

Considerations for Coaching Female Football Players: A Brief Review and Implications for Practice

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Introduction

With the recent surge in professionalisation of female football in the United Kingdom (UK), there is a need to better consider how best to facilitate positive learning and developmental experiences. Within the UK, the FA Women's Super League and Championship have taken significant steps towards professionalisation through full-time and part-time status. With an increase in the contact time with athletes, coaches must become better equipped in providing and creating appropriate and effective programmes for female athletes.

Despite the necessity for greater consideration when structuring appropriate programme designs, traditional coach education sites have failed to provide an appropriate climate for coaches to construct appropriate knowledges. As scholars have frequently noted over the past two decades, the coaching landscape is characterised by ambiguities and an array of dynamic social interactions (Bowes and Jones, 2006). However, coach education strategies have typically placed importance on coaching practice through the development of tools and methods that attempt to serve the needs of athletes, often without appreciation of the sometimes subtle and complex nuances (Cushion, Armour and Jones, 2006).

In dealing with such complexity, questions have been raised as to the coach's considerations of gender during training and competition (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Idealised or gender blind conceptions of the coaching process do little in helping coaches make sense of the myriad of factors at play. In pursuit of finding clarity on the core contextual parameters at play, we will briefly review a number of areas identified by the authors, all of whom are active practitioners within female football or elite female sport within the UK. We do not wish to prescribe a coaching approach, instead we aim to bring to light our current understanding of how gender differences may shape the coaching process.

The Gender Order within football coaches knowledge's

Coaches learn through construction of knowledges in a variety of formal, non-formal and informal learning sites (Nelson, Cushion and Potrac, 2006). Within these sites of education, coaches become socialised to an accepted discourse that is deemed to hold value or befitting with common-sense practice. Within football specifically, coach education sites have been seen to lead to the construction of norms, rules and practices that coaches act upon. One such construction is the inherent differences between male and female athletes. As explored by Adams et al. (2010), male athletes were seen as the norm, with coaching practice being heavily influenced by the construction of desired athletic masculinity. These constructions are seen as an objective truth (Norman, 2016) which are used to legitimise and (re-)construct existing discourses which have become manifest within female football environments. Further, coaches have constructed a discourse surrounding the preferences and athletic practices of female athletes.

The (re-)construction of gender discourses within coaching have subtly interfered with how coaches approach coaching female athletes. Coaches believe they engage in gender blind practices, treating athletes in similar ways irrespective of their gender. However, de Haan and Knoppers (2020) note these indifferences as an empty ideology. Female athletes tend

to be problematized, constructed as the other and frame “women’s failure as intrinsic and exonerate organizational culpability” (Fielding-Lloyd and Mean, 2011; 351). Work conducted by Felton and Jowett (2013) illustrated that when working with male athletes, coaches would promote a winning at all costs mentality, however when working with female athletes they advocated female athletes try their best, assuming that female athletes are not capable of high-level performance. Many coaches within female football in the UK are male, were male athletes, and were coached by males, having been embedded in masculinised environments. Coaches are likely to inadvertently reproduce the very same discourses about gender that have been socialised upon them. It is important that coaches question how well prepared they are to respond to their athletes on an individual basis considering the deeper social and gendered contexts (De Haan and Knoppers, 2019).

Constraints on the Coach-Athlete Relationship

An important consideration for coaches of female athletes in football is to consider the power imbalances manifested within the coach-athlete dyad. Importantly, to ignore such imbalance is to disregard what *doing* gender is within the social context the relationship is situated in. Doing gender in this regard, is how one acts in accordance with the normalising cultural and social practices that define the role played by an individual, and the relationship they have to their gender. Thus, it is crucial that coaches should pay significant attention to who they are coaching, not just what they are coaching. Research exploring effective coach-female athlete relations have debated how the coach may shape the efficacy of the relationship. In particular, Norman and French (2013) argued that female athletes want more support as a person as well as a performer, consequently needing a more power-equal coach-athlete dyad. Therefore, constructing supportive relationships becomes central to a positive learning climate, where female athletes may respond more effectively to positive behaviours that underpin mutual communication (Longshore and Sachs, 2015). Research by Stewart (2016) states that when a coach creates a learning climate consisting of punishment, reduced positive feedback and less social support, athletes perceived greater internal conflict. These negative learning climates may increase performance-related worry, reduce self-confidence, and may live on after leaving that team (Pensgaard and Roberts, 2002).

Female health considerations for coach and player

Central to an effective coach-athlete dyad is the mutual understanding of constraints placed on the female’s athletic experience. Obvious anatomical difference occurs between sexes, but differences also occur in physiology, endocrinology, and psychology, which can also vary significantly between individual females. Understanding the female bodily experience is essential, yet currently insufficient evidence exists to suggest training at certain times of the menstrual cycle or hormonal contraceptive cycle is more or less optimal. Therefore, coaches should see the menstrual cycle and hormonal cycle as an individual, and not a collective experience (Pitchers and Elliott-Sale, 2019). Armour et al. (2020) researched symptoms and performance perception in 124 elite female athletes, with 82% of athletes reporting period pain and 83% reporting premenstrual symptoms. This resulted in 50% and 59% of responders alluding to a perceived reduction in performance in practice and match play because of their cycle. These topics should not be viewed as taboo, given the menstrual cycle offers a unique and early detection system for low energy availability and the role of oestrogen in bone health.

In understanding the female athlete experience, coaches should interpret individual menstrual/contraceptive symptoms (physical and psychological) the same way they would when receiving any form of athlete wellbeing data (sleep, muscle soreness etc) (Clarke et al., 2021). Research determining the effects of long-term monitoring within the club environment have shown mixed results (Pitchers et al., 2020). Athletes reported that

monitoring enabled them to discuss their own cycle with other athletes (80%), strength and conditioning coach (100%) and medical staff (65%), but not their football coaches (30%). This highlights a failure for some coaches in forming functional relationships with their athletes, leading to an inability to understand the female athletic experience, and how this may interact with their training and matchday performances.

Concluding remarks and implications for practice

Whilst we are cautious not to further perpetuate the position of female athletes as 'other', we have provided a brief case for the need to understand how gender may influence how the coach-female athlete relationship is practised. Given that a significant portion of the workforce in women's football has been - and continue to be - socialised within masculinised spaces, we urge coaches working with female athletes to carefully reflect on how their knowledge of the female athlete shaped their practices and interactions. Normalising the female athletic experience within the coaching environment can allow coaches to engage with their athletes to better understand the individual and collective needs and requirements at a given moment. Equally, coaches should be supported to further seek how differences between genders are constructed and the ramifications for the ordering of gender in a social hierarchy. Coach Education programmes should seek to drop the one-size fits all approach, and instead adopt gender as an important organising constraint on coaching practice. Through a deeper and more critical understanding of how gender constructs shape the athletic experience; team managers, coaches and practitioners can effectively tailor their daily personal interactions and performance programmes to provide supportive and stretching development environments for female football players.

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