

April Heinrichs: Coaching Boys vs. Girls -- More Similar than Different

Here's what I know after coaching girls and women for 25 years, and coaching our nation's best female players for the last 15 years:

Like any coach in any sport, to be successful you must have a vision for the way you want to coach, a vision for the way you want your team to play, and a vision for what steps (there are always steps) you must take in partnership with your players. It must be a partnership!

Players grow at different rates and different times in their development, hence the need for patience and being able to coach players differently. No two players are the same and no two players respond the same, thus, you must coach each player individually.

Finally, the key to coaching is being able to communicate your vision, plan and how a player fits into it all. Planning and preparing is a great part of a successful journey, so too is communicating and connecting with your players.

A great coach taps into each player's mind and their heart. A great coach motivates and asks a player to become more self-aware in order to reach the "next level." Ultimately, the most important lesson in coaching -- there is no finish line in communicating with a player. It's an on-going process.

I have limited experience coaching boys and men. But what is clear to me -- as I have many friends who coach males and of course I'm always watching the men's game -- is that in the last 25 years, coaching men and women is becoming more similar than different.

Twenty-five years ago you could make grand statements about the differences. "You can scream and shout at men and they'll respond." ... "Men don't care about team chemistry they only care about winning." ... "Women are not competitive." ... "Women are soft psychologically."

I don't think any of these old statements hold true today. Some of the most amazing competitors are women (athletes and businesswomen).

Women will really get after it in the competitive arena, and relentlessly so. They can unleash their furor on the field; just watch the U.S. women against any of the top teams in the world. There are fearless tackles, along with tactical adjustments communicated by their coaches.

As for men's teams and coaches today, a good team can beat an average team any day, but if a good team meets another good team that lacks cohesion, inevitably the team without good cohesion/chemistry will collapse under the pressure.

And, we hear today in men's soccer about the coach who has good "man management skills." These are some of the most successful and respected coaches in the men's game.

This sounds a lot like coaches of women's soccer. Coaching women and men is becoming more similar than different. And, one day soon, we will see a female coach coaching men at the highest level.

(April Heinrichs is U.S. Soccer's Technical Director and the head coach of the U.S. U-18 women's national team. She served as the U.S. women's national team head coach in 2000-2004, which included a gold medal win at the 2004 Olympic Games. Prior to coming back to U.S. Soccer, Heinrichs served as a Sportfolio Leader for team sports at the U.S. Olympic Committee. As a player, Heinrichs captained the USA to the 1991 Women's World Cup title and scored 35 goals in 46 U.S. appearances. She won three NCAA titles at the University of North Carolina.)