

## COACHING

# Female Athletes' Rankings of Coaching Behavior: A Longitudinal Report

Craig Stewart

## Abstract

*Coaching female athletes is as rewarding as it is challenging. These athletes are usually more coachable, intelligent, and mature than males at similar ages. However, they are different in many ways from their male counterparts. For example, Drobnick (2012) and Merchant (2012) have emphasized women's communication styles as seeking feelings more than solutions; conversations are often an end in themselves where expressing emotions is more important than seeking solutions. Conversely, most males, having thought out issues in advance, communicate with a purpose. When males do listen, they do so actively assuming there is a problem to be solved and they are being asked to resolve it quickly. Generally, females communicate to share and create a sense of community or relationship with someone who understands her issues. That relationship reduces anxiety and prepares her to handle the stress of her environment. The data in this report was collected over a period of 12 years on convenience samples of undergraduate female students enrolled in an introduction to coaching class at a university in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Every semester, as part of in-class assignments, students were asked to prioritize 10 characteristics of coaches in a forced ranking process. Their results were later combined with their demographic data (years of competition, the sports they played and the highest level) to stimulate in-class discussions concerning the group's competitive nature and their rankings of coaching behavior.*

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Craig Stewart is a professor in the Department of Health and Human Development, Montana State University-Bozeman. Please send author correspondence to [cstewart@montana.edu](mailto:cstewart@montana.edu)

*This is a presentation of information specifically related to the female student-athletes' rankings of coaching behavior over a period of years with practical implications for coaches to develop positive coach/player relationships, improve player motivation, satisfaction, and performance.*

## **Literature Review**

The coach/athlete relationship is one of the most important components in sport (Jowett, 2003). That dyad is foundational not only to the athletic atmosphere that binds individuals into a cohesive team, but paramount to the success of both the team and the players. This relationship and its effects on the development of positive atmospheres contribute to players' satisfaction, continued participation, increased intrinsic motivation, and overall success. Many coaches, especially young ones or those with limited professional preparation, need practical, clear, concise guidelines by which to establish those bonds (Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007). The origins and importance of the player/coach relationship should be provided in a practical, understandable format that will assist all coaches at any level (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004).

The importance of coach/player relationships spans from the youth to the professional levels (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013). However, if those relationships are formed by coaches who are less empathetic, use negative feedback in an autocratic coaching style, and emphasize winning as more important than the development of athletes, the results can be counterproductive to both the athlete and the team's success. Athletes in adverse environments may develop negative self-concepts, emotional and/or physical exhaustion, psychological withdrawal, and feelings of devaluation (Vealy, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 1998). Poor player/coach relationships can affect motivation, focus, concentration, attention span, and overall team cohesion while increasing athletes' stress and ability to cope (Gearity & Murray, 2011). The foundations of those relationships begin with coaching behaviors (Cushion, 2007).

### **Coaching Behaviors, Player Motivation, and Performance**

To convince many coaches of the effects of their behaviors, connections must be clarified between them and athlete/team performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). They observed that at all the levels

of competition, positive relationships between a coach and the athlete are factors that create mutual respect, trust, care, concern, support, open communication, shared knowledge, and understanding.

The effects of coaches' behaviors on athletes' satisfaction and performance have been investigated in depth (Chelladurai, 1990; Jowett, 2009; Jowett, Yang, & Lorimer, 2012; Riemer & Toon, 2001). Likewise, the positive relationships between leadership styles, coaches' behaviors, and athletes' performance, satisfaction, and overall well-being have been well established (Crust & Azadi, 2009; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Philippe & Seiler, 2006). Athletes reporting positive relationships with their coaches exhibited lower levels of anxiety, higher levels of self-esteem, more positive motivational climates, and were less likely to drop-out of sport (Gearity & Murray, 2011).

Similarly, previous researchers determined that team performance and player satisfaction were improved when the coaches' behavior closely coincided with athletes' preferences (Crust & Azadi, 2009; Riemer, 2007; Riemer & Toon, 2001). In addition, positive coach/player relationships improved mental toughness, increased their preference for training and instructive behaviors (i.e., skill development aimed at improving performance), fostered players' internal locus of control, and sharpened task-oriented focus (Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008; Jones, 2007).

In contrast, when a coach created a climate with less social support, reduced positive feedback, and use of punishment for mistakes, athletes perceived greater internal conflict (Balaguer, Duda, Atienza, & Mayo, 2002; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2005; Smith, Fry, Ethington, & Li, 2005). Those negative climates also resulted in higher player anxiety and performance-related worry which reduced athletes' abilities to stay focused on learning, reduced their self-confidence, and remained even if they moved to other teams (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Smith et al., 2005). In summary, negative coach/player relationships often affect players' satisfaction, their performances, and their overall motivation to continue participation.

