

Women and Coaching

Changing the Androcentric World of Sport

BY ROSE MERCIER AND PENNY WERTHNER

Cette étude critique certaines politiques et programmes qui encouragent la participation équitable des femmes et des filles dans les sports. En particulier, l'auteure demande que soient développés des modèles d'entraîneuses et d'examineurs qui iraient plus loin que des définitions androcentriques des compétences des entraîneuses.

As women involved in the world of sport, attempting to question the world around us and ultimately bringing a deeper analysis to our participation in this traditionally male arena, we begin by examining our personal experiences. One of the authors, a former track-and-field Olympic athlete, learned early in her career that there were limitations in her sport that were based on her gender. For example, a man could compete at the Olympic Games in 1,500m, 5,000m, 10,000m and the marathon. The longest race distance in which she could compete, for a number of years, was the 800m. The 1500m race became an Olympic distance for women only at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Prior to that, it was said that women could not run that far without severely damaging their ability to have children!

If we look at sport from a coach's perspective, it is disheartening to discover the very low percentage of women coaches at the national level still today, in 2002. Only a handful of national sport federations are able to meet the federal government's expectation of women constituting at least 25 per cent of national team coaches. Over the years, a variety of



Sarah Pape (left), rowing coach, at work during Pan American Games in Winnipeg.

explanations have been offered for the differences between men's experiences and women's experiences in competition or in a career in sport. Among the arguments you might still hear are these:

Women don't want to coach at the national level. They don't have the expertise or the motivation."

Women will eventually get pregnant and leave, so why bother?

There just aren't as many women competitors.

There are too many events in the Olympics as it is.

There have been programs designed to increase the number of women coaches at national levels and several sports organizations have introduced their own initiatives. But the statistics have told the same story for many years now. Most of these programs are short term, usually last-

ing a single fiscal year. One strategy for increasing the impact of such programs is to ensure the programs are of sufficient duration. The Women in Coaching program run by the Coaching Association of Canada is showing the way by introducing multi-year programs which are designed to

facilitate the movement of women coaches into national coaching positions. This is a promising and important innovation; however, such programs will only achieve optimal results when they are combined with other organizational and institutional changes.

Webster's defines androcentrism as "a preoccupation with men and the activities of men to the exclusion of women in human affairs." Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *She Who Is*, defines androcentrism as "a pattern of thinking and acting that takes the characteristics of men to be normal for all humanity, alienating women and children and those who do not fit the standard."

We need only look as far as our local and national newspapers to see what androcentrism in the sporting world looks like. On Monday, May 28, 2001, the *Ottawa Citizen* carried six pages of sport news—all professional and, for the most part, male and American—covering the NBA, the Memorial Cup, the Indianapolis

500, the PGA, and so on. There was a small sidebar on Canadian cyclist Lyne Bessette winning the prestigious Tour de L'Aude in France. Other amateur sport was covered in a sidebar on a decathlon world record and a local lacrosse result—both by men. The *Globe and Mail* on that date carried similar content, but also pro-

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vided a headline and article (on page 8) on Bessette's win in France. Better, but we need to ask why such an important international win in cycling wasn't on page one. As Laura Robinson pointed out in a *Globe and Mail* article on May 16, 2001, even when women win they get little or no coverage. When Colleen Jones won the world curling championship, we heard and read more about the men's rink missing out on a medal than about the women's dramatic victory. Similarly, NHL coverage dominated the sports pages even as the national women's ice hockey team won the world championship for the seventh time in a row! Page one of the June 5th sports pages of the *Globe and Mail* headlined the story of sex being bought for Toronto Raptors basketball players!

The media is but one example, albeit a pervasive and powerful one, of the inherent nature of the world of sport in North America—a world dominated by male professional sport

at best and at worst, by sex and drugs. While we are seeing more and more women participating, playing, and competing in more sporting activities, they are still doing so within a sporting world that is created and dominated by a male perspective.

