

COACHING

Needs Of The High Performance Elite

FEMALE ATHLETE

Role of the coach



ONLINE ARTICLE- SEPTEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

When we look at the world of sport, there are many elite female athletes that come to mind, but there certainly is no one like Serena Williams. Yes, she has a natural talent in heaps, but her hard work ethics and choice of coaches make her a smart athlete. Her relationship with her last coach lasted over 10 years and in this time many Grand Slams were won on a variety of tennis court surfaces. One might think that the relationship between a top female athlete and a very dominant male coach might never work, seeing that they both have strong personalities, but they made it work for over a decade. This is due to a trusting relationship and open communication. Now Serena's career has taken a bow and coach Patrick Mouratoglou is taking on another top female athlete, Simona Halep. Halep describes her relationship with Patrick as follows:

While Halep doesn't see herself as the new Serena, she notes that "Patrick made Serena better than she was before" and that "it has put him in the top tier of coaches". "I didn't really know him before this year," she says. "We never talked and I didn't have a feeling of how he is, but I saw that he has a strong personality and he's pretty hard as a coach. So I thought he's a good match for me and that's why I'm here. "He's easy to talk to. We know each other pretty well already, which is a big step for me because I'm not very open to everybody, I'm a very introverted person. So he made me open and I think this is a good thing for our relationship on court. His simplicity is super heavy, super strong. He has a few words that he tells you and you understand perfectly what you have to do." Mouratoglou has coached Serena to ten of her 23 Grand Slams – and she was aged over 30 for each of them. Halep turned 30 last year.



On the other side of the coin there is a top female tennis player who turned professional as a coach after her retirement in 2006. Her name is Conchita Martinez. She has worked mainly with female athletes and is currently the coach of Spanish top player, Garbine Muguruza. Muguruza was coached by Sam Sumyk and after on-court ructions in 2018, Muguruza started looking elsewhere for a coach. In 2019 Muguruza turned it around and signed on with female coach and Spanish legend Conchita Martinez (1994 Wimbledon Champion). Martinez contrasts sharply with Sumyk and has a calm and positive influence on her.



Muguruza explains it further: "The good thing about having a coach who has been very good as a player is that she usually understands you a lot. Conchita has been in very special moments because she understands me a lot as a player in that aspect and it is an advantage. I am very fortunate to share that experience with her. It's very special. We have known each other since I was young, like a junior player. We always had a good connection since we met. It was just the right timing to get together, you know, in my stage of the career and the way she coach. I think it was a great combination," said Muguruza.

Two great examples of top female athletes with very different coaches of different genders, but some of the aspects they have in common...communication and building a sound relationship with the athlete they are working with.

Let's have a look at what women want...well in this case, what female athletes want out of a coach.

4 PREFERENCES OF HIGH PERFORMANCE FEMALE ATHLETES

1. BOTH A PERFORMER AND A PERSON

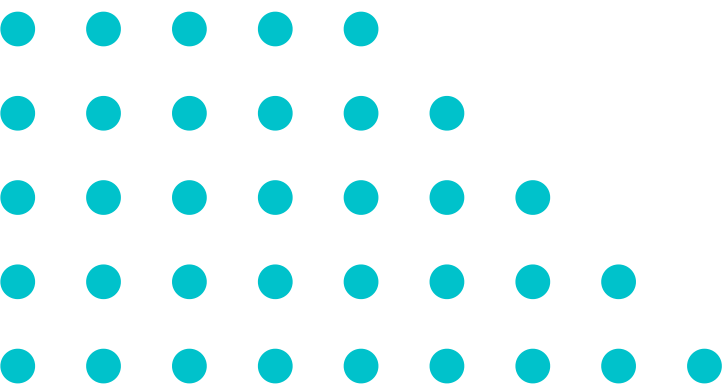
According to female athletes, understanding the athlete goes beyond just a tactical, technical or physiological awareness in their athletic progress or performance. Instead athletes feel that coaches should strive to comprehend how to back their athletes as individuals, their motivation in life and sport and their goals. It is essential for coaches to see female athletes as individuals and not just sport performers. This will assist coaches to understand that female athletes crave a balance between their sport obligations and an external life



- Female athletes prefer to be supported as both a performer and a person
- Coaching should be a joint endeavour
- Female athletes prefer positive communication
- Gender is significant in the coach-athlete dyad

Female athletes feel sharply that a coach's appreciativeness and understanding of their athletes as individuals is the most relevant trait of an effective coach. Female athletes want their coach to get to know them entirely as a person. It is essential for female athletes that coaches understand they have a life outside their sport (i.e. education / work / school) and acknowledge that athletes need to juggle all the different areas of their lives with their sport.

