

Coaching should recognize differences between men and women: expert

By Jeff Doner

Coaching men and women in sport has its similarities, but differences need to be recognized and addressed.

That's the message Dr. Vicki Harber delivered to a packed room of many of Aurora's coaches.

Dr. Harber, a professor of physical education and recreation at the University of Alberta, is a former Canadian Olympic rower and women's soccer coach. She has done extensive research on metabolic and hormonal responses to physical activity and dietary intake in women and has been spreading her knowledge and experience to coaches and athletes all over Canada.

'There are huge benefits to girls and women being involved in sport,' she said.

Speaking to a crowd of mostly male coaches, Dr. Harber went over details about how coaching female athletes can be different in terms of physical injuries, socially, and also in controlling the training environment.

'As a coach, know what you know and what you don't know. Don't pretend you know,' she said, adding coaches have to be able to understand what girls and women might be going through.

'Your training atmosphere and climate is yours to be managed by you. I want to be able to instill some confidence in you that it can be done.'

A main area of discussion with coaching females was how to avoid cliques and rejection among teammates.

Sarah Gray, who coaches boys and girls archery, stopped by to hear whether her coaching strategies were appropriate for these very types of situations.

'For the girls' team, we have a magical wall of silence, as we like to call it,' she said. 'They're allowed to talk on one side of the line on the floor and as soon as they cross it, they're quiet and they're focused on their performance.'

'Instead of singling people out for talking too much, we just sort of say, 'go over there, that's the appropriate area for you guys to gossip and chatter'. There is that sort of thing that goes on and we found that if you try to cut it out all together, it's just a nightmare.'

But Gray also said it's more about learning how to coach different personalities than anything.

'I think everybody should be able to coach everybody,' she explained. 'I don't agree with this separate idea, because I think we're all individuals and there are certain men who will be able to work better with females and vice versa.'

'I think it's just looking at the athlete from the individual perspective.'

Dr. Harber explained there are key things coaches can do to help create a positive atmosphere for the athletes. Her key points were for coaches to develop social connections, acceptance, skill acquisition and act as role models.

The majority of female athletes are coached by men, which Dr. Harber said makes it even more important for the coach to be in tune with issues and, at times, show signs of empathy.

'If they feel acceptance, you are going to get their best effort,' she said.

Brent Purdy, who coaches with Aurora Soccer Club, said he was eager to see what Dr. Harber had to say and pick up a few tips.

?I like some of the things she said in terms of the social cohesion,? he said. ?I think that's really important for chemistry.?

Purdy also coaches school teams and said learning how to coach female athletes has been a big learning curve. He added, however, that it's important for coaches to understand the differences in coaching women.

Aside from the social aspects, Dr. Harber also said it was important for team physicians to understand gender specific implications of health issues.

She said girls and women are more susceptible to certain musculoskeletal injuries and various medical problems like ACL tears.

A large part of her research has been to highlight ways to prevent injuries with appropriate training and nutritional intake.