

WHY NOT WOMEN, TOO?

While our society claims to be progressing in workplace equality, with women comprising nearly half the labor force by 2010, the profession of coaching has stayed overwhelmingly male-dominated.

BY WILL CONRAD & DENIZ INCE

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Sara Beckord Swails was no stranger to making history. After all, she had taken fifth in the Olympic Trials in the 800 meter run as only a senior in high school and was the first Iowan girl to participate in the legendary event.

For such a successful high school athlete, Swails was upset she would not be able to run at the collegiate level. Title IX, which according to the NCAA “requires that women and men be provided equitable opportunities to participate in sports,” was signed in 1972, four years after Swails’s high school graduation.

“When [I] graduated from high school, there wasn’t anything out there for [me],” Swails said. “It was such an injustice, and it made me mad and made me determine that I wanted to be a coach for women.”

Swails had no female coaches growing up. In fact, she was one of the pioneers of the women’s sports movement. In the 1960’s, only three states — Iowa, Texas and Oklahoma — had girls sports. In Iowa, many of these programs were in small towns.

Following the passage of Title IX, athletic opportunities for girls at both the high school and collegiate levels grew. During her coaching career at West High in the ’80s, Swails led a combined program of both girls and boys cross country. In 1988, she made coaching history: Swails became the first woman in Iowa to coach a boys team to a state title.

The 1988 boys cross country team’s first-place trophy remains West High’s only boys cross country title. To the members of the ’88 team, it was business as usual.

“She was just a coach,” said Todd Lane ’91, a member of the championship team and current

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UNIVERSITY TRACK
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Assistant Track and Field coach at Louisiana State University. “I don’t think we ever wished we had a male coach. I don’t think the significance really even hit us. I remember after it happened, people [were] talking about [how] this was the first female coach to coach a boys team to a state championship, maybe in any sport. For us, as 15-to-17-year-old boys, we really didn’t care, but as I look back on it now, it was a much bigger deal.”

Even 30 years after Swails’s historic run at West, the field of coaching has fallen especially short in terms of the equality trajectory it seemed to have started years ago. According to the study “Women in Intercollegiate Sport” by R. Vivien Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter, in 1972, 90 percent of women’s collegiate teams were coached by women; today that number is less than half.

However, Lane believes this is not due to lack of ability; this past summer, he witnessed one of his fellow coaches at Louisiana State University, Coach Tamara Ards, help Damion Thomas to a 20 or under World Junior Championship in the 110 meter hurdles.

“[Thomas] has a great respect for her,” Lane said. “There’s females that have great respect for her too ... She’s just as good at chewing out the guys as the ladies, and the ladies are probably equally as offended as the guys are.”

Similar to the past few decades, just two percent of men’s teams are coached by women. Even at West High, only five out of 23 sports — dance, cheerleading, girls tennis, girls golf and softball — have women as head coaches.

Swails had a short reaction to this statistic: “That’s terrible, terrible.”

To many female coaching hopefuls, part of the



IN **1981** **women coached more than 90%** of collegiate women’s teams.

IN **2018** **women coach less than 50%** of collegiate women’s teams.

Sources: National Collegiate Athletic Association

gap in gender equality in coaching comes from the fact society does not often market the option of coaching to women. Because many women have grown up without seeing their future selves in athletic careers, they may not see coaching as a potential profession.

"I think it's hard because most people in [coaching roles] are male coaches. It is very hard for [females] to think 'I want to do this job,' because they see only male coaches and think [athletes] will go more towards them than the female coaches," said Bailey Libby '22, a gymnast and aspiring coach.

Girls tennis coach Amie Villarini concurred with this sentiment and the need for more female representation in coaching.

"It's nice to have the balance [of genders in coaching] so that other girls can look up to [their coaches] and say 'I can do this too.' It's not just an all male position," Villarini said.

Lane agreed that the desire to coach among women may be waning.

"Certainly at the promoting level, it could be a little better also. In the summer I'm involved with what's called Coach's Education," Lane said. "People have the opportunity to come in, and it's a track and field class at a really micro level. It's interesting because probably about 75 percent of the people in there are male, and you'd like to have more females."

Many women who are old enough to coach are also just entering motherhood. Consequentially, these women are saddled with the additional responsibility of handling family arrangements that their male counterparts traditionally have not and still today do not face, which can dissuade aspiring females from getting involved. Swails pointed to the fact that it was difficult to balance her family life and raise children while juggling a coaching schedule, as practices take place when the kids get out of school.

"It was really hard for me, because my children [were] young in elementary school. It's just a juggling act, and it was difficult, and you know, that makes a difference," Swails said.

Today, Villarini has experienced the same troubles.

"In a lot of professional jobs for women, another reason it's hard for women to hold high ranking positions [is] because there is the family aspect: the desire and need to be there for your family," Villarini said. "I used to look up to Vivian Stringer. She was the women's basketball coach at Iowa and she's still coaching at Rutgers [today]. She has a family, she has kids. I remember reading her biography about how difficult it was."

