

This factsheet is one of a series, produced by sports coach UK and Women in Sport, aimed at coaches who coach women or who are interested in coaching them in the future. Each factsheet provides insight into the female athlete and her needs, and guidance as to how better to coach and support her.

Although the information contained within this factsheet has been academically evidenced, sports coach UK recognises that it is a generalisation. All people are individuals and it is for you, the coach, to contextualise the following information to your own coaching environment.

If something is said enough times, it starts to become 'fact'. When it comes to coaching female sport, many of these facts are often based on stereotypes and things our colleagues have told us over the years. After all, every athlete and player we work with is an individual with their own traits and idiosyncrasies. Should we, as coaches, make assumptions based on the gender of the athlete we are working with?

However, some generalisations can be drawn upon by those working with female athletes to assist them in getting the best out of the individual and the relationship. This factsheet will address some of the common assumptions made about female athletes and consider whether they are based on fact or on hearsay.

Women are more difficult to coach

 Women are often more open to being coached and new ways of doing things, especially if it will help them perform better.

Female athletes also have a tendency to give coaches more initial respect and are more open in expressing their appreciation for good coaching. Women and girls generally have a strong desire to please the coach and give their best efforts for others as much as for themselves.

Women communicate differently

 There is some truth in this, but it shouldn't make women more difficult to coach; in fact, quite the opposite. Women are more likely to open up and share their concerns or problems, which can actually be a beneficial trait if these issues are preventing focus on training or competition.

Listening and being listened to are also qualities that are valued by women. Female athletes will often be more likely to ask questions of the training programme or methods. This is not because they disagree with what is being asked of them, but because they want to better understand what is required and establish a rapport with the coach via two-way dialogue.

Female athletes lack confidence

 Low confidence is often more pronounced in female athletes. Women tend not to give themselves enough credit and are likely to put good performances and success down to luck rather than talent and hard work. Women's confidence levels are also influenced far more by the opinions of those around them.

Female athletes might reflect their concerns both verbally and through their body language. Coaches can use this as an indicator that their athletes need 'a boost' and some words of encouragement to help build their confidence.



✗ Female athletes over-analyse and can't take criticism

✓ Women may spend time reflecting on what has happened in their performance and what is said after the event. This internal scrutiny can have a negative effect on confidence levels and self-perception.

Among women there is likely to be a far greater sense of not wanting to let the team down, and taking ownership of mistakes made during a competition or match.

So, given that females tend to be more sensitive to comments made, coaches need to consider when and how feedback is given and the tone in which this is done.

✗ Female athletes are more worried about blending in or fitting in than standing out

✓ There is far more concern among women wanting to maintain relationships with each other and not seeing themselves as 'better' than one another.

The coach should value this trait as it can lead to a cohesive team. Teams are most effective and successful when the relationships between the women are working well. Team building, away from training and matches, may also be a feature of women's teams and used to enhance a sense of community.

It's vital we ensure female players have an opportunity to bond with each other beyond having a common competitive goal.

✗ When female athletes are menstruating they cannot train as hard or perform as well

✓ It is generally accepted that menstruation does not interfere with a woman's strength, speed, coordination or endurance. Various research with world-class female athletes shows that the vast majority believe menstruation has absolutely no effect on their athletic performance. Further information on the menstrual cycle can be found within the Female Physiology and Considerations for Coaching Practice factsheet that has been produced as part of this series.

✗ Female athletes can't or don't want to work as hard as male athletes

✓ Female athletes have their own training requirements: physiologically; biomechanically; nutritionally; and even psychologically. An athlete's capacity for hard work is down to the individual and is not dependent on gender.

✗ Women just want to chat to their mates

✓ Social interaction is important between female athletes and something that has already been alluded to here. Given that we know a harmonious team is often a successful team, coaches shouldn't be overly concerned by the desire to chat. Consider building time into the training sessions to allow for this in a way that will be least disruptive to the actual practice.



✗ Female athletes don't want to train alongside male athletes

✓ For some women this may be true, they may be embarrassed and self-conscious or feel that the male athletes dominate the session; however, this is very much down to individual choice. Some female athletes relish the challenge of being pushed by others to reach their potential and perhaps find this easier to do in a male-dominated environment where less value is placed on social interaction.

✗ Female athletes don't work as hard when they are training alongside men

✓ This view may have come about in two ways. Firstly, from a sense that female athletes may be distracted when training alongside men, which may be true in part, but could also be a reflection of the way women tend to interact on a social level and their desire to feel a part of the group. Secondly, by the coach comparing the athletes 'like for like'. Could it be that some coaches subconsciously 'protect' female athletes and do not challenge them in the same way as male athletes in the group?

✗ Women are not competitive enough

✓ While it is true to say that women and girls are less likely to take part in organised competitive sport (thus contributing to the assumption that women are less competitive than men), for those women that do choose competitive sport, there is

little evidence to suggest that 'on the field' they are any less aggressive or strong-willed than their male counterparts.

Social conditioning contributes to this assumption, but women who choose to compete in sport are competitive and, in the team environment, often have an added incentive of wanting to win not only for themselves, but for others.

A call to action

Think about how you could change your approach to your coaching sessions. You don't have to be able to identify with everything on this factsheet, but the differences you will achieve from changing a minor part of your coaching methodology could bring great results.

There are five other factsheets in the series. Each one explores a different area surrounding women in sport, which may help inform your approach to your current coaching practice. The factsheets are:

- Developing Female Coaches
- Female Psychology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Female Physiology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Coaching Female High-performance Athletes
- Socially Inclusive Coaching.

For further information about the series, please email coaching@sportscoachuk.org

