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Women coaches, professionalisation, and national governing body mergers in England, 1989–2000

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ABSTRACT

Between 1989 and 2000, many women's sports which had previously been governed separately to men's sport were forced into 'mergers' with male governing bodies. These processes were profoundly disempowering for the women involved, often leaving them with very limited voice and representation in the governance of their sport post-merger. In this article, I detail the experiences of female coaches caught up in these merger processes, based on an analysis of archival documents and oral history interviews across six sports (squash, athletics, football, hockey, lacrosse and cricket). For some women coaches, the mergers proved a positive step on the path to professionalisation: they began to be paid for work which previously was often done for free. However, in other cases, elite coaching roles were removed and reallocated to men at the point of merger. Prior to the mergers, many women's sports were coached entirely or predominantly by women; however, the mergers led to the loss of a generation of women coaches who were either actively pushed out or were asked to 'requalify' for their roles and left coaching altogether. The legacies of the mergers are still evident today in the structural gender discrimination which operates across contemporary British sport coaching.

KEYWORDS Women's sport; Coaching; Gender; Governance

Introduction

At the last ever meeting of the Amateur Athletics Association (AAA), held at the University of Birmingham in March 1991, AAA President Arthur McAllister proposed the adoption of a Special Resolution which would see the AAA cease to exist, joining up instead in a 'union' with the Women's AAA to form the new British Athletic Federation (BAF). In McAllister's opening statement, he explained the rationale for the move as follows:

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He felt this step alone would provide the impetus for a marked improvement in competitive and coaching opportunities for women, through all age groups, right to the top of international competition women will have the opportunity to participate equally and fully in all aspects of the sport ... today the stark choice was before the meeting. Without amendment those present had to decide whether they wanted BAF.¹

The special resolution was eventually carried by 128 votes to 6, and the new BAF – responsible for the running of both men's and women's athletics – duly came into being on 1 October 1991.

The above is a fascinating insight into what those at the top of men's athletics believed would be one of the key byproducts of their 'merger', or amalgamation, with the Women's AAA: increased coaching opportunities for women. The Sports Council, the government quango responsible for overseeing sport in the UK at this time, seem to have concurred with this view. Their 1993 policy statement, *Women and Sport*, expressed concern about the underrepresentation of women within coaching roles, and explicitly recommended that all governing bodies of sport should:

Draw up and implement a gender equity policy for the sport and the governing body ... In consultation with women draw up and implement an action plan for increasing the number of women at all levels and in all roles ... Where separate governing bodies for men and women exist, discuss the formulation of a common policy and co-ordinate planning and practice. **Where appropriate, establish a single governing body.**²

It thus became official Sports Council policy that men's and women's sports should, wherever possible, be administered by a single governing body. As a result, in the years between 1989 and 2000, the landscape of English sport was transformed: many women's sports which had previously been governed separately to men's sport – including athletics, cricket, football, hockey, lacrosse and squash – were forced into 'mergers' with male governing bodies, such as the one described above between the AAA and the WAAA. While these governance mergers were partly driven by a desire for equity, as a way to encourage male NGBs to focus more attention on women's sport, they were mainly grounded in neoliberal ideas about efficiency: in a period of economic retrenchment, it was felt that joining NGBs together would enable the Council to cut down its overall spending on administration grant-aid.³ As I have argued elsewhere, these processes were profoundly disempowering for the women involved, robbing them of autonomy and often leaving them with very limited voice and representation in the governance of their sport post-merger.⁴ But might governance mergers have had the positive byproduct of increasing the availability of roles for women coaches?