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DARTMOUTH COLLEGE
FOOTBALL COACH*



Recently, Dartmouth College hired the first known full-time Division I female football coach: Callie Brownson. Brownson is a graduate of Mount Vernon High School.

"When I found out I got the position, I had no idea that I was the first, because it was kind of absurd to me [that] there had never been another [full-time Division I] female [football] coach in the NCAA," Brownson said. "I consider it a great opportunity to really set the tone so that all those great women ... have the opportunity come next year and the year after, and so forth."

In the past few years, the NFL has placed three females in full-time coaching positions. In 2015 they hired their first female official. Now, the NCAA seems to be following suit. However, this integration has not come without pushback.

"A lot of people's arguments, and it's crazy to me, [are] that women are incapable of understanding the game of football," Brownson said. "What is it about the game of football that makes the female brain incapable of absorbing? ... The boundaries are limitless for [women] if they have confidence in [their intelligence]. But because we're entering this male-dominated sport, a lot of times the perception that is reflected on them ... is that they're not good enough, they're not adequate enough. And then they start to doubt their knowledge."

Sometimes it was another coach criticizing Swails during her time at West.

"There was a coach who coached a boys team, and he was a little messed up, and in 1988 a woman beat his team," Swails said. "I had a friend who coached in the same school with me and we just kind of laugh about it. But he was old school and he didn't like the fact that a woman coach of a boys team beat his team. It was ridiculous."

Because of motherhood responsibilities, lack of representation and pushback in the industry, interest has remained low among female candidates. West High Athletic Director Craig Huegel cited this lack of interest as a reason why gender equality is hard to achieve on a staff.

"Sometimes it comes down to supply and demand," Huegel said. "It depends on the position. If I'm hiring a football coach, I don't get a lot of female applicants. In that world, there just aren't a lot of female applicants."

Simply getting more female applicants will not completely solve the problem. Another barrier that prevents women from getting involved in coaching is ongoing systemic discrimination faced in hiring and carrying out the duties associated with a coaching position. To Dr. Jerry Arganbright, former principal at West High,

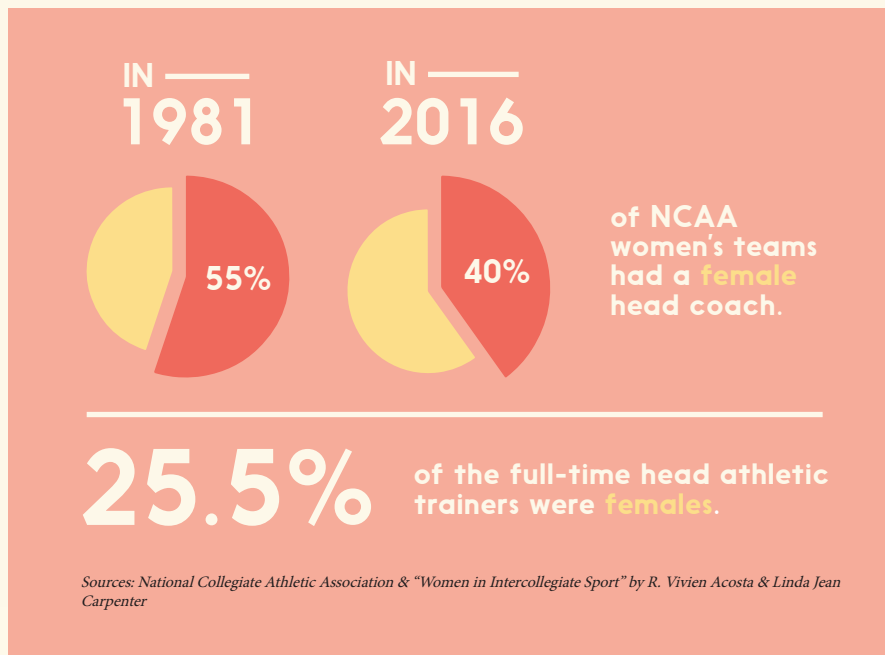
diversity was paramount in the hiring process.

"Hiring a diverse staff was always a high priority at West," Arganbright said in an email. "When given the opportunity, we tried to include candidates with diverse backgrounds in the interview process and also worked toward a staff that reflected the diversity of our student body."

However, part of the deficiency stems from the lack of females in athletic director roles who make new coaching hires. At the turn of the 21st century, 23 percent of women's collegiate programs lacked any female representation in their administrative structure.

"From a hiring standpoint, I think it's getting better, but it needs to get a lot better," Lane said. "I would even go a step further. I'm not familiar [with] the high school level, [but] if you look at athletic directors at the NCAA level, there's not a lot of female athletic directors. I think that needs to get better, too."

Sue Chelf, head swimming coach at West and City High for 10 years, strove towards maintaining diversity on her coaching staff.



