

COACHING GIRLS =

A Survival Guide

By Karen Coffin

Coaching girls is different than coaching boys. This claim could cause an argument at face value. It may not be politically correct, but it is necessary for coaches to understand this basic tenet if they are working with girls teams. The rules of the sport may be universal, but the dynamics of how females respond to coaching techniques need to be taken into consideration to achieve success.

These observations are largely unscientific, but they are based on the experiences of many coaches over the years. It is possible that in the future, attitudes of girls will change as many start playing sports more seriously and at an earlier age. Currently, however, problems that have little to do with the sport itself are the plague of girls athletics. Many a coach has been blindsided when relationships wreck team spirit or players fail to fulfill their potential due to emotional blocks.

Being aware of physical and emotional issues that are potential pitfalls could help in avoiding them. Be proactive and address how players might be affected by personal issues. Expect surprises – just about the time when competition gets serious. Three-quarters of the way through the season is when trouble often occurs. Playing time complaints, overuse injuries, personal problems and criticism of coaches all erupt simultaneously. Everyone is tired and tempers flare easily. It's not pretty.

Of course, not every girl is affected and not all teams suffer problems. The observations that follow apply to situations that are most common. To quote the Boy Scout motto... "Be prepared." I would add, "Stock up on your antacids." Male coaches are particularly encouraged to recognize the differences in coaching girls as opposed to boys. Much has been written in the past few years about how men and women don't understand each other. It's no different in athletics.

COMPETITION

- **Avoiding embarrassment is a priority for girls.** It's No. 1 with many. They care about how they look or play, whereas boys want to win. Not wanting to look bad can cause girls to panic when they are losing. They won't take risks and they may retreat from challenges. They may even look like they don't care. Teach them how to handle mistakes.
- **Learning to win can be an issue.** For some girls, trying to win goes against how they have been taught to behave. They want to be liked and popular and defeating someone can lead to animosity. Boys are trained to be aggressive and girls to please people if they want to succeed. The negative perception of assertive women is gradually changing, in part because of sports, but it still may be an issue to teenage girls.
- **Momentum swings during competition are common.** Boys teams also experience this, but it doesn't seem to last as long. If fear sets in, girls can struggle with being assertive and confident enough to change their performance. They begin to worry about themselves instead of concentrating on the opponent. Work on mental toughness techniques.

TEAM DYNAMICS

- **Being a team player is a learned activity.** Teamwork must be taught at every level and coaches must make their expectations very clear. Reinforce the concepts often. How to treat teammates must be explained. Forming cliques and criticizing others

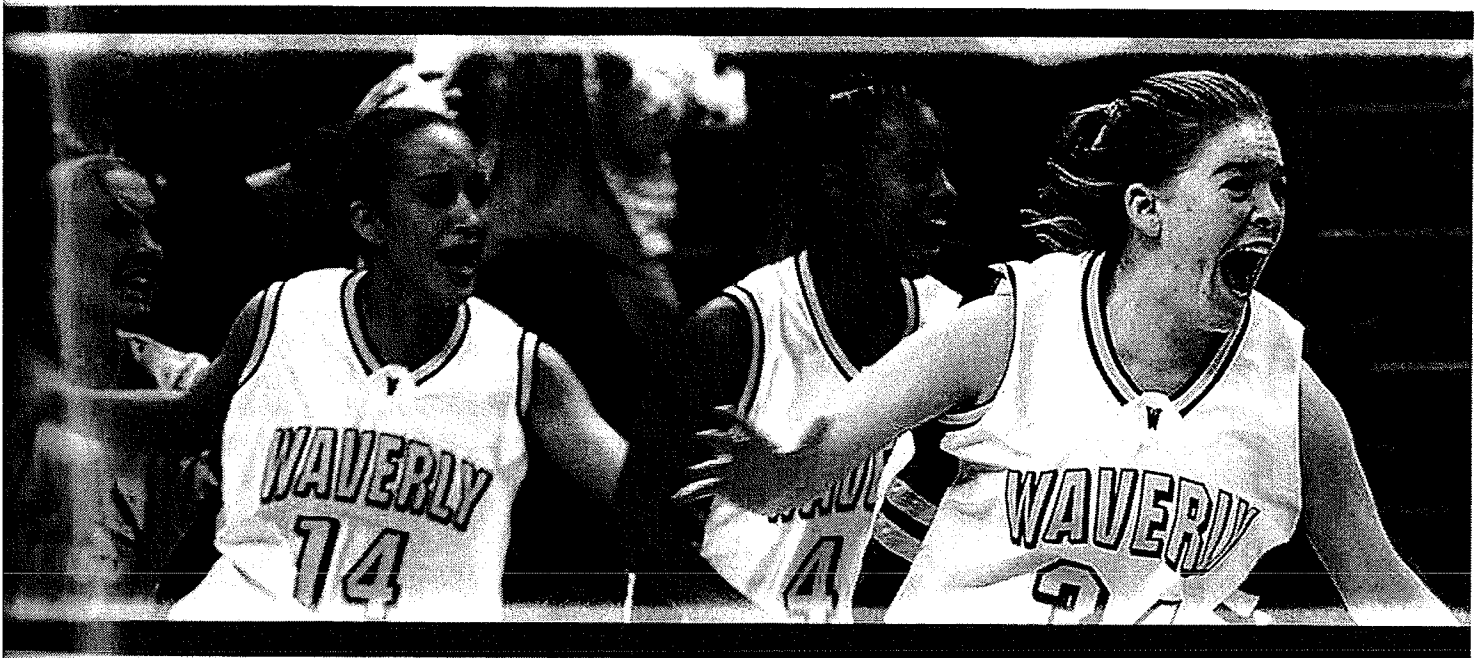


behind their back is a "time honored" way for girls to treat people they don't like. Jealousy, boyfriends, disappointments and competition can all trigger dissension on a team. Captains have to be your leaders in dealing with these kinds of conflicts. Prevent when possible and manage the fallout if it happens. Don't ignore it and hope it will go away.