Female athletes also often bring their problems with them to training sessions and find it hard to switch off. Female athletes feel that coaches should know how to manage this and recognize the impact it will have on training. Understanding the athlete as a person will enable the coach to understand the type of working relationship their athletes prefer. This understanding should be articulate and flexible and the relationship and role should change as they grow older. In addition to this, female athletes want their coaches to be approachable. Athletes are individuals with specific backgrounds and also have problems which cannot just be left at the door when they start training. Female athletes don't essentially want their coach to be a friend, but have a need for coaches to have a willingness to discuss personal issues that may influence performance. It is indispensable for female athletes that coaches understand that they have an emotional connection to their personal performance. It is felt that coaches should have a high degree of interpersonal knowhow to balance the personal with the performance.



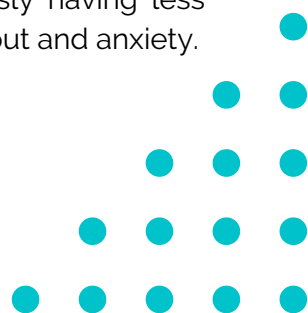
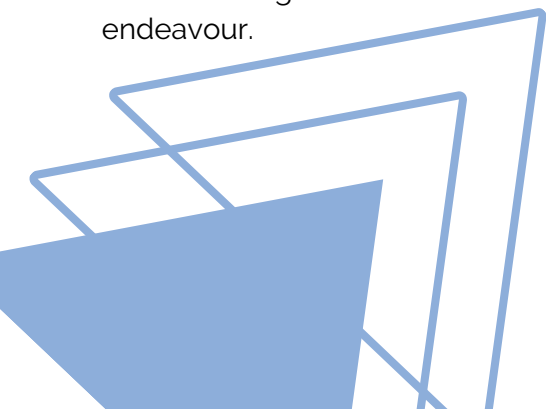
2.COACHING SHOULD BE A JOINT ENDEAVOR

It is often felt by female athletes that coaches have an autocratic coaching style – 'my way or the highway'. This repeatedly leads to female athletes feeling considerable frustration within their everyday coaching experiences. Female athletes want coaches to understand women's emotional investment in their performance and thus use a less dictating coaching style. This scenario is often seen in sports / teams where female athletes are coached by male coaches who simply transfer their autocratic processes from their male athletes to their female athletes. This is not all bad – female athletes want coaches who are in control and who leads a team, but what is often lacking is their lack in flexibility and negotiation with the athletes. The main idea behind these conversations regarding training sessions is that the role of the coach should be one that 'scaffolds' the athlete – providing the athlete with tools and knowledge which will enable the athlete to think for themselves in difficult situations (competitions) and not just rely on coach cues. This goes hand in hand with the type of athlete the coach is working with – at this level of participation, elite female coaches have developed quite a bit of knowledge about their own limitations and strengths. They want coaches to listen to their ideas and suggestions. They want the coach at this level to be more of a mentor and not just barking instructions. They want a coach who can guide them through difficult situations on and off the court / field.

For the coach to act more as a guardian of athletic development rather than as an authority means the coach-athlete relationship becomes a cooperative endeavour rather than a leader-follower setup. By wanting the coach to be a guide, female athletes aspire for a greater involvement in decision making processes and for the management of their careers to be a joint endeavour.



While this might be difficult for some coaches to balance the power within the coach-athlete relationship, seeing themselves as the sole leader of the team and authority, less autocratic coaching styles might positively impact athletes' motivation in sport. Coaches who welcome athletes into making decisions and allowing them to offer suggestions, may lead to other positive psychological outcomes for athletes, such as enhanced enjoyment and perceived competency, whilst simultaneously having less negative outcomes such as burnout and anxiety.



3. FEMALE ATHLETES PREFER POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Female athletes prefer specific communication with their coach. There are 2 important aspects which must be considered with communication, i.e. frequency and type of communication.

