

“We want a male coach”: A teachable moment for female athletes



Female athletes' preference for a male coach is a commonly heard statement. Instead of validating and reinforcing this sentiment, ignoring the comment, dismissing it as immature or irrelevant, or perpetuating the problem by explicitly asking females' preference for the gender of their next coach, athletic directors and individuals in charge of hiring coaches can use this as a teachable moment. This educational tool provides information on the bias inherent in athletes' preference for male coaches and offers five perspectives and examples of informed responses.

1

Given that males statistically dominate the coaching landscape at every level of competition in all sports but a rare few, many girls and young women grow up being coached only by men. Therefore, it is not surprising female athletes will ask for and prefer a male coach... because that is what they know!

Response: “Have you ever had a female coach?” If no, “Then how do you know you wouldn't like having a female coach?”

2

Perspective-taking can help players shift their thinking, see something from a new and different point of view, and uncover their own biases. Many athletes don't think from the coach's perspective—they make judgments from their own limited experiences.

Response: “Do any of you want to be coaches?” Ask those that raised their hands, “So how do you feel, knowing that nobody wants to hire you because female athletes want male coaches?” Ask those who want a male coach, “Given this information, would you reconsider?” This may generate discussion and foster perspective-taking.

Response: “How would you feel if you were hoping for a promotion, management or leadership position in the workplace, and your colleagues or subordinates tell the person who is hiring, ‘We prefer you hire a male’?”

3

If a female athlete does have a female coach and has a bad experience, the female athlete will often generalize that ALL female coaches are the same (i.e., incompetent, too emotional, mean, doesn't push them hard enough) and therefore the athlete prefers males. Rarely does a female athlete have one bad male coach and say, “I prefer and want only female coaches.”

Response: “Have you ever had a bad male coach/teacher?” If yes, ask, “Do you think all male coaches/teachers are bad, so much so you'd never want another male coach/teacher?” Not all male coaches are the same—and neither are all female coaches. Teach that overgeneralizing is an unproductive thinking style.

4

Gender bias affects how we evaluate, interpret and perceive behaviors. Research has shown that “agentic behaviors”—such as acting assertive, dominant, confident, self-reliant and ambitious—are stereotypically associated with masculinity. We also associate such agentic behaviors with effective coaching. Therefore, our perceptions of what it means “to coach” often privilege men.

For example, if a male coach yells at an athlete it is perceived as “coaching.” If a female coach yells the same thing with the same tone, she is often judged negatively and may be perceived to be abusive, a bitch, a bully or mean. Male coaches are often permitted to use coaching methods and behaviors that are perceived as off-limits for female coaches. **This is gender bias.**

Response: “What makes a good coach?”

Response: “Why it is that you prefer a male coach?” Follow up with, “Do you think ALL male coaches are like that? Do you think ALL female coaches lack those characteristics?”

5

Homophobia is another reason why female athletes may prefer male coaches. If the coach is a man, he cannot be a lesbian. Unfortunately, due to persistent homophobia and stereotypes about lesbian coaches, this may unconsciously or consciously influence athlete preference for a male coach.

Response: Teach that preferring male coaches is layered with homophobia and stereotyping, whether or not they intended it—and that no data exists that connects either gender or sexual orientation with quality of coaching.

Additional Resources:

- **The Alliance of Women Coaches** is an organization dedicated to supporting women coaches.
- **Beyond the X's and O's: Gender Bias and Coaches of Women's College Sport** is a report by the Women's Sport foundation that documents widespread gender bias in college athletics.
- **Cognitive Distortions and Unhelpful Thinking Styles** is a concise summary on biased thinking patterns.
- **Do Female Athletes Prefer Male Coaches?** from the Women's Sport Foundation outlines six common myths and misconceptions about women coaches and the underlying bias in each.
- **Patterns of Gender Bias, from the Gender Bias Learning Project** outlines four types of bias, and gives real-life scenarios that bring biases to life.
- **Privilege and Unconscious Bias in Sports Coaching** is a fact-sheet from Sports Coach UK.
- **#SHECANCOACH** is a campaign of the Tucker Center that includes free tools to inspire and celebrate women coaches and increase the number of women in the coaching profession.