

COACHING WOMEN: GOING AGAINST THE INSTINCTS OF MY GENDER

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Although I was young, when I was first asked to coach the University of North Carolina (UNC) men's soccer team in 1974, I was prepared. Being male, and a devoted athlete and scrappy soccer player myself, I understood training men. The shock came in 1979, when I was asked to coach the women. The feminist literature at the time was telling me there were no differences between men and women; however, I have spent nearly my entire career discovering, and appreciating, those differences.

Perhaps the best way to view coaching women is to explore how different it can be from coaching men. In fact, our program at the UNC is largely defined by the social (and yes, athletic) differences between men and women. And while we, as coaches, never want to cease learning about our sport, ultimately, coaching development ceases to be about finding newer ways to organize practice. In other words, you soon stop collecting drills. Your coaching development shifts to observing how to support and motivate your players, and how to lead them to perform at higher and higher levels.

Equality between the sexes doesn't necessarily mean that men and women need to be led the same way. In fact, I find that the way to coach women is a more civilized mode of leadership. There's a coaching cliché that states, "You basically have to drive men, but you can lead women." Women relate through an interconnected web of personal connections, as opposed to a more traditional male hierarchal style.

To that end, what is critical in coaching women is that all the players on the team have to feel like they have a personal connection with the coach, and it has to be unique. So, your effectiveness with women is not necessarily through a powerful presence and force of will; it is through your ability to relate to them.

Obviously, what I am sharing with you are generalizations—truths in my own experience. But for the sake of illustration, I will summarize the differences between coaching men and women with some specific examples.

Leading by the force of your personality isn't effective. When I first began coaching women, I was the typical sideline critic. I think every coach interested in developing players has the habit of being critical. Like many coaches, I couldn't keep it to myself. In the beginning, I was continually muttering about mistakes or poor performance--some comments were quite harsh.

During the beginning of one women's game, that had immediately followed one of the men's game I had also coached, one of my wing midfielders, who was closest to the sideline and thus got all the abuse, said to me, "Sit down Anson; you're coaching the women now." Since I had just finished coaching the men (and was in men's coaching mode), my natural instinct was to continue aggressively coaching in what my gender dictates. The great lesson was that in this environment (with our young women), it didn't work.

Leading with your humanity. While you may successfully lead men with the force of your personality (In general, men respond to strength; burying them verbally doesn't crush them, their egos are too strong), it is more effective to lead women with your humanity.



Early on, I learned you don't lead women effectively with intimidation. You have to be savvier than that. You lead by gaining their respect, being sensitive to their strengths and weaknesses, and showing that you value their contributions. You will not succeed if women feel their relationship with you is simply dependent on their soccer success.

Men need videotape; women don't. If you make a general criticism of a men's team, they all think you are talking about someone else. Videotape is proof of the guilty party. You don't need that proof with a woman. In fact, if you make a general criticism of women, everyone in the room thinks you are talking about her. If you tell a woman she made a mistake, she'll believe you. Seeing it on tape often only makes it worse.

However, because I have found that a lot of women do not have the confidence to feel they are as good as they actually are, we use our videos as highlight reels to build their confidence. This doesn't mean you can't help an individual player to improve her game using negative videotape. And it doesn't mean a female player doesn't want or need criticism. It is simply that it is important to choose the appropriate method with which you deliver that critique.

(On that note, coaches have a tendency to stop practice only when something goes wrong, to correct mistakes. Yet one of the best times to stop practice is to praise something particularly brilliant or noteworthy).

Tone is critical. My greatest half time talk to men was kicking a waste basket in frustration and anger. That let them know how I felt, in no uncertain terms.

"Well, what do you think?" I will ask women during a particularly tough game. I do this because I want them to be self-critical. Very rarely do male athletes take full responsibility. Men respond to a passionate or emotional rant. Women see that for what it is--my own frustration. They don't see how that benefits them.

In my experience, women will criticize themselves honestly. Asking them to take responsibility eliminates the coach from the equation. Then, when they have evaluated themselves, showing the way and building confidence--positive attributes-- becomes our job. (Also, when a man is criticized, he understands it's just someone taking his game apart, not taking his life apart. A woman doesn't separate the two.)

I have also learned that women listen less to what I say than to how I say it. In other words, they listen less to the language and more to the tone. They also watch your body language. If either of those are negative, that's the message, regardless of what comes out of your mouth.

Praise has to be doled out differently. Men love public praise. But if you praise a young woman publicly, every woman in the room now hates her with a passion, and every woman in the room also hates you, because you have not praised her. To top it off, the young woman you've praised hates you for embarrassing her in front of her teammates. However, a sincere and well-timed individual comment, such as "You were awesome," can be very effective and meaningful for any player.

Making connections is important. Men don't necessarily want a relationship to a coach. With women, you need to establish a different relationship with each one. Some women don't want any kind of connection, while others require a closer and more caring relationship. Some want constant feedback; some don't want any. However, whatever the relationship is, it must be a relationship of their choosing. They will let you know what they need, or don't, and it is your job to respond.

Women coaches have it tougher than men. Women coaches have issues different to the ones I'm describing here. Women athletes have higher expectations of women coaches. A woman coaching women will not be forgiven as often for the mistakes she makes. Women will judge each other more harshly. I think women are always surprised when a male does

something right. So if a man can evolve to a certain level, can learn to lead women well, can gain an even greater respect for it.

THE COMPETITIVE CAULDRON

There are some aspects of coaching leadership that are expressed in more concrete terms. They are connected to the nature of our sport. For one thing, soccer is not a sport like tennis; soccer has a very large physical contact component. However, there are certain general truths to all sports, and competition is one. What probably defines our program above all else is our belief that despite the enormous gains in women's athletics, there still exists a deeply entrenched sociological drawback. It is women's lack of support to wholeheartedly compete. And competition is at the heart of the game (and, many would argue, in life).

While men have been schooled to "beat each other up" in the spirit of the game (or in life), women have not completely embraced it yet. They can do it under conditions--against an opponent, for example. But in our experience, until that intense, no holds barred level of competition is a total part of their being, they will always be holding something back, especially in practice against teammates and friends.

Early in my career, I was inspired by the legendary UNC basketball coach Dean Smith. He used to let me come to watch his practices. They were a marvel of organization, efficiency and accountability. His assistant managers scattered around the floor, recording statistics—such as who hit or missed a shot, and whether a team won or lost a scrimmage. Statistics were tabulated, and players were ranked.

We adopted this method for our program, "soccerized it" and took it to a new level. We call it the competitive cauldron. It's a system in which we track, record and post everything. The competitive environment we foster is our attempt to inculcate it, to make female players understand that competing against each other should not jeopardize friendships. Trust me, if you want your players to get the most out of themselves, they must be re-socialized in an environment that totally supports, even more, rewards, this intense competition.

Coaching women, therefore, can be said to combine some attributes of what you know of athletics to be universally true (i.e. competition), with the more subtle, or artful, aspects of leadership. If you are capable of leading women effectively, I genuinely believe, you will have evolved to a higher level of humanity. This is because you are forced to develop a connective leadership style that is much richer and more satisfying than the hierarchal style that pervades so much of male leadership. In fact, this more connective style is the direction into which our entire culture is evolving. No doubt, the civilized man would much rather be lead this way as well.

*All these concepts, plus a complete description of our program, are fully explored in my book, **The Vision of a Champion** (Huron River Press), available wherever books are sold.*