

Different but equal: Why understanding the female mind is a must for male coaches

Published 13/11/17 by [Blake Richardson](#)

Women in Sport Conference

Professor Guylaine Demers, left, with Women in Sports Conference North host Tanya Arnold

Men and women are not the same. But just because females may differ from males physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially, does this mean they should be treated differently? Professor Guylaine Demers explodes some behavioural myths and blasts some social stereotypes to help male coaches become more gender aware.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. This has nothing to do with the fact mince pies decorated with festive trimmings are monopolising shelf space in supermarkets, or that Home Alone is suddenly being repeated on our television screens ad nauseam, and everything to do with my excitement levels after just ordering a present online.

Not for my kids, I hasten to add, but as a treat for myself. The book in question is more professional development tool than early Christmas present but I am impatient for its arrival as it promises to be every bit as informative as other books of its ilk: *'Men are from Mars Women are from Venus'* and Steve Biddulph's *'Raising Boys'* and *'Raising Girls'*.

These texts acknowledge and deconstruct the psychological differences between the sexes, in the context of relationships and parenting respectively.

What drew my interest to the publication currently winging its way to the Richardson household – ['Gender and Competition: How Men and Women Approach Work and Play Differently'](#) – is its pertinence to the world of sport, performance and coaching.

More about the book later, but for now suffice to say it was recommended by the esteemed Guylaine Demers, Professor of Physical and Sport Education at Laval University, Quebec during her Question and Answer session at the Women in Sports Conference North at Headingley Stadium.

In front of a 200-strong audience representing higher education institutions, schools, governing bodies and other health and fitness organisations, she gave her respected opinion on a number of burning issues related to the involvement, retention and treatment of women and girls in sport. And her candid thoughts left a lasting impression.

No competition: Meeting friends beats everything

Professor Demers first responded to questions concerning the differences that exist between the sexes, with her observations containing some vitally important messages for male coaches to consider.

Many would do well to heed her advice on the need to better understand the psychology and motivations of their female participants, relating some examples of the mishaps that can befall coaches who either struggle to discern or choose to ignore these differences and fail to modify their approach accordingly.

'With my work as Chair of Égale-Action [Quebec's Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity] I understand what measures we need to put in place so girls are encouraged to join a club, first of all, and then not drop out,' says Professor Demers, explaining that the high dropout rate in Canada, traditionally around the ages of 14 and 15, is now commonplace in girls as young as 10 and 11.

'I think the message which has to come out to get more girls involved in sport is to embrace diversity and make sure every single girl can relate to sport – and that it doesn't have to be competitive sport, it can be with your friends.

'Male coaches, for example, will come to our workshops because they really want to do a good job but just not get why their female participants have acted in a certain way. They will say, "I just explained something and she started to cry", or, "we walked into the gym and they just carried on talking, talking and talking."

'So we explain that the main reason they joined was probably because their friend is there as well, or a group of friends. Social bonding is super

important for girls. If you try to fight that, you've really had it!

Professor Demers – who also sits on the editorial board of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching, which seeks to create a positive environment for women coaches – says there are a few basic rules that coaches can incorporate to guard against such elementary pitfalls.

'Tell them they can talk when they come into the gym, no problem, but that they must do the warm-up at the same time.

'Just by acknowledging that, some coaches were like, 'Ahh! It's working now. Amazing''.

Don't think best, think of the rest

The process involved in becoming accepted as part of the team – which is totally different for a male than it is for a female – is a key psycho-social element coaches must fully comprehend if they want to engage and retain their participants long-term.

Cast your mind back to when you were in the school playground and you had to pick two teams.

You have a male captain and a female captain. 'Who', Guylaine asks audience members, 'is the first person the male captain will pick?'

The answer comes back instantaneously: 'The best player in the group.'

'And the female captain?' asks Guylaine. 'Their best friend', comes the response, equally as swift.

'So that means, as a coach I need to understand that difference,' she adds. 'If I am coaching a female team and want my athletes to perform, the first thing I need to make sure is that they all feel accepted within the team; that they belong. Then I know they will work hard.'

A male team, in sharp contrast, will not need to be accepted in order to perform, rather they will perform in order to be accepted.

Going round in circles

Which neatly links back to my soon-to-be-delivered parcel examining 'how men and women can communicate, understand, and ultimately overcome their non-physical differences.'

Guylaine tells the story (which I paraphrase below) of when the author of '*Gender and Competition*', former volleyball coach Kathleen DeBoer, first got the idea for her book.

She was taken aback when, talking with a male coaching colleague, he told her that in his experience as a volleyball coach female athletes were not as competitive as their male counterparts.

His supporting evidence went something like this:

It was the make-or-break last game of the season. He called a time-out before the last play with the result hanging in the balance. He delivered some rousing words to the effect of, 'Right, Jim, this is your moment. You're on fire tonight. We must feed Jim the ball and then, Jim, you make sure you smash it hard and, you know what, we can win this game!' There was a loud rallying cry amongst the tight huddle and, minutes later, they were celebrating turning the match on its head, and a memorable victory.

Then a few years later when he was coaching a female team, he was faced with a near identical scenario, and so repeated his mantra. 'Right, Kate, this is your moment. You're on fire tonight. We must feed Kate the ball and then, Kate, you make sure you smash it hard and, you know what, we can win this game!' The team promptly fell apart!

The team dynamics that were at play can be explained in simple geometric terms.

'Women work in more of a circle environment, men in a triangle,' says Guylaine.

