men’s teams, is not only important for girls and women, but for the culture of sport itself. First, a much greater prevalence of women in coaching and other leadership positions would further legitimize sports as a safe, female-appropriate cultural activity for girls and young women, and encourage them to take up sport, while reassuring parents and community elders. This is no mean consideration in a country with such cultural diversity, with many recent immigrants coming from societies deeply structured by gender. One only has to observe the popularity of women-only hours and women-only instruction in facilities across the country to see the extent to which an explicitly female-friendly environment can enhance female participation. Ensuring that a significant number of women are in charge is a vital step in making sports acceptable and safe to many more girls and women.

Second, we owe it to the remarkable young women who invest themselves in sport as athletes to give them better opportunities to stay in sport to forge their careers. “I think it’s less a case of women

¹⁰ Extrapolated from Ann Hall and Dorothy Richardson, *Fair Ball: Towards Sex Equality in Canadian Sport* (Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1982), pp. 56-64; and M. Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, pp. ; and Donnelly and Kidd, ‘Gender Equity in Canadian Interuniversity Sport’.

¹¹ Milton Holmen and Bonnie Parkhouse, ‘Multivariate Considerations in the Selection of Coaches for Female Athletes: A Demographic and Attitudinal Inquiry’, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* (52 (1), 1981, pp. 9-18; and Linda Jean Carpenter and Vivian Acosta, *Title IX* (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics, 2005).

dropping out of coaching than we lose them before they even have a chance to consider making it a career,” says Beth Ali, director of intercollegiate and high performance sport at the University of Toronto. “There’s no obvious route for a young woman to go into coaching, and so few examples of women enjoying rewarding coaching careers that even those who really want to be coaches plan something else for their futures. I don’t think that gender should be the main factor in hiring a coach, but we’re missing a lot of great coaches when we turn so many outstanding females away.” Melanie Belore agrees. “Many of my teammates would love to coach, but there are very few jobs, and work schedules and social commitments make it extremely difficult to volunteer. We’re cheating those young women when the chances for careers are so slim.”

Third, it’s important from a developmental perspective for both boys and girls. “Children of both sexes should be exposed to both male and female leaders in all adult roles, so they experience all manner of interpersonal styles and see all manner of careers available to them, says Professor Gretchen Kerr of the University of Toronto, who has written extensively on these issues. “We need to shake up the traditional career expectations. We need more males in child care centres, kindergarten, and primary schools, and we need more females in coaching.”

Finally, it’s also essential for the culture of sport itself. Those of us in the Olympic Movement and in public institutions promise that the sports we provide are accessible to all and reflect broad popular interests, but we know that in reality sports remain deeply masculinist (and Eurocentric), privileging men and certain male values in countless ways that discourage girls and women and some other men. It is instructive that at the founding meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS) in 1981, one of the most important debates was whether the name of the new organization should refer to ‘Women in Sport’ or ‘Women and Sport’. The ‘founding mothers’ decided on the latter, recognizing that if women were to be fully integrated into sport, they had to change not only access but the very nature of sport itself. The task is to make sports more androgynous, heterogeneous, and thus inclusive. It’s not just an abstract challenge. As more senior decision-makers in public institutions are drawn from groups who do not have good experiences with sport, they increasingly question the funds expended on sport.

Those of us in universities who face similar challenges know that the best way to change the culture is to recruit as many qualified representatives of the traditionally under-represented groups into the faculty, staff, and student body as possible, confident that a richly diverse community will gradually make the institution more accessible and democratic. In many ways, the history of Canadian sport can be considered a long, fascinating experiment in physical culture, as innovators, organizers, athletes, and fans continually debate and revise the various ways to play, but we have been much slower than other fields to share this experiment with under-represented groups. If Canadian sport is to fully reflect Canadian society, we need to bring many more voices, rhythms, and traditions into the experiment, especially those of female leaders.

The way ahead

How do we ensure that more Canadian women have the opportunity to exert their potential for sport leadership, especially in coaching? Studies have identified a long list of barriers: male control of the sport; the lack of role models; employers’ unwillingness to hire; lack of recruiting and mentoring programs; lesbo-phobia; job insecurity; low salaries; gender-based violence; work-life balance; and the lack of networking, group practices, and job-sharing that have enabled women to succeed in other demanding professions such as the law. It has also been alleged that girls and women want male

coaches because they are considered ‘better’, but the evidence suggests otherwise.¹² We need a comprehensive strategy that addresses the day-to-day issues female coaches face right up to the policies that shape Canadian sport and Canadian society. In talking to the women I know who work in the trenches, the most immediate need is a program that recruits, trains, and enables the employment of women much earlier than previously believed for careers in coaching. “Most athletic directors I know would hire qualified women if they could, but there are few if any women who apply,” offers Beth Ali. “The problem is that in the current system, by the time the rare former athlete works her way into a position where she could be considered for a job, marriage and children come along and she drops out. The timing is just so poor.”