The current literature on mergers or amalgamations in sport has highlighted numerous issues with such moves in relation to gender equity in

governance.⁵ However, the impact of mergers on women in coaching roles is an area often overlooked in these studies. With regard to historical work, the limited historiography on sports coaching has tended to focus largely on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, meaning we still know little about the experiences of female coaches in the period since the Second World War.⁶ Sociological studies examining the experiences of contemporary women coaches paint a picture of structural discrimination whereby women are numerically underrepresented, continually ‘othered’, and often face worse pay and conditions than their male colleagues.⁷ For example, Leanne Norman’s groundbreaking 2008 study featured interviews with elite coaches in six different sports in the UK, and found themes which cut across sports: opportunities blocked by senior male administrators; a failure of governing bodies to champion women coaches; and an inadequate coach education programme for women.⁸ Similarly, Fielding-Lloyd and Mean’s observational research into coach education within English football coach education programmes concluded that a ‘standards discourse’ had developed, such that women’s competence as coaches was continually questioned.⁹ However, these studies tend to be ahistorical, creating a widespread assumption that sports coaching has always been a masculine pursuit. In fact, prior to the mergers mandated by the Sports Council, many women’s sports were wholly or predominantly coached by women. This article seeks to advance our understanding of the ways in which the experiences of women coaches in sport in the UK shifted between the 1980s and the early 2000s, creating the hostile environment identified within these sociological studies.

There are potential parallels here with the situation in the US which prevailed prior to and post-Title IX, whereby the increased funding made available within women’s sport after 1972 led to an influx of male coaches and an exodus of women who had previously held such roles. Acosta and Carpenter’s longitudinal study found that the number of female athletic teams at collegiate level coached by woman had declined from over 90% in 1972 to just 43.4% in 2014.¹⁰ Reasons cited by the women who left the profession included the existence of an ‘old boys’ network’, inadvertent discrimination, and a lack of women administrators working within elite sport.¹¹ There has previously been no equivalent study examining the UK context in the period after the mergers, a period which saw increased funding flowing into many women’s sports. The following pages, therefore, seek to demonstrate the extent to which the professionalisation of women’s sport coaching via governance mergers had a similar negative impact in the UK to the one seen in the US in the wake of the Title IX legislation.

In this article, I detail the experiences of female coaches caught up in the merger processes, drawing on an analysis of archival documents and oral history interviews with 13 women and 13 men across six English sports

which underwent mergers in the period between 1989 and 1998 (squash, athletics, football, hockey, lacrosse and cricket). These interviews were undertaken as part of a multi-year research project into governance mergers, funded by Bournemouth University. I also draw on one interview with Ruth Prideaux, carried out as part of my earlier doctoral research into the history of women's cricket.¹² As Day has argued, oral histories are 'invaluable to those researchers wishing to explore the changes and continuities experienced in the working lives of coaches'.¹³ In the context of organisational changes like mergers, oral histories are also particularly pertinent, given that these were 'highly emotional life events' whose impact cannot be wholly understood via written archives.¹⁴

The article begins with a brief explanation of the dominance of female coaches in women's sports prior to the 1990s. I then explain how the move to professionalisation of coaching which took place in the 1980s and 1990s disadvantaged female coaches, as men moved into positions which were remunerated for the first time. Thirdly, I introduce case studies of leading female coaches who at the moment of merger or in the immediate post-merger period had positions removed from them and reallocated to men. Finally, I explain how the mergers led to the loss of a generation of female coaches, due to the need to requalify for their old positions under terms dictated by the new, male-dominated governing bodies.

'Female candidates preferred': the dominance of coaching roles by women prior to the mergers

Existing studies of English and British sports coaching covering the 1980s and 1990s suggest an overwhelming underrepresentation of women within coaching roles.¹⁵ For example, White and Brackenridge's analysis of the power structures of British sports organisations in the period from 1960 to 1985, which includes statistics about the numbers of coaches leading British Olympic teams and an analysis of the membership of the British Association of National Coaches, concluded that there were 'relatively few women with national coaching responsibilities' and that 'the proportion of women with power and influence in British sports organisations is very small'.¹⁶ This analysis was also drawn on within the Sports Council's 1993 *Women in Sport* framework, and formed the backbone of one of the policy's key objectives: 'To increase the numbers of women involved in coaching and to encourage and assist them to reach higher levels'.¹⁷

