



Women coaches fracture the glass ceiling

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Issue: *Volume 28 Number 2*

In business it has been known for many years as 'the glass ceiling': that invisible yet impenetrable barrier to promotion beyond which female executives could not pass. The glass ceiling has been all the more frustrating because of its transparency; making visible to women a world of power and privilege to which they contributed, but could not join.

This article discusses whether a version of the glass ceiling is part of Australian coaching. How hard is it for women to break into the elite levels?

The consensus among the coaches we asked (three females and one male) is that a ceiling does exist but, depending on the sport, it is fracturing and will continue to do so as new generations and different ideas begin to take over.

Toni Cumpston, who heads the coaching program for women's hockey at the Victorian Institute of Sport, believes the change is recent. 'When I started coaching at this level in 2001, a lot of the girls I was working with who were members of the Hockeyroos had not had much exposure to female coaches,' she said.

'There is now much more female involvement and certainly no-one has ever said to me that they would prefer to be coached by a male.'

The former Victorian captain also coaches the Azuma Vipers women's team in the Australian Hockey League. Cumpston said that Hockey Australia was actively encouraging more women to become involved at the elite level, and had recently established a coaching apprenticeship program for women.

'You are certainly not fighting the administration, but I would say confidence is a big issue, especially when you are faced with the fact that in elite hockey male coaches have predominated, so administrators tend to go with what they know when they make appointments.'

Ellen Randell, who has taken charge of women's rowing teams at two Olympics, stresses the need for support. 'The only way you are going to break into the top level is if you have the backing of someone making the decisions at the top,' she said.

'I was so lucky to have had the support of the Australian head coach, Reinhold Batschi, when I started. He did a lot of work on coaching development, and when the Australian Institute of Sport started he was keen to promote women's coaching there.'

'I had done some good work and I suppose I was in the right place at the right time. I got the job as junior women's coach at the AIS and went from there.'

Early success at the World Junior Championships in 1989, where her Australian crew won the women's fours, breaking an Eastern bloc stranglehold on the event, propelled Randell into the senior ranks, with her teams reaching finals in the 1996 and 2000 Olympics. Now, after having two children, she is easing back into the sport, taking charge of the University of Technology, Sydney club.

As a female, she remained the exception to the rule throughout her years of elite coaching. 'Maybe there was one trip away in 15 years when there was another female coach on the same team,' Randell said. 'That is hard because you tend to be away for months on end — it can be very isolating.'

'However, my focus was always on getting results, so I lived with it.'

'But there is a barrier. You generally get reasonable support at club level, but if you are progressing to state level, you often find a tendency to pick male coaches ahead of females.'

'And when you start having babies, people just assume you are going to disappear. It could be organised if someone was selected to work with you so that you needn't be there every day, but that thinking doesn't exist.'

In breaking into elite tennis coaching, Emma Doyle sees no disadvantage in being a woman and not having played at grand slam level. It has been a spur to her achievement in other areas: completing her degree in sports coaching, obtaining the elite Level 3 certification for coaches and gaining experience at famous coaching academies overseas.

Indeed, she credits part of her success to the risks taken and the opportunities created during her travels, including her experience of being the only female tennis coach in all of northern Mexico.

Doyle is now established as an elite under-18s coach. For the past five years she has travelled with, and mentored, Australian female juniors competing in International Tennis Federation events, as well as coached Australian teams at world championship level. In addition, she has coached at the junior grand slam tournaments at Wimbledon and the Australian Open.

'One of my goals is to see more Australian elite junior females make the treacherous transition into the senior ranks,' Doyle said.

'To do this the girls have to face the challenge of international travel — that may appear glamorous and exciting on the surface, but it quickly degenerates into a long, hard slog in unfamiliar territory, amid a sea of unfamiliar faces. It can be emotionally threatening.'

'My experience over the past five years, and the fact I am a female, allows me to relate emotionally to the girls, thereby providing a stable environment on the other side of the world.'

Doyle recognises tennis as a male-dominated sport — 'A legacy of the tremendous success of our male players in the past' — she but does not believe it should be an impediment to female coaches and their particular skills. 'I believe we need a strong balance between managing a player's emotions and instilling a ruthless desire to succeed at the top level,' she said.

As a young female, Doyle is able to commit to overseas travel for half the year, but recognises that in the future this may not always be possible. She believes the passion and enthusiasm of youth has its advantages. 'If you are not passionate, you won't survive at the top level,' she said.

Doyle emphasises the need to stay in touch. 'Women's tennis is constantly changing, moving towards more power, more athleticism. Also, I've found that, to get the respect of the male coaches, you have to be confident in your ability and share a common goal in building a brighter and better future for young tennis players.'

Former Australian Football League (AFL) coach Terry Wheeler believes the traditional mould of the female athlete having a few seasons in the sport before retiring to family life or another career, is breaking down. 'There are increasing numbers of women who see their sport as a lifetime commitment,' he said.

'As a result, I think the rate of improvement in female sports has surpassed that of the males in recent years.'

Wheeler, who was recently appointed a high performance consultant at the Australian Sports Commission's Coaching and Officiating unit, said the attitudes of the latest generation of female athletes are now beginning to flow into coaching.

'There will be restrictions, such as family life, that will hold some women back, but as society changes, it is no longer the females who have to stay at home with the children,' he said.

'At that point it becomes a question of remuneration, but I don't think lack of knowledge or motivation is going to be a problem any more.'

The last bastion for females will be the major professional sports. Wheeler believes it will be a long time before a leading AFL, rugby union or league team appoints a female coach. 'However, I can see cricket as being more of a possibility, especially as it is played at an elite level by women who then might not want their coaching careers limited to the female side of the sport.'

The 'old boys' networks are still a potent force in maintaining the glass ceilings in many sports. 'But they are old boys, and they will eventually be replaced by generations that have a more accepting and all-encompassing view of females in society, and by extension, in sport,' Wheeler predicted.

Summary

- Currently, there are probably more female coaches at the elite level than ever before, but the numbers are still small.
- A breakthrough into the top level is still largely dependent on the attitudes of the males at the top.
- The demands of family life continue to be limiting for women, especially as they often emerge at the crucial breakthrough stage of a woman's coaching career.
- Changes in society's attitudes will eventually make it easier for female coaches to advance to the top level.

- Many sports are making positive and worthwhile efforts to encourage more women to develop their coaching careers.