

FEMALE COACHES – WHY ARE THERE SO FEW AT THE TOP LEVEL?

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With the emergence of Elka Graham as the world's top female 200m Freestyle swimmer, and her coach Narelle Simpson, the question of female coaches at the top level comes up again. Over the years it has been apparent in Australia, and overseas, that at the upper level (Olympic and National Teams) there have been very few women appointed to the coaching staffs of those teams.

Why?

What ... if anything ... should we do about it?

I believe the reasons can be summed up in a few words ... **OPPORTUNITY** and **AFFINITY**.

OPPORTUNITY is closely allied with good luck. Olympic coaches are selected from people with swimmers on the team – usually in the top eight in the world. You need to have been quite lucky to have had such a talented swimmer walk in the door. Most women simply never have the opportunity to become elite coaches, although there are clearly those who have the academic qualifications and the knowledge of swimming and could easily be Olympic coaches if they had the good luck to have just one highly talented swimmer and the opportunity to be solely in charge of a program attracting potential Olympic swimmers.

In swimming, women have been so successful in other areas...

- Φ Learn-to-Swim
- Φ Junior Coaching
- Φ Baby and Toddler Teaching
- Φ Teaching at all the lower levels
- Φ And in administration, selling, managing, etc.,

...that they just have no time left for coaching top swimmers. As a rule, the part of the swimming program in women's hands is the part which makes money. Top level coaching costs money. Most swimming schools, and most Australian swimming coaching, works on the "Swimming School" basis – consist of females who run all the lower levels – with a male senior coach who looks after a small number of elite swimmers, travelling around Australia and around the world with them, which he couldn't afford to do unless he had a solid Swim School behind him.

Only at the Sports Institutes, AIS and the State Institutes can the financial situation be a little different. However, Institutes pick their coaches from the "top" (based on the performance of their swimmers) coaches around, who, at present, are men. Are the Institutes the places which should be stepping outside the circle and promoting female coaches? If they did, a very different pattern might emerge – but the first step in a new direction is a very difficult one to take! So, financially, women are needed at the bottom of the pyramid to support the soaring tip – with a male coach flitting around the world with his top few swimmers. Women do not have the opportunity to try themselves out at the top.

Realistically, a huge amount of good luck is involved in having a great swimmer come into your program. To become great, a child needs all the things we all know...

- Φ Year-round warm water
- Φ Good teaching
- Φ Good motivation
- Φ A streamlined shape
- Φ To start early
- Φ Suitable economic situation

- Φ Keen parents in a stable marriage
- Φ Dedication
- Φ Good health, etc.

...but as well he/she needs natural ability ... **TALENT** at swimming. And this is where **LUCK** comes in.

The good coach (and good parents) can have everything else right, but without TALENT it's going to be almost impossible to get into the Olympic Team. Twenty or thirty years ago this may not have been the case, but today – with many more children swimming and with all those other factors available in more places – only with TALENT as well will the swimmer be good enough to put his coach up with the elite. We can all look back to coaches who became **GREAT** – only because they were lucky enough to have a great, talented swimmer join their group.

The second issue ... keeping women from being top coaches ... after opportunity is **AFFINITY**. Do women want to be Olympic Coaches? Or do they have more affinity with other levels of the coaching pyramid?

The hours needed to be an elite coach make the job totally incompatible with woman's natural role of being a mother and rearing a family. It is hard enough to avoid divorce when the man is a swimming coach keeping extraordinary hours and never having a weekend off (what's a weekend off?), let alone if the mother and home-maker has these hours!

For the smooth running of the home, the mother needs to be there at breakfast time...

- To get the children up
- Fed ... breakfast, "the most important meal of the day"
- Their lunches prepared
- To get them off to school
- She needs to be there with a supporting shoulder when they come home
- Or to take them to after-school activities
- She needs to prepare dinner at a reasonable hour
- Set up the routine of homework and determine bed time

From time immemorial women have done the home-making duties. Are we going totally against nature in trying to break this pattern? Is that going to make happy households? Are women themselves going to feel guilty? Feel they have done the wrong thing? Is it so bad not having elite female coaches if we have happy households? Women have great affinity with the swimming profession (because it is so concerned with children), but their role is not necessarily to be Olympic coaches.

Some female coaches – and there are about 50% males, 50% females coaching at the lower levels in both Australia and the United States – have a perception that men don't want them up in the top coaching positions and would ostracise them in a team situation. They think there is "back-room" talk to keep them out. I spoke to John Leonard, the Executive Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association, who is in those "back rooms" and he says male coaches do not feel that way at all, and I believe the same is true of Australian male coaches. **What everybody should want is the best coach for the job.**

Another issue is the media, whose job it is to be controversial and make stories. People would just accept the female coaches who are up there if the media did not treat it as peculiar in some way.

The reporters will ask the female coach *"Isn't it hard in the male-dominated world of elite coaching? The men must hate you being successful."* Actually, swimming people don't worry about the gender of the coach – they are only concerned with the swimmer's results.

Because the female's affinity may not be to be seen as tough, ruthless, commanding – as we perceive some of our top male coaches to be – an option some female coaches have adopted is to make themselves available for managerial positions on elite teams. This is a good move as it uses the female's talents of administration and "mothering" to best advantage and it gives contact with all that happens

on a team. A team is very well served when this happens as swimmers have a great deal of respect for coaches.

With equal opportunity and anti-discrimination – things will change – there will be more female elite coaches – but it will only happen slowly. In the meantime, I consider gender is immaterial. What we need is good, committed coaches – financially secure by whatever means. There should be no discrimination by males, but equally, no ridiculous over-zealous determination by females to “get women up there”.

We need the best for the job ... be they male or female!