

More women and girls are playing soccer, but where are the female coaches?
by Alix Bruch



In the dying seconds of the 2015 U Sports women's soccer national championship, the players on the University of British Columbia bench are chanting, "UBC! UBC!"

Head coach Marisa Colzie stands on the sideline with her hands neatly placed behind her back. It is her first season with the team, and she is seven months pregnant.

The referee blows her whistle and the players rush onto the field, piling on top of one another. They are national champions.

Four years later, sitting in her office at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, N.S., Colzie digests the fact that of 53 teams in U Sport women's soccer, she is one of just eight female head coaches.

Colzie doesn't need to say anything to understand how she feels about that number.

"I look a lot of places and I'm very astounded," says Colzie. She is referring to the lack of female representation not just in soccer, but across the board.

Colzie says there are many reasons why we aren't seeing females in leadership positions, but one is a result of flawed hiring practices at universities. She says a big

issue is that most of the hiring is done by athletic directors who are disproportionately male.

Athletic directors have long been scrutinized for having a tendency to hire who they are comfortable with and people that look like them. Some AD's will argue that women simply aren't suited to the job.

Colzie is proving them wrong.

In her first two seasons at SMU, Colzie took her team from dead last to a fifth place finish and their first playoff appearance since 2012. Prior to her move to Halifax and her national championship at UBC, Colzie was the assistant coach of the Simon Fraser University men's soccer team who compete in the American NCAA.

Her son is now almost four years old, and with a mom who coaches soccer and a dad who coaches football, he spends a lot of time on the field. Colzie says providing support for women who want to have a family is crucial to keep female coaches in the game.

"It has to be a safe and open environment for pregnancy and children around," says Colzie. "It's important for women to see that they can have a career, and they can be mothers, and they can go on maternity leave and come back and still do what they want to do."



'A really long way to go'

Down the road at Dalhousie University, women's soccer head coach Cindy Tye is on the field putting down cones and pushing nets into place. Meanwhile, the players are on the sideline lacing up their cleats when one shouts, "look who it is!" The players all smile and turn to see the assistant coach walking across Wickwire field holding her seven month old baby. He is a regular at practice.

Back in her office, Cindy Tye thoughtfully reflects on her career. The white walls are bare and her desk is virtually empty, leaving no obvious clue that she is an accomplished and highly respected coach.

Tye is another of the eight female head coaches in U Sport women's soccer. Similar to Colzie, she is discouraged by the numbers.

"I mean, I think it's coming," says Tye. "I feel like it's way different than it was a decade ago, even. But it has a long way to go. Statistically if you look at it, it's got a *really* long way to go."

Tye is in her fourth season at the helm of the Dalhousie women's soccer team. A home-grown Nova Scotian, she has extensive coaching experience at the provincial level, including serving as a coach and Director for Soccer Nova Scotia's Regional Centre of Excellence. Tye's expertise also reaches the national and international stage, most recently taking on the role of assistant coach for Canada's U17 team.

Tye may be a fixture in the local soccer community, but it wasn't an easy or necessarily straightforward path.

"If you want to be good at it, you have to work at it, just like everybody else. If you're not good enough, you're not good enough," says Tye.

Approachable and light-hearted off the field, and demanding and focused on the field, Tye is a professional. Her perspective on the competency and effectiveness of coaches is not gendered, which Tye says is important to maintain while navigating issues around the absence of women in coaching.

"For me, I think diversity is important. I don't believe it has to be all one way or the other. The male voice or different background can be just as valuable, but I do think it is really important for young females to see females in the lead," says Tye.

But why aren't we seeing females in head coaching positions?

In addition to a lack of opportunity and lack of representation, Tye attributes family demands as one of the biggest factors keeping women out of the profession. A mother of two, Tye admits her career put a lot of strain on her marriage early on.

“We had to change. People traditionally have supper together, but we don’t have supper together. We eat breakfast together. I can take them to school, but I can’t necessarily be there when they get home,” says Tye.

As a coach, mentor, and mother, Tye likes to say if you can see it, you can be it.

“For young players to see women in front, making hard decisions, having hard conversations...that’s important.”



Potential paths to change

Both Tye and Colzie boast impressive resumes and have managed to maintain a successful work-life balance, but competence means nothing if you can’t get in the door.

According to statistics released by the Government of Canada in 2015, women represent only 25% of all coaches in Canadian sport.

At the Canadian university sport level, where most full-time coaching positions are, the number of female head coaches is declining. These numbers are discouraging, especially considering the growing participation of women and girls in sport.

Speaking on the phone from his office at the University of Toronto, Bruce Kidd audibly exhales.

“I sigh because I’ve been involved in this issue for 50 years,” says Kidd. “And there are cycles of breakthrough and then it’s almost as if it reverts to the culture of masculinity.”

Kidd is a professor of kinesiology and physical education, and a former Olympian and Canadian track and field athlete. Over the years, he has been involved in a variety of initiatives to advance women in sport. Most recently, Kidd was named to a federal working group aiming to achieve gender equity in sport.

“I have absolutely no doubt that there are qualified women who could become coaches,” says Kidd. “But the trick is implementation of policy and then monitoring for compliance, and that has not always been there.”

Kidd says there have been a variety of approaches taken to increase the number of women in coaching. One is what Kidd calls a form of affirmative action, which gives young women with interest, aptitude, and ability, opportunities to develop.

Another approach is to ensure that hiring decisions always consider female applicants.

To do this, Kidd and his colleagues have proposed a version of the National Football League’s Rooney Rule for all coaching positions in Canadian sport. The NFL policy requires teams to interview candidates of ethnic minorities for head coaching positions. Applying the rule to Canadian sport would mean including at least one woman on the short-list for a head coaching position.

“The trouble is, the policies are there, but unless an independent group like ourselves comes along and monitors...it’s not being enforced,” says Kidd.

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport (CAAWS) is an organization that is working with Canadian sports associations to recruit and support women in coaching.

Partnering with the Coaching Association of Canada, CAAWS offers the Female Coach Mentorship Model to help women advance their career. The model is part of their mission to prepare women for a career in coaching, and provides them the tools to stay there.

“We look at the systems that surround women coaches and we ask what are the ways that this system is letting them down or not supporting them to get the mentorship and professional development that they need,” says Greer Gemin, CAAWS Marketing and Communications Coordinator.

“If people aren’t doing the work to do that kind of questioning and making sure things are inclusive, then you could have as many women coaches as you can get,

but the question of keeping them is whether or not they feel supported and included in that environment.”

The lack of female coaches in women’s soccer, and women’s sport as a whole, is a multi-layered issue. There isn’t one obvious reason why women aren’t in these positions.

Colzie and Tye speak from direct experience, understanding firsthand the barriers that keep women out. Kidd approaches the issue as an academic, former athlete, and feminist-ally, pointing to flaws and bias in the hiring process. CAAWS takes a systemic approach, looking at the environment clubs and organizations are creating for female coaches to succeed and stay in leadership positions.

What they all agree on is the value of mentorship. Initially, neither Tye nor Colzie were interested in becoming career-coaches. It wasn’t until they had a mentor that offered support and told them they could do it, that they started on the path.

Both coaches are actively investing in mentorship on a regional and national scale. They hope to see more female players in coaching courses and mentorship programs here in Nova Scotia, and across the country.

“I want to give females a chance,” says Colzie. “I want to keep them in the game. So who better to do it than me?”