## **Motivation**

Motivation is an ever-present topic in any sport. In his description, Nicholls (1984) wrote that motivation and mastery in athletics is viewed in either a task or an ego orientation model. Task orienta-

tion is when effort and learning is an end in itself to achieve one's goals. Ego orientation is viewed as effort and learning as means to the end of defeating an opponent. Athletes who are task oriented, therefore, define success as working hard and doing their best. Those who are ego oriented can only achieve success if, during competition, they defeat their opponent. Competition, obviously, is foundational to sports, yet when overemphasized, especially in public forums, it can foster an ego mentality (Deci, Betley, Kahle, Adams, & Porac, 1981). Athletes who are motivated by "task" participate primarily for internal reasons like fun, pleasure, or personal goals (Amorose & Horn, 2000). However, as the external, tangible rewards of mastery in sport increase, that orientation (task) may change (Deci et al., 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2000). If athletes view rewards as a result of their effort and learning, it reinforces internal motivation. However, if external rewards begin to control athletes' behaviors, internal motivation is diminished. According to Smith et al. (2005), coaches' behaviors may create positive learning atmospheres if they emphasize athletes' efforts. Coaches who provide positive feedback, while not ignoring mistakes, and limit the emphasis on winning foster internal motivation or task orientation in their athletes. However, if coaches punished athletes' mistakes, relied primarily on negative feedback, and over-emphasized performance outcomes, ego orientation or external motivation resulted.

In their examination of preferred leadership styles, Surujlal and Dhurup (2012) found the preferred coaching behaviors of both male and female athletes were training and instruction and positive feedback. The least preferred characteristic was autocratic behavior. They concluded that both males and females have similar preferences and coaches can affect the competitive environment of both genders by emphasizing training and instruction, democratic behaviors, social support and positive feedback. Coaches whose dominant characteristics were an autocratic leadership style with limited positive feedback and, generally, negative behavior degraded the coach/player relationship and should be avoided.

The critical human element in the development of motivation in sport is the coach. Even in the elite athlete, the team climate created by the coach is vital (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002). In Pensgaard and Roberts' interviews of Olympic athletes, coaches were expected to

develop and refine skills, and also advance positive atmospheres and increase confidence. However, a focus on external criteria (medals) was contrary to those goals. Many of the elite athletes emphasized the importance of a caring and accepting climate to which the coach was a primary contributor. If even Olympic athletes are motivated more by a positive coach/athlete atmosphere, younger, less skilled athletes would rely even more on that relationship. It is as relevant to consider the effects of coach behaviors and characteristics on the female athlete, who, while as competitive as males, exhibits significant differences in many components of the coach/player relationship.

### **Female Athletes**

A fictional video on YouTube, *It's Not About the Nail* (Headley, 2015), exemplifies one of the differences existing between the genders. In it, a young man and woman, shown only in profile, converse on a couch. The young woman is attempting to express her feelings of stress and discomfort, while the young man continually interrupts in an attempt to "fix" her problems. As she rebukes him for not listening, the camera pans back to reveal the physical cause of her problem....a nail embedded in her forehead. The young man finally relents, and begins to sympathize with her instead of trying to immediately eliminate the problem. While entertaining even to female student athletes in class, this video serves as an excellent example of one the differences between females and males.

In Merchant's (2012) more academic approach, the author emphasized the many differences between the manner in which females and males communicate. Females are more relational and personal in their communication styles, while males tend to be more assertive and direct. Though care should be taken not to over-generalize, the communication differences between the genders impact many of their interactive environments.

In a more sport related example, former U.S. Women's National soccer coach Tony DiCicco wrote in *Catch Them Being Good* (2002),

Validating a person's feelings is something I learned working with women. It is a method of interaction that optimizes listening skills. For example, when somebody comes to you and says, 'I've had a terrible day, I went to a meeting and found I was an hour late.' They do not want to hear, 'Well,

you know, I have a great pocket notebook that works for me, and it has really kept me organized.' What they want you to say is, 'You must feel terrible about that. You probably feel like you let people down. I'm sure they're going to forgive you though, because they know the type of person you are.' This way, you're validating and sharing their feelings, or, as Colleen might say, 'wearing' those feelings with them. (p. 5).

