

## How to Coach Girls

Coaching girls and retaining them in mountain biking programs requires understanding what girls want from biking, how they best respond to coaching, and how to create an environment that supports retention. By focusing on better coaching and creating a team culture that provides a supportive environment for girls, teams will hopefully experience an increase in numbers of girls on bikes over time.

### What Do Girls Want?

While both girls and boys can receive the same physical, mental, and emotional benefits from mountain biking (such as increased confidence, improved fitness, and emotional resilience), girls need a different coaching environment and team culture to fully integrate these important biopsychosocial components of development. The primary components providing what girls want from a biking program include:

- Skill Development
- Confidence
- Social Interaction
- Health and Fitness
- Teamwork
- Physical Safety
- Emotional Safety
- FUN!

### Girls are Different - Physical, Mental, and Emotional Considerations

- *Physical - Girls mature earlier than boys, have less muscle and more body fat, and slightly lower aerobic capacity.*
- *Mental - Girls have better developed areas of the brain associated with speech and language and with organization and decision-making relative to boys of the same age. They are able to identify and express emotions verbally. They also perceive more physical discomfort and pain relative to boys and are more susceptible to stress and anxiety.*
- *Emotional - Girls face many emotional stressors as they reach puberty. In particular, they often become self-conscious about weight and body image, overly self-critical, and lacking in confidence, in addition to fearing risk and failure, experiencing anxiety about performance (academic and athletic), and feeling negative peer and societal pressures.*

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## Positive Coaching Strategies

There are many positive coaching strategies that can be used to support the physical, mental, and emotional needs of girls in mountain biking. Practices, competitions, adventure rides, clinics, and other events all provide opportunities for creating a positive and confidence-building team culture for girls. Professional coach conduct and management of co-ed teams are particularly important for keeping girls physically and emotionally safe, and for giving them a space in which to develop their skills and confidence within a predominantly male team setting. Other factors of development that require close attention from coaches include social needs, body image and self-esteem, and physical health issues such as eating disorders and overtraining.

### General Coaching Strategies (apply to all student-athletes)

- Check in with girls before practices and competitions.
- Create a culture of support, cooperation, and camaraderie.
- Provide options and allow girls to make choices (e.g., about which skill to focus on, what trail to ride, etc.) and solve problems.
- Connect with families - show interest, communicate concerns, celebrate ups and downs.
- Use female coaches and mentors as positive role models.
- Set up for success - appropriate trails, bike fit, safety checks, risk management, clear instructions and expectations.
- Focus on improvement not outcome.
- Encourage expression of thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
- Provide specific, brief, and positive feedback.
- Corrections should be made calmly and away from other student-athletes, as girls are very sensitive to criticism and peer judgement.
- Teach goal-setting and help girls define **SMART** goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**imely).

### Professional Coach Conduct

- Be an advocate for girls and female coaches on your team.
- Maintain professional physical boundaries (“hands-off” policy).
- Follow youth protection training protocol (never be alone with ANY student-athlete).
- Use appropriate language (no cursing, pet names, etc.).
- Respect needs for physical safety.
- Provide emotional safety (no bullying, respect differences).
- Give specific and genuine praise and encouragement.
- Listen and ask questions.

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## Co-Ed Group Management

- Provide opportunities for separate skills instruction, evaluation, practice time and space for girls.
- Encourage girls to develop leadership skills (e.g., leading rides, teaching peers, organizing race day activities).
- Focus on skill development and learning through girl-only clinics, rides, and camps.
- Require respect among boys and girls - zero tolerance for non-respectful behavior and/or language.
- Allow for physical, mental, and emotional differences between girls and boys during practices, rides, and competition.
- Avoid making comparisons (with respect to skill level, effort, strength, etc.) between girls and boys.
- Provide opportunities for girls to cooperate (e.g., games and skills practice) and socialize at practices.

## Social Needs

- Relationships are important to girls. Allow time to socialize and create friendships.
  - Girls enjoy bonding through rituals (e.g., painting their faces with glitter before a race).
  - Girls may form cliques and ostracize other girls - intervene to correct this potential problem.
  - Treat girls respectfully as equals with boys.
  - Respect boundaries - “no” means “no” in any situation.
  - Girls enjoy cooperation and working in groups to solve problems - include activities during practice to support these needs (for example, let a group of girls set up a short course or a skill demonstration session).
  - Competition may not be an intrinsic motivator. Help girls identify non-competition goals for improvement and for making biking fun and rewarding.

## Body Image & Self Esteem

- Focus on health not weight.
- Encourage good nutrition.
- Celebrate strength, character, and effort.
- Avoid comments about body shape, weight, appearance.
- Be aware of pressure to conform to social and cultural norms.
- Bust myths - such as “weight training makes girls bulky,” or “missed periods are normal for female athletes.” Research is your ally. Enlist other mentors such as a teacher or pediatrician if needed to provide student-athletes and families with accurate information.

- Encourage breaks from social media. Girls are especially vulnerable to negative body image and low self confidence during puberty. Social media creates physically unrealistic and emotionally damaging expectations for young girls.

## General Physical Health

- Girls experience fast physical development starting around age 9 and progressing through puberty. During these years, girls will grow taller and heavier, breasts will develop and hips will widen, and they will experience their first menstrual period. Many of these changes will affect how girls function physically, mentally, and emotionally. Coaches should be aware that these changes will affect athletic performance and day-to-day personal interactions with female athletes.
- Encourage good nutrition and hydration.
- Focus on fitness (biking, cross-training), strength (weight training), and flexibility (stretching or yoga).
- Enforce rest days for recovery.
- Pay attention to physical complaints (soreness, GI issues, menstrual cramps) and adjust practice expectations accordingly.
- Allow girls to choose different activities during menstrual cycles (e.g., walking, yoga, or a rest day).
- Stock tampons and pads in med kits for coaches. Be aware girls may need time and extra accommodation during trail rides and bathroom breaks.
- Have female coaches check in with girls about physical, mental, and emotional health, and provide “girl talk” as needed.

## Female Athlete Health Issues

Eating disorders, disordered eating, and the Female Athlete Triad (FAT) tend to appear more often in girls and women participating in endurance based sports. As a mountain bike coach, be aware that you may encounter these behaviors and conditions in your female athletes.

More common in female athletes than full blown eating disorders is The Female Athlete Triad. The FAT is defined as one or more of the following conditions: disordered eating, amenorrhea (loss of periods) and osteoporosis (low bone density). Most commonly, the behavior manifests as over-exercising combined with under-eating. If untreated, it can lead to low bone density, stress fractures and decreased performance among many other health complications.

### Symptoms:

- Anemia
- Weight loss or binge-purge cycles
- Irregular or no menstrual cycle

- Stress fractures
- Muscle injuries
- Delayed injury healing time
- Hair loss
- Dry skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Fatigue and decreased ability to concentrate
- Depression, mood changes

### What to do:

- Don't try to manage it alone. Intervention takes a partnership between parents, coaches and medical and mental health professionals
- Informing a parent should be the first step
- If a coach has a positive, supportive relationship with the athlete, an intervention by a coach is appropriate
  - If you speak to your athlete, do so sensitively, privately and use "I" statements. ("I am concerned you are not eating enough to fuel your performance." etc.)
  - Do not judge or criticize. Offer support and understanding.
  - Be prepared for denial and resistance.
  - Help the athlete seek help.