

Girls vs. Boys: Should coaches communicate differently? (Part 4)

By Mike Voitalla

A few years ago, I asked a man with plenty of experience, and a fair amount of success, coaching both genders about whether he takes a different approach. He didn't want his quotes attributed, but after answering "Yes!" provided an example.

If he felt a male player needed to correct something about his game, he'd simply point out the player's flaws and tell him how to improve. With a female player, he'd first praise something in her game, and then say, "Oh, and you might want to consider working on this ..." And then he'd end the conversation with another bit of praise.

The notion is that the "sandwich method" is even more important when dealing with female players. And that coaches should be more sensitive in how they communicate with female players comes up often when the girls vs. boys question is posed to coaches who have experience with both genders.

Anson Dorrance, the most successful, by far, women's college coach ever, said in his biography ("The Man Watching" by Tim Crothers):

"When a man is criticized on the soccer field, he understands that a coach is taking his game apart, not his life apart. A woman does not separate the two."

Another longtime coach of both genders, who didn't wish to be identified, said that self-esteem can be a bigger issue with girls than with boys. "I'm not saying boys do not hurt as much, but it shows differently. ... If you are a bully of a coach, I think you damage the female player more than the male overall. ... A coach may be perceived more as a 'father' with girls as opposed to 'teacher' with boys."

Dorrance says that when he coached men, he would show them videotape of their mistakes so they would see the proof, because "I have never met a male athlete who has ever felt that he made a mistake in any athletic competition in his life." As for women, he said, "I am constantly amazed at how little confidence even my most talented female players have, so if you tell them they did something wrong, they'll believe you. Video makes it worse, because they see how bad they actually were. A woman takes full responsibility for her problems emotionally, and you have to be careful not to destroy her psychologically. I stopped using videotape for the women except to show the positive aspects of their play to try and build confidence."

Dorrance also says that women, much more than men, pick up on body language that shows the coach is upset with their play and verbal criticism isn't necessary. During halftime after a poor first half, they sense the coach is unsatisfied, so all he has to do is ask, "Well, what do you think?" ... And "You can hear a chorus of self-flagellation as every woman in the room is taking full responsibility ..." The coach can then interject some suggestions about how to improve in the second half. "Now they think you're a coaching genius. You haven't criticized them at all, you've just reconstructed them a bit ..."

Some youth coaches agree that girls are more sensitive to how a message is delivered.

"With boys, challenge them with negative comments and they can get stronger by trying to prove you wrong," says coach Jon Nishimoto, coach of Bishop O'Dowd's girls varsity team in Oakland, Calif., and the assistant coaching director for East Bay United/Bay Oaks. "With girls, if you approach them and say the wrong thing -- or say the right thing the wrong way -- they can turn you off and you can actually lose them from any further information that you give them."

Tony DiCicco, who coached the USA to a Women's World Cup title, Olympic gold and U-20 Women's World Cup, also has vast experience coaching youth soccer. In his book, "Catch Them Being Good," co-authored by Colleen Hacker, DiCicco interprets how he believed women felt they should be coached based on Mia Hamm's comment, "Coach us like men, treat us like women."

“I think what she meant was, ‘Coach us as you would coach an elite men’s team. And at the same time treat us like women, which means don’t be in our faces, don’t be confrontational. Challenge us, but do it in a humanistic way.”

Christian Lavers' 2011 FC Milwaukee U-18 girls team became the first Wisconsin team ever (boys or girls) to win a USYS National Championship.

“From a psychology standpoint, any player needs to know you care about them and their development -- how you express that may vary a little bit between the genders,” says Lavers, now the ECNL Director at FC Wisconsin. “I think the phrase ‘They have to know you care before they care what you know’ is true on both sides of the game. All coaches need to be true to their own personality -- because players will see right through a fake. Within your own personality, if the players know you are on their side through the ups and the downs, and that you are there to help them accomplish their personal goals -- you will be effective.”

Wes Hart, a former MLS player who is the Director of Coaching at Colorado Rush and has worked with the club’s U.S. Development Academy (boys) and ECNL (girls) teams.

“I try not to change my style too much when coaching the girls vs. the boys. I try to treat both genders as soccer players,” Hart says. “I definitely do not believe in treating all players the same, though. A coach needs to learn what makes their players tick. They have to figure out which players need their egos stroked and which players respond to having their head ripped off. They need to know which players learn verbally and which ones need to physically see things in order to process it. This is player management. And the best coaches are those who can differentiate the different needs of the players.

“I think a common misconception is that you should be ‘hard’ on the boys and a bit ‘easier’ on the girls. I’ve coached plenty of girls over the years who responded better when I was tougher on them. And plenty of boys who didn’t respond well to having their head ripped off. It just goes back to knowing your players.”

Cindi Harkes, recently named assistant coach of the NWSL’s Washington Spirit, is the U14-U18 girls Age Group Director for McLean Youth Soccer and has also coached boys youth soccer.

“I think boys in some regards are easier to coach because they just get after it,” Harkes says. “They prefer to play instinctively and therefore sometimes lack the discipline to improve their technique and tactical awareness. The mental aspect of the game is the area with boys that I least have to be concerned about. As I mentioned, they just get after it.

“Girls, on the other hand, respond very differently to coaches and coaching style. A large part of coaching girls is centered around the mental aspect of the game. Girls are more sensitive. These observations are for the majority of the girls I coach, but not all. They are very hard working and disciplined and also want to please.

“But I wouldn’t say that there are necessarily unique challenges to coaching girls vs. boys -- it is all the same game, it is just how you present it to your players. I also would not say that there is one certain coaching style that works best for each gender. I think each team, player and environment you coach in is unique and offers up different challenges.”