

Improving Competitiveness of Female Teams

The following information was presented at the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) Conference by Kethleen DeBoer and MaryJo Pepler.

I opened the seminar by discussing gender differences in competition, spurred by a question from a male coaching friend asked while we were both languishing in the bleachers on a summer recruiting trip. "Why aren't women competitive like men?" he asked me. I bristled defensively and asserted that women were just as competitive as men and he was crazy.

He spoke of using the same words to motivate his star female player that he had seen motivate a star male player. While the male player rose to the coach's challenge to "Be da Man," the female player folded up emotionally.

I knew intuitively he'd made a big mistake in trying to motivate his female star with this approach, yet that day I couldn't explain why he was wrong in both his approach and conclusion that women were less competitive.

Gender Differences Effect Athletes

Our disagreement led me to search for everything I could find on the topic of gender differences from Tannen, Gilligan, Fischer, Belenky, Heim and others. I became convinced that male and female athletes enter the gym with very different worldviews that influence their behaviors, responses and attitudes.

Most coaches, including my male colleague and me, are completely oblivious to these gender-related differences. Male coaches assume others share their own worldview and are frustrated when female athletes do not respond as they themselves would. Though they know better, female coaches often assume the female worldview disappears when athletes enter the gym. They, too, become frustrated when athletes act out "female" responses.

Female vs. Male "Worldview"

I identified the female worldview as defined by a web, connection and relationship-orientation. In contrast, the male worldview is defined by hierarchy, separation and a results-orientation. The coach had spoken to the male athlete in his language. It put him "alone at the top" and he responded. The same words were alienating and threatening to the female athlete, who wanted to be "at the center of connections," so she retreated.

Sports talk is peppered with what I call "challenges to manliness" words that encourage an athlete to separate themselves, to one-up others, to have enough pride to fight.

Women athletes respond much better to “good old fashioned guilt” words that challenge them to carry their part of the load, that question their commitment to the team, that obligate them to shared sacrifice.

This is just one of many implications of worldview differences for female athletes in team sport settings. Things as fundamental as the importance of winning also are affected by gender-related attitudes. I told of coaching a female athlete who refused to compete with a close friend.

Failure also affects athletes differently: Females tend to internalize it, males tend to externalize it. We define fairness differently: For females it is competing by the rules, while for males it is competing within the rules. Our reactions to criticism are gender-related: Women tend to personalize, males tend to globalize. In the area of play, females bond through interaction, males bond through action.

What does it mean to compete?

Peppler followed with an exploration of the nature of competitiveness what it is and what it is not asking the coaches to provide the specifics. She used their input to discuss feedback loops in coach/player and coach/team relationships. “Most coaches,” Peppler said, “get stuck in one area of the feedback loop in their practices, and then get mad or frustrated when another area produces undesirable results in a match.”

She had the coaches list the specific times where their teams struggle with competitiveness at game point, when facing a dominant opponent, when they are comfortably ahead, etc. Then she asked them to identify the defeating behaviors their teams exhibited in these situations missed serves, careless hitting errors, lack of effort on defense. Peppler identified the left-brain/right-brain components of training versus competing. Practice is mostly a left-brain activity with the focus on certain postures, base positions, precise routes and taught verbal responses. Competition, however, is a right-brain activity. At peak performance there is no time, space or judgment. The test of coaching is to prepare a team in a left-brain environment to perform in a right-brain activity.

A small group exercise allowed participants to examine the personal characteristics that shape their coaching behavior and impact their relationships with their female athletes. Coaches discussed their strengths, weaknesses, pet peeves and common reactions to stressful situations.

Left Brain vs. Right Brain Activities

Next, I led a discussion on the impacts of gender programming in practice planning and team building. Female teams are more comfortable with connecting activities and less comfortable with competitive activities; the opposite is true for male teams.

Consequently, across sports and age groups, female teams spend more of their practice time in single-contact, repetitive drills (left-brain) while male teams engage early and often in competitive game-like sequences (right-brain.)

One result is that female athletes often have better technique but less “killer instinct” than males with the same training and experience. The stress of competition is familiar territory for male athletes but less so for female athletes. The challenge for coaches is to find the balance in training between activities that are comfortable for their teams but only reinforce existing predilections, and those that make their teams edgy but improve their weaknesses in competition.

Next, Pepler demonstrated coaching feedback directed at improving and evaluating the competitive performance of a player as well as the team around her. Pepler’s feedback was emotionless and specific. She pointed out that anger and frustration signal that a coach is helpless to solve the problem facing a team, and challenged the coaches to evaluate when they revert to these emotions in both matches and practices. These emotions, she asserted, are the result of a lack of clarity; she showed the coaches how to script the competitive response they want from their team and how to include that training in their practices.

The Blanchard Model of Leadership Styles

On the final morning, the focus turned to issues of leadership, management style and relationship development. Pepler identified the Blanchard model for characterizing leadership styles directive versus supportive and gave examples of the styles in coaching behavior. She showed the coaches how to evaluate their styles and gave examples of when each style is most effective.

Next participants did an individual exercise to assess their leadership skills. The purpose was to provide them with a written inventory of their attention to vision, planning, organization, communication, personal improvement, succession preparation and a long-term exit strategy.

I concluded the seminar with a discussion of leadership in a gender context, identifying general differences in the reactions of females and males to authority. Females, more comfortable with flatter and more egalitarian systems, often struggle with capricious uses of power, while males deal better with hierarchical structures and “Do-this-because-I-said-so” directives.

I also identified the subconscious reactions of women athletes to female coaches: Women don’t let other women act like men. Each gender has rigid, though largely tacit, rules for behavior. Both females and males punish their own gender much more viciously for behavior outside the lines.

For this reason, I believe female coaches cannot succeed simply by mimicking male coaching behavior. Their female athletes will rebel. Instead, female athletes need successful female coaching models to learn the gender-related behavioral standards required for leading teams.

A better mantra for coaches of females is: *"You can lead men, but you must convince women."*