'Each gender operates very differently within the team structure. The men are aware of the hierarchy of players, with the captain invariably the best player – who sits at the top of this triangle. They know exactly what is needed to get to the top.

'On the female side, the links forming the circle are super important and everyone must feel as if they belong equally in the team. They don't want to feel as if they are outside that circle. They want to win as a team. Put a player on the spot she will not feel comfortable and probably she will not perform as well.'

Male coaches who refuse to buy in to the triangle concept are destined to go round in circles with their female team, which is likely to fall short of reaching its potential.

Social stereotyping is everywhere

These differences are hardwired into males and females.

There will of course be exceptions, but the innate characteristics and idiosyncrasies of individuals within the group will only be revealed to those coaches who endeavour to forge strong [coach-athlete relationships](#) with their participants.

Guylaine has used this knowledge of the different psychological nature of female athletes to great effect in her own career as a coach, explaining: 'I was the captain of my university basketball team for five years and played maybe one minute per game. Would you see that on the male team? Why was I captain? Because I was super strong in making sure everyone felt as if they were part of that team.'

Learning to adapt your communication skills and read body language and [emotions](#) will help you create an environment whereby your female participants savour rather than shun competition.

But to truly understand the differences between the sexes, male coaches must have the [self-awareness](#) to strip away their own subconscious gender prejudices.

Does that sound harsh? Judgemental? Consider the wider context. There is a compulsion to conform to black and white gender stereotypes due to their reinforcement in advertising and in the media, a relentless bombardment that has been perpetuated over many lifetimes, and propagated to new levels since the advent of the internet and social media platforms.

These skewed messages, both subliminal and manifest, are impossible to escape and such cultural prejudices can have far-reaching consequences in the domain of sport and coaching. For champions of equality and diversity bent on driving home the fundamental message that **women can be equal but different** they are an ever-present and disheartening interference.

Little wonder young girls are put off taking part in physical activity, when every communication medium is awash with the sexualisation of female sports stars; traditional representations of the female body as an object of beauty ('I'll never match up to her, why bother!'); and the stereotyped connotations associated with 'feminine' and 'masculine' sports.

'Go onto Google Images and type "female athlete" and you will see images that fit the stereotype,' says Professor Demers.

I followed her advice and the result speaks for itself...

Women in Sports Conference North

The message that sport and physical activity is good for us gets swallowed up then by the sea of stereotypes, symbolism and misconceptions that besiege our young people.

Guylaine explains: 'During the onset of puberty you are first of all struggling with your body. Doing sport, young girls may be afraid of gaining too much muscle as then it will be seen as not being feminine. Even in 2017, girls are struggling with the fact they can have muscles.'

'The way boys and girls are socialised today is still very different. We are still very protective of the girls, who learn very early what it means to be a girl or a boy.'

'Unfortunately, the messages that they get from the media and advertising is there is a certain way you have to look and act so you fit into that box of what it is to be a girl.'

This creates a catch-22 situation in those sports where you need to be strong and aggressive. Women and girls ask themselves, 'How can I be a great athlete and still be feminine?'. They find it difficult to reconcile the two.

'You see female athletes fighting like crazy on the rugby field, but when they step out of the locker room they will have made sure they have done their hair and make-up so they look super feminine,' says Professor Demers.

Stigmatising labels

The upshot is that girls are being dissuaded from playing 'masculine' sports because they are afraid of being labelled.

Professor Demers explains that one mother and father told her they didn't want their little girl playing ice hockey because they didn't want her to become a lesbian.

With that sort of homophobic attitude, is there any wonder LGBT athletes are so scared of coming out and why girls are so quick to trade sport out of their lives during adolescence?

‘They are so scared of being rejected, of being isolated, of being a victim of bullying,’ says Professor Demers.

‘When you see a man playing rugby, everyone assumes he is heterosexual because real men play rugby don’t they, strong and aggressive. That’s what a man is.

‘And if you see a woman figure skater, of course she is heterosexual. She is feminine and has everything that our society relates to being a woman. But if you see a male figure skater, well, he’s probably gay. It’s because what we assume is needed to be a great figure skater is to be gracious and aesthetic. We align those qualities with being a female.

‘I don’t know about here, but in Canada, if you are a female rugby player or ice hockey player, of course you must be a lesbian. Why, because they are strong, powerful and aggressive. It’s like you cannot be a strong woman and heterosexual.’

There were those in the audience who suggested times were changing.

But changing deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and attitudes towards gender roles, cultivated over generations, is like turning a supertanker around in a harbour... frustratingly slow and fraught with difficulties.

What are your thoughts regarding gender differences? How do you manage them? Has gender stereotyping impacted on participation at your club?

Further reading

Women in Sports Conference North

Leeds Rhinos Foundation hosted the free Women in Sports Conference North, which also included a keynote speech from British Olympic 1500m runner Laura Weightman, third from right, along with several other engaging speakers and panellists from the worlds of broadcasting, sport and physical activity. [More details can be found here.](#)

More related ConnectedCoaches blogs and conversations:

- [What are the differences between coaching boys and girls?](#)
- [Myth Buster – Coaching Women](#)
- [This Girl Can: What are your top tips for coaching women and girls?](#)
- [Coaching campaign Reaches out to Britain’s women](#)
- [Men coaching women – a different approach?](#)
- [Equal to the task: Women have just as much to offer the coaching industry as men](#)
- [Separating fact from fiction: There are no ‘golden rules’ to coaching women](#)

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now](#)

tags : women, equality, gender, feminine, homophobia, masculine, stereotypes, women-in-sport