

Gender issues in youth soccer coaching

by Steve Watson

Women's football (soccer) is not new. In England the 'fairer sex' have been playing the 'beautiful game' since the nineteenth century and on Boxing Day, 1920 the premier women's football team of the day (Dick, Kerr Ladies) played another Lancashire team, St. Helen's Ladies, before a capacity crowd of 53,000 at Goodison Park with another 10 to 15,000 fans locked out. In the same year the Dick, Kerr Ladies toured the USA where they played eight games against male opposition, winning three and scoring 35 goals.



The Dick-Kerr's Ladies Team which toured the United States in 1920. They outscored their male opponents 35-34, and left with a 3-3-2 record.

However, female participation in football in England was actively discouraged by the Football Association until quite recently (the FA banned women from using its grounds for fifty years between 1920 and 1970), and is still widely considered as a 'man's game' in which women are seen as marginal, both as players and even as spectators.

Yet by 2002 football had become the number one female participation sport in England. Today it is the country's fastest growing sport and the coverage of the England women's football team competing in Euro 2005 on prime time terrestrial television will surely result in more and more girls wanting to emulate their new-found sporting role models.

The scale and speed of this explosion of interest in English female football is demonstrated by the facts: in 1993 there just 80 girls teams. In England today there are more than 7,000 teams and over 100,000 registered players.

Female interest in playing football is not limited to the birthplace of the 'beautiful game'. In the USA the game really took off after 90,185 fans watched the women's national team beat China in the final of the 1999 World Cup. Today, an estimated 6 million American girls play soccer regularly and in many other countries there are large and growing numbers of girls and women playing the game.

The fact that female soccer is so popular today inevitably means that many coaches (especially in the younger age groups) will suddenly have girls in their squads for the first time. Other coaches will be switching from coaching all boys teams to coaching all girls teams. This will, understandably, result in some anxiety for soccer coaches who will wonder if girls should be coached in the same way as boys. They won't know if the coaching techniques they have used with boys in the past are transferable to girls and male coaches may worry about how they should treat girl players who get injured. Female coaches may have similar concerns. These worries are perfectly understandable but not often expressed.

The fact that football coaches (who are, of course, predominantly male), are so reluctant to voice their concerns about coaching girls might be because they interpret 'equal opportunities' as meaning that all the children in their charge must be treated exactly the same. They may believe that to consider treating one group of children differently to the others is inappropriate, old fashioned and even reactionary.

However, this ignores the fact that boys and girls have been shown to differ in their approach to sport, soccer and coaching in several, possibly significant, ways. These differences need to be understood by soccer coaches if they are to coach boys and girls as effectively as possible.

Before we look at why the gender of the children you are coaching might influence your coaching style, it is worthwhile stressing that boys and girls are more similar than they are different. For example, the reasons why girls and boys want to play soccer are virtually the same:

	Girls	Boys
have fun	99%	94%
improve at my sport	98%	94%
learn new skills	95%	89%
be competitive	94%	94%
be in shape	92%	88%
be with friends	92%	87%
keep busy	73%	63%

Source: Mary Healy Jonas, [Do Boys and Girls View Competition in Different Ways?](#)

Also, both sexes respond better to positive reinforcement than negative criticism, boys and girls can both kick a ball just as far (good technique, not strength is the key to distance) both can pass accurately and so on. Also, both boys and girls like their coaches to be assertive, cooperative, determined, respected (and respectable), willing to help, dedicated, 'cool' and energetic.¹

Research into gender differences applicable to soccer coaches is pretty thin on the ground. However, The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Report on Physical Activity & Sport in the Lives of Girls (1997), concluded that females, in general, are more internally motivated by self improvement and goals related to team success and appear more motivated by a cooperative, caring, and sharing team environment. The authors cited Garcia (1994) that some female athletes actually can be 'turned off' by coaches who over emphasize winning.²

However, my own experience as a soccer coach who has switched from coaching boys to coaching girls teams supports the findings of Dr Stewart and others that:

- Girls tend to be more analytical than boys. This means girls will not take generalities at face value. They will want to know why they should do something a particular way more than boys will.
- Team unity is more important to girls than boys.
- Girls may place more emphasis on 'fair play' than boys who are more likely to bend the rules.
- Boys are more likely than girls to blame other people (the referee, the weather, the coach) if they lose. Girls have a tendency to blame themselves for a poor performance.
- For girls, winning is not as important as making sure every player gets an equal amount of playing time.
- Males appear to be more 'self' or 'ego' oriented and tend to be more 'win at any cost' in their approach to sport.

The reason for these differences is not certain. Certainly, they could be highly influenced by social or cultural expectations (Gill, 1994) so presumably could be 'unlearned' if the conditions were right.³

Gender differences relevant to soccer coaches have also been identified by Mary Healy Jonas' study, [*Do Boys and Girls View Competition in Different Ways?*](#) She considered the differences between girls' and boys' responses to three statements:

"I would do almost anything to win"

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	20%	23%	27%	15%	14%	29%
Male	11%	15%	26%	20%	29%	49%

"It is more important for key players to play in order to win than for everyone to get equal playing time"

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	25%	21%	30%	14%	10%	24%
Male	11%	12%	36%	21%	21%	42%

"I get very upset when my team loses"

	Almost never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always	Frequently + Almost Always
Female	21%	28%	33%	10%	8%	18%

Male	10%	23%	26%	21%	21%	42%
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Conclusion

Boys and girls should always be offered the same opportunities and given the same consideration during your coaching sessions. Don't, for example, cancel a training session for girls because of inclement weather if you wouldn't cancel it for a boy's session. And if you coach mixed groups, don't try to 'protect' the girls. Treat them equally but understand the differences.

It's not insulting to females to consider if they need to be coached differently. It is, rather, an indication of your desire to coach them as effectively as you can.

To quote Dr Stewart:

"If differences exist, coaches need to be aware of them. That awareness could assist coaches in varying coaching styles to meet the individual needs of the gender being coached. If individualization is achieved, coaches would be assisting both the team, and the individual player, in achieving the highest performance possible. It could also reduce the frustration experienced by coaches who switch between teams of different genders."⁴

References and links

1, 2, 3, 4: Dr Craig Stewart, [Should boys & girls be coached the same way?](#)

[Why children want to play soccer](#)

[Child protection and youth soccer](#)

[Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, Fact Sheet 5: Women and Football](#)

[American Sports Data](#)

[The FA Annual Review, 2004-5](#)

Soccerhall.org, [The Dick Kerr Ladies Football Tour 1922](#)

Mary Healy Jonas, [Do boys and girls view competition in different ways?](#)

Mentalhelp.net, [Gender differences in values, purpose, self-esteem, and orientation](#)