That degree of empathy, especially in an athletic environment, is difficult for some coaches, and more so for males in general. Coaches would benefit female athletes and the programs by understanding and accepting the players' different communication styles. Sport psychologist Dr. Joan Steidinger (2014) wrote in *Sisterhood in Sport*,

... with females, talking and communicating is very important. Females are hardwired to be more social and verbal than our counterparts ... relationships are so vital to females that we handle stressful situations differently ... we place more significance on the emotional connections ... one-on-one friendships, empathy, positive peer group collaboration and camaraderie ... and the desire for fun." (p. 1)

It is the female athletes' perspectives on preferred coaching characteristics that this study reports. The goal was to assist future coaches in methods of approaching this issue and assist them in developing positive, task-involved atmospheres. This is one of the most important areas of sport with either gender and at any level (Smith et al., 2005).

## Method

Over the course of 14 academic years (24 semesters), 338 undergraduate female students in Introduction to Coaching classes participated in a number of in-class assignments. One assignment was a forced-ranking of 10 coach characteristics commonly documented in coaching education texts (Hammermeister, 2010; Martens, 2012; Sabock & Sabock, 2008; Seefeldt & Brown, 1991; see Appendix). The purpose of the exercise was to discuss peer preferences for coaches in relationship to the students' competitive histories (Table 1). The

students were asked to rank the characteristics from the most important (1) to the least important (10) and required to use each rank (1 thru 10) only once (see Appendix). Nonparametric measures were used to determine if the rankings of female students changed over the time period. Nonparametric statistical analysis (Siegel & Castellan, 1988) was used to determine that there was no significant difference between how female students ranked coach characteristics between 2002 and 2015.

**Table 1**  
*Average Years, Number of Sports, and Highest Level Played by Female Student Athletes*

Years	Females <i>n</i>	Average Years Played	Sports played			Highest level of sport played			
			Three	Two	One	CV	HSV	HSJV	Other
2002	39	10.18	7	29	2	10	25	1	3
2003–04	22	9.94	3	16	3	7	13	1	1
2005	34	10	3	27	4	8	25	1	0
2006	31	10.1	25	3	3	5	23	2	1
2007	28	9.29	18	9	1	10	15	0	3
2008	11	8.64	6	3	2	2	9	0	0
2010f	25	12	18	7	0	6	17	1	1
2012f	29	8.86	24	4	1	3	20	4	2
2013f	38	8.46	27	7	4	10	24	4	0
2014f	43	9.82	30	8	5	14	25	0	4
2015sp	38	9.13	30	8	3	6	25	2	5
totals	338	9.63	191	121	28	81	221	16	20
% of total			57%	36%	8%	24%	65%	5%	6%

*Note.* CV = college varsity; HSV = high school varsity; HSJV = high school junior varsity; other = intramurals, middle school, club, semi-pro, etc.

## Results

The female students in this report were experienced student-athletes who had played competitively in multiple sports, on average, for over nine years (Table 1). For these female student athletes, coaches' ability to teach ranked first, being fair and honest was second highest and the commitment to the development of sportsmanship, third.

The preparation of athletes to play at a higher level, the individual commitment to winning, and a coach's prior experience as a player were consistently the bottom three characteristics. These rankings were statistically consistent across the whole period of the study (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2**  
*Ranking of Coach Characteristics by Year/Semester*

Coach characteristic	'02	'03-'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'10 fall	'12 fall	'13 fall	'14 fall	'15 spring
Ability to teach	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1	4
Being fair and honest with players	2	1	2	4	4	1	2	1	4	4	1
Knowledge of the skills of the sport coached	4	4	4	2	3	4	4	5	2	2	5
Commitment to the development of sportsmanship in players	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	4	3	3	2
The enjoyment of the players of their sport	7	7	7	8	7	7	8	2	6	7	3
The preparation of athletes to play at a higher level	8	6	6	7	8	6	5	8	8	8	8
Knowledge of the rules of the sport coached	7	7	7	5	5	7	6	7	4	5	7
The prevention and care of injuries	6	8	8	6	6	8	7	6	7	6	6
Individual commitment to winning	9	9	9	9	9	10	9	9	9	9	10
Experience as a player in the sport coached	10	10	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	9

**Table 3***Overall Characteristic Rank Across All Years (2002–2015)*

<b>Coach characteristic</b>	<b>Rank across all years</b>	<b>Average rank across years</b>
Ability to teach	1	1.22
Being fair and honest with players	2	2.67
Commitment to the development of sportsmanship in players	3	3.22
Knowledge of the skills of the sport coached	4	3.44
The enjoyment of the players of their sport	5	5.78
Knowledge of the rules of the sport coached	6	5.89
The prevention and care of injuries	7	6.78
The preparation of athletes to play at a higher level	8	7.11
Individual commitment to winning	9	8.89
Experience as a player in the sport coached	10	9.89

## **Discussion**

As stated by Merchant (2012), the differences in the way genders communicate and interact have been documented in both the popular and scientific press. While care should be taken to avoid overgeneralization, coaches could succeed in creating a positive environment for all their athletes by recognizing these differences.

