

What Can I Do?

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What Athletic Coaches Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Young Women

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 coaches of girls’ and young women’s sports from around the state of Utah. Sports participation is a widely recognized pathway to leadership, and coaches are in an ideal position to positively influence their athletes. This discussion focused on how coaches can first lead by example and then work to support girls’ personal development and resilience. Attendees also emphasized the importance of building team unity and influencing other stakeholders to strengthen girls and young women in sports.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Coaches understand they play a role in educating, molding, and inspiring their athletes. One of the most effective methods is modeling the behavior and attitudes they want to see in those they lead. Successful coaches will do the following:

- Set a clear “tone from the top” about accountability and responsibility on a team. This includes preparedness, punctuality, communication, goal setting, sportsmanship, having a clear plan, and exceeding expectations.
- Create a culture of positivity, acceptance, and achievement, with a healthy dose of fun.
- Ensure girls see a love for the sport and for coaching.
- Communicate clearly the “why” behind important decisions; this builds cohesion and cooperation among players, parents, and staff.

- Maintain a professional environment where young women feel both safe and supported. Hold one-on-one conversations within the sightlines of others.
- Treat all players with dignity and respect; avoid favoritism and give each girl the personal attention and support she needs to excel.
- Strive to see the best in team members, both current strengths and potential; this positive perspective will in turn help young women believe in themselves.
- Balance high expectations with high levels of support and caring. This creates an environment where girls can be stretched and challenged in a healthy way and achieve more than they thought possible.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Participating in sports provides the opportunity for girls and young women to grow in many ways beyond athletic skills and fitness. Coaches can provide a myriad of opportunities for personal growth in their athletes:

- Follow age-appropriate models for the life lessons players should learn from being on a team: ages 3-6 (inclusivity, fun, personal attention, making memories, and positivity); ages 7-10 (teamwork, responsibility, fairness, skill-building, and confidence); ages 12+ (understanding distinct roles, strengths and weaknesses, increased competition, and sportsmanship in victory and defeat).

- Use simple tools and activities to inspire and foster character growth: powerful quotes, cheers or mantras, journals, and other tokens or mementos can help girls feel connected to something important and motivated to play their part.
- Create an environment that focuses on skills development, not just on game-time performance.
- Take a customized approach to coaching girls in order to bring out the best in each one, and ensure team members know they are cared about as individuals, not just athletes.
- Help young women develop confidence by asking them to think for themselves and act accordingly.
- Reinforce the idea that the purpose of sports involvement is for growth and learning in all areas; winning is not actually "the only thing."
- Foster the development of crossover athletes; this improves overall athleticism, reduces the possibility of burnout and injury, and decreases the likelihood that a young woman will define herself too narrowly.

RESILIENCE

Sports provide an ideal training ground for developing strength of character as well as resilience in times of struggle. Coaches can assist their players in nurturing these crucial qualities:

- Encourage goal setting and accountability for individual success; emphasize a growth mindset and the notion of progress, not perfection.
- Help girls overcome their fear of performance by encouraging them to identify and focus on the factors under their control.
- Reinforce the idea that mistakes are a critical part of the learning process and athletes should feel empowered to try and possibly fail; teach them to learn from their mistakes and become better as a result.
- Remind young women that their sport is what they do, not who they are, and they can use the lessons they learn in sports to be better at every other role.
- Help girls to navigate a wide range of emotions; teach them they can be passionate without losing control.
- Set age-appropriate challenges to really push young women; many teams encourage physical, mental, emotional, and personal goals that are ambitious, demanding, and able to facilitate tremendous growth in a short time period.

TEAM UNITY

While sports can do much to develop individuals, some of the greatest lessons one can learn involve how to thrive as part of a team. Coaches can facilitate teamwork and unity by doing the following:

- Create a team culture of trust, respect, goodwill, passion, and striving for improvement; ensure every athlete buys in and agrees to support and contribute to the positive team environment.

- Work with athletes and staff to establish team goals, mottos, and a theme for each season.
- Build cohesion by emphasizing the idea that all players are equally valued and should be treated with respect, regardless of individual talent or playing time.
- Consider a buddy system where each player is assigned one teammate for whom she is responsible, in training, communication, and motivation.
- Foster an environment of collaboration and ownership where team players work together to identify problems and implement solutions.
- Support and educate players as they work through the inevitable disagreements, misunderstandings, and other conflicts that emerge in high-pressure settings.

OUTREACH

In addition to guiding their athletes, coaches have a powerful influence on parents, their own staff, and others within the larger community. Coaches can lead positive change in various ways:

- Serve as outspoken advocates for girls to participate in sports at all ages and levels; inform stakeholders of the related physical, mental, and emotional health benefits, even for those who may not see themselves as serious athletes.
- Promote more inclusivity in sports participation and continue to challenge social norms surrounding gender and athletics.
- Work to decrease barriers for more girls to play sports (e.g., availability, variety, costs); facilitate the transition for young women to move from recreation to higher level sports if they desire.
- Encourage girls to try both coed and all-female teams; each has its own advantages.
- Collaborate with coaches of other sports to encourage more crossover athletes.
- Develop clear, consistent guidelines for communication and expectations for parents and athletes from day one; these guidelines will vary by age and level of competition.
- Train parents and coaching staff to see the big picture surrounding girls' sports participation; emphasize a long-term perspective that goes far beyond the single game or season win/loss record.

CONCLUSION

More girls and young women in Utah are participating in a wide variety of sports at all levels of play. From improved physical and mental health to increased confidence, resilience, and developing leadership skills, involvement in sports brings benefits that last a lifetime. As informed coaches influence their athletes and other stakeholders in positive and powerful ways, they will help train and mentor the next generation of strong women leaders in Utah.

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