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## Coaching Styles for Boys' and Girls' Sports Teams

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## Coaching Styles for Boys' and Girls' Sports Teams

### Writing Process

The writing process for this article began when my English 198 teacher assigned our third major essay, instructing that it was to be on the topic of gender and include original research. Being a lifelong athlete, I decided to investigate how coaching styles might differ depending upon whether one is coaching boys or girls. With this in mind, I set out to interview the coaches that I know so as to gain their insights and approaches to coaching. I developed a set of questions and interviewed four coaches of varying ages who had coached girls and/or boys at different levels. I then used this information to create an outline for my paper. After the outline came the first draft, which was about three pages. My classmates peer reviewed this draft, and their valuable comments assisted me in making the revisions for the second draft of the paper. Draft two was thus both longer and more pulled together, being around eight pages and starting to look like a more polished paper. This second draft was then not only reviewed by my classmates again, but also by my professor. I reviewed the feedback, re-read the paper, and made extensive edits before the final submission. The final version of my paper ended up being nine pages and over 3000 words, by far the longest paper I had ever written. Because of the multiple drafts and revisits, however, I believe that it is one of my best works.

**Editor's note:** For this paper, the author received the English 198 Excellence in Writing Award (\$100 prize).

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# Coaching Styles for Boys' and Girls' Sports Teams

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*Jack Murphy*

Many people, at some point in their youth or adolescence, will play on at least one youth sports team, and whether they look back on that experience as a positive one will most likely have something to do with their coach. In today's youth sports environment, effective coaching is a hotly debated topic. Some believe that a coach should be hard on players in order to help them and the team perform well. Others maintain that a coach should be more understanding and focus on making the experience a good one. Beyond these fundamental differences, there is also a diversity of opinion regarding how boys and girls should be coached. Are the same coaching methods equally effective when used with boys' teams and girls' teams? What adaptations, if any, do coaches make in their coaching styles for boys and girls in order to help individual players and the team as a whole perform well and have a good experience?

Interviews with four current and former grade school and high school coaches dispel the notion that girls and boys are worlds apart when it comes to sports. Aside from making minor adaptations, effective coaching methods for both boys' and girls' teams involved the same essential elements: providing encouragement, avoiding a negative tone, incorporating team-building activities, and knowing players individually to tailor responses to each player's needs. Interviewees included three men and one woman and ranged in age from early twenties to mid-fifties. Their combined experience included soccer, basketball, volleyball, football, and golf, and included teams at the grade school, middle school, high school, and college levels.

Kevin Downey has his master's degree in sports psychology and has coached both high school and college football for nineteen years. Two of those years, he led his high school team to the state championship game. Karen Seida has

coached primarily at the elementary level, focusing on girls' basketball. She has coached at this level for ten years and has had her teams compete in numerous statewide tournaments. Benjamin Swick has coached high school girls' soccer as well as middle school boys' and girls' soccer. He played high school soccer for four years and, as a recent graduate of the University of Dayton, was able to draw from both player and coach perspectives since his playing days were fairly recent. David Thomas has coached more than 70 teams over a period of fourteen years in soccer, volleyball, basketball, and football; he also has been a golf instructor. He has coached girls' teams, boys' teams, and coed teams. Most of Thomas's coaching was focused on middle school athletes, but he also worked with some athletes through high school.

The first area examined between boys and girls in sports was their mental approach to the game and how their emotions impacted performance. Seida argued that both boys and girls were equally emotional and that any differences could be purely individual, as some players at her coaching level were more capable of playing with sportsmanship than others. Thomas said one gender was not always more emotional than the other and that it was often individualized, but he attributed it to unnecessary pressure put on his athletes by parents who wanted their children to perform at higher levels than they were currently able to do. Therefore, he tried to help relieve those pressures, focusing on fostering emotions of joy and confidence in his players. Thomas said insecurities played a part in mental and emotional preparation for a game as the athletes grew older, but these varied from player to player.

On the other hand, Swick did not necessarily agree that boys and girls were emotionally equivalent. He claimed that girls often kept their emotions more in check during a game but were more emotional off court, while boys often used their emotions to dictate their next move during a competition. He noted that it was harder to encourage a girl to get into the game mentally, whereas he could typically count on boys' desire to show off in order to get them into the game mentally. Thus, the interviewees seemed to be mixed in their assessment of the role gender plays in the emotional element of youth athletes.

