

From Policy to Progress: Working to Develop and Retain Female Coaches

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Despite it being early days, here is an initiative to watch, support, and adapt. Ringette Canada's Female Coach on the Bench Policy and the subsequent Action Plan may offer a blueprint for other sport organizations to produce a realistic pathway to develop and retain female coaches.

Complementing Ringette Canada's initiatives are two new tools, one nation-wide that focuses on increasing retention and advancement of female coaches. The other is Alberta-based and aims to increase gender equity and leadership diversity in sport organizations. It is crucial to recognize the role of partnerships in these developments with Ringette Canada and the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) working together, the CAC and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) jointly developing the Female Coach Mentorship Model, and the CAC and Alberta Sport Connection supporting the Women in Sport and Leadership Impact Program. Funding for the latter two came from Status of Women Canada.

The *Journal* Editorial Board is encouraged by these developments and will monitor the movement from policy to progress. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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From Policy to Progress: Working to Develop and Retain Female Coaches

By Sheila Robertson

It is widely assumed that ringette is a game strictly for females; over 29,000 registered players on some 2,000 teams are girls and women, while boys and men number around 700. Given this overwhelming preponderance of female players, it can also be assumed that females form the majority of the country's 8,000 ringette coaches. Not so. Until recently, the coach benches were all or mostly male.

In 2008, the situation began to change, albeit slowly and not without resistance, when Ringette Canada (RC) launched a national and regional approach to encouraging more girls and women to participate, coach, and lead. The approach was a straightforward requirement that stated: "All divisions and calibres must have at least one fully qualified (trained or certified for the specific division) female coach, at least 18 years of age, on the bench."

Over time it became apparent that the requirement was not enough. It lacked clarity, leading to inconsistent interpretation and application, says RC technical director Nathalie Müller. "Some of our provincial associations bought in 100 percent, some ignored it, and others took 'female coach' to mean a trainer or a manager. In other words, they found a loophole."

Wanting acceleration, after much consultation RC decided upon a more rigorous approach. The resultant Female Coach on the Bench Policy, adopted two years ago, merits further examination, not least because the national numbers have gradually equalized to 1,277 female and 1,251 male coaches.

Developing the Female Coach on the Bench Policy

Noted for its commitment to the ongoing development and encouragement of females in coaching roles, the policy defines trained and certified coaches as "... individuals in a coaching position who have completed the necessary National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) training and certification within the ringette coaching pathway." Failure to comply can lead to disciplinary action as spelled out in RC's Discipline and Complaints Policy.

While explicit in its commitment to providing opportunities for females to coach, the policy is also intended to develop strong role models with women and men working collaboratively.

With a view to encouraging expansion beyond the national level, there are guidelines to help members, including all age division teams under the jurisdiction of a provincial association, to have at least one female coach associated with each registered team.

Müller stresses that RC controls only its own national teams and events. "We are very clear that our policy is only related to teams we can control and have jurisdiction over." She adds that at the national level, RC has a laudable record around "everything we control ... all our national teams have female coaches, sometimes a completely female coach roster, and our national championships and events require a minimum of one female certified coach on the bench at all times." Included are the junior and senior national teams and all Canada Winter Games teams. The requirement does not apply to Open teams, which are deemed recreational.

To develop the next step, Müller turned for assistance to CAC senior coaching consultant Isabelle Cayer and Sydney Millar from CAAWS. Provincial staff were involved through conference calls, an in-depth online survey, and a comprehensive webinar. Including a female coach from each province throughout the process provided "very valuable input towards understanding their challenges and what could improve their coaching pathway," says Müller.

Adding an Action Plan

Out of these deliberations came an action plan that complemented the policy by clarifying the coaching requirement and developing guidelines and recommendations focused on all levels of the sport. Making mentorship a priority, the action plan links to the NCCP's [Mentorship Module](#). Whether female or male, the mentor coach consults and collaborates with the mentee in a program that includes formal and informal components. RC provides mentorship opportunities for its high performance coaches; provincial associations do the same for Provincial Competitive programs, including at the Canada Winter Games, and local associations identify mentor coaches.

