



## ***What makes a successful coach of female athletes'?***

Results from study 1: Coaches of female athletes'; and study 2: Female athletes'.

Presented by: Dr Donna de Haan

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

d.de.haan@hva.nl

### **Background:**

Recent pressures from the IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020 to reach 50/50 representation in playing, coaching, volunteering of females in sports globally (IOC, 2015) reflect growing trends on gender equality in sports. A key issue within this context is the challenge of attracting and more importantly retaining female elite athletes (e.g., FISA ranking 22nd among the 25 International Federations in women athlete representation at the 2012 London Olympic Games; FISA, 2014). Elite athlete retention in general has received an interest from an applied science perspective. These studies are helpful in offering advice for instance on ways to assist athletes in their physical and psychological recovery (e.g., from injury). However, to date there is limited research to provide an evidence-based approach to supporting female athletes' through the 'attraction, retention, transition and nurturing' (ARTN) model (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2009).

Within the sport-specific context of rowing, athletes compete at elite level in sex-segregated competition but male and female athletes may be trained together and coaches often have experience coaching both male and female athletes. With regards to their high performance athletes, in a recent report on Women's Development within Rowing, FISA identified larger dropout rate for female rather than male athletes and whilst the report acknowledges 'highly motivated and committed coaches prepared to work with female teams', it also concluded that there was a 'lack of mental preparation for coaches to train female athletes (as they are mostly prepared to train men)' (FISA Report on Women's Development Survey, 2014; p.18). Indeed within the field of High Performance Sport (HPS), details on female specific needs and gender specific pressures during their careers is rather limited leaving high performance managers and coaches unable to adopt and advance their educational and professional development activities and practices accordingly (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2015).

### **Research Question:**

FISA presented us with the broad research question: "*What makes a successful coach of female elite athletes?*" In order to answer this question the aims of this study were to:

- a) Review the phenomenon of success from the perspective of the coaches and athletes;
- b) Understand the role of gender in the coach-athlete relationship;

c) Provide, in collaboration with FISA, the creation of an evidence-based coach education resource specifically aimed at coaches working with female athletes.

### **Methodology:**

The chosen methodology for this study was a qualitative approach. This was chosen in order to understand fully the athlete-coach relationship as a socially constructed phenomenon. Following Patton (1990) an interview guide was employed to provide prompts for the interviews. The interview guide created for the purpose of this study centred upon the following six core themes: (a) Defining success, (b) Coach education, (c) Communication, (d) Socio-cultural issues, (e) Coach-athlete relationship, and (f) Role of the coach. The first stage of the study involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with elite rowing coaches, a total of 15 coaches, 4 female and 11 male coaches from 9 nationalities and who had coaching experience in over 18 countries were interviewed. The second stage of the data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 elite female athletes from 12 countries. All interviews were conducted in English and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then subjected to content analysis and the results of the first two stages of the study are presented below.

### **Key findings from stage 1: the coach interviews:**

1. **Defining success:** primarily the coaches felt that success was quantifiably measured by results. For example one coach pointed out that he was only ever nominated for 'coach of the year' when he won major championships. Some coaches referred to the 'development of athletes', and 'making the most of what you have', although these responses tended to come from less established coaches or those in more developing systems. When asked if they needed anything from their club or national federation or FISA in order to be more successful, the younger less established coaches said they would like access to more training / education and / or mentoring programmes.
2. **Coaching practices:** coaches generally acknowledged that 'yes females athletes are different (socially, physically, emotionally and culturally) but they coach them the same way as they do male athletes' and coaches referred to coaching 'individual differences rather than gender differences'. However they are not 'gender blind' and referred to several gender differences linked to *communication, emotions and retention*.
3. **Communication:** coaches referred to male athletes 'just doing what you ask' but acknowledged that female athletes ask more questions, they need to understand what you're asking them to do.
4. **Emotions:** coaches referred to female athletes as being 'more' emotional than male athletes, with some coaches explaining that they didn't always know what to 'do' with that emotion.
5. **Retention:** coaches believe that female athletes are affected by marriage and children related commitments, are adverse to risk in their careers, prefer to have a realistic perspective on their future goals with clear timelines (more so than their male counterparts).
6. **Structure of the sport:** the coaches all felt they had access to the resources they needed to coach female athletes but some did make reference to 'value' of female rowing in comparison to male rowing in relation to status and Olympic medalling opportunities.
7. **Cultural differences:** the culture of the coach influenced coaching practices of female athletes. For example whether a male coach would feel comfortable talking to a female athlete about menstrual cycles or birth control. According to the coaches certain country specific traditions, cultural and social norms influence the development pathways and the overall environment within which female athletes join and maintain their participation in rowing.