A closer analysis, however, suggests that the coaches may not be as far apart in their observations as it first appears. Swick's comments make a distinction between how boys and girls channel their emotions in a game setting—not their overall level of emotional expressiveness. Boys may more often use their emotions to “power up” their game, whereas girls are less emotionally expressive

while playing, but both may be very expressive on the sidelines of a game or at practice. These emotions are not rigid along gender lines, however, and can vary from player to player. Therefore, coaches often end up with a wide spectrum of emotionality in their players, and it becomes critically important to be aware of where each player is coming from emotionally, while also recognizing that what motivates one player might demoralize another.

Although some research disputes my findings regarding gender and emotionality in athletes, it has minimal usefulness for identifying desirable coaching styles for young athletes. A study conducted by Evangelos Bebetos and his research team in 2017 examined how various coaching behaviors may affect male and female athletes differently (Bebetos 1, 3). In this study, they concluded that “women show greater ‘attachment’ to emotional aspects of coaching” (Bebetos 5). They interpreted this as women being more sentimental and emotional than men and concluded that both positive and negative coaching behaviors would more significantly affect female athletes. However, at no point did the Bebetos study claim that this difference in emotionality between male and female athletes necessitated a difference in coaching style. The Bebetos study included athletes between ages 15 and 39, and it is possible that teen and adult athletes handle coaching styles differently from how youth athletes do, which limits the applicability of the study to the question of emotional difference between girls and boys in youth sports.

On the topic of the best ways of delivering criticism and encouragement to players, there was no difference in the responses amongst the interviewees. They uniformly agreed that regardless of gender, a coach should be encouraging players much more often than critiquing them. Swick stated that he liked to follow what he called the “sandwich rule.” This meant that he would sandwich the topic that needed to be addressed between two things the player was doing well. Thomas added that a coach should not use the words “can’t,” “shouldn’t,” and other negative words. He also said positive thoughts build a player’s confidence and self-esteem, so a coach should focus on the positive as much as possible.

Finally, all four agreed that if a coach needs to address an issue, it should be done in private, not in front of the team. They also agreed that the coach should show players the correct way to do something—not just tell them that what they are doing is incorrect. All encouraged public compliments so that players would be recognized for what they did well in front of their teammates and the rest of the

coaching staff. They also emphasized the importance of the coach's tone in delivering messages.

An article by Andy Podolsky, contending that tone strongly influences how well a coach's message is received, emphasizes the significance of coaches' tone in establishing trust with their players, regardless of gender. (paragraphs 7-10). Conversely, Podolsky does point out how emotional displays may work differently with boys' and girls' teams, noting that a men's team may be motivated by "kicking a trashcan across the room," while this technique might have the opposite effect on a women's team (paragraph 10). Thus, while the interviewees agreed uniformly that positivity is beneficial for all team members, research indicates variation in how a coach's emotional displays affect a boys' team or a girls' team.

When asked about how to lead a team in a time of trial and what works the best for each gender, interviewees gave a variety of answers. Downey and Swick both agreed that the best way to motivate boys was to issue a challenge, so as to get them to play with a strong passion and desire. For girls, they both recommended playing on the girls' familial bonds, emphasizing how they do not want to let each other down. This varies from the approach of Seida, whose primary focus was to calm her athletes and reinforce how they had practiced and prepared for this situation many times. Thomas also said the coach should remain calm, adding that the coach should clearly explain the plan for getting out of the difficult situation, focusing the players on the most basic elements of the game. The differences between Downey's and Swick's responses, which analyzed how to motivate a team during difficult games, and Thomas's and Seida's responses, which focused on what exactly the team should do in those situations, can best be understood by examining the types of teams that each has coached. Downey and Swick have both coached older teams with more experience in the sport; Thomas and Seida have primarily coached younger teams often just learning the fundamentals of the game.