The purpose of this study was to report the rankings of coach characteristics by female student-athletes in an introduction to coaching class over an extended period of time. The in-class exercises were used to stimulate discussions within the class as to what coaching characteristics their peers felt were the most important. That dialogue allowed students to examine their rankings in relationship to the preferences of the majority of classmates. It was emphasized that over 90% of their classmates were current or former athletes, and as importantly, probably parents of future players. If individual student rankings of coach characteristics were significantly different than

their peers, how would that affect their future players' motivations and satisfaction, and, as importantly, parent interactions? Hopefully, these discussions would prepare them to coach better and create positive environments for players, coaches, and parents.

Obviously, these female student-athletes valued coaches who could teach their sport well, but in an environment characterized by fairness, honesty, and sportsmanship. These findings support Jowett and Cockerill (2003) who observed that if positive player/coach relationships develop, athletes are more focused and willing to follow directions and instructions. Athletes in positive relationships see their coaches as caring about them as people and seek support and advice away from the sport. Those strong personal relationships developed by positive communication and individualized interaction (without the perception of favoritism), increased athletes' well-being while improving player and team performance. Others have reported similar findings that the effects of negative coaching behaviors such as bad coaching behaviors, poor personalities, little or no teaching or communication skills, overall lack of knowledge or an over emphasis on winning, affected their athletic experiences and/or their willingness to continue participation (Stewart, 1993; Stewart, 2013; Stewart & Owens, 2012; Stewart & Taylor, 2000).

Others found that female athletes were concerned with elements of competition different than males (Steidinger, 2014; Wang, Chen & Li, 2004). Certainly, female athletes are not less competitive than their male counterparts, but their approaches and preferences are unique. If coaches accept, understand, and plan for those idiosyncrasies, positive competitive atmospheres will contribute to increased performance and player satisfaction. This report also highlighted that coaches who emphasized winning or playing at a higher level were not ranked as high as some would imagine. This lack of value placed on extrinsic rewards should be noted. Likewise, having played their sport was not an important coaching characteristic and counters the concept that being a former player in a sport was a preferred characteristic. In reality, there are more former players who failed as coaches than succeeded. Coaches should recognize these rankings by experienced players and adjust their behaviors accordingly. If accomplished, positive athletic environments are developed that include a constructive learning atmosphere, optimistic socialization

opportunities, and a more caring and ethical atmosphere, players, coaches, and programs will excel.

In conclusion, as recommended by Philippe, Sager, Huguet, Paquet, and Jowett, (2011), the investigation of the coach-athlete relationship should continue. It should be examined in different sports and at different levels of competition, starting with younger athletes and documenting any changes across time. Of special concern should be the progression of the 'millennial' generation into sport. The characteristic of those young athletes is already being discussed in numerous venues (Hoffman, 2008; Zotos, 2015). Coaching is a difficult, demanding profession, but rewarding and positively addicting. The failure to understand, accept and accommodate for individual differences in players will not make it easier. To succeed, coaches should know their players as well as they know their sport and how to teach it. If accomplished, the atmosphere in which players and coaches exist would be a more positive, competitive environment where the chances for success will be maximized.

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# Appendix

## Instrument Used in Class to Rank Coach Characteristics

In class: COA 205 INRO. TO COACHING ----- spring 2015

Student name \_\_\_\_\_ (please print clearly)

Gender: (circle one)    F    M

Number of years played competitive sports: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of sport played: (circle one)    college varsity.....high school varsity ..... middle school

Other? Please list \_\_\_\_\_

**WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A COACH?**

(RANK THEM 1 FOR **HIGHEST**..... DOWN TO 10 FOR THE **LOWEST**.)

COACH CHARACTERISTICS:	RANK:
A commitment to winning	
Development of players to play at a higher level of play	
The development of sportsmanship in players	
Fair & honest treatment of athletes	
Commitment to enjoyment of sport by players	
Knowledge of the rules of the sport they coach	
The ability to teach their sport	
Knowledge of the skills of the sport they teach	
Experience as a player of the sport they coach	
Prevention, care and rehabilitation of injuries to players	

**USE EACH RANK (1 thru 10) ONLY ONCE**