However, White and Brackenridge's methodology explicitly *excluded* sports run by separate men's and women's governing bodies, meaning they discounted a key production line of women coaches. For organisations like the Women's Cricket Association (WCA) and the All England Women's Hockey Association (AEWHA), who did not permit men to become

members, the promotion of female coaches was a cornerstone of their work; in 1950, the WCA Executive Committee argued that ‘of the fundamental principles on which the WCA was founded, one of the most important ... was that women should run every aspect of it’.¹⁸ This was not an empty promise. By 1985 (the year of White and Brackenridge’s study), the WCA’s coaching panel consisted of 97 women, 13 of whom held a WCA Advanced Coaching qualification; by 1998, the year the WCA merged with the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), there were 96 female coaches listed, including 16 who held the advanced badge. None of the coaches listed were men.¹⁹

While it is difficult to precisely quantify the number of female coaches working in other women’s sports, evidence suggests that a similar situation prevailed to women’s cricket. In 1993, the appointment of Mark Coups as the All England Women’s Lacrosse Association’s first ever Director of Coaching raised eyebrows, due to what he described in our interview as his ‘novelty’ status as one of the first ever male coaches working within women’s lacrosse:

Men’s lacrosse, right, was known as a tough working-class game, you played it because it was like rugby league, it, you know, you went out and you knocked three bells out of each other and then you had some beer on a Saturday night. That was the sport and it couldn’t have been further different if you like to the crust-off sandwich brigade drinking tea at Benenden with the, with Princess Anne playing. I mean it, it just couldn’t be more apart.

And so this idea that somebody with a very northern accent could then pitch up to play a coaching role in the women’s game was very unusual ... I got an opportunity in the late 80s to work with the Welsh senior women’s team and that was the first time any male had been anywhere near the kind of top end of the game and again they didn’t really know why, why, they didn’t really know what I was going to bring and they certainly didn’t know how to use me. I was a novelty.²⁰

There is evidence that some women-only sporting organisations pursued an unofficial policy of positive discrimination with regard to women coaches. At one meeting of the Women’s Squash Rackets Association (WSRA) in May 1987, during a discussion about the appointment of new Development Officers, the minutes reported that: ‘male coaches should be considered for these posts, but in the event of two equal candidates of either sex applying for the post, the female candidate would be preferred’.²¹

This is understandable given the climate of male hostility within which many female coaches were operating. One of my interviewees, Jan Febery, was a qualified athletics coach operating in both men’s and women’s athletics from the 1970s onwards. She explained:

Oh all the men didn’t, some felt it wasn’t very feminine, but most just didn’t want the women around. And I mean I can recall in my time in the sport, men and top coaches who would not speak highly of women and women athletes

... I was qualified over several events so I coached any of the boys who wanted to be coached ... so I found the coaches okay with me but in general some of them were anti-women. I think some men in general thought that it wasn't feminine to be involved in running ... I wouldn't let it be a problem. I could understand some of the other people, they had been probably subjected to the attitude for longer from the beginning and the men would put them down.²²

Another interviewee, Ruth Prideaux, had experienced similar attitudes within cricket, and was therefore pleasantly surprised when she was appointed as the first ever head coach of the England team in 1988:

And then after all the playing that I'd done I applied, later on of course, to be the England coach ... And I was interviewed, which I do remember quite clearly, with five men. And I said to one of my daughters, I said, 'I'll never get the job, because men always do'. She said, 'well you never know mother'. And the thing about it was, which is interesting, was I had the better coaching qualification than any of them, because I'd become a senior staff coach. And their criteria for appointing a coach, I seemed to meet the criteria more than any of them, so I got the job.²³

No doubt the women running organisations like the WCA, the WAAA and the WSRA recognised that, in wider society, men dominated the coaching landscape; therefore, there seems to have been a determination to promote roles for women wherever possible.

One of Febery's proteges was future Olympian Beverly Kinch, while Prideaux would go on to win a World Cup at Lord's in 1993 after introducing a pioneering programme of sports psychology (Nicholson 2017).²⁴ It is important to highlight this long tradition of female success in coaching, not least to counter the contemporary discursive presentation of all-male coaching teams as 'common sense'.²⁵ Additionally, while coaching as a whole may have been male-dominated in the post-Second World War period, within some women's sports there were pockets of female dominance. Unfortunately, the mergers were to fatally damage that prevailing influence.

