

## Assessing the Current State of Women Coaches in High-Performance Sport

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### Introduction

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Historically, coaching has been a male-dominated profession, rooted in traditions and practices that privileged certain pathways and excluded others. The recent rise of women's sport, characterized by landmark moments such as the inclusion of women's events in the Olympic Games and the passage of legislative reforms like Title IX in the United States, opened new avenues for women athletes. However, for women coaches, progress has been uneven, with systemic barriers persisting. Expert coach Séverine Tamborero draws on her extensive experience to indicate steps that must be taken if the way forward for Canada's women coaches is to improve. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor.

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

### An Overview

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Is women's sport thriving? Are more people watching women's sports? Are more women and girls playing and competing? Is progress being made regarding women at the high-performance level?

Definitely there are far more spectators, not only to support the "cause", but because the calibre is that good! Every time a women's league is created or expands, the next generation of girls and young women is encouraged by innovative options and opportunities.

Some will become professional athletes, and some will even coach, but at what level? Is high performance an option or are we still dealing with the stereotype of women being "good with kids"? I'll come back to that.

It's eye-opening to review spectatorship and viewership at major events contested by women.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) numbers are remarkable. One example: The 2024 national basketball women's championship game between South Carolina and Iowa drew 18.9 million viewers. The 2024 Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) final between New York Liberty and Minnesota Lynx was the most watched game in the history of the

league with an average of 1.6 million viewers, an incredible increase of 115% from 2023. In 2024, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) attracted a viewership total of 18.7 million on all platforms, five times higher than the previous season. According to ESPN, a Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) world record was set on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, with 21,105 fans at Montreal's Bell Centre for the game between the Montreal Victoire and the Toronto Sceptres; the league has drawn over 1,001,648 attendees since January 2024 when it was launched.

These numbers reveal something most of us have known for a long time: Women's sport is exciting, creative, fun to watch, and very competitive.

So, it can be agreed that women athletes now have progressively more opportunities to aspire to a career in sport. But what about the situation for women coaches?

## Are Women Coaches Gaining Opportunities?

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Over the last decade, certain women coaches have been breaking the glass ceiling that for so long have characterized professional sport. There are a few inspiring examples.

In 2014, **Becky Hammon** became the first woman coach in the National Basketball Association (NBA) when she was named assistant coach of the San Antonio Spurs. She was briefly head coach of the Spurs, taking over the role when Coach Gregg Popovich was ejected from the game on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. She is now the head coach of the WNBA's Las Vegas Aces.

In February 2015, the Texas Revolution of the Champions Indoor Football League named **Jennifer Welter** their linebackers and special teams coach, making her the first woman to coach in a men's professional football league. Also in 2015 Welter, who has a doctorate in psychology, became a defensive coaching intern for the Arizona Cardinals of the National Football League (NFL) during training camps and the 2015 preseason, the first woman to coach in that league.

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024, former Canadian national team player **Jessica Campbell** was hired as assistant coach of the Seattle Kraken of the National Hockey League (NHL), the first woman to be behind the bench in league history.

The question is: Did these women coaches break the ceiling or are they the exception? Regardless, their "first" have encouraged growth in women's coaching professional sports.

Today, of the 13 WNBA teams, seven of its head coaches are women: **Hammon**, **Natalie Nakase** of the Golden State Valkyries, **Stephanie White** of the Indiana Fever, **Lynne Roberts** of the Los Angeles Sparks, **Sandy Brondello** of the New York Liberty, **Cheryl Reeve** of the Minnesota Lynx, and **Noelle Quinn** of the Seattle Storm.

At the 2025 UEFA Women's European Championship, seven of 16 national teams were led by women coaches. The upward trajectory is interesting: In 2013 it was 18.75%; in 2022 it rose to 37.5%; and today it stands at 43.75%.

According to the February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025, issue of *Women's Health* magazine, currently in the NFL a record 15 women are coaching full time, more than other men's sports league and a 47% increase from the 2021-2022 season.

## Or not?

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Notwithstanding success stories such as the above, at the Olympic and Paralympic Games, recent statistics suggest stagnation. For women coaches at the Olympics, the percentage was stubbornly stuck at 11% for London 2012 and Rio 2016, until a slight shift in Tokyo 2020 to 13%. According to the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, only 19% of Canada's coaches were women while at the Paralympic Games, it was marginally better at 31%.

