

Sport Psychology in Coaching Women in Rugby Union

Introduction

It has been said that sports psychology plays a huge role in enhancing athletic performance not only just in men's sport, but it is also very much alive in women's sport as well, the idea of fostering mental resilience, and promoting well-being amongst all athletes. Rugby union can be a physically demanding and psychologically intense sport and it is here that the application of sport psychology with women who play rugby is extremely crucial. In my learning over the years of coaching women in rugby union, psychological considerations have more significance due to gender specific challenges like, societal expectations, along with the evolving landscape of women's participation in a male dominated contact sport. Throughout this essay we will explore the intersection of sport psychology and coaching women in rugby union, we will touch on and examine key psychological principles, gender dynamics, implications and coaching strategies for athlete development.

The Rise of Women's Rugby Union

With all the positive media coverage over the past decade women's rugby union has experienced a significant growth not just nationally but globally as a whole, with this increased participation, and institutional support. *Cited in "Why Did I Really Want to Coach? To Help Girls"* The 2017 Women's Rugby World Cup triggered a turning point, with the showcasing of elite female athletes and challenging traditional gender norms in sport, with the most viewed and most socially engaging world rugby event of the year with 45 million views. (Fittes, A. (2023). However regardless of these developments, coaching practices remained a male-centric model, failing to address the unique psychological and physiological needs of the female players, (Rugby AU & La Trobe University), (2023).

Psychological Demands of Rugby Union

Rugby union demands high levels of mental toughness, focus, and emotional regulation. Players will have to cope with physical collisions, strategic decision-making under pressure, and fluctuating team dynamics.

Key psychological skills include:

Confidence and self-efficacy: Belief in one's ability to perform effectively.

Motivation: Intrinsic and extrinsic drivers that sustain effort and commitment.

Resilience: The capacity to recover from setbacks and maintain performance.

Team cohesion: Trust, communication, and shared goals among teammates.

Stress management: Techniques to regulate anxiety and maintain composure.

As mentioned in Fittes, A. (2023). “Why Did I Really Want to Coach? To Help Girls”: for women in rugby, these demands are compounded by societal stereotypes, limited resources, and underrepresentation in coaching and leadership roles.

Gender-Specific Challenges in Coaching

Research highlights several gender-specific challenges faced by women in rugby union:

Masculine coaching environments: High-performance rugby often operates within male-dominated cultures, where women coaches and players navigate power dynamics and surveillance. (Fittes, A. (2023).

Underdeveloped tackle coaching: Studies reveal that women’s tackle coaching is often minimal or inadequate, leading to increased injury risk and reduced confidence. (Dane, K., Foley, G., Hendricks, S., & Wilson, F. (2023).

Mental health concerns: Female athletes report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders, influenced by biopsychosocial factors such as hormonal fluctuations, body image, and societal expectations. (Hawke, D. (2021).

Retention and motivation: Women and girls are more likely to leave the sport due to negative coaching experiences, lack of support, and feeling undervalued. (Rugby AU & La Trobe University. (2023).

Psychological Strategies for Coaching Women

Effective coaching of women in rugby union requires a psychologically informed approach that integrates empathy, empowerment, and individualized support. Key strategies include:

1. Creating a Safe and Inclusive Environment

Coaches must foster psychological safety, where players feel respected, heard, and free to express themselves. This includes addressing microaggressions, promoting diversity, and challenging gender biases.

2. Empowering Through Autonomy

Encouraging athlete autonomy enhances motivation and self-determination. Coaches should involve players in decision-making, goal-setting, and tactical discussions, reinforcing their agency and leadership. (Fittes, A. (2023).

3. Mental Skills Training

Structured programs in visualization, self-talk, mindfulness, and goal setting can improve focus, confidence, and emotional regulation. These skills should be tailored to individual needs and integrated into training routines.

4. Holistic Athlete Development

Coaching should extend beyond performance to include personal growth, academic support, and life skills. Recognizing athletes as whole individuals fosters long-term engagement and well-being.

5. Gender-Sensitive Communication

Language and feedback should be constructive, specific, and free from gendered assumptions. Coaches must be aware of how tone, body language, and phrasing impact female athletes' self-perception.

Case Study: Coaching Practices and Player Outcomes

A systematic review of rugby union coaching practices found that athlete outcomes—such as performance, engagement, and well-being—are significantly influenced by coaching style, communication, and psychological support. (*Malkin, M., Morgan, P., Yan, J., & Eather, N. (2025)*). In women's rugby, positive coaching relationships were linked to increased retention, reduced injury rates, and enhanced team cohesion.

Mental Health in Elite Women's Rugby

Elite female rugby players face unique mental health challenges, including stress urinary incontinence (SUI), menstrual cycle-related symptoms, and gender-specific injury prevalence. (*Hawke, D. (2021)*). Coaches must be educated on these issues and provide access to high-quality support services. Mental health literacy, referral pathways, and open dialogue are essential components of athlete care.

The Role of Female Coaches

Female coaches bring valuable perspectives to women's rugby, yet they remain underrepresented in high-performance settings. A Foucauldian feminist analysis revealed how female coaches navigate disciplinary power and dominant knowledges in masculine environments. (*Fittes, A. (2023)*). Supporting women coaches through mentorship, leadership training, and institutional change is critical to advancing gender equity in sport.

Recommendations for Practice

To optimize sport psychology in coaching women in rugby union, the following recommendations are proposed:

Coach education: Integrate sport psychology and gender sensitivity into certification programs.

Research and evaluation: Conduct longitudinal studies on psychological outcomes in women's rugby.

Policy development: Establish guidelines for mental health support, tackle coaching, and inclusive practices.

Athlete voice: Involve players in shaping coaching strategies and organizational culture.

Resource allocation: Invest in female-specific training, facilities, and support staff.

Conclusion

Sport psychology offers powerful tools for enhancing the coaching of women in rugby union. By addressing gender-specific challenges, promoting mental skills, and fostering inclusive environments, coaches can empower female athletes to thrive both on and off the field. As women's rugby continues to grow, integrating psychological principles into coaching practice is not only beneficial—it is essential for sustainable success and athlete well-being.

References

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