8. **Coach educational needs:** an identified lack of coach education provision relating to safeguarding education, gender education (e.g., menstrual cycle, sexual harassment etc.), and female coaches identified a need for a coach mentoring programme. The 'older' coaches referred to developing skills through experience and gaining recognition through results. The 'younger' coaches were more interested in coach educational opportunities and a mentor / appraisal system in order to advance their careers.

### **Key findings from stage 2: the athlete interviews:**

The most pertinent themes identified within stage 2 of the study included:

1. **Defining success:** athletes referred to achieving personal bests, or goals.
2. **Male Hierarchy:** athletes often referred to the dominance and prevalence of men within the sport, from their exposure to mostly male coaches and limited experience of female coaches, to the perceived 'value' of men's rowing over women's. For example one female athlete explains: 'I think we as women felt that we were not a priority. We felt that the men...all of the decisions were made for the men, and we were second.' All the female athletes stated that they liked having the opportunity to train alongside their male team mates. In fact one athlete referred to being separated from male athletes during a training camp and she felt this created an unhealthy gendered power relationship between the female athletes and male coaches – referring to it as 'the male coaches thought that they had a harem – a harem of women that followed them around and did everything they said, and they got a bit carried away with that'.
3. **Communication:** the female athletes wanted a lot of information and detail from their coaches, an explanation as to how decisions were being made. This was not necessarily to question the coaches' decisions but to enable the athletes to understand how and why decisions were made. Several athletes discussed their need to 'trust' their coach and this was based on receiving adequate information. The athletes felt that the male coaches often felt challenged / threatened by this. Several of the athletes mentioned their awareness of their own learning styles and the benefits of having a coach that could adapt to suit this and the frustration of having a coach who couldn't.
4. **Power:** all female athletes agreed that the power in the coach-athlete relationship resided with the coach (regardless of the gender of the coach), however the athletes still felt there should be a level of mutual respect in the relationship, but this wasn't always the case and was often linked to point 2.
5. **Female attrition:** many of the athletes discussed times when they thought about leaving the sport. Some followed through with this and either took a break or quit.
6. **Goal orientated:** the majority of athletes discussed the need and importance for clear planning and goals in their careers.
7. **Coach education:** most athletes were unaware of their coaches' educational background, they felt coaches were appointed and retained based on results. However, the athletes felt their coaches may benefit from formal training in areas of psychology, physiology (specifically injury prevention and working with athletes post injury) and some athletes felt their coaches did not keep up with the latest developments in coaching science, biomechanics and training.
8. **Socio-cultural gender expectations:** the way female athletes discussed gender with regards to their experience within the sport or with regards to their relationship with their coach was often linked to their broader socio-cultural experience of gender.

### **Conclusions from stage 1 and 2:**

Results from study 1 and 2 show that coaches and athletes primarily refer to 'an individual approach to coaching rather than a gendered approach to coaching' for example one coach stated "there are no gender differences in coaching. There are different persons with different problems. The approach is always individual...the difference is not because of gender it is because of their problems..." and from an athlete perspective "my coach doesn't treat us any differently, as far as I've experienced. He runs the same programme for males and females, and expects the same from both of us."