Formal apprenticeship programs are encouraged for identified, next-generation coaches in partnerships with organizations such as the CAC and the Canada Games Council.

Under consideration are four recommendations aimed squarely at young players who, so far, have generally been ignored as potential coaches. This could be reversed by providing female-only workshops and Competition-Development courses facilitated by female coach developers, also identified and trained by RC; identifying current athletes and encouraging them to coach; providing athletes with incentives such as free training, mentorship, and awards; and developing a long-term plan to attain 100 per cent compliance with the policy and action plan. Adds Müller: "We'd also like all national team athletes to become trained and certified coaches during their national team cycle so they can go back to their communities, not only as coaches but as role models."

As RC moves forward, it is essential to change attitudes, particularly when it comes to coaches who are fathers. "Dads who come from hockey backgrounds, either as players or coaches, still seem to be given more credibility than a female with NCCP certification in ringette," says Müller, acknowledging that this will not be reversed overnight.

While not intended specifically to increase the number of female coaches, RC has enshrined adherence to the Rule of Two whereby two screened and/or NCCP-certified coaches are always present when an athlete is in a “potentially vulnerable situation”. The latter is a key component of the CAC’s [Responsible Coaching Movement](#) (RCM), which “supports coaches with the training and knowledge they need to ensure that participation in sport occurs in a safe, healthy, and fun environment”. RC also intends to abide by RCM stipulations that call for defined roles in coaching contracts and agreements and will provide links to templates covering contracts and roles and responsibilities.

Building on Provincial Engagement

Envisioning a world where female coaches are the norm and a gender equity policy obsolete, Ringette Alberta (RA) measures success by the number of women in head coach or co-head coach positions. With females now accounting for 35 % of its head coaches, the expectation is that by the 2022-2023 season, the target of 50% will be reached, a goal executive director David Myers admits is “very aggressive”.

Referring to RA’s Team Staff Policy, Myers explains that a female coach requirement has been in place for as long as he can remember and applies to practices, exhibition, league, and tournament games, provincial, western, and national championships, Alberta and Canada Winter Games, and playdowns and qualifiers, all of which RA controls directly. “If you don’t meet the Team Staff requirements, you don’t participate,” he says.

The policy is explicit: “Young ringette players benefit from the positive role modelling of adult women in leadership (coaching) roles and from observing mutually respectful teamwork between adult female and adult male coaches.” Its gender equity clause states that “All U19 and under teams require a minimum of one female head or assistant coach who is 18 years of age or older.”

Myers points out that ringette’s first generation of players are now in their 50s and 60s and their children, who grew up playing the game, are becoming coaches and fully support the policy. These are “strong, confident female leaders who know the technical, tactical, and strategic parts of the game,” he says. “Because of their experience, they have leadership capacities and are taking the leadership roles.”

Traditional gender roles in the home remain a stumbling block that can make it difficult for women, particularly mothers, to commit the necessary time to coaching. Also to be overcome has been the impression that the policy diminishes the contribution of fathers. “It’s about healthy relationships between adult men and women in the coaching environment the players observe,” says Myers. “It’s about communication and sharing leadership roles, not one or the other. If we want the benefit to go to the players, it shouldn’t be too much to ask for mothers to be as involved as fathers. Part of being a leader involves making unpopular decisions ... not everything worthwhile doing is easy; it used to be a battle, with arguments and complaints, but stick with it and there is less and less resistance as former female players become coaches. The momentum is there.”

The momentum Myers mentions is bound to increase with RA’s participation in the newly-launched [Women in Sport and Leadership Impact Program](#), being offered jointly by the CAC and Alberta Sport Connection. Aimed at increasing gender equity and leadership diversity in Alberta’s sport organizations, the program is designed to build more inclusive programs by creating opportunities for women within sport programs and supporting leadership skills and capacity. “We’re involved specifically to acquire more knowledge that we can leverage to increase to 50%,” says Myers.

