

# Great Coaches See Potential, Not Stereotypes: Why Leaders Must Invest in Coach Education

By The Coaching HER® Team

Every decision leaders make- from training requirements to evaluation systems- directly influences how coaches show up for athletes. When coaches hold limiting beliefs or stereotypes about girls' abilities or motivations, those assumptions shape how girls see themselves, the opportunities they receive, and whether they stay engaged in sport. But when leaders set clear expectations for athlete-centered, research-informed coaching, they transform the environments coaches create on the field, in the gym, and in the rink. A coach's mindset is not an isolated issue, it is a systemic responsibility, and strong leadership is what ensures coaches see potential, not preconceived limits.

## THE PROBLEM OF PERSPECTIVE: When Bias Shapes Coaching Decisions

Unconscious gender biases remain one of the most persistent barriers affecting girls' confidence and ability to thrive in sport. Biases are often grounded in **gender essentialism**—the belief that girls possess fixed traits, supposedly rooted in biology, that make them less capable, less competitive, or less psychologically suited for sport than boys (Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024). Research confirms that many youth sport coaches hold essentialist views, measuring girls against a masculine ideal of athleticism and interpreting any deviation as deficiency (Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024; Avner et al., 2025).

### These beliefs have direct, measurable consequences:

- **The Confidence Gap Begins Early:** In elementary school, **69% of girls** rate their self-belief in sport as "good" or "very good," compared to **79% of boys** (Women in Sport, 2023). When coaches view girls as "less competitive," "more emotional," or "naturally timid," they often under-challenge them, inadvertently widening the confidence gap.

- **Societal Undervaluation Reinforces These Patterns:** Cultural messages echo biases. For instance, **Nearly one-third of parents** believe boys are inherently better at sports than girls (Women's

Sports Foundation, 2020). Only **30% of parents** say sport is "very important" for their daughters, compared to **41%** for their sons (Women in Sport, 2023). These beliefs shape resources, encouragement, and expectations. When societal stereotypes combine with coach bias, girls receive fewer challenges, fewer leadership opportunities, and less reinforcement of their athletic identity.

## When Stereotypes & Bias Overlap

Girls are not a monolithic group. Those with marginalized identities, including race, socioeconomic status, disability, and more, experience **layered and compounding forms of bias**. Leaders must understand that for many girls, sport is navigated through both gendered and racialized expectations.

- **Opportunity Gaps in Access:** Girls at heavily minority schools have access to only **39% of the sports opportunities** available to girls at heavily white schools — Aspen Institute, Project Play Revisited (2021)
- **Magnified Barriers for Racialized and Lower-Income Girls:** Girls of color and girls from lower-income households report facing barriers such as cost, bullying, racism, and lack of access at rates **10-15% higher** than white girls from higher-income families — Canadian Women & Sport (2022)

• **Racial Bias in Coaching Perceptions:** Research shows that Black girls' passion and assertiveness are often misread as aggression or attitude by coaches and referees, resulting in unfair judgment or exclusion —Women in Sport, Black Girls & Sport Project, (2025).

• **Cultural and Structural Barriers for Asian American Girls:** Asian American students are among the most likely to report that their schools do not offer sports they find interesting or relevant. —Aspen Institute (2021)

• **Barriers for Girls With Disabilities:** Girls with disabilities face the toughest access challenges of all, reporting the **lowest rates of believing they can become top athletes** (36%) — Activity Alliance, Annual Disability and Sport Survey (2025)

## The Result

Girls must navigate not only the physical and emotional demands of sport, but also a constant pressure to conform to narrow gendered expectations, expectations boys encounter less often, if at all. These forces undermine confidence, restrict opportunity, and push far too many girls out of sport before they have the chance to discover their full potential.

## THE SOLUTION: Leaders Must Build Systems That Teach Coaches to See Girls' Full Potential, Not Stereotypes

If stereotypes and unconscious bias shape how girls are coached, then leaders must shape the systems that undo those limitations. Coaches do not automatically know how to challenge harmful gender narratives or how to support girls with the confidence-building messages they need. Their mindset is shaped by what leaders teach, expect, and reward and their past experiences. The strongest action a governing body or sport organization can take is to mandate gender-transformative coach training. This form of training directly challenges the stereotypes that have historically limited girls and replaces them with athlete-centered, identity-affirming coaching strategies proven to help girls thrive.