What do we find when we move to the world of amateur and Olympic sport? In 1990, Sport Canada published "The Gender Structure of National Sport Organizations." In this report, the authors, Ann Hall, Dallas Cullen, and Trevor Slack, discussed two points of view in research about making changes to the under-representation of women in leadership roles. The first of these,

the person-centred or individualistic approach, attributes women's limited representation ... to factors that are perceived to be internal to women themselves. In other words, women are assumed (in actuality or in the perception of themselves and others) to lack the proper training, motivation, and skills to succeed. The research and literature focuses on delineating these stereotypes and their implications for personnel decision-making and career development; and then either demonstrating that women and men do not, in fact, differ in their abilities; or showing women how to acquire the necessary attitudes, skills, and motivation to succeed. In the person-centred perspective, the primary focus is on how women must change to fit the organization with little question as to the organization's role. The organization is a given into which everyone—both men and women—must fit. Men, because of their socialization, fit better than women do. Women, if they want to participate, must change to fit the system.

If you apply that person-centred perspective to coaching, you would

have to conclude that we are currently doing all that can be done to increase the number of women in national and international level coaching positions. We look hard for every opportunity to prove that men and women do not differ in their abilities to coach if they are in similar roles. We identify the types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that it takes to become a successful national and international coach. We provide programs that accelerate the learning process. And yet ... there has been no appreciable difference in the numbers of women coaching at that level over several years of focused effort.

Hall, Cullen, and Slack go on to state:

The second perspective, the organization-centred perspective, focuses on changing the organization itself, rather than the women (or men) in it. This perspective ... argues that people's behaviour is shaped by the organizational structures and systems in which they find themselves.... Differences in men's and women's behaviour can be attributed to the fact that women are more likely to be found in positions of low opportunity and low power, and are likely to be proportionately under-represented, or tokens, in decision-making. In this perspective, the focus of change, and the entity that must change, is the organization itself. Behavioural change in both women and men will then follow from the changes made within the organization. (30)

The report goes on to provide sport leaders' analysis of the lack of women in leadership roles. The explanations are depressingly familiar:

The lack of qualified women with the right experience is the key factor in women's under-representation.

It's a matter of being the right person in the right place at the right time.

While these perceptions may reflect individual experience, the authors state that "this orientation can also lead to a passive and dysfunctional approach to correcting the problem" (32). If there is ever to be a real change in the number and involvement of women in coaching, we need to move beyond thinking that women are the problem or that men are the problem.

We need to understand that the structure of an organization is not neutral, that organizations are structured through an invisible gender-biased view of reality, and that individual solutions will not result in sustainable changes for women in coaching and leadership roles in sport. If we ignore or deny the need for organizational structures that coordinate work and family in such a way that males and females could easily participate in both and if we assume that the ideals we have set up are gender-neutral, then we cannot fashion real solutions. We must be willing to examine the deepest assumptions we hold when we describe the process and skills of coaching.

Recently, one of the authors of this article worked with a group of women coaches to examine the reasons for the lack of women coaching at the national level. The women worked very hard to question the roots of this continuing problem and identify the factors that reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. (Interestingly, one of the main factors identified was an androcentric coaching model.) At the end of the weekend, the coaches were evaluating the work they had done and one noted that the best aspect of the session was hearing the voices of other women coaches—voices that she noted were a silent minority when they gathered at coaching association meetings.

There is a shift occurring in our society's ideas about leadership that can have important ramifications for



Moira D'Andrea, long track coach, directs speed skaters at the Olympic Oval.

our current coaching model. The traditional view of leadership was founded on male-oriented values of rationality, competition, and independence. The assumptions that everything must be based on reason, that only the strong survive, and that it is every man for himself are so deeply embedded in our political and social institutions that they are invisible. They have shaped the culture of our organizations, and sport is no exception. The organizational view that assumes the male model to be the norm does not work well for women. Some of the most basic tenets, which we take for granted, come from these assumptions. And when we simply try to fit women into this existing model, they often, and yet not surprisingly, are isolated, receive little support, have limited opportunities, and do not stay around, thereby perpetuating the prevailing thinking that women cannot "take the pressure."