"I just think the best person for the job is the person that's going to be committed and give it their all, regardless of their gender," Chelf said. "With male athletic directors, a lot of people have said that, conscious or unconscious, gender bias can come into it, but I like to leave it out. For a while, I had an assistant that was female, and part of the time I had assistants that were male; it's always nice to have the other gender."

Today, many hiring biases are subconscious but still very present. Because of this, Huegel makes a conscious effort to avoid slighting certain candidates. This means creating and receiving feedback from a committee when interviewing applicants for West's coaching positions.

"I think you have to be aware of what your own bias is," Huegel said. "I try to really focus on who is going to be the best person for this position and who has the best experience. We do an interview process, and I usually include a committee of students or parents. I get other perspectives. I try to make reference calls to people who aren't on their application. I try to find out as much about a person as possible before I make those decisions. I don't care whether [a candidate] is African-American, white, male [or] female. If they're the best candidate, I'm going to hire them."

Even after being placed in coaching positions, female coaches often have to struggle to gain the





same respect in their field as male coaches.

“People try to get away with more stuff because you’re a woman, and [they think] you’ll be more forgiving and more nice,” Villarini said. “Suddenly when I get stern and lay the law down, I get viewed as ... [a] ‘bitch.’ If I were a man, that wouldn’t be thought of. I do feel like there’s some discrimination there.”

The key for Brownson has been to gain the respect of her football athletes.

“If you respect the person who’s coaching, or the person who’s teaching or instructing you in anything, it’s never really a problem of authority,” Brownson said. “So for me, that was really kind of a foundation of my direction.”

However, this has not come without doubt.

“The questions come up of, ‘What’s your experience? How much do you really know about football?’” Brownson said. “You just kind of have to have the confidence in the fact that you do know what you’re talking about. You have put in the work; you have built up yourself to be somebody who deserves to be in that position, and that shows through to the players.”

Moving forward, many are looking for potential remedies to improve the female coaching experience. This past June, Erica Douglas, Waukee High School coach and founder and president of She Plays, a program designed to empower female athletes, held a coaching clinic for female coaches throughout the state. According to Douglas, simply being able to put together a

group of female coaches who can share their experiences is a tremendous help.

“I had a coach come to me and they said, ‘I love what you do for She Plays. I love what you do for all the girl athletes. I wish I had something for me as a coach,’” Douglas said. “And I was kind of like, ‘Oh, you know, I kind of wish I had that too.’”

Among the panelists was former professional athlete and current Des Moines Roosevelt High School track and field coach Kim Carson.

“Someone asked a question like, ‘What professional athlete or professional coach should I follow?’” Douglas said. “[Carson’s] answer really stuck out to me, because she said those aren’t the people you should try to emulate. It’s the coach-



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HIRING PROCESS

Job listings are posted on West's website for a week or longer.



Resumes are gathered and reviewed to determine which candidates are viable.

A few of these viable candidates are invited to West for an interview.



Interviews are conducted with a committee of outside sources posing the same questions to all candidates.

The committee does a debrief and discusses positives and negatives about each candidate.



Any candidates who the committee cannot see in a coaching role are eliminated entirely.

The coaching job is offered to the candidate chosen by the committee and Craig Huegel.



If Huegel's first choice declines, the job is then offered to the next best choice.



es that have been around, you know, for 30 years that are always positive, that are always welcoming, that the kids just gravitate towards, because they know something that you don't."

Villarini agreed that in such a male-dominated field, it is necessary for female coaches to support each other.

"We mentor each other because we got through some of the same issues. How do I still be strong and not come off as a bitch? How do I maintain that respect? There is that part of me that doesn't want to be mean," Villarini said. "I've gone to Coach DiLeo and Coach Bres and Coach Mundt, other female coaches, and talked to them about how to handle things. I've been glad to be able to reach out to them for that."

Douglas is already planning for the second annual event to come in 2019. She has faced her fair share of criticism, but what has been important to her has been the growth that followed.

"I've gotten accused of being too emotional or too sensitive, things like that," Douglas said. "If I [were] not female, would [that] be a criticism? It's just that confidence, that learning [through] self reflection. Am I doing what I know is best for me? Do I bring my best self? If the answer is yes, then you know that you just can't worry about what other people say."

Whether the current shortage of females in coaching is due to motherhood duties, systematic barriers or hiring discrimination, the industry has failed to make much progress in the past few decades. As workplace equality continues to advance in most fields, normalizing women in coaching roles is more important than ever. In a school that has consistently redefined gender expectations in coaching, West High must continue to pave the path for change.

"The history and the tradition of West High athletics is a rich and diverse history," Huegel said. "We've had success in almost every one of our programs at the highest level. And we continue to have that success. So we want to continue to promote the valuable things that athletics does. Stories like 'the first female coach to coach a boys team to a state title' are more chapters in the book of successful West High athletics."

Brownson is optimistic for the future.

"One of my favorite quotes is, 'Slow progress is still progress,'" Brownson said. "With something like this, where we're going against the grain and trying to basically restructure a culture that's been a certain way for [a] very long time, it's going to take some time."

Source: Craig Huegel