Frequency of communication:

Female athletes prefer the following when referring to the frequency of communication:

- Consistent and frequent communication with the coach
- They want the coach to keep in contact with them regarding a variety of aspects, not only related to sport
- Continual communication makes athletes feel integrated and an important part of the team
- Athletes don't want to feel isolated within a team sport setting



Type of communication:

- Communication needs to be personalized and positive
- It should be a source of encouragement and motivation
- Communication does not need to be 'sugar coated' or praise should not be given if not earned, but positive feedback and praise should be given when it is due
- This provides them with a sense of confidence and motivates the athlete
- Female athletes don't want:
 - Inconsistent communication
 - Distant communication
 - Autocratic communication
 - "Laid back" communication

Athletes are responsive to positive coaching communication and this can lead to an increase in motivation and self-confidence. It is often thought that athletes are passive recipients of coaches' communication and that communication is always successfully received. But it is seen that the manner in which the athlete receives the communication is affected by the coach-athlete relationship and athlete identity.

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER IN THE COACH-ATHLETE DYAD

For female athletes, it is important for them that coaches understand that gender is an important consideration when working with athletes.

Female athletes want coaches to know that:

- Female athletes approach training and performance in different ways to male athletes
- The gender of the coach also affects athlete perceptions and interactions

What do female athletes want?

- They want to be pushed just as hard as their male counterparts
- They have a deep emotional connection to training and competition outcomes and they want to discuss their progress in detail with their coaches
- Female athletes want to know "why" more frequently – hence the coach should tailor their communication type to get to that goal
- Female athletes react to failings and triumphs with more emotion than male counterparts – coaches should thus be aware of this and handle it accordingly (i.e. more sensitivity and understanding)
- Female athletes question their self-confidence on occasions and need an environment in which they feel secure rather than exposed
- Younger female athletes often describe incidents in which they feel aware of their appearance in front of others whilst training and this decreased their sense of confidence
- Younger female athletes that train with male coaches, often go through a phase where they start to feel uncomfortable and might often decrease their training time due to this or seek a female coach
- Female athletes don't want to be compared to their female counterparts in terms of weight or body fat %. Many coaches make remarks about body composition without understanding the impact.

A positive coach-athlete relationship which offers security, sensitivity and encouragement on the part of the coaches in such instances are needed in addition to an understanding that the confidence levels of female athletes may be affected by what the coach might think are insignificant coaching practices.



How can these DIFFERENCES BE SEEN EVERY DAY?

- The female brain has a higher level of sensitivity to stress as well as conflict
- Different areas of the brain is used to solve problems, process language as well as experience and store robust emotions
- In female brains, the centers which are needed for language, hearing, emotion and memory formation are larger
- Male brains have larger processors areas in the brain that register fear and trigger aggression
- Female brains have better verbal agility, an ability to connect deeply in friendship and a psychic ability to read faces and tone of voice

