

# Coaching Topic - Coaching Females

May 2019

It will come as no surprise to anyone in our association that Fastpitch softball is predominantly played by girls. Yes, we have boys' teams. And yes, male enrollment is currently growing, which is great. That said, the vast bulk of our player enrollment are young female athletes.

This is important to note, because our softball association, like many organizations that provide development environments for female athletes, have a situation that is not necessarily ideal; *most of our coaches are male*.

That isn't, in and of itself, a "problem". I myself am a male and a coach in softball. It's just not ideal.

Why is it that this isn't ideal?

Well, there's two reasons.

## Representation



First, in an optimal sport development environment, the athletes will have representative role models. In simple terms, they benefit from role models that *look like they do*.

This makes perfect sense. When young people see someone that they identify with doing something they dream of doing, they can imagine themselves doing it as well, and the path towards that goal becomes more clear. It's simply easier for our kids to reach their goals in sport; whether that goal is lifelong involvement,

high-performance participation, or simply learning a new specialization, when they can observe someone who has already done it.

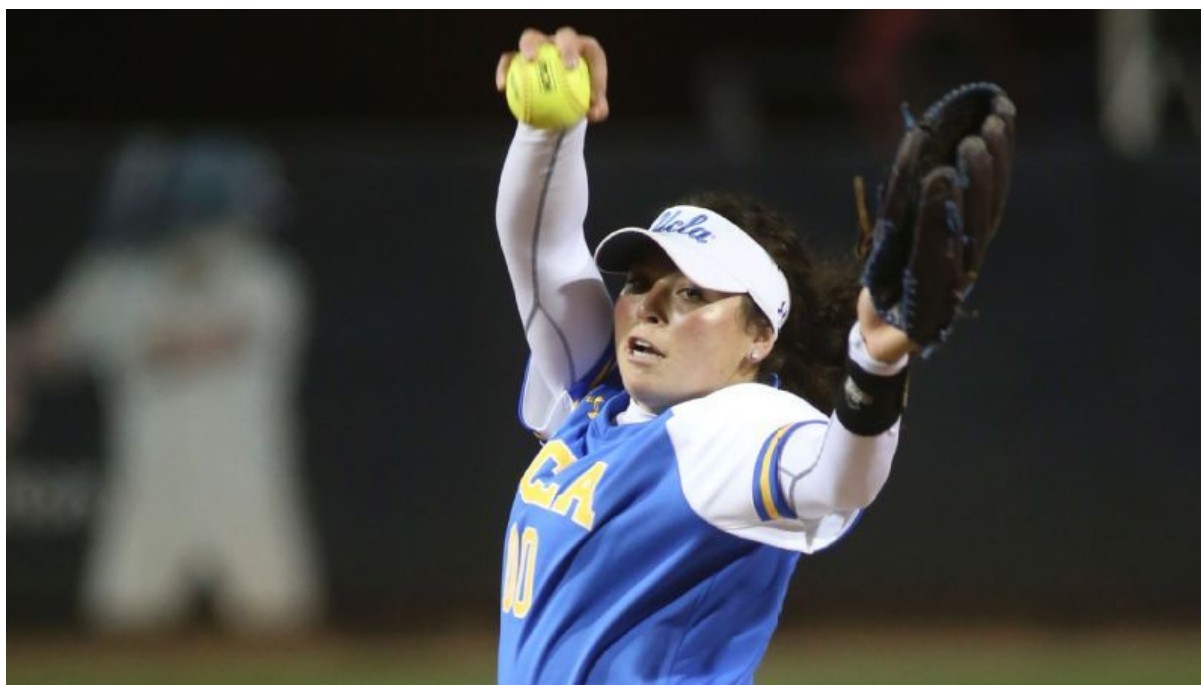


There are some ways that male coaches can compensate for this. One good tactic is to actively encourage and assist your athletes with locating and following a great role model in their sport. With today's social media access, role models have never been more accessible!



## Become a Fan

One great role model without our own association is Dianna Jordinson, a former high level player and current coach of the U19 Thunder rep team. She has a great tactic which we can all adopt.



Some of the best softball on the planet is played in [NCAA Division I](#). Dianna asks the young players she is training to become a fan of a Div I team, and pick a favorite player to follow. It's a fantastic exercise. Almost all Div I softball is streamed online (either on [NCAA](#), [YouTube](#), or on [ESPN](#)), so players can watch games. There are tons of highlight reels on Youtube from games, teams, or even individual players. Most players have their own social media presences, so young athletes can follow them on Instagram or whatever new platform the kids are using at the moment.

## Exposure to Older Players



This applies mostly to our younger players. Here in Medicine Hat we are blessed with a growing association, and as a result, we have a variety of ways for our younger athletes to be exposed to more experienced ones.