When asked what elements contribute to a strong team bond among players, the results were similar across teams of both genders. Team-building events and activities help to foster strong relationships among players and build a sense of camaraderie that encourages players to support each other, both on and off the court or field. Downey related that his early experiences of a family-like atmosphere within a team were with girls, and that only recently had he witnessed boys adopting that family-like atmosphere in teams of their own. All of the

interviewees pointed to team activities outside of playing the sport together as great ways to create team bonding. This included social activities such as cookouts and group outings. These events help the players to get to know each other better personally, and they start to discover commonalities among themselves and develop friendships. All of the coaches noted that although all teams benefit from such activities, it was especially imperative for girls' teams to share these team-bonding moments, since they tend to be more oriented to the social aspects of their sport. Thomas also noted that it was best to know something about the background of each player, including where they came from and what they like to do in their spare time, in order to understand their players' perspectives better. The interviewees' comments were echoed in Podolsky's article on the social aspect of sport, highlighting it as essential to both boys and girls. Podolsky noted especially that the "pre-game/practice period is critical social time" for girls (paragraphs 11, 13). Podolsky affirmed that social interaction is beneficial to a boys' team but a necessity for girls.

Regarding whether boys act differently from girls in a practice environment, the interviewees reflected a unanimous decision: Girls and boys behave differently. They all found that in high school, girls were often much more focused on the social aspect of the sport than boys were. They noted that boys put a heavy influence on the competitive side, trying to best each other, while girls are much more talkative and social. Seida pointed out that at the elementary level, girls were often shy, while boys were more "squirrely." Thomas agreed with this conclusion but added that when players are young, their natural skill often dictates how committed they are to the team and the sport itself.

None of the interviewees allowed the behavioral differences in their players to impact their coaching style. They all found that regardless of player interactions, the most effective coaching methods generally remained consistent for all teams. This lends credibility to the claim that the fundamental elements of effective coaching cross gender lines and help all young athletes to have positive team experiences.

When asked what they would do differently coaching the gender they were less familiar with, the coaches offered varying answers. Swick said that he would be more blunt with boys about what they were doing wrong and right. He claimed that saying the wrong thing—or saying the right thing the wrong way—would be more likely to upset girls emotionally than boys. Therefore, he said he would feel freer to express what he wanted in a more direct way with boys. Seida did not find

there to be many differences in how she would coach boys and girls. She said they both benefit from the same things, such as encouragement and a sense that they are valuable members of the team, especially when the players are of younger age.

Thomas agreed with Seida, discussing how he did almost the exact same drills whether he was coaching boys or girls because he did not find there to be a large difference between the two genders. Downey seemed to echo the thoughts of Swick, saying he would be less likely to yell at girls at practice. However, he added that regardless of gender, it was important for this generation in particular to know the reason they were doing something. Explaining the reasons for a drill or a particular play helps all athletes to better understand and follow the instruction willingly. For all the coaches, a top priority with both genders is emphasizing the fundamentals and modeling how to be aggressive in the sport while keeping attitudes of good sportsmanship. Although the interviewees might adapt elements of their approach, they would not substantially change their coaching styles depending on whether they were coaching boys or girls.

Prominent voices in the field, such as the *Championship Coaches Network*, support the idea that boys and girls both benefit from similar coaching techniques. In their special report on coaching men and women, they emphasized, “There are MANY more similarities in how men and women approach sport and competition than there are differences” (Janssen, paragraph 3). On the other hand, a blog by the *Sport Information Resource Center (SIRC)* published an article in 2014 about the differences between coaching boys and girls, offering a different view about coaching boys and girls. SIRC found that “males tend to be more analytical” and that “females tend to like the whole picture” (“Coaching,” paragraph 2). They also found that boys tend to prioritize individual accomplishments, where girls prioritize team goals. Obviously, these findings would have significant implications for coaching by identifying motivating factors for team members. However, both of these points were too broad for comparison with the four coaches interviewed for this project. The interviewees repeatedly emphasized both the individuality of each athlete as well as the fundamentals of good coaching that they believed applied to all athletes, girls and boys alike.

Through my research and the research conducted by others, I have found that girls and boys often benefit from similar styles of coaching. It is true that coaching is very personal, and no two coaches are the same. The best coaches, however, adapt their coaching styles to the needs of their team and the situations

their team faces. Although some distinctions exist between coaching boys and girls, they are minimal and often are simply differences in emphasis. Both girls and boys perform better when the coach is encouraging and does not embarrass them in front of their peers. Furthermore, both boys and girls respond better when the coach initiates activities outside of practice to enhance team bonding, as well as when the coach remains calm and collected during a tight game. Coaches who know their teams well and how to connect with each player are able to easily adjust their techniques as needed to successfully coach both boys and girls.

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