Coaching Female Athletes 

This article comes from the notes taken at a presentation made by Cindy Tye.

Cindy is a graduate of Acadia University where she was a National Champion, Academic and CIS All Canadian, and Acadia Athlete of the Year. A long-time competitor in the Nova Scotia Soccer League, Cindy has competed in a dozen National Championships, including Canada Games, winning six medals. At the age of 28 years, she made the national team and played for Canada in 2002 and 2003. She was inducted to the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame in 2010. Cindy currently holds a National B license and has been assistant coach and/or head coach for the last two Canada Games for NS.

It is no surprise the male and females are different; physically, socially and emotionally. So it should come as no surprise that coaches should act and react differently to them. It is important for coaches to be aware of the general difference between male and female athletes so they can adjust their coaching style accordingly.

This document is a general guide for how coaches should approach coaching female athletes. This document highlights qualities, communication styles, and general habits of female athletes. It should be used as a guide for coaches to improve the lines of communication. This will not apply to all female athletes or all teams and situations, but this is a general guideline of what to expect and how to act in certain situations.

When you ask the female players of various ages the question; why do you play? Here are the results:

* Fun
* Friends
* Fitness
* Challenging
* Improve
* Belong to something
* A place to just be me. It is the one place where I don’t have to worry about what to wear, how I look, what I say or how smart I am.

The social connection is very important. It is what will often keep them in the sport. This is often very different than males.

# Qualities of female athletes

There are always exceptions to all rules, but us as coaches need to be aware of these qualities.

Intuitive

Female players can sense what is going on and can pick up on social cues. They recognize when someone is upset or not well and can tell when the coach is not having a good day. Often male coaches do not understand the cue he is sending. Coaches must be careful of what you say and your body language. Female players will pick up very quickly when a coach has a favorite player.

## Hard working

In general, the players will give you an honest effort.

## Internalize and sensitive

Words you use or things you say will come back to haunt you. Choose your words and actions wisely. Females are very sensitive to where she fits within the group.

## Literal

Paint a clear picture. When you speak in generalities it may cause confusion.

## Pleasers

The players will try to do as you ask.

## Blend in

Very often they do not want to stand out from the group.

# Lack of female role models

Very often there is no one in front of her doing her sport. When she watches TV it is always males. There is often a huge increase in female participation when women are shown in a positive manner on TV participating in sport. They can’t be what they can’t see. Invite successful women to speak to the players. Make use of females to demonstrate the skills in practice. Provide a picture they can relate too. The players will start to say, “I can do that.”

We need to put players in front of strong females. This gives the players a vison of what is possible for them to achieve. When always lead by males this often does not occur. Bring back former players to train with the athletes. Have them jump in; this can be very powerful for the players. Sitting and talking about their experiences. This should not be seen as a threat to the male coach’s job. It shows confidence on behalf of the coach to bring in relevant voices that are different from his or her own.

# Connection – relationships

Since the social connection is a strong reason why players play, how do we as coaches ensure this happens?

# Connection windows

* A simple “hi, how was your day?” when the player arrives at practice. It shows that you care.
* Warm up / cool down – informal check in
* High fives, fist pumps – it says: “I saw you”.
* Team building activities that may be co-operative or competitive. These can help players examine challenges and each other in different ways.
* Finish training with high fives or some social connection. Look each player in the eye

# Treat them like athletes

Do not excuse a lack of effort. When it is time to train be ready to go. Note: you do need to build in a short window for socialization at the start, but when it is time to go, it is time to go. Hard work is non-negotiable. Talk about what a champion looks like. They have to know that if they do not act as champion they do not have the right to be treated as champions. What does this look like, sound like and feel like? They must understand how their daily choices influence this area.

# Low maintenance vs high maintenance athlete

This must clearly be defined to the players. The low maintenance player leads herself by showing up on time ready to train and give energy to the team. The high maintenance player has to be constantly reminded about leading herself- she is an energy taker. This sets the stage for the culture of the team. How we will spend time together. Do not assume that all females are high drama; again, these are female athletes, so do not rely on unfair stereotypes to dictate your behaviour and approach.

# Drama

We don’t accept it here. Girls will clique if you let them. Players must be called out immediately when it occurs. Be direct, there are no subtle ways to disrupt a clique. Constantly switch partners and teams. Everyone gets to share different roles.

# Improvement mindset

 Very limited talk about results. Talk is mostly directed to improvement. Players need to learn to transfer the lessons learned in sport to everyday life.

# Culture of Competitiveness

Girls will often raise or lower themselves to fit in to the group. They want to be accepted by the group. Typically see themselves as equals. They have to learn how to combine competitiveness with cooperation. We need to define what it means to compete. It is not just winning the game or the drill. It is an action used to gain an advantage on your opponent. The combination of these little actions leads to the scoreboard win.

Help them frame competing and playing at a high level versus their teammates as a way of helping them improve and the team get better, along with improving their own game. Be sure to point it out now and again when you can using that type of language (“good job using hand pressure to help Sally keep working on her left hand”, or “get up into hand pressure; you need to make Sally better!”)

Players need to recognize that they came to the team to be part of something. They have to contribute.

Praise feedback immediately. Give it in real time. They need to know you notice and you care. Help them see an accurate picture of where she has been and where she can go. “Wow, two months ago you could not do that, look at you now”.

During the ugly stage, the time when they are struggling, what do you say? “I need you to stay focused on these key fundamentals. Don’t worry about the results” and then be sure to stay true to that when giving feedback and opportunities if she is focused on the few points while her results may fluctuate early.

# Formal Individual meetings

These can be very difficult for young female athletes. They will often get very emotional in this environment. Be honest with your athletes, don’t sugar coat or talk in generalities. This is the role you play and this is what you need to do. Here is the current picture and here is what it can look like in the future. The informal formal meeting often works best. This is a planned meeting by the coach, but done in an informal way; a talk at lunch or on the trip to the gym. Coaches should be cautious of meeting with athletes in a closed door room. Have these meeting in an open space with privacy to not being overheard, but open for other to see.

# Communication in training

Start with a well-organized practice. Players will often internalize criticism. Your tone of voice is important. They will think you are mad at them. It hurts their heart. Practice needs to have a fast, fun and flowing pace. It should be a teaching environment. Activities should be relevant. Do activities on the court in the same location they will do it in the game. Paint a picture of what you want the players to do. Do not just focus on the outcome. Instead of; “You need to play defence!” tell the player what she needs to do; “when the ball is in the swing be more in shade stance rather than an influence position.”

# Communication in competition

Take the stress off the players. They are afraid they are going to make mistakes or mess up. Need to alleviate this fear. Let them talk honestly about what they are thinking. Very often it is questions; “what if I am not good enough?” You need to help them change the focus. Ask two questions:

1. Why are you here? What is your role? If you don’t know, ask.
2. What are your strengths? What do you bring to this team?

Talk about the ups and downs that will occur in the normal flow of a game. We need to try to do the little things consistently.

When you fail, understand that development is a process. Today is just one simple snap shot on the road to success. Your attitude and effort will help you win the day.

# Girl Stuff

Menstrual cycle, they need to talk about it. How does it affect your play? It can be different for different players. Low calorie intake can impact the menstrual cycle (amenorrhea). They need to eat. Players need to be educated about this area. Osteoporosis, low bone density is another problem if not eating properly. Be wary if players are not eating or losing weight. You need to talk or involve other people if you suspect an eating. This should include parents, and appropriate authorities within the school setting. The other players on the team can be a major help. This may be another area in which using a female mentor player can help. For a female basketball player, training requires eating more than an inactive peer and an athletic body may look different from a magazine body; discuss this.