'They came in without doing a lot of homework': professionalisation and male infiltration of coaching

Prior to the 1990s, the majority of coaches in women's team sport in England would have been categorised as amateurs: some were paid honoraria, while others received expenses, but the financial struggles of most women's sports meant that the idea of paying even the national head coach on a full-time basis was not considered feasible.²⁶ But the mergers signalled a key shift within English (and British) sport: what Shilbury et al have labelled a 'transition from volunteer-delivered amateur sport to professionally managed

and delivered sport supported by volunteers'.²⁷ Roger Simons, who had been involved in athletics administration from the 1970s and became a board member for UK Athletics in 1998, described this transition as follows:

We were moving to a more professional setup. Throughout all my days really up to the 80s, 90%, 95% was done by volunteers and 5% was done by professionals. In my time at UKA [UK Athletics] the shift has been far more to professionals and less to amateurs ... track and field officials are still very amateur, but other things especially coaching, there's more money coming into those, or people are only prepared to do the work if they get paid is my way of looking at it, rather than before where everything was done as an amateur.²⁸

The Sports Council both drove and managed this shift, devoting increasing amounts of resources to funding National Governing Body (NGB) elite coaching initiatives, in line with their strategic move away from focusing on grassroots participation to 'performance and excellence'.²⁹ The advent of Lottery funding for sport in 1995, which was filtered into the Sports Council's new World Class Performance Programme, provided the financial underpinning for this: the Council stated that Lottery money would be used 'to provide more world-class coaches, team managers, training opportunities and preparation for our best sports performers' and to fund 'genuine career opportunities in coaching for our best coaches and sports managers'.³⁰

A useful case study is that of hockey, which had undergone an NGB merger in 1996 partly because the Sports Council suggested to them that merged organisations would be given preference for Lottery funds.³¹ Sure enough, just a few weeks after the men's Hockey Association (HA) and the All England Women's Hockey Association (AEWHA) voted to come together to form the new English Hockey Association (EHA), the Sports Council agreed to offer a substantial Lottery Revenue grant of £19 million over eight years to the EHA.³² As a standalone organisation, the AEWHA had been unable to afford to hire a full-time, paid coach until 1996; yet the Lottery grant enabled the new, merged EHA to invest rapidly in an entire cohort of national coaches. In our interview, Duncan Snook, who had served as the HA's Finance Director and continued in the same post for the EHA, recalled the financial shift brought about by the merger:

RN: Did it feel the same working for the EHA as it had pre-merger?

DS: No, it didn't. It felt bigger because it was. It felt more responsible, because it was. I think the advent of lottery funding meant there was just an extra dimension. Because the English Hockey Association could actually then invest in coaching and sports science talent, rather than recruiting it voluntarily. So it did feel different ... we had full time physios, that the game never had before. Doctors, that were on a retainer, rather than sort of giving up their time out of their annual holiday. Sports science specialists, whether it would have

been video analysts. We'd never known this before. The performance wing actually had - in fact we used to call it the performance wing. It was a separate suite of offices a bit further along the corridor. A whole new, sort of 40, 45 members of staff.

RN: All being funded from the lottery?

DS: Absolutely, yes.³³

What did all this mean for women coaches? Some, of course, embraced the move to professionalism, arguing in interviews that it was a necessary step. Janet O'Neill, who worked jointly for the men's English Lacrosse Union and the All England Women's Lacrosse Association from 1984 to 1996 as their first ever National Development Officer, said that she had relished the chance to introduce more professionalism within lacrosse coaching and development:

JO: The stuff that we used to do ... it was all on such a shoestring and it was such hard work and so much fun, hardly any sleep involved ... The whole thing was so amateur, yes, it was sort of like swimming in the dark really at the beginning. But yes.

RN: It's interesting that you use that word amateur, do you think that part of what you were doing was trying to make it a bit more professional?