What Ali proposes is an intentional, formal process to recruit, train, and apprentice female coaches during an intercollegiate or Olympic career so that they could already be hired and “be well embedded in a position before marriage and childbirth hit.” Ali’s system presupposes adequate parental leaves, affordable child care, and supportive employer flexibility, but that is ‘best practice’ in public and private institutions today. Her idea is to create a specific stream for female coaches within existing kinesiology/physical education degrees, with working relationships with provincial (PSOs) or national sport organizations (NSOs) so that the student coaches would gain internship experience before graduation. It could even be a full undergraduate or graduate degree. Such a program makes eminent sense, but in these cash-strapped times, it would take a special effort to persuade a university to risk one. Yet given the urgency of the need, the situation warrants special effort. What is needed is a sponsor to endow or underwrite the first years of the program, financing the faculty who will teach in it and/or the students who will enrol in it. It would make a fitting legacy investment for the federal and Ontario governments from the 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games.

Moreover, even if the pools of women seeking employment as coaches were greater, policies are needed to ensure that female applicants are seriously considered. I suggest a version of the (US) National Football League’s Rooney Rule, which requires teams in that league to interview minority candidates for all coaching and senior management positions; that is, to ensure that the short list for interviews contains at least one minority candidate. The rule has led to the hiring of significantly more minority coaches and head office staff. I would urge the federal and provincial governments to impose this requirement on all PSOs and NSOs as a condition of funding, and the CIS to urge members to do the same, and all institutions to create a transparent system of monitoring for compliance. The rule should be applied to both men’s and women’s sports. If it was implemented in step with the first graduations from the above recommended programs, it could significantly increase the numbers of female coaches. These steps should be enhanced by proactive recruiting—research shows that women are far more modest about their skills and experience—supportive mentoring and maternity/child care policies, and a re-thinking of the demands of sport upon coaches and other leaders. In the CIS, for example, schedules have often been extended without consideration of their effects upon students and coaches.

Sport Canada, the COC, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, the CAC, and CAAWS should take the lead in realizing such a program(s), hiring rules, and support systems. It is fully in keeping with the 2012 Canadian Sport Policy and its principle of inclusivity. Significantly increasing the number of female coaches should be a high priority of the next decade. It should be considered the unfinished business of the Canadian sport system.

¹² Laura Pappano and Lauren Taylor , ‘Acosta & Carpenter on why it’s nonsense-talk that females want male coaches, why women’s teams shouldn’t be the Lady (fill in the blank) — and more’, *Fair Game News*; www.womentalksports.com/items/read/52/63191, accessed October 27, 2012.

Of course, the full empowerment of female coaches cannot be achieved without other, broader changes. We need to re-assert the educational, health-enhancing, and community-building contribution of sport, link programs to other avenues of youth and social development, and insist that promised outcomes are actually realized. This is an age-old concern in Canadian sport—the tension between the narrow focus on athletic performance and the broader promise of holistic development—but today we have the knowledge, skills, and metrics to realize genuine development. We just need genuine commitment. The spin-off will be a fuller understanding of the need to affirm and include diversity in Canadian sport. Moreover, with more athletes having a much more rewarding developmental experience, perhaps more of them would find coaching a more attractive career possibility.

We need to make the conversation about the gendered nature of sports—and the discussions about how to make sports more inclusive—much more explicit and frequent. This is difficult because the social structures of sex and gender touch every one of us in deeply sensitive ways, and they are inextricably related to social power, but it is long overdue if we are really to be transparent about the sports culture we are nurturing. The discussion process launched by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport about the need to “transition Canadian sport” is an excellent example of how it could be done.¹³

We need much more information about how women have successfully entered other once male-dominated professions like law and medicine.

We need to create more professional coaching jobs and to make them attractive careers, with much less craziness, more job security, and adequate salaries and benefits.

And, of course, we need to continue to push for a more equitable sexual division of labour in the workplace, the community, and the household, to make it possible for many more women to have rewarding jobs.

It would be well worth the effort. Research shows that under the right circumstances, sport can contribute significantly to social development, and leadership is key. In fact, if only one input is possible, it should be leadership.¹⁴ Enabling more women to take up coaching positions in Canadian sport is an urgent priority.

About the author

Bruce Kidd is Warden of Hart House and a professor of kinesiology and physical education at the University of Toronto. He teaches and writes about the political economy of Canadian and international sport. His most recent book, co-edited with Heather Dichter, is “Olympic Reform Ten Years Later” (Routledge 2012). As a volunteer, Bruce has worked with numerous bodies to advance opportunities for physical education and sport. He currently chairs the Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport, the Maple Leaf Sport and Entertainment Team Up Foundation, and the Selection Committee for Canada’s Sports Hall

¹³ Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, ‘Sport in Transition: Making Sport in Canada More Responsible for Gender Inclusion’, <http://www.cces.ca/en/news-206--sport-in-transition-paper-supports-the-rights>, accessed October 28, 2012; see also Gretchen Kerr and Dru Marshall, ‘Shifting the Culture: Implications for Female Coaches’, *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*, 7 (4), October 2007.

¹⁴ Bruce Kidd and Peter Donnelly, *Literature Reviews in Sport for Development and Peace* (Toronto: Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, 2007), <http://www.righttoplay.com/International/news-and-media/Documents/Policy%20Reports%20docs/Literature%20Reviews%20SDP.pdf>, accessed October 28, 2012.

of Fame, and is a member of the Scholarship Committee of the Olympic Study Centre, International Olympic Committee. Bruce won the 6 miles at the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Perth, Australia, and competed in the 1964 Olympics. He was twice elected Canada's Male Athlete of the Year by Canadian Press. He still holds the Canadian junior record for 5,000 metres after 50 years.