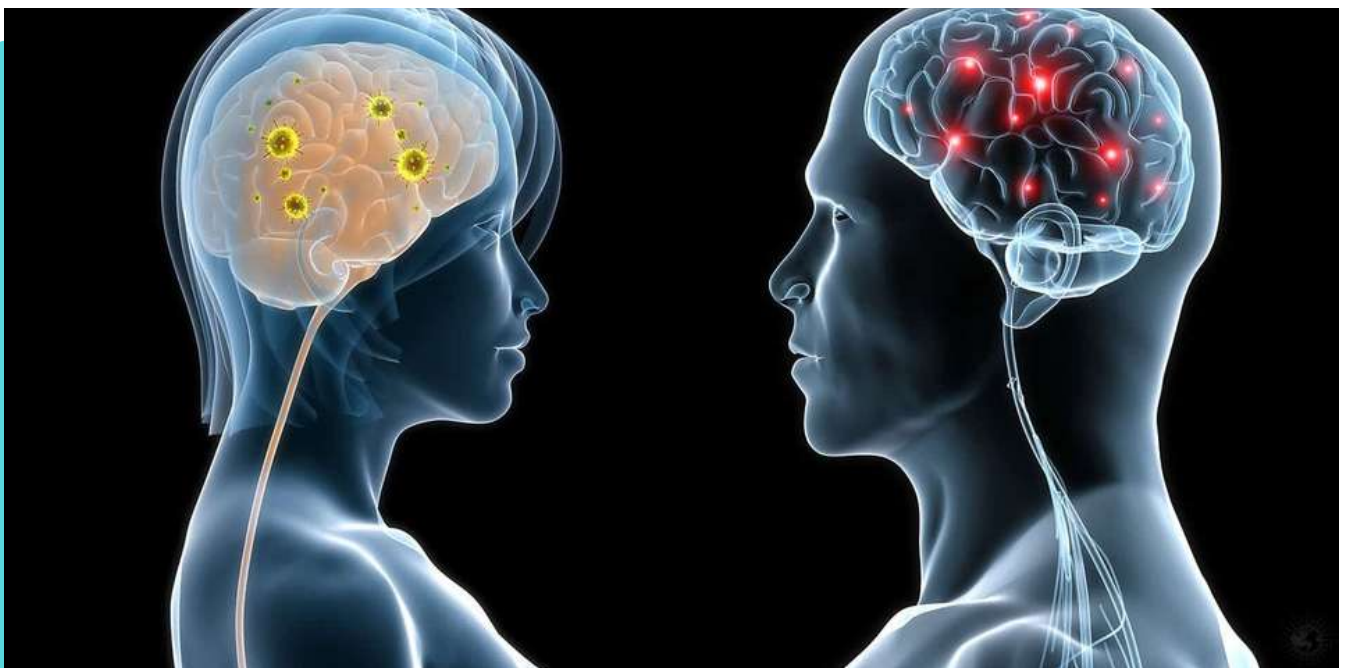


Figure 1: Male vs Female Brain Anatomy

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In 2006, Cunningham and Roberts published a study in which they explained the differences between the male and female brain connected to

MAIN AREAS:

AREA OF DIFFERENCE	MALE	FEMALE
Intellectual function	More analytical, linear & logical in processing of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process information in a more 'whole-brained' or 'bigger picture' manner Females use both sides of the brain to solve problems <p>Coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female athletes need to understand why they are performing certain tasks during a training session and how the task will assist them to achieve their goals
Base reaction	Base reaction is to jump into action Male brain is dominated by the 'fight or flight' centres (reptilian behaviours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Females react more emotionally Brain activity occurs more in the limbic system which deals with emotions and feelings <p>How does this affect your coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does this explain why certain instructions to female athletes make them frown? How are you communicating with your female athletes? What can you do to help female athletes make use of their reptilian brain? What reaction does shouting or raising your voice cause in female athletes?
Stress response	<p>Fight or flight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hormones such as testosterone and adrenaline are secreted during stress Males tend to react with alarm, aggression and individualistic behaviour during stress 	<p>Tend and befriend</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hormone levels differ between men and women and even more so under stress Women secrete oxytocin which buffers the fight or flight response and has a calming effect <p>Coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know how to provide the correct environment during stress to your female athletes? Do you contribute to their stress levels or alleviate it?
Innate interest	<p>Things vs People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Males are more interested in things Males want to understand how things work 	<p>People vs Things</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Females are more interested in people Females are more interested in connecting and bonding with people, understanding others' motivation etc. <p>Coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is your coaching affected by the female athletes' natural interest in people? Do you see it as a hindrance to coaching or an opportunity for team building
Survival strategy	Through self-interest, hierarchy, power and competition Alpha male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through relationships, empathy and connections Getting along with everyone in the group <p>Coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do your female athletes respond to internal and external competition? Rather create an environment where the female athlete can focus on personal development and improvement instead of internal competition to dominate sessions
Mental preferences / Understanding and processing information	Hard-wired to systemize <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Males understand the world by building systems to explain how it operates 	<p>Hard-wired to empathize</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Females understand the world by understanding things from the other person's perspective It is not just about being emotionally aware but to gauge moods, atmosphere and to interact with people <p>Coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the expectations from your athletes emotionally? Is your picture of success the same as the athlete's? How does your mood affect the female athlete during training sessions?

MYTHS AND FACTS

ABOUT FEMALE ATHLETES & COACHING

At high school and university level, 80% of all coaches are male. At university level, only 2% of men's teams are female coaches and less than 50% of female teams are coached by female coaches.

Myth #1 – Female coaches are not winning championships. This proves that male coaches are better

Unfortunately even in sports where there is a 50-50 ratio of male and female coaches the following is seen:

- Male coaches have higher paying jobs
- Male coaches have the status positions at major institutions
- Male coaches have better budgets, facilities, recruiting and staffing resources to maintain these positions

It is thus not surprising when this information is taken into account, that female coaches are less likely to win national champs than male coaches – the odds are against such an outcome.

