

Men vs Women

Having recently jumped from 6 years coaching in the Men's space to coaching Women in a high-performance environment for the first time, I wanted to share my thoughts on some of the key differences I have experienced.

Rugby is a sport renowned for its physicality, technical complexities and teamwork, driven by strong work ethic, mental resilience and tactical intelligence. In this essay, we will delve into the learned differences in coaching men and women, focusing on physical, mental, and technical aspects. In developing my current Game Model, careful consideration and the acknowledgement of known differences was forefront of mind.

Physical Differences:

There is an equal appetite for men and women to want to work hard and challenge themselves to be the best athletes they can possible be. With the advancement in the Sports Science realm, and the increased exposure for the women's game to high performance environments, we are seeing an increase in the quality of female athletes we are producing in Rugby Union.

The physical disparities between male and female rugby players are evident in various dimensions such as strength, speed, and body composition. Men typically possess greater muscle mass and upper-body strength, influencing the dynamics of Set Piece, ruck and maul, and all collisions. As coaches, we must acknowledge these distinctions and tailor training programs accordingly. For instance, men's training might emphasize powerlifting and explosive strength, while women's programs focus more on functional strength and agility.

Women often exhibit superior flexibility and lower body strength, which can be beneficial in evasion and agility-based movements. Effective coaching involves leveraging these strengths, refining techniques that capitalize on women's physical attributes, and integrating specific training modules, strongly connected back to Game Model, that cater to their unique requirements.

Mental Differences:

The mental aspects of coaching in rugby union extend beyond gender, considering individual differences in personality, motivation, and cognitive processing. I think generational understanding is significantly important in relation to how you communicate with, and educate players, and what platforms you use to facilitate this. Gender specific variations in communication styles, team dynamics, and mental resilience can influence coaching strategies. I firmly believe authenticity must underpin your coaching approach regardless of what gender or program you are working with.

My experience in the Men's space often involved a more direct communication style, with an emphasis on clear hierarchies and collaborative decisive decision-making. I found varied success in employing motivational tactics that appealed to competitiveness, individual achievement and themed, team-based goals. I found success in the men's space through the facilitation of more structured 1 on 1 meetings and challenging players to invest in the content of these meetings. I found this to be beneficial in challenging the cognitive learning process. In conjunction with this, I found that my communication around the learning process needed to be accurate, clear and firmly directed towards the desired outcome.

My current experiences in the women's space have forced me to be a little more collaborative in my communication, inviting players into the conversation piece. I believe this is imperative in building deeper, personal connections with female players, in order to gain their trust. Authenticity remains a strong focal point in my communication style, however I have checked my language and dialogue tone to get the desired outcome of the communication piece.

Mental resilience is a crucial component in rugby, which manifests differently between genders. Men may draw motivation from assertive challenges, while women may respond better to positive reinforcement and collaborative problem-solving. As coaches we must recognize these nuances and tailor our motivational strategies accordingly, fostering a positive and effective team culture.

The exploration of mental variances between men and women extends to the realm of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, plays a pivotal role in shaping the mental dynamics of rugby players.

Research suggests that women often exhibit higher levels of emotional intelligence compared to men. This heightened emotional intelligence can profoundly impact the coaching approach, influencing how coaches communicate, motivate, and build team cohesion. In coaching women's rugby, the ability to recognize and harness emotional intelligence becomes an asset.

For women, the ability to understand and navigate complex social dynamics within a team setting is often pronounced. I have found that fostering a supportive team culture, where players feel emotionally connected and understood, can significantly enhance performance. Empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, is something that I consider a strength of mine. This has become a powerful tool for my introduction to working with women, allowing me to connect with players on a deeper level and address individual needs effectively.

In contrast, my experiences with men have involved a focus on channelling emotions in a constructive manner. Men may benefit from coaching strategies that encourage the acknowledgment and regulation of emotions and fostering resilience in high-pressure situations that are specifically game based. For instance, creating an environment where emotional expression is welcomed but controlled can empower male players to handle stress and challenges more effectively on the field.

