

NEW COLUMN: EMPOWERING FEMALE COACHES

Redress the gender balance in S&C: women need more voice

By **Val Craft**, PGDip, PGCert, ASCC, *Val the Coach*

INTRODUCTION

Strength and conditioning has historically been, and remains, a male-dominated profession, with female S&C coaches in the minority. Yet, female coaches have much to offer the profession: they bring different insights and skill sets to the field, insights that have the capacity to significantly enhance the provision of S&C at multiple levels. However, without direct action, women may never be able to exploit these opportunities.

What can be done?

Strength and conditioning is still a male-dominated profession: what can be done to change this and to help women find more opportunities? Part of this involves the provision and sharing of information, information that can facilitate individual and co-ordinated action. This new column aims to be a forum via which information can be shared in a manner that informs, inspires, leads and questions. The information itself will be diverse, drawn from a range of sources and presented in a range of formats, including inspirational stories, advice drawn from experience, and case studies of actions taken by individuals, groups and even whole organisations. There will also be more traditional theoretical articles on aspects of interest.

To kick off the column, I outline in this article some of my own feelings and experiences as a female entering the profession. I found it a little daunting at times coming into S&C spaces as a female coach. With a background in both sports coaching and social sciences, including a PGDip in women's studies, I wanted to help support the S&C community to empower female coaches, to open up more

opportunities and to enhance the profession as a whole through doing so.

Waiting in the Performance Education Centre (PEC), at St Mary's University one early September weekend, I felt very small and outnumbered as around 70 new students for the distance MSc course on strength and conditioning came together for the induction weekend. You could almost feel the testosterone in the air. The female contingent in this cohort was a significant minority: in that year group there were 69 males and 11 females enrolled. As a woman, it was awesome to see that one of our lecturers was female and was present for the introductions: Emily Cushion came with a strong female presence that made me feel inspired to be in this room full of men.

Opening up the space for females

At a Special Interest Group meeting a year or so later, I mentioned the need to inspire more females within S&C and was beaten down by an older male member with a longer history than mine in the game. I felt silenced. I felt misunderstood. Women are not just small men, as has clearly been demonstrated in sports science literature.

AUTHOR'S BIO



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Val is an accredited S&C coach with a background not

only in sports coaching, but also in the social sciences. Val is a qualified and experienced instructor and coach in many sports including football, snowboarding, weightlifting and indoor rowing. She completed a postgraduate certificate with distinction in strength and conditioning at St Mary's University and passed the UKSCA accreditation first time. Val has also completed a PGDip in women's studies at Ruskin College in Oxford and has a keen desire to help support more S&C female coaches. She is currently studying for a MSc in applied sport and exercise physiology.

‘There are far more opportunities for – as well as interests in – women’s sport on the horizon now’



There are both biological and societal differences in the way in which both men and women experience this life, and it is therefore important to note this and make considerations to open the space up for female coaches.

I realise that the majority of the readership of this journal is male. And someone once told me that trying to talk about opportunities for women within the S&C space is like trying to get turkeys to vote for Christmas! I do therefore hope I am not turning you off, but rather encouraging you to tune in. My personal thought is that if we all work together to open up the S&C space and

create more opportunities for each other we all win. This is not a zero-sum game and we do not need to fear scarcity if we work to create opportunity. There are far more opportunities for – as well as interests in – women’s sport on the horizon now, what with the advancement of UK women’s sport being driven by more media coverage, as well as great results within sports previously dominated by male coverage – sports such as women’s cricket, football and rugby to name but a few.

As a woman in S&C, I can tell you that it can be more challenging to feel seen and heard. By the very nature of the social constructs within our language, the discipline of strength and conditioning is heavily weighted towards the male community, due to the connotations of the word strength being highly correlated as a male attribute. The females in the profession are therefore up against it from the outset. We can change this though and it takes all of us to recognise the maleness of the profession and to help reduce this as a barrier for women to enter S&C courses and positions within the field.

I personally feel lucky that Dan Cleather was the course lead for the course I was on. He made me feel seen and heard as a female entering this male-dominated space. He made me feel like I belonged – when much of the testosterone-filled environment did not.

Call to action

This column is a call to action to encourage practitioners within S&C to consider ways in which we can help the profession to have less male dominance and encourage more females into coaching. There is no yin without yang. To have more female perspectives in the profession can only enhance it and provide more opportunity for us all.

As discussed, this column aims to help present ideas and stories of how we can work together to help female coaches within the profession. This is an opportunity for us to grow our influence, to help each other thrive and make S&C a true career path for the female coach. What ideas do you have and use within your current positions and companies which help redress the balance? What experiences have you had that could help other coaches, and what information could you share that can move us forward? Please get in touch: you can reach me at valthecoach@yahoo.com.