Myth #2 – Females coaches are less intense – they don't expect so much from their players and they aren't strong enough

Sport is a highly visible and one of the most powerful social institutions in our society. Female coaches who are seen in sport, especially in a coaching position, challenges outdated gender stereotypes about women in leadership and it sends a strong message about what is relevant and valued. Generalizing about a few female coaches is not helpful in an industry where female athletes and coaches are fighting for equal opportunities. Young athletes should be taught that any statement that imparts a specific characteristic to a group as a whole is false. Stereotypes are the product of ignorance and discriminatory bias.



Figure 2: Two female coaches coaching in the NFL in 2021. There are 12 other female coaches in the NFL.

Myth 3: Women don't inspire other women. It is easier to get coached by a male

It is essential for young athletes to recognize that there are an assortment of coaching and teaching styles:

- Some coaches ask that athletes do exactly what they are told to do
- Some coaches never tell athletes what to do
- Some coaches want athletes to be able to think about why they should make one choice over another
- Some coaches yell and are psychologically abusive
- Some coaches are quiet and subdued

How the coach gets the athlete to perform to his or her potential differs significantly and varies with gender as well. Often times coaches use diverse methods with different athletes due to the fact that diverse personalities respond to different teaching methods. It is essential for the athlete to understand that the basic need of coaching is basic respect and beyond that there is no right or wrong way to coach or teach. Athletes should also pay attention to another common way to use stereotypes of various coaching styles wrongly is to assume that the methodology of one successful coach is the favoured style of coaching.

Research tells us that in the 21st century, business, politics, sport and all social institutions will be diverse. The traditional face of leadership will be changed and this is seen already today. To interact and compete successfully in this new world requires ease and comfort to be led by a woman, a differently-abled person or a racially different person. Sport teaches a lot of life lessons and here is another lesson to be learnt.