However, both the coaches and the athletes discussed specific gender differences that effect the athlete-coach relationship, specifically; (a) female attrition rates, (b) communication style, (c) the role of gender from a socio-cultural perspective, (d) the structure of the sport and the 'valued' success of female and male competition.

Whilst the preliminary findings of study 1 and 2 are clustered under these four themes, the experience of these are not always the same for the coach and the athlete. The results show that the female athletes experience of the coach-athlete relationship are socially constructed and that despite both coaches and athletes referring to 'an individual rather than a gendered approach to coaching', gendered ideologies concerning women's sporting abilities can negatively affect this relationship.

Based on the results of this study we conclude that a successful coach of female athletes is more likely to:

- a) be able to identify different learning styles of their athletes and adapt coaching styles appropriately;
- b) be able to communicate in depth and with detail, reasons behind training decisions and be open and responsive to questions from the athletes;
- c) provide clear planning and goal orientated support for the athlete in relation to short and longer term career planning;
- d) have a good understanding of socio-cultural issues relating to gender with regard to their own background and that of their athletes.

### **Recommendations:**

We suggest that if any one coach does not have the above skills, an alternative option may be to create coaching teams, across which these skills are covered.

As an immediate response to these findings, we suggest FISA considers including gender-specific education courses within coach education programs to ensure coaches are cognisant of female related subtleties. This education will enable them to adapt their coaching style to prevent or manage micro and meso level issues. However due to the international dynamic in the coach-athlete relationship within High Performance Sport we propose that coach education should focus not only gender but also socio-cultural training and support.

### **Recommendations for further study:**

This study has focussed on the coach-athlete relationship. The results have highlighted unique issues related to the experience of *female athletes*. Whilst not a focus of this study we noted that the athletes mentioned numerous reasons why they began rowing, discussed several points in their career where they considered leaving the sport and there seemed to be a lack of support offered to the athletes when they finished their athletic career. We believe there is more knowledge to be gained from specifically looking at the 'pathway' of female athletes in order to enable coaches to support these

athletes throughout the attraction, retention, transition and nurturing phases of elite female rowers' careers. We also believe there is an opportunity to retain more females in coaching if a clearer athlete-to-coach pathway was established. However, this was not the focus of this study and we believe additional follow up studies specifically focussing on these areas would be of value to FISA.

Another aspect of gender not yet covered in this study is the role of the *female coach* within the sport. Reference has been made from respondents both in stage 1 and 2 to the male hierarchy within the sport and the lack of female coaches at elite level is one aspect which we believe contributes to this. Preliminary analysis from stage 1 and 2 highlights issues relating to a) the lack of clear athlete-to-coach pathways, b) the structure of the sport, for example creating coaching teams rather than a single coach approach may give female coaches the option to stay in coaching; c) an 'old boys network' and a male dominated culture in coaching, which was seen as a barrier for female coaches; and d) lack of career progression support, such as specific coaching pathways training and mentoring support for female coaches. Based on these preliminary findings we would like to propose that a further study focusses on the recruitment and retention of female coaches.

### References:

FISA Report on Women's Development Survey (2014). "Report on women's development survey of International Olympic Sport Federations and FISA Member National Rowing Federations". FISA. Lausanne, Switzerland.

IOC (2015). Olympic Agenda 2020: 20+20 Recommendations. IOC: Lausanne, Switzerland.

Patton (1990) Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Sotiriadou, P., & de Haan, D. (2015). Elite female athlete retention: The case of rowing. World Congress on Elite Sport Policy, Melbourne, Australia.

Sotiriadou, K., Shilbury, D., & Quick, S. (2009). The attraction, retention/transition, and nurturing process of sport development: Some Australian evidence. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22(3), 247.

Any questions regarding any part of the research can be directed towards the Principal Investigator of the study: Dr Donna de Haan, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, [d.de.haan@hva.nl](mailto:d.de.haan@hva.nl)