

# Women's barriers to becoming and being a strength and conditioning (S&C) coach

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## 1. Introduction

The role of a S&C coach is multifaceted. It involves working directly with athletes to develop physical qualities, help prevent injuries and improve athletic prowess (see Figure 1). This role is a vital part of the coaching process, which has led to increases in the number of people who seek employment in the field (Read et al. 2016). The UK strength and conditioning association report that there are 750 members who are accredited coaches (UKSCA 2018). However, only 7 (!) percent of those are women (Medline-Silver et al. 2017). Clearly, female coaches are almost completely absent in S&C, especially at the elite-level.

The aim of this research is to explore perceptions & attitudes towards becoming a female S&C coach in predominantly male dominated sports and to identify the reasons why female coaches are marginalised in the sector.



Figure 1. S&C Coach Andrea Hudy working with Kansas basketball team

## 2. Method

To explore this lacuna, we carried out an exploratory study using one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with female S&C coaches in key positions, working in elite sports. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants (see Table 1 Participants Demographic Information). Audio data was analysed through thematic coding and key themes identified which form the spine of the discussion.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Sports worked with	Gender of team	Coaching Experience	Highest Degree Earned
Karen	36	English	Football	Female/Male	12 years	MSc
Holly	41	English	All	Male/Female	25 years	BSc
Sarah	33	English	Football	Female	10/11 years	PhD
Jenny	34	American	Volley Ball	Female	10 years	MSc
Claire	21	Scottish	Netball	Female	2 years	BSc
Rachel	26	English	Football, Rugby	Female	6 years	MSc
Sophie	31	English	Rowing	Mixed	15 years	MSc

## 3. Findings

Participants noted three main challenges that they, as S&C coaches, have faced.

**Presence of an 'old boys network'..** not only affirms men's power within the sporting realm, but also over women (Puwar 2004). A common observation among participants was that men employ/promote men. *"it's a good old boys club. If you play football and you are good buddies with the coaches you used to play for and you know whatever it is, you look big, you look strong then you're in"* (Jenny). Women feel at a disadvantage when applying for S&C positions or seek to advance their career. *"I saw an increase in progression in top heavy male in charge of jobs. It was almost like if all the male members of staff always managed to end in places they wanted to end up"* (Holly).

**'Impression management of gender identity'...** is employed by individuals to portray an idealised image of the impression we want others to have of ourselves (Goffman 1959). This view was supported by Karen, *"most of the female S&C coaches are quite strong characters, fairly confident and probably, almost like one of the boys"*

**'Work-life balance'...** is the attempt to find the equilibrium among the roles we assume in our lives, which may include parent, spouse, employee, and individual (Eason et al. 2014). This was a perceived barrier for women in S&C positions. *".....there was none it was just work, it was just work, work, work, you know, as I say just missing so many things no control over your schedule"* (Sarah). In a group of athletic trainers, despite women working less hours than their male counterparts they experienced higher levels of burnout (Naugle et al. 2013).

## 4. Conclusion

The emphasis on masculinity in sport serves to exclude feminine attributes from entering positions, such as S&C, which are thought to require physical strength, bravado and strong leadership qualities to excel (Whisenant et al. 2002). The presence of an boys network, impression management of gender identity and work-life balance were thought of as barriers to reaching higher positions of leadership or to secure S&C positions in other sports.

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