## **Representation Wins: How Sports Leaders Can Recruit and Retain Girls Through Role Models**

### **Why Representation Is a Game-Changer**

The numbers tell a story — and not the one we want. Only **27% of youth sport coaches in the U.S. are women**, and for girls’ teams, that number is even lower in certain sports (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2023). In many programs, girls can go through entire seasons without ever having a female coach, referee, or administrator.

The **Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport** has consistently shown that representation matters: girls are more likely to start and stay in sport when they see women in leadership positions. This “see it to be it” effect applies whether the sport is soccer, hockey, basketball, swimming, or any other discipline.

When girls have visible female role models, they begin to see a future for themselves in sport — not only as athletes, but as leaders, mentors, and professionals.

### **The Data Behind the Impact**

* When girls see themselves represented in sport leadership, **retention improves by 33%** (Women in Sport UK, 2021).
* **63% of girls** say they’d be more likely to keep playing if more women were coaching and leading teams (Canadian Women & Sport, 2022).
* Girls who feel heard by their coach are **2.5× more likely** to stay in sport (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2020).
* Sports with higher percentages of women coaches tend to have stronger recruitment and retention of female athletes (LaVoi & Wasend, 2023).

The takeaway? Sports leaders that actively recruit and support women in coaching create a culture that is more inclusive, relatable, and inspiring for girls.

### **Breaking Down the Barriers**

Recruiting more women coaches isn’t as simple as sending out a flyer. **Dr. Nicole M. LaVoi’s research** points to systemic barriers: lack of confidence, time constraints, and the perception that coaching is a “male domain.” Many women don’t step forward because no one has personally asked them — and they may not see themselves represented in recruitment materials.

### **How Communities Can Take Action Now**

* **Ask Directly and Personally** — Women, especially mothers of players, are far more likely to consider coaching when personally invited by someone they know and trust.
* **Start Small** — Offer assistant coaching, skills clinics, or seasonal volunteer roles as entry points.
* **Build the Next Generation** — Create mentorship pathways for high school and college-aged women to shadow and learn from current coaches.
* **Offer Support and Flexibility** — Provide training, mentorship, and adaptable schedules to fit around work and family responsibilities.
* **Celebrate Role Models** — Feature female coaches in local media, newsletters, and social media so girls and the community can see them leading.

### **Why This Matters for Girls**

When girls see women leading, it changes the narrative about what’s possible. They understand that sport is a lifelong space for them — not just in childhood but as a career path, a leadership platform, and a community they can always belong to.

As the Tucker Center’s findings make clear: visible representation in sport leadership isn’t just about equity, it’s a proven driver of participation and retention. Schools, clubs, and organizations that commit to recruiting and supporting women in these roles will see the payoff in **higher retention, greater engagement, and stronger, more confident athletes**.