

## **Approaching Girls & Boys Differently**

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### **Indoctrinating boys and girls into their new team**

Having coached boys and girls, the trend to suggest coaching girls is no different than coaching boys is not only inaccurate, it only serves to hurt coaches' ability to deliver a positive experience to young female athletes. This coaching philosophy has more to do with ideology than a sincere desire to provide our young female athletes with a positive sport experience.

Any club season starts with the initiation period where teams are formed. Athletes are introduced to their coaches, team volunteers and their new teammates. In general, boys can be relied on to immediately accept their place within the team. Therefore, if you are coaching a boys' team you can comfortably start exploring their roles on the team and how you will train the team to compete effectively. Boys will be eager to hear technically how the coach plans on training athletes and the team strategies that will be pursued. They will be eager to hear how the coach anticipates creating a culture of winning and they will want to know how you see their roles in contributing to the success of the team.

Girls do not generally respond well to this approach. After being placed on a team, young female athletes will require a socialization strategy that will establish opportunities for the young athletes to get to know each other. Simply stated, girls need to believe they are accepted by their teammates and they, likewise, need to like their teammates before they will feel like they are a part of the team. Early-season team outings are essential in providing girls the opportunity to get to know each other and start the season on the right track.

It is therefore important if you are coaching a girls' team that you spend some time with affirmation circles and team outings to give the girls an opportunity to get to know each other.

### **Approaching coaches differently**

Boys will generally approach new coaches with some degree of skepticism; That is, the new coach will have to earn their trust and that may take a significant part of the season to achieve. Once that trust has been earned, however, it is very difficult to break. The coach may become difficult, overly animated and the boys will tend to simply shrug it off.

Girls, on the other hand, will readily give their trust to their new coach out of respect, however, once that coach loses her trust, it will be permanently lost.

### **Connecting with your athletes**

The coaching expression, "Athletes won't care what you say until they know you care" is fundamental when coaching young female athletes. As a coach of a girls' sports team, developing a personal connection with your athletes is essential. Pulling girls aside at practices to ask how they are doing at school or with other activities they enjoy is always a good idea.

Boys enjoy being singled out for special recognition so establishing a number of opportunities to stand out is generally a good idea. Consider such accolades as: "Hardest Worker of the

week" for the athlete who has worked hardest at practice, "Star of the Game/Tournament", etc.

Of course, many coaches of girls' teams would happily declare they have used these techniques with positive results. With that, it must be understood that this practice may make some female athletes uncomfortable especially if they notice some of their teammates are never being recognized for special recognition.

Furthermore, whereas singling out an athlete for errors in front of his teammates is understood among boys as an efficient way to correct play, doing so with female athletes comes with some risk. If you plan on coaching girls, "like boys" and criticize their play openly within the team, you will need to spend a great deal of time preparing the girls ahead of competition with examples during training. You will also need to be cognizant of the tone you use. Young female athletes are very sensitive to the tone of voice being used. Otherwise, you would be well served to pull female athletes aside and chat with them discreetly. Remember, if you single an athlete out in front of her teammates and she loses her trust in you, that will be permanently lost.

### **Other Tips When Coaching Young Females**

Long after the season is over, few athletes will remember exactly where their team finished at Provincial and National Championships (with the obvious exception of the winners). What they will remember are the friends they made and how they became friends. Girls, in particular, will appreciate opportunities to develop relationships outside of the technical training. Consider pairing a returning player with a new athlete to the team. When an athlete doesn't understand how to perform a skill have another athlete spend time with her one-on one rather than doing so yourself.

Simply put, young males do not need to like their teammates to function well as a team. That supports the adage that boys will play for themselves while young females play for each other. Girls will derive strength from the affection they have for each other and that will result in greater self-esteem as they collectively meet the challenges the season will produce. A young female athlete who is the best player on her team but finds herself surrounded with teammates who do not like her will not likely develop a strong self-image. It is the coach's responsibility to ensure all girls have an opportunity to get to know each other outside of the training and develop a liking for each other. Only once this has happened can the team start having fun and enjoy a successful season.

Until next time,

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