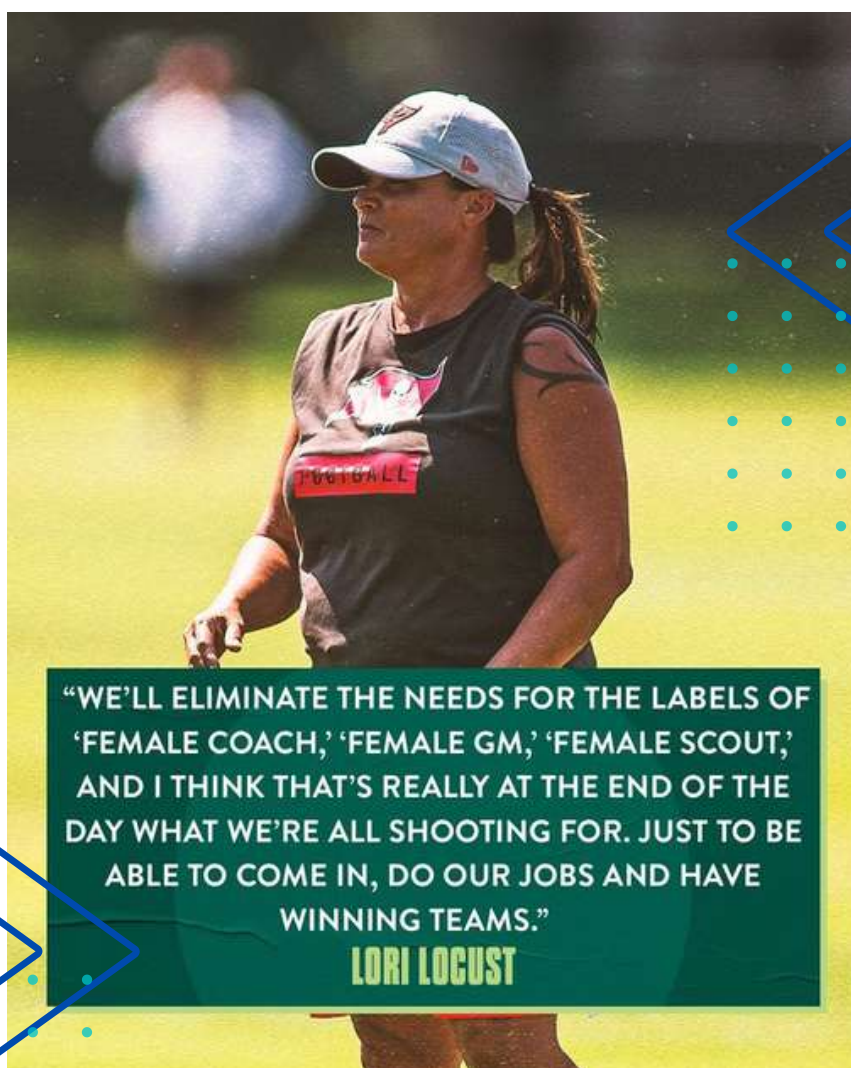


Figure 3: Lori Locust, one of the NFL female coaches

WHAT TO CONSIDER

When coaching female athletes

In the last couple of decades there has been little research done into the area of female athlete experiences and needs. In 2010 however, a quite unique study completed in the UK, spoke to 27 elite female athletes and basketball players between the ages of 18 and 28 years and the following was seen in this research study.

There are 8 areas that female athletes differ from their male counterparts:



Commitment



Vocalize your commitment to her and your belief in her ability



Get to know her

Every athlete is unique. Understand the challenges she face in balancing being an athlete and other demands of life

Joint endeavour



Listen to her and involve her in decision that affect her training and performance



Communicate

Develop a personalized communication style with her

Training sessions



Make training sessions fun, varied, structured, tailored and challenging



Feedback

Keep lines of communication open & give regular feedback – positive & constructive

Balance



Balance the needs of the team and the individual to avoid potential conflict



Mentor her

Help the athlete with problems outside of the sport – be more than a coach

WHAT TO CONSIDER

When coaching female athletes

1. Get to know the individual

All athletes have different perspectives of what they want and need from a coach and how they want to be treated. Mostly female athletes want their coach to get to know them as individuals. This would entail understanding their personalities, their motivational cues, their goals and which methods will bring the best out of them.

2. Communication style and approachability

Depending on the coaching style (autocratic, distant, approachable, jokey, easy-going), athletes will respond differently depending on their personalities and levels of motivation. Female athletes in general want to feel they can talk to their coach about anything. They want to understand the reasoning behind the coach's method and want discussions to be more elaborate. The main aspect here would be to develop a personalized communication style with each female athlete, i.e. one athlete might need immediate feedback after a game, where another athlete first wants to be alone and analyze the game on her own and then come with solutions on improvement.

3. Constructive and positive feedback

Irrespective of the coach's coaching style, female athletes want personalized feedback. They need to feel that the coach watched their performance specifically and individually and need to have feedback which will improve them on an individual basis. Female athletes don't want constant praise, but want to hear praise when it was deserved. This will boost their motivation and confidence. Feedback need to be positive and constructive.

4. Support the person: the role of the coach as a mentor

Coaching is more than teaching skills. It is often times a type of mentorship where the coach will be the taxi driver or the teacher or sometimes even the stand-in parent. Female athletes want to have this personal connection of mentorship with their coach. They want the coach to provide them with guidance in their life.

5. Commitment to the athlete and her goals

Female athletes want to believe their coach is committed to them and believe in their ability. Female athletes often go through phases of self-doubt and lose confidence, so they need to extra boost of moral support. Female athletes need their coach to see their potential and need the coach to set high, yet realistic and achievable goals for them. It is essential for coaches to be vocal with this aspect, i.e. vocalize your commitment and belief in the athlete during training or conditioning sessions. Also pull this through to competition times, when self confidence might take a knock.

6. See coaching as a joint endeavour

Coaches should not underestimate the power they have in the eyes of the athlete. Female athletes respect a coach who is in control, leads the team, takes charge of training sessions, but they want these sessions to be balanced and the coach should be open for negotiation. The reason is that high performance female athletes are at a level in their sport where they already know a lot about the sport, about training sessions, about recovery sessions, about mental training and they are aware of their bodies ' limitations and strengths. They want the coach to listen to their ideas and suggestions and feel that they are able to contribute towards their training and development.