Ultimately, understanding and leveraging the emotional intelligence of players, whether male or female, can greatly impact team dynamics and overall performance. Coaches must recognize that emotional intelligence is not a one-size-fits-all concept and should tailor their

approach to capitalize on the unique strengths and challenges associated with the emotional dynamics of both men's and women's rugby teams. In doing so, we as coaches can contribute to the holistic development of players, nurturing not only their physical and technical skills but also their emotional intelligence for success on and off the field.

Technical Differences:

Technical proficiency in rugby union encompasses a wide range of skills. From the basic core skills of passing, kicking and tackling to positional specific skill, game awareness. While the core skills remain consistent across genders, we as coaches must adapt our teaching methodologies to account for variations in physical capabilities, playing styles and cognitive learning process. I believe that connection again back to Game Model is significant in how you frame technical content of your program, technical install and on field delivery.

Game Model provides the framework for playing style and provides clarity and confidence around the things that underpin it. This naturally draws the key technical aspects that become core components of your program.

In the scrum, for instance, men's teams may emphasize raw power and stability, requiring coaches to fine-tune techniques that leverage their physical advantages. In contrast, women's scrummaging may focus more on connection and technique, prioritizing agility and cohesion over sheer force.

One significant difference I have experienced is the need for female players to understand the "Why" behind technical and strategical components of the game. I believe the emphasis on understanding the rationale behind the technical aspects of the game goes beyond mere execution; it fosters a deeper comprehension and engagement with the game generally. The lack of exposure and experience in dedicated pathways for female rugby players has left a gap in the development and understanding of the game. I think there is also a strong connection back to psychological make up of females and their need for deeper understanding.

Understanding the "Why" behind technical components creates a sense of purpose and confidence amongst female athletes. Women players, like their male counterparts, benefit from knowing the strategic objectives behind specific skills and system. Whether it be a particular core skill, attack or defence system content, or a set-piece strike play, comprehending the purpose behind these elements provides a framework for confident decision-making on the field. For example, understanding the specific outcome and rationale behind a specific passing drill that challenges pass selection helps female players recognize when and why to execute it during a match, creating a more competent player.

I also believe that when female players understand the "Why," it fosters a sense of ownership over their development, giving them clarity and direction. Connecting back to the collaborative communication principle outlined earlier, instead of perceiving technical training as a set of prescribed tasks, players become engaged in their learning journey. This engagement is crucial for skill retention and continuous improvement. As coaches we should encourage players to ask questions, seek clarification, and actively participate in discussions about the strategic and technical complexities of the game. For instance, involving female

players in discussions about the tactical advantages of a particular Attack System encourages productive thinking and a deeper connection to the team's overall strategy.

I believe that understanding the "Why" also plays a pivotal role in building a culture of collaboration and cohesion within the women's landscape. When players comprehend the strategic objectives behind technical components, which is built through collaboration, it fosters effective communication and teamwork on the field. For example, installing the purpose and desired outcome of our Attack System and Shape and making sure there is shared understanding gives players the confidence to coordinate their roles, positioning and execution more cohesively on field. This shared knowledge contributes to a sense of unity and collective purpose, essential elements for success in team environments.

The emphasis on understanding the "Why" behind technical components is a crucial aspect of coaching women's rugby. Beyond the enhancement of individual skills, this approach contributes to the development of great rugby brains, fosters a sense of ownership among players, promotes team cohesion, and deepens the players' understanding of the game. As we continue to invest in imparting the "Why," we not only empower female players with the knowledge to excel on the field but also grow with the detail required to be professional rugby players.

In conclusion, coaching rugby union at different levels and across different genders demands an acute awareness of the physical, mental, and technical differences between men and women. I believe it is imperative that we embrace these distinctions, adapting our approach and philosophy to unlock the full potential of the player. By acknowledging and capitalizing on the unique attributes of each gender, we as coaches can foster an environment that challenges our athletes in the most efficient and productive manner.