- **Girls do not accept the function of a depth chart.** The important thing to them is everyone being equal and getting the same playing opportunities. They resent that better teammates may get preference. "It's not fair" is a common complaint. A depth chart or ladder should go sideways rather than up and down in their opinion. By the way, their mothers feel the same way – concerning their sons as well as daughters.
- **Competing against teammates is tough on girls.** Challenge matches and head-to-head races can have long-lasting negative consequences for both athletes. The relationship between them (and their friends) can become strained. It may even cause animosity that ultimately engulfs the entire team. At the very least, it can be awkward as the winner and loser re-establish their relationship by how they treat each other. Reinforce the idea that such competition helps teammates get better.
- **Girls may ostracize stars.** Boys tend to respect them, but not girls. Since the best players get the most playing time, headlines and attention, their teammates resent them. If the stars do a good job of supporting everyone else, the ostracism can be lessened. The kids don't factor in that the good players see the toughest opponents and probably have worked the hardest to achieve their success. The pressure that the best players feel is not understood by their teammates. Warn the stars this may happen and encourage them to show visible support for others.

EMOTIONAL ISSUES

- **Girls want to be liked; boys want to be respected.** Most teenage girls are very worried about relationships and spend a lot of energy on trying to develop positive connections with others. Their feelings are easily hurt, especially by authority figures like coaches. Overreaction, especially when being criticized, can be extreme. They are very aware of what others are saying and doing during competition – especially parents and boyfriends. A disapproving facial expression, tone of voice or comment can totally disrupt their concentration.
- **Girls will bring emotions and worries to practices and games.** It may be hard to get them to focus on anything else and concerns may well affect their performance. It can help if they are allowed to visit with each other during stretches at the beginning of practice and then kept very busy after that. School activities such as Homecoming, Proms and Standardized Tests are huge distractions. Coaches must realize that sports are a part of the educational process and constitute only a portion of the athlete's life.
- **Tears are to be expected.** It's likely that someone will shed tears at every practice, game, meet or match. Parents and coaches need to expect it and be calm about it. It basically means someone cares enough to cry. Tears can flow because of joy, sorrow, frustration, relief, anger, fatigue, disappointment, gratitude and just about anything else emotional. Teaching athletes to maintain their composure helps, but if people care enough, they cry.
- **Deliver praise and criticism cautiously.** Girls are uneasy being singled out in front of teammates. Praise



and criticism are better received if delivered one on one. Try not to compare one girl to another. Praise is a better motivator than punishment, but compliments must always be earned to matter.

PHYSICAL ISSUES

- **Conditioning needs to be gender-specific as well as sport-specific.** Pay particular attention to prevention of ACL injuries. Girls are susceptible to this debilitating knee injury. Teach landing, cutting and hopping skills. Give emphasis to strengthening the legs, hips and abdomen. Know your whiners and your stoics as you make decisions on when to ease up and when to push harder.
- **Most girls dislike running for conditioning.** Thankfully, track and cross country runners are notable exceptions. Stretching is not a problem. It is productive to incorporate conditioning into drills during practice and improve movement techniques at the same time. Expect complaints about conditioning. Calling it "fitness training" makes it much more accepted!
- **Anorexia is a big concern.** Teenagers are especially susceptible to unhealthy ideas about what they should weigh. Some sports, especially gymnastics and cheerleading, lend themselves to an emphasis on body image. Hints to someone about being overweight can trigger severe consequences. Coaches can help by teaching proper nutrition and closely monitoring weight changes in athletes.
- **Menstrual cycles do affect performance.** The hormone changes just before a period begins may affect coordination, timing, energy level and emotions. Some girls experience significant pain and the over-the-

Coaching girls can be a great experience. This "Survival Guide" can help make the job easier, more successful and a lot more fun.

counter drugs they take contain caffeine. Issues are generally kept private, but coaches must remain sensitive to the fact that problems may arise.

- **Be absolutely ethical and legal in behavior with female athletes.** Improper sexual language and conduct with girls has become a huge issue in this country. Coaches face community disgrace, ruined careers and jail time if convicted of criminal activity. The victims can suffer long-term emotional problems. The danger of being falsely accused is real, and coaches are reminded to be aware of appearances and compromising situations. Do nothing that can be misconstrued. Adult authority and players' affections must not be abused. Coaches have a unique opportunity to make a difference in a player's life. Make it a positive one. **CQ**

Photos provided by 20/20 Photographic, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Karen Coffin retired from the Port Clinton, Ohio, school system after serving as a tennis coach and physical education teacher for more than 20 years. After retirement, she presented seminars for coaches and taught coaching classes at the college level. She writes a newspaper column for parents and coaches involved in youth sports and is a facilitator for the NFHS Coach Education classes. She is a member of the Port Clinton High School Athletic Hall of Fame. She may be contacted at coachcoffin@cros.net.