Our U16 and U19 Thunder rep teams for 2019 boast some pretty experienced MHMSA players and

play some good ball. They don't play in Medicine Hat very often, but a team trip to check out a game if they are in town can be a great way to show our newer or younger players what can lie in their short-to-medium-term future if they keep playing and practicing.

MHMSA's High School league can also be a fun game to take in. While the experience of the players is much more varied, it can be a nice experience for our younger players to see and imagine themselves playing for their eventual High School. Maybe one day they'll wear the forest green of the Hat High Mohawks, the deep blue of the Crescent Heights Vikings, the Fire Red of the McCoy Colts, or the Sky Blue of the Eagle Butte Talons?



## Understanding

The second main reason that having predominantly male coaching in a predominantly female sport if that male and female athletes are *not the same*; besides the obvious (and sometimes not so obvious) physical differences, they often have differing goals and attitudes with regard to sport.

Many male coaches, unsurprisingly, come out of sport backgrounds that are heavily male-centric. Since coaches will tend to apply what they already know to how they coach, what often results is that male coaches default to applying tactics and strategies they learned growing up as a male athlete, which are not always the best way to approach female athletes. It's very important for male coaches to be cognisant of some of these differences.

Without diving into every single difference between male and female athletes, and while keeping in mind that we are speaking in generalities (every athlete is an individual, after all), here are some common differences that are important to keep in mind. I'll refrain from addressing some of the physical differences, apart from one that you might not be aware of...

## Injuries

Most people, coaches included, aren't aware that injury concerns actually vary quite a bit between male and female athletes. For example, did you know that females are a staggering **6x more prone to ACL injuries** compared to males? In order to best understand how to safeguard the health of our female athletes, it's important to know where things can easily go wrong.

## Priorities

It's a fact that girls drop out of sports at much higher rates than boys do. Why is that? Perhaps it's a failure to properly understand what the priorities are of girls who participate in sports. There have been many large surveys conducted on why girls leave a sport. The number one answer by far is both simple and complex:

**"It wasn't fun anymore."**

What does that mean? When asked to elaborate, *fun* is a complex idea, but there are surprising nuances. For example, one survey managed to break the idea of *fun* into 81 elements identified by players. How did winning rank with female athletes? **48**. Nowhere even close to the top.

Maybe Cyndi Lauper was on to something with that hit from 1983, ["Girls Just Want to Have Fun."](#)

While this is a nuanced issue to be sure, I can tell you that some of the top things that factored into not having fun include:

- Getting too competitive
- Unfair treatment (coach having "favorites")
- Poor coach behavior (yelling, negative comments)

## Role of Social Elements in Performance

Here's an interesting one. Experts have identified that Social Acceptance (this includes interactions with teammates) and Athlete Performance are related. The interesting part is that girls and boys seem to have them interrelated in quite different ways, and understanding that difference is key to understanding your athletes.

For boys, the role of Social Acceptance and Performance looks like this.

**Effort -> Performance -> Acceptance**

What this means is that boys typically see high performance in sport as a means to be accepted by the team. Boys generally want to “prove themselves” to the team, so they start with high effort in order to improve performance, and through the improvement in performance build team acceptance.

For girls, it looks a bit different:

### **Acceptance -> Effort -> Performance**

Girls tend to desire acceptance up front. Their effort, and therefore performance growth, is almost dependent upon team acceptance. Starting with a cohesive team environment is paramount to getting the most out of girls, so sincere effort needs to be expended on this.



### **So what can we do?**

It's not like we can, or even should, discourage men from coaching women and girls. Until we can get more women into strong coaching roles, there will certainly be men involved in coaching females.

It's also important to note that men aren't always naturally great at coaching boys, and women aren't always great at coaching girls, so really anyone involved with coaching girls can benefit from a sincere effort to improve their understanding of those that they mean to coach.

There are some really great resources out there. One that I've completed and can recommend is [Keeping Girls in Sport](#). This all-online 90 minute course is a joint venture between Respect in Sport, [JumpStart](#), [NCCP](#), and [CAAWS](#).

It covers the things that I've touched upon here, as well as much more. I'd highly recommend it for all of our coaches of girls' teams, but especially for us male coaches. It's worth a few PD credits from the NCCP if you need to keep up your coach certification, too.

Past that, the best advice I can give is to surround yourself with great women on your team staff. There are quite a few ladies out there that have or even still do play(ed) ball. This is important for a variety of reasons, including those above, but also to keep good communication lines with your players. It happens sometimes that girls are more comfortable approaching a female coach. While us coaches would love to think that we are always accessible and our players should trust us, we can't anticipate the personality and history of every player, so having those options around is incredibly valuable.

While this is hardly a comprehensive guide on relating to female athletes, the bottom line is to just try and stay open to the priorities of your girls, and understanding of what they want to get out of the sport for best results.