JO: Oh yes ... Definitely. And I think, well we did.³⁴

However, her colleague Celia Brackenridge – a former England lacrosse player who had also coached England at the 1986 Lacrosse World Cup – was more perturbed by the impending onset of professionalism. In one article in *Lacrosse* magazine, published in winter 1987, she expressed concern that the ideals of gender equality promoted by the Women's Liberation Movement might actually have a negative impact on women coaches within lacrosse: 'The meritocracy ideal works against women coaches, umpires and administrators since they have less experience of leadership and power bargaining and have been raised to accept and submit to male decisions'. She concluded that male coaches, who possessed greater confidence and social capital, might well eventually 'swamp women and shift them further from their sporting goals'.³⁵

There are interesting parallels here with the situation in the United States, of which Brackenridge – who was also an academic researcher, and the co-author of the study into power structures in British sport mentioned above – was well aware. The introduction of Title IX into federal law in 1972 prohibited sex-based discrimination in education, ensuring a huge influx of funding into women's college sport. It has been hailed as a transformational moment in sporting gender equality.³⁶ Yet its immediate impact on coaching was far from progressive: the sudden availability of well-paid positions in women's sport

led to an influx of male coaches into these new, high-status roles, and a concomitant decline in females holding head coach positions.³⁷

Brackenridge's fear that this situation might eventually be replicated within the UK would prove to be a prescient concern. As rapidly as the Sports Council poured more money into elite women's sport coaching in the late 1980s and 1990s, and encouraged NGB mergers on the basis that they would bring about increased opportunities for women to take up coaching roles, so men seamlessly flowed into these newly-created paid positions. One former England cricketer, who played either side of the WCA's 'merger' with the ECB in 1998, described to me the way this unfolded within cricket:

A lot more male coaches, I guess, were beginning to come into the sphere. So you did see, I guess, a slow progression of professionalism ... And I think my first, my first gig into the professional men, let's say, with the men, was when we had Paul Farbrace and Graham Dilley as coaches ... But immediately being the men, and not really women's cricket, seeing it as much as you can now, they said, 'put the sweepers back straightaway'. I said, 'No. Why, why do that?' ...

I think they came into the women's game without really doing a lot of homework, too. As to what it really meant at that time. And really doing research, I guess, into the players that were currently around and what they did, the outfit they were, what professional training that they or coaching that they'd been accustomed to, and stuff like that. So I think the transition really was pretty quick, without a lot of research put into that transition ... And I think it helped Paul Farbrace in his career, I think, because then he moved up to the men's side pretty quickly.

The perception amongst many female athletes was that this new generation of male coaches were using the new funded coaching opportunities in women's sport simply as a first step on the career ladder, and would vacate their roles as soon as they could find paid work in the elite men's game. This, then, was how professionalisation played out in the context of English women's sport coaching.

'I just got sidestepped': the reallocation of coaching roles to men post-merger

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, NGB mergers tended to result in the appointment of new, male-dominated boards which prioritised men's sport; meanwhile, many women with decades of expertise either walked away or were actively pushed out during the merger processes.³⁸ With regards to coaching, this meant that all appointments, employment contracts, working conditions and coaching award structures moved into the hands of men, who had (as we saw above) historically failed to respect the achievements of women coaches. This did not bode well for women who held coaching roles at the moment of merger.

Two of my interviewees shared upsetting stories about their personal experiences under these new, male-dominated regimes. One explained how she was dismissed from her international coaching position at the moment of merger with no notice, and replaced by a man:

INT: My tenure came to an end because we joined with [the men].

RN: How was that communicated to you?

INT: It really sort of wasn't ... I feel it was done behind my back, so it was quite hurtful really ... I think it was an assumption that - without anyone actually saying to me the words, 'right we're going to be', or 'you need to reapply for your job', or something like that.

Another interviewee, Julie Hemsley, was appointed as the Assistant Manager of England immediately after the 1993 FA takeover of women's football from the Women's Football Association (WFA). At the same time, she was elected as the first woman to sit on the FA Council. However, after four years in the role, she was manoeuvred out of the coaching role:

JH: I got my role of Assistant Manager taken away because the two roles weren't - it was hard to be a Council member and - which was a question that was asked at the meeting in '93 when I got voted in. 'Well she's the Assistant Manager of the national team. Can she do both?' 'Yes she can.' And then in 1997 or whatever it was, 'No she can't.' But instead of asking which one I wanted, I just got sidestepped ... I said, 'Whatever is best for the game because the game's bigger than any of us.'

RN: Who would that have been that made that decision then by that point in '97?