Also in Paris, the team sports of football, basketball, handball, hockey, rugby, volleyball, and water polo all had fewer women head coaches than in Tokyo 2020. The overall percentage of women coaches in Paris was a dismal 13%.

A 2019 FIFA study found that only 7% of soccer coaches worldwide are women, citing a lack of opportunity and funding. The NWSL reached an all-time low in the 2025 season, with only 14.3% coaches being women, compared to the league high of 37.5% in the 2013 and 2022 seasons.

As reported by the Female Coaching Network (FCN), Team GB had fewer women coaches on their 2024 Olympic team than in Tokyo 2020, despite claims from UK Sport that improvements had been made.

According to Scorecard 2024, Team Australia's numbers are also low with women coaches accounting for 18.6% at the Paris Olympic Games and 26% at the Paris Paralympics Games. Further, less than 10% of the top 36 funded high-performance sports have women coaches leading national teams.

At the start of the 2025-2026 season the PWHL will have eight teams, six of which will be led by men head coaches.

So, while there is progress by women athletes in television coverage of some sports and equity in prize money for Grand Slam events in tennis, the same cannot be said for high performance coaching. I like to say: "The higher you go, the lower the ceiling gets."

The FCN has published excellent articles on the state of women in coaching, including *Female Coaches Who Shaped the Olympic Games* (Part 2). It is noteworthy that prior to 1972 and before the existence of Title IX, coaches of top women's sports in the NCAA were volunteers and 90%+ of all women's teams were coached by women. Now, 51 years later, as women's sports in the NCAA are funded and coaching roles are paid, the percentage of women coaching such teams has dropped to an average of 42.44%.

This alarming decline is not confined to the NCAA. Why has it happened? Is there is lack of interest in the profession? Lack of opportunities? Poor leadership? Is it all of the above?

Answers were sought at an athletic coaching summit in October 2024 at Leeds Beckett University's Carnegie School of Sport in Leeds, UK. FCN founder **Vicky Huyton** co-presented a workshop entitled *Achieving Gender Equity in High Performance Athletics Coaching*. The workshop focused on three barriers that prevent the progression of women coaches in the high-performance stream:

1. Poor selection practices for international staff
2. Lack of female personal coaches
3. Unequal, sometimes unsafe, working environment

This workshop was reportedly “a crucial step in advancing the conversation around gender equity in athletics coaching, furthering the FCN’s mission to support and elevate female coaches globally.”

The workshop’s three barriers are not just in Athletics but are found in many sports. That’s the point. It’s not just about educating and building better leaders; it’s about the system failing to create opportunities for women coaches to succeed at the higher levels.

My conclusion: The system and structure around hiring women coaches at the high performance level must be changed!

Let’s be honest. Women are held to higher standards than men in applying for leadership positions.

Mandating national sport organizations (NSOs), sports teams, and clubs to hire a woman coach is not enough. Besides, men are tired of hearing: “We need a woman coach.” “We need to create opportunities for women at the higher level.” “We need gender equality.” Instead, the focus must be on women coaches’ abilities and experience to ensure that they cannot be brushed off.

There are pitfalls. NSOs may rush to take the one woman coach currently in their system, accelerating her without providing the environment to succeed. Too often, the perception is that men leaders expect women coaches to be the team manager or team chaperone and fail to provide opportunities to demonstrate their coaching skills. Then, as I mentioned earlier, there is the prevailing stereotype that women are best suited to coach youth sports, that men have “stronger characters and expertise” with older kids and at the higher levels of development, and that consequently they are better coaches at higher levels. This demonstrably false attitude needs to change. I know many men coaches who are great with kids; I also know many women who are amazing when coaching at the higher levels.

On the positive side, I note the proliferation of many first-rate programs globally for women coaches in various sports. Many NSOs, the international community such as World Rugby, and the professional level in sports such as basketball, tennis, baseball, golf, and multisport events have created mentorship programs that develop opportunities to include more women coaches in their systems. For example, Swimming Canada sends women coaches to international championships to gain experience. Also, the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) created the

Coach Inclusion Program that gives educational tools and international access to young women coaches who want to access professional events. The program will continue to focus on increasing the number of women coaches on the 2025 Hologic WTA Tour by promoting professional coaching as an achievable and ideal career.