We need to look at sport and coaching differently. We need to ask some hard questions. And then, we would suggest, we need to fundamentally alter the models of our sporting world. Why do we, almost without

exception, continue to have only one head coach of many of our national and provincial teams? Why do we continue to resist new models of team coaching or co-coaching? Why are so many coaches reluctant to share their knowledge with others they perceive as not their equals? Are they afraid that someone will sweep by them in the race that goes only to the swift? Why do we continue to perpetuate the thinking and behaviours that say emotion and intense feeling are to be avoided in the coaching process and confine ourselves to the tangible quantitative measures and scientific research? Why do we continue to hire coaches on the sole basis of technical expertise, while almost universally ignoring the importance of effective interpersonal skills? Such skills are crucial in enabling young children to enjoy their sport experience, helping keep athletes at all levels involved throughout their lifetime, and creating the kind of environment that allows young adults to excel in competitive sport and high performance athletes to achieve international success.

As we continue to rethink leadership, values, and the profession of

coaching, the attributes and characteristics of the traditional masculine model of leadership most certainly need to be re-evaluated and altered. The emerging form of leadership will be characterized by empowering oneself; enabling other coaches, colleagues, and one's athletes; fostering self-confidence; and developing an organizational vision that embodies the goals, needs, and values of both leaders and followers, of both girls and boys, women and men. This will require, without a doubt, organizations to adopt new values and act in new ways.

A wonderfully informative example of one woman's quest for freedom through sport is that of Hassiba Boulmerka, the extraordinary Algerian middle distance runner who won the gold medal in the women's 1500 meters at the 1992 Olympic Games. Boulmerka claimed that her international athletic experience provided her with a powerful chance to express herself and, by speaking out, she could not only extol the values inherent in excelling in sport, but could use her visibility to attempt to create and promote the more secular and democratic Muslim culture that, for a time, allowed her to excel as a woman athlete and as a Muslim woman. She spoke out about the possibilities for women in her country and within the sporting world. Difficulties arose for Boulmerka when a more fundamentalist form of Muslim culture rose to power and she became a target of great criticism, illustrating for us the difficulty in trying to make change solely as an individual (Morgan).

Just as one woman's words and breakthrough achievements cannot reframe the profound religious and political world view in Algeria, androcentrism in sport cannot be remedied solely through individual solutions. It will take visionary organizations and individuals within those organizations to rethink how coaching can equally fit the life patterns and needs of both women and men. In *Women, Men and Power*,

Hilary Lips writes: "It will take ferocious creativity to do the restructuring so as to arrive at a society where both female-male equality and important communal values are protected, where the economic structure is designed with consideration for the needs of female and male employees and their families. Nothing is more certain than that such a goal will never be reached if women are the only ones who change."

How can we begin to create a better sport environment that is inclusive of young female participants and athletes, older women, and women coaches at all levels of play and competition? Here are a few starting points:

- Develop coaching models that equally value female and male lives and offer alternatives to both women and men.
- Follow performance review models that go beyond androcentric definitions of coaching competencies.
- Involve women in leadership in significant enough numbers that their voices are heard and their experiences and perspective are reflected in decisions made in sport organizations.
- On an individual basis, continuously challenge those aspects of coaching that are anchored in androcentric values or models.
- Ensure there are opportunities for women coaches to speak at your conferences and workshops.
- Ask women coaches to write articles for your newsletter or magazine.
- Propose that there be female and male co-chairs for workshops, conferences, and committees.
- Ensure balanced visual evidence of women and men coaches in newsletters and media guides and on Web pages.

Being physically active is instrumental in each individual's well-be-

ing. We need to create an environment in the world of sport where that environment is welcoming, respectful, and enjoyable for women.

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