JH: Well I would have thought it was the [FA] women's committee ... And they, very gracious and very gentlemanly but didn't understand women's football or why women wanted to play football ... I mean I'll never really know the real story ... It was a shock. But you know, and then I think it was, 'Well you'll go to the games.' I'm like, 'Well that's not what it's about. I thought we were developing women to become coaches.' ... But yes, did it hurt? Yes. Big time.³⁹

The fact that the FA Women's Committee, in Hemsley's words, consisted largely of men with no experience of women's football is a good illustration of one of the key issues with the move to merged governance; decisions were now being made by those with no experience of the discrete needs of the women's game. Hemsley's experience also suggests that while the FA wanted to be seen publicly to be promoting opportunities for women coaches, the reality behind the scenes was very different.

Another example of the FA's seeming preference for its own coaching candidates can be seen in the handling of the England manager role prior to and after the merger. For several years before the FA takeover of women's football, the role of England manager had been held by John

Bilton, who was an experienced coach within the women's game. However, in January 1993 the WFA wrote to Bilton to inform him that they had 'no option other than to release you from your present responsibilities as Manager of our International Team' due to the FA's assumption of responsibility for women's football. They added, however, that Bilton should offer his services to the FA.⁴⁰ The FA's response was to parachute in Ted Copeland as Bilton's replacement, despite the fact that Copeland had never coached in women's football before.

One former England footballer explained to me in our interview that she and her contemporaries felt powerless to intervene with the FA's decisions at this time: 'We got a new coach, they told you who the coach was. They assigned everybody and everything, and you just sort of like, they said jump, you said how high?' In his book on the Doncaster Belles, published in 1996, journalist Pete Davies also relayed the disquiet which Copeland's appointment caused within women's football, which was then a relatively small world:

... he [Copeland] saw himself as trying to raise standards - standards of preparation, of diet and nutrition, of behaviour, as much as standards of play - but the way he went about this struck the players as ineptly draconian, and more and more of them came to view England duty as a chore, not a pleasure ...

Belles players used to love going away to play for England; now ... they came back from Copeland's sessions 'demoralised' ... Joanne [Broadhurst] had played for England eighteen times; the words she used to describe Copeland's training sessions were 'disheartening' and depressing. At another club, the manager told me of a young player who went to her first England training weekend - and rang home in tears from the hotel on the Saturday night, saying she wanted to come home.⁴¹

The imposition of coaches within women's sport who had no prior experience or knowledge in the post-merger period was evidently not a wholly successful strategy.

Sociological studies carried out in the late 1990s and early 2000s point to continued issues with the post-merger environments as experienced by female coaches. In 2008, in a study of elite coaches working within cricket, hockey and football, Leanne Norman bemoaned the 'significant lack of support from the governing body for which they coach, which reveals the failure of the various sporting associations within the UK to champion women coaches'.⁴² Comments from her interviewees included:

The head of the coaching department is male, the head of umpiring is a male, the administration, etc ... you have to be twice as good as any man that goes for a job.

The coach of the national women's team, she stopped the last summer ... I thought I was going to get the job off her but because all of the politics, they

wanted a man ... I think they [the governing body] thought now we have to have a man because the pressure from the men in women's [sport] was too big.⁴³

These examples point to the multiple ways in which the move from separate to merged governance was a fundamentally disempowering process for existing female coaches. The loss of women in key leadership positions led to a situation whereby male coaches were, or at least were perceived to be, given preferential treatment. This contrasts unfavourably with the situation which prevailed prior to the mergers, outlined above, whereby women's sport was the one arena in the UK in which elite women's coaches could expect support to progress to the highest levels.

'Lack of nurture': the loss of a coaching generation

Another, more formalised method of gatekeeping was also in operation by the new male-led governing bodies. This involved forcing women coaches who had previously held coaching qualifications within women's sporting organisations to 'requalify' for their positions, by requiring them to undertake new coaching badges certified by the merged NGBs.

In some sports, this process had been underway prior to the mergers. For example, former England footballer Wendy Owen described in her memoirs how after gaining the WFA Preliminary Coaching Certificate in 1974, she then had to take the FA's 'virtually identical' course six years later, in order to progress to a senior award.⁴⁴ However, the mergers brought the issue to a head because of the question over whether coaching badges gained under separate, women-run organisations would continue to be valid once those organisations ceased to exist.