7. Training sessions

The main difference between male and female athletes are the types of training sessions and their repetitiveness. Male athletes don't have a problem doing certain sessions over and over again, but female athletes need to have

variety in their sessions whether it is on the court / field or in the gymnasium. Female athletes want to train hard, but they want the sessions to be enjoyable and varied. Training sessions need to be well organized and tailored to the needs of the athlete, i.e. if a badminton player is struggling with acceleration, the programme should focus on this specific aspect to get the player quicker.

8. Balance the requirements of the team and the individual athlete

Being a team coach is one of the most difficult tasks, as you need to do 2 jobs – you need to individually prepare each and every athlete and then prepare the team as a whole as well. In addition to this, the coach needs to take the needs of the team and the individual player into account and balance things perfectly. This is where a lot of coaches don't get it right completely, especially in a team environment where there are 1 or 2 elite athletes and the rest of the team's level of competence is average to good. The average athletes will feel that the 2 elite athletes are getting all the attention and might stop playing all together. The elite athletes might crave their coach's attention constantly and might feel that when the coach is working with the other players, he/she is ignoring them. Difficult situation to be in. But not impossible to solve.

Tension in team sports might arise for a number of reasons:

- Athletes might feel that other teammates are getting preferential treatment
- Some teammates might not be pulling their weight in the team
- An individual athlete might be seen as being treated comparatively harshly
- The quality of skills within a team could be very diverse and individual athletes might feel that there are hierarchies or that the coach has specific favourites.

Coaches need to be aware of these potential divisions and tensions as they can affect the cohesion of the team. In female sports, this situation is fairly common and coaches often struggle with getting cohesion in female teams. A good coach will make sure that each athlete receives the level of support that she needs (individualized). Coaches should be ready to explain why a certain athlete is treated differently to another athlete. Each individual female athlete will have different motivations and goals and it remains the responsibility of the coach to manage all of these and ultimately get the girls to work towards a common goal as a team.

In individual sports, athletes will often train with other athletes and sometimes they have the same coach. These athletes might be their competitors and the level of attention which is given to each individual athlete might get the coach into a tight spot. A good coach will acknowledge this and ensure all athletes feel as though she is receiving personal treatment. Understanding that the needs and goals of the team and the individual athlete may be different. This will identify potential conflict before it occurs.

8 situations where female athletes want their coach to individualize their training sessions and communication. Let's sum it up:



PHYSIOLOGICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALE & FEMALE ATHLETES

There is a swift growing need to better understand contemporary female athletes as the level of female sporting performance and professionalism increases. We frequently say that children are not mini adults, thus highlighting the anatomical and physiological differences between children and adults and the need to adapt their training accordingly. The question remains whether female athletes should be trained the same as male athletes given there are anatomical, physiological and endocrine variances between the genders. Female athletes are not smaller male athletes and this should be taken into account as a crucial training consideration. Let's have a look at physiological differences and similarities between male and female athletes.

Male vs Female General Physiological Differences

Muscle Capacity

Differences in muscle mass and muscle strength is seen between male & female athletes. In addition muscle cross-sectional areas of male athletes are more than that of female athletes

Absolute Strength

A female's absolute whole-body strength is 60% compared to that of a man.
A female's upper body strength is 55% compared to that of a man
A female's lower body strength is 72% compared to that of a man



Fitness

Male athletes have a higher anaerobic power and capacity than females. Males also have a higher $\dot{V}O_2\text{max}$ capacity than females

Is anything the same?

Yes, a female's ability to build muscle during hypertrophy phases are similar to the ability of a male athlete.
In addition a female's post exercise muscle synthesis rates are also similar to that of a male athlete



PHYSIOLOGICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALE & FEMALE ATHLETES

Taking the female menstrual cycle into account when designing either a strength & conditioning programme or a skills training programme will be the smart thing to do. This will save coaches a lot of 'down time' due to a 'lack of motivation'. Female athletes are not keen to talk about their menstrual cycles, especially with male coaches, but it is essential for the athlete to understand that the cycle plays a massive role on the outcome of their progress. There are certain times in the cycle, where the athlete is able to push hard in training sessions and other times where their total wellbeing will just be affected by hormones. There is not much to do about hormones, unless the athlete is keen to go onto contraceptives, but there is a lot to be done with adjusting training programmes especially the intensity and the types of programmes.