While such programs are laudable, often the result is more educated women coaches but not enough employment opportunities. Too often women apply for a position and never get an interview let alone the job; it usually goes to a male coach with fewer credentials. Surely this demands systemic change, including bringing clarity to what “experienced coach” means in an advertisement for a position and to expose unconscious bias in selecting coaches.

### **The Challenge: Do Better and Be Better**

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First, it's crucial to establish clearer job descriptions and definitions of "profile" and "competence." It's often observed that women hesitate to apply for positions unless they meet all the listed criteria, while men may apply meeting as little as half. This suggests that women are often held to higher standards than men.

For high performance coaches and leadership roles, questions often arise about a woman coach's past athletic or coaching experience. The lack of such experience can unfortunately diminish a woman's chances of being hired. Creating a clearer pathway encourages women to enter the sport system and remain engaged for longer.

## **A Case in Point: Sport Ireland Moves Forward With Women in Coaching High Performance Strategies**

A 2023 Women in High Performance Coaching in Ireland survey “identified barriers and opportunities in high performance coaching.” The survey, which was divided into three categories – skills, experience and knowledge, and qualifications - was designed to collect the following information:

- What proportion of the national high performances coaches in each sport are women?
- Do National Governing Bodies (NGBs) have a target to increase the number of women in their high performance coaching staff?
- Do NGBs have any strategy to increase the number of women in their HP coaching staff?
- What are the requirements for high performance coaching roles?

Of the NGBs that have a strategy to increase the number of women employed as high performance coaches, the main themes are:

**Pathway:** The concept of a pathway is central in many of the strategies. Pathways are intended to provide opportunities for women coaches to progress to high performance and to ensure that the route to HP coaching is accessible.

**Education:** This involves providing opportunities to gain relevant qualifications and knowledge, developing coach education courses, and providing financial support to attend courses and gain qualifications.

**Experience:** Opportunities are provided to learn in a high performance environment and include attending training camps and international events and mentoring.

**Talent identification:** The focus is on identifying talented women coaches and giving them targeted supports to become high performance coaches.

These themes are relevant for Canada’s women coaches at the high performance level. And clearly, they demonstrate that much more clarity is needed not only about the path to high performance but also about available opportunities. To recruit and retain women coaches in Canada’ sport system requires more and consistent chances for them to experience higher levels of coaching and competition in their respective sports.

Questions often arise about a woman coach’s past experience as, for example, a high-performance athlete or as a coach at the provincial or national levels. The lack of such experience can unfortunately diminish a woman's chances of being hired. By creating a clearer pathway, we encourage women to enter the system and remain engaged for longer.

Excellent programs supported by the CAC are designed to support women coaches:

- High Performance Women in Coaching Mentorship Program
- Women in Coaching Canada Games Apprenticeship Program
- NCCP Mentorship module
- Women and Gender Equity in Coaching Program

It is worth noting that the only women head coaches in the PWHL - **Kori Cheverie** of the Montréal Victoire and **Carla MacLeod** of the Ottawa Charge - were part of past CAC Women in Coaching programs, Cheverie with the CAC's University Female Coach Mentorship Program and MacLeod with the CAC-Hockey Canada National Team Apprenticeship Program.

Finally, let's change the narrative that women are not good enough to coach at higher levels and give them the courage and determination to prove that they are.

Certainly it is appropriate to acknowledge the positive changes that have occurred in women's sports in recent years. These changes are having an impact on young girls who dream of being a professional soccer player or playing on centre court at Wimbledon or being drafted by the WNBA or simply being active in recreational sport.

But we must not passively accept those changes as being enough. Rather, we must continue to challenge sport's leadership culture, generate more and better positions for women coaches at the high-performance level, and overall create a healthy environment for women to succeed.

We need to move to the next step. We have an opportunity to use the gains at the professional level to hire more women coaches. It is not just about equality but about opportunity.

## About the Author

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Séverine Tamborero is a Performance Consultant and high-performance coach, mentor, and TV analyst. A graduate of the National Coaching Institute in Montreal and a NCCP Competition-Development Certified coach, she is the author of two books: "La performance à quel prix ? " and "Casser le Moule". She is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* and a Mentor in the CAC's *High Performance Women in Coaching Mentorship Program*.

**References available upon request.**