Indeed, this issue was often a live one in merger negotiations. WCA Chair Sharon Bayton recalled that coaching (alongside umpiring and scoring) had been one of the key talking points in her conversations with ECB Chief Executive Tim Lamb, in the months leading up to the WCA's merger with the ECB:

SB: [We were] trying to work out how it would impact on the clubs, whether there would be any resources ... how umpires would be selected for matches, how scorers would be selected ... it was all about the practicalities really of how that would fit into what is a fairly large existing organisation ...

RN: There were a lot of female coaches and female umpires. The WCA had its own panels, didn't it?

SB: Yeah ... I can't remember exactly what was decided. I do know that subsequently there was a bit of an issue, because to get onto ECB panels you had to have certain qualifications and you had to have certain levels of experience, and obviously the women didn't necessarily have that level of experience and so they didn't make the panels, and so they didn't get selected, which for them was sort of fairly disappointing.⁴⁵

The exact nature of Bayton's conversations with Lamb is undocumented; however, there is a suggestion here that the male-dominated ECB did not respect the existing coaching experience gained by females within the women's game. The end result was that Bayton was unable to successfully make the case that WCA coaching qualifications should carry over into the post-merger era, and that the 96 women on the WCA's Register of Coaches, including the 16 with a WCA Advanced Coaching qualification, were asked to requalify for positions they had been doing for many years. Many refused to do so, and a generation of female coaches was thus lost to the game.⁴⁶

A similar situation occurred within squash. Prior to the merger of the men's Squash Rackets Association (SRA) with the Women's SRA in 1989, two separate coaching set-ups existed. The women's set-up, headed by national coach Jane Poynder, aimed to develop a cohort of female coaches within squash; it was actually widely considered superior to its male equivalent. Bob Morris, Chief Executive of the SRA at the time of the merger, recalled:

They [the WSRA] had their own structure of coaching which was superb. Quite superb. They had everything that the SRA had in duplication. And frankly, they were better in a lot of areas, in my private view. The coaching was excellent ... we hadn't got it structured right ... they had a very good coaching structure and some very good, very sound people involved, developed I think from the tennis coaching model.⁴⁷

Christina Myers, who served as General Secretary of the WSRA from 1976 to 1989, concurred:

We were qualifying women as coaches, we were, we had a whole set up in the counties, all women ... And we had quite a big operation with that, training coaches and coaching young players and coming through with some success. And yes, it was vital.⁴⁸

However, multiple interviewees recalled that despite the WSRA's success at developing female coaches, the Sports Council were critical of the coaching set-up within squash, considering the separate men's and women's programmes to be 'duplication'. In February 1988, the Council reportedly threatened to withdraw all government funding to squash unless a full merger went ahead between the SRA and the WSRA – including merging their coaching set-ups.⁴⁹

A merger subsequently went ahead in September 1989; in practice, this amounted to a takeover by the SRA, who retained their existing office and the name 'Squash Rackets Association'.⁵⁰ Jackie Robinson, the WSRA's Secretary, argued in our interview that this SRA takeover had been catastrophic for female squash coaches:

My philosophy is that for the women squash players, it was a disaster for the first 10 years because ... we lost all the coaches. We lost all the volunteers, because all the counties had to amalgamate, and what happened? The men took over. So you lost a whole generation, and as I said before, if you don't have females involved in coaching and playing, you don't get the next generation ... The WSRA office knew someone in every county. Things got done. But all that went because the men didn't have that ... We lost the coaches, the volunteers because they, I suppose you could say we nurtured anyone.

When I asked why so many women stopped their involvement after the SRA-WSRA merger, Jackie said:

I think it was the lack of nurture, and they were intimidated by the men. It was very much the women's committees in the counties were taken over by the men, and though I think some counties had two representatives at the council meeting, they were very rarely one of each. It was still the men ruled.⁵¹

In 2022, Squash England reported that 80% of the coaches on their coaching pathway were male.⁵² These oral history accounts suggest that this contemporary dominance of squash coaching by men can be directly traced back to the 1989 SRA takeover of women's squash, and the resultant axing of a highly successful development pathway for female squash coaches.