Female Menstrual Cycle & Injuries

Menstrual cycle & training

- Consideration to the female athlete's menstrual cycle should be given when planning a training programme / phase

Menstrual History of the Athlete

- Either the coach or the athlete needs to record the menstrual history of the athlete so that a better understanding of what is happening in the body of the athlete during different times of the month can be comprehended and programmes can be adjusted



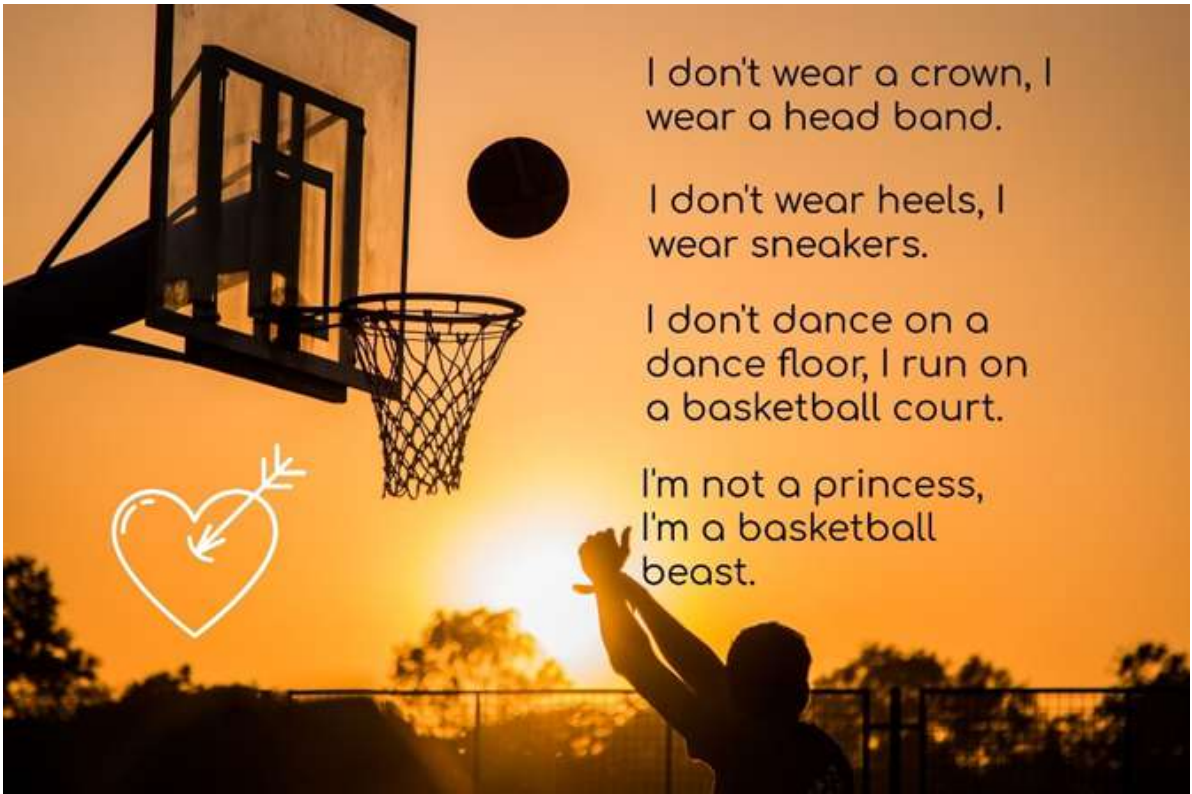
Menstrual cycle: Effects of training

- As hormone levels change throughout a cycle, the effect on training, the focus of the training session, the intensity of the training session and the type of session should be adjusted.
- Example: Ovulation at day 14 – Testosterone peaks – strength & power training to be done – Focus is maximal strength and power, very heavy intensity. Speed sessions on the field is advisable as well.

Injuries in female athletes

- Females incur more stress fractures, shoulder subluxation and dislocation injuries, patella femoral pain, ankle sprains and ACL injuries.
- Anterior knee pain is higher in female athletes
- Females in jumping and cutting sports are 4 – 6 times more likely to sustain a serious knee injury compared to males
- Females are also at a greater risk for overuse injuries

Let's have a look at how the menstrual cycle affects training. In addition, female athletes are also more prone to specific injuries like knee injuries.



I don't wear a crown, I
wear a head band.

I don't wear heels, I
wear sneakers.

I don't dance on a
dance floor, I run on
a basketball court.

I'm not a princess,
I'm a basketball
beast.



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