Nicole Robb, executive director of Ringette BC, speaks of the challenges of implementing its own official policy, passed in 2013, requiring all teams under its jurisdiction to have a certified female coach on its team staff in order to qualify as a roster. Until then, the role of many mothers of players was to “take turns standing on the bench and opening a gate during play, with no qualifications required.” It was a role the women valued because it allowed them to be involved in their daughters’ sporting life. Unclear wording and the lack of a development pathway led many to feel displaced and to believe Ringette BC was insisting the “mom” coach had to be certified at the Competition-Introduction level in all divisions. Reaction was intense, with Robb accused of “destroying the sport singlehandedly, discriminating against dads, and forcing the women to take coaching courses. In fact, we were saying, if she’s coaching a U10 team, she needs to be qualified at the Community Sport level ... we’re not trying to make it harder for the women; we’re giving them the tools to do a better job in handling the many layers of coaching.”

Robb stresses that “clear communication” is the key to creating a more harmonious environment. This means carefully explaining what level of coaching is required for all divisions and developing an understanding of the role coaches play in children’s lives in sport. “It also includes supporting women who step up to help them know they are valued,” she says.

Ringette BC is encouraging its leagues and associations to take a close look at their members with a view to identifying opportunities for younger players to volunteer to coach with its U7, U9, and U10 programs. “We explain the importance of the role of the mentor coach with new coaches and ensure that mentors support the new coaches and give them opportunities to be leaders,” says Robb.

Success in the officiating sphere is providing hope for female coaches. “Senior-ranked female officials actively identified and encouraged younger players to start refereeing and followed up on each recruit to help keep them engaged on the pathway,” says Robb. Changing that culture has led to retention with the number of female to male referees now at 3:1. “Our officiating leaders have done a really good job of encouraging players to take an officiating course and of building a community. In the high performance stream, for example, the up-and-coming officials are all women. Their mentorship identification system works really well so we are applying it to coaching with women recruiting women.”

Modelling the officials’ approach, experienced female coaches are identifying younger female players to take on coaching roles within their teams. “Female role models who seek out younger female athletes and give them the chance to coach is proving to be the most successful approach to retention,” says Robb.

Ringette BC has also compiled a list of identified female coaches to make sure they are considered when coaching opportunities arise. Also catalogued are high performance players who express an interest in coaching. Coaches of youth teams encourage their players to take peer-only coaching courses for which they get high school credits.

“It’s a work in progress,” says Robb. “A male coach with a female coach can create a very good balance between two styles of leadership. We don’t want the men to leave; we want more qualified women to step into the position.”

Postscript

The efforts of Ringette Canada and its provincial associations will be bolstered by the Female Coach Mentorship Model, a free, turnkey tool designed to increase retention and advancement of female coaches.

Launched in November 2017 by CAAWS and the CAC and available on the CAC’s website for free download, the [Female Coach Mentorship Model](#) consists of three guides: a sport administrator’s guide, a mentor guide, and a mentee guide. Together, these resources offer a guided approach to establishing effective and sustainable mentor-mentee relationships.

“Female coaches bring unique and significant value to the sport system at all levels, but often face complex barriers when trying to advance in their coaching careers,” says CAAWS CEO Allison Sandmeyer-Graves. “This mentorship model is a pragmatic and proven tool that any sport can use to encourage and support female coaches as crucial leaders within their sport and the Canadian sport system as a whole.”

Canada Basketball, Tennis Canada, Wrestling Canada, and Hockey Canada piloted the model for a full year. In the University of Toronto’s evaluation of the pilot, mentor and mentee coaches reported an array of positive outcomes, such as clear perceived personal and professional growth and tangible advancement towards coaching goals. The Model was made possible with funding from Status of Women Canada.

“The process of mentorship supports the coach and creates the opportunity for professional development while also providing an atmosphere of support, which is often not currently available to female coaches,” says CAC CEO Lorraine Lafrenière. “So when the pilot project showed such encouraging outcomes, we knew that opening it up to the Canadian sport community would bring even more supportive opportunities and experiences to female coaches.” For more information on the Female Coach Mentorship Model and to download the guides, [click here](#).

About the author

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor and an author for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*; the author

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