Of course, some women coaches in a variety of sports did choose to undergo requalification. However, by contrast with the supportive all-female environment which had prevailed prior to the mergers, this new coach education tended to be undertaken in predominantly or exclusively male environments. The problems with this were particularly apparent in my interviews with those involved in women's football. Julie Hemsley reported:

I did my FA prelim. Got that. All men, you know. Didn't bother me. I thought well, but it did get tough because fortunately I could play and I was fit. But I did get, you know, I got a couple of bad knocks because 6 ft 4 guys and you're going in, it wasn't really appropriate but it was, there was nothing else.⁵³

June Jaycocks, the WFA's International Officer, agreed with Julie's assessment. She explained that many England footballers had struggled with feeling unsupported during FA coaching courses, but felt they had no choice but to persist if they were to continue in coaching:

A lot of our girls did get coaching certificates. But I think they had to really work hard, probably harder than the men, shall I say. But a lot of them did it. A lot of them did it. I think sometimes it's, people are against you, it makes you work harder, doesn't it? But a lot of the girls, I mean they were you know sort of taking exams and things like that, and they wanted to go into all sorts of things, which they needed the FA as well. Because if you want an FA badge, you've got to have the FA behind you, haven't you.⁵⁴

These uncomfortable experiences help to explain why by 2000 – seven years after the FA's takeover of women's football – only seven women in the entire country had gained the FA's 'A' Licence, compared to 1,105 men.⁵⁵

Contemporary studies of sports coaching have often highlighted the problematic nature of the current coach education process, in which women are usually in a minority, feel unwelcome, and sometimes have to endure degrading comments from male participants.⁵⁶ This was of course not a problem under women-led NGBs, because women tended to make up the majority, if not the entirety, of participants on coaching courses. The loss of these coaching talent pipelines was yet another way in which a forced move to merged governance ultimately damaged the cause of equity in English sport.

Conclusion

This article began by highlighting the long tradition of female coaching in women's sport which existed prior to the 1990s. It is important to recognise this tradition for two reasons. Firstly, it reinforces that women belong in the coaching arena just as much as men do, even in sports like football and cricket where coaching is currently heavily male-dominated.⁵⁷ Secondly, the current underrepresentation of female coaches is not a timeless phenomenon, but in fact stems partly from the forced transition to merged governance driven by the Sports Council in the 1990s. Recognising this allows scholars to challenge the legitimisation of inequalities between male and female coaches as 'natural' or 'normal'.⁵⁸

While it is difficult to measure precisely how much female coaching talent was lost as a result of the Sports Council policy of merged governance, the oral history evidence presented in this article suggests that between 1989 and 2000, a substantial number of women left sport coaching, including some who were actively pushed out of their roles at the moment of merger. The vision outlined in the introduction of this article by AAA President Arthur McAllister, in which NGB mergers would lead to an improvement in coaching opportunities for women, is still far from a reality. Of course, financial largesse has flowed into UK sports coaching since the 1990s, partly as a result of the introduction of National Lottery funding, allowing for an unprecedented professionalisation. As a result, some women coaches have been able to forge careers within coaching, in a way which would have been impossible in prior eras. However, this funding has come at a cost: the loss of all-female coaching environments and pathways. Female coaches who did successfully transition from separate to merged governance often endured discrimination at the hands of the new male-led NGBs – an experience far removed from the supportive environment in which they had trained.

It is interesting that the introduction of women-only coach education courses is often posited by sociologists as a solution to contemporary gender discrimination in coaching.⁵⁹ Arguably this in itself is a tacit admission that merged governance has not been the panacea for sport equity which the Sports Council envisioned. Further research might usefully examine whether the experiences of English female coaches were mirrored in other national contexts. However, based on the evidence presented in this article, it seems that – just as it has been within the field of leadership – merged, merged governance has proved damaging to the cause of gender equity in coaching. Indeed, the legacies of the mergers are still evident today in the structural gender discrimination which operates across contemporary British sport coaching.⁶⁰

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