## 1. Mandate Gender-Transformative Training Across the Coaching Workforce

### Why Training Must Be Required, Not Optional

The current coaching landscape was built around masculine norms. Girls enter sport having already absorbed cultural messages about what they "should" be (quiet, compliant, emotional, modest) and what they "shouldn't" be (loud, assertive, powerful, competitive, or physically dominant).

When coaches hold biases shaped by these norms, even unintentionally, girls experience:

- Less challenge and fewer opportunities to lead
- More scrutiny of their emotions, bodies, and behavior
- Fewer identity-affirming messages that strengthen confidence
- More pressure to fit narrow expectations instead of expressing their full athletic selves

Gender-transformative training disrupts this cycle. It helps coaches unlearn the essentialist beliefs that girls are "fragile," "passive," or "less competitive," and instead teaches them to see girls as capable, multifaceted athletes worthy of high expectations.

### What Coaching HER® Teaches Coaches

According to Challenging Gender Stereotypes, effective training must explicitly equip coaches to:

- Use inclusive, stereotype-free language
- Celebrate girls for being loud, strong, assertive, competitive, physical, and powerful
- Understand how stereotypes influence coach perceptions and athlete self-belief
- Affirm a wide range of girl identities, expressions, and motivations
- Respond supportively to girls' emotions instead of labeling them "too emotional"
- Coach the individual—not the stereotype or the societal expectation
- Address harmful comments and create team cultures that reject gender bias

When coaches learn these behaviors systematically—not by accident—girls receive consistent, confidence-building messages that reinforce their strength, belonging, and potential.



## 2. Prioritize Coaching Skills That Support Girls' Confidence, Identity, and Belonging

*Girls leave sport not because they lack ability but because environments fail to support them.* Girls repeatedly say they stay in sport when they:

- Feel seen, valued, and understood
- Have coaches who believe in them and challenge them appropriately
- Receive reinforcement for their effort, strength, leadership, and risk-taking
- Can express their emotions without judgment
- Can be their authentic selves, not watered-down versions designed to avoid criticism

*Girls also consistently report that confidence—not ability—is one of the strongest predictors of whether they continue in sport.* And confidence comes from coach behavior, not from talent alone.

*Holistic training* grounded in positive youth development and relational coaching gives coaches the tools to:

- Build strong connections with girls
- Encourage self-belief and resilience
- Validate girls' emotional and physical expression
- Understand how identity, culture, and gender affect sport experience
- Normalize mistakes, learning, and growth
- Help girls define success on their own terms

These skills matter just as much as technical instruction—often more—because they determine whether girls feel they belong in sport.

## 3. Link Training to Accountability, Expectations, and Coach Evaluation

Training transforms coaching only when it becomes *part of the organization's expectations and evaluation systems*. Leaders must embed gender-transformative coaching into:

- Certification requirements
- Continuing education
- Annual coach evaluations
- Performance reviews
- Organizational culture

*Evaluations should assess whether coaches:*

- Use stereotype-free communication
- Challenge girls at levels that build competence and confidence
- Provide leadership opportunities to all girls
- Celebrate girls' assertiveness, strength, and competitive spirit
- Create environments where every girl feels welcomed and valued
- Address language and behaviors that reinforce stereotypes

**Girls notice when coaches believe in them.**

They also notice when coaches limit them. Systems must reward the former and correct the latter.



#### 4. Leaders Set the Standard for What Girls Experience in Sport

UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that ***policy-makers and sport governing bodies play the decisive role in shaping whether sport becomes a place of equity*** and opportunity or a place where harmful norms persist. Leaders control:

- What coaches are taught
- What coaches are expected to do
- What coaches are held accountable for
- What environments are funded and prioritized
- What coach behaviors are permitted or discouraged

When leaders mandate gender-transformative training, they disrupt the status quo and ensure that girls receive the messages that help them stay, grow, and thrive in sport.

Girls hear:

- ***Your strength is powerful.***
- ***Your voice matters.***
- ***Your assertiveness is leadership.***
- ***Your emotions are valid.***
- ***You belong here—exactly as you are.***
- ***Sport is for you***

Gender-transformative coach education is not a small operational upgrade, it is **a strategic, cultural shift** that ensures every girl is coached in a way that affirms her worth, expands her possibilities, and supports her growth as an athlete and as a human being.

#### Sources

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