

Advancing Women in Coaching: An Evaluation of Guelph Soccer's "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" Pilot Program

Year 1/Cohort 1

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by E-Alliance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the well-documented paucity of women coaches at all levels of sport, Guelph Soccer designed and delivered a program to increase the representation of girls and women in the sport. The purpose of this program is to increase parity in the male to female coach ratio by addressing specific barriers to women in coaching. By increasing the number of women in coaching, improving female registration and decreasing the gender gap in sport participation will result. Named “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach”, this program provided resources and supports that addressed previously identified barriers to coaching for women. For example, childcare was provided while participants engaged in the women’s soccer league; funding was made available to cover the cost of coach certification; and coach huddles were offered to provide education and social support. In total, 50 women participated in the first of three cohorts of this program. Evaluation of the program included pre- and post-participation surveys and mid-point focus groups. Findings indicated that before engagement in the program, the most commonly reported personal and professional barriers were personal time restrictions, competing employment and caregiving responsibilities, lack of confidence, cost of certification, fear of failure, and lack of awareness about roles and responsibilities of coaching. Participants reported facilitators that would help them become a coach or remain involved in coaching, including funding of coach certifications, knowledge of the sport, being personally asked to coach by an individual or organization, flexibility in their work lives, financial compensation, support with caregiving responsibilities and free childcare. Prior to engagement in the program, participants reported a range of feelings, including excitement, pride, eagerness and optimism, nervousness and anxiety. Their motivations for participating in the program included personal and professional development, advancing women in sport and the opportunity to be a positive role model. In their evaluation of “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach”, participants predominately appraised the program and their participation in it as very positive. More specifically, they praised the program design, including the informational, emotional, and instrumental supports offered through the program, the intention and care in delivery of the program by Guelph Soccer, and the program structure in terms of the broad age range, breadth of offerings, and timing and flow of the program. Participants also reported outcomes related to professional development, including a strengthened soccer IQ, technical skill development for coaching, and developing an appreciation for the significance of the role of the coach. Participants also reported experiencing personal development through the enhancement of self-efficacy. The participants acknowledged the strengths of the program for advancing gender equity in sport. Their recommendations for strengthening the program included more clarity with respect to administration and operations, greater diversity in coach huddle speakers, and increased marketing. Of significance, the participants expressed a desire to remain engaged in the program, specifically to have access to resources, to serve as a mentor to the second cohort and to continue to be mentored. Finally, the program may be

assessed as effective in meeting its objectives as the majority of Cohort 1 participants expressed intent to continue coaching.

INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in coaching is seen at all sport levels in Canada and abroad (Banwell, 2020). Historically, in Canada, male coaches outnumber female coaches, particularly in competitive levels of sport, and female coaches rarely coach male athletes (Demers, 2019; Reade et al., 2009; Robertson, 2010). While the sport system in Canada has advanced to include equity focused policy requirements for sport organizations, increased competitive sport opportunities for women, enhanced equity-focused funding, and more female athletes performing at elite levels, a paucity of women in coaching remains (Demers et al., 2019). According to the 2021–2022 Coaching Association of Canada annual report, 58% of new NCCP coaches identified as male, showing that there is still a discrepancy in the ratio of male to female coaches becoming trained and certified in Canada (Demers et al., 2019). Based on these current statistics, steps must be taken to ensure further progress towards gender equity in coaching.

A paucity of women coaches worldwide is a significant issue facing the sport community. Research suggests women coaches may bring distinct benefits and competencies to the sport environment, including, the ability to create a positive and inclusive space, effective communication, empathy, multi-tasking skills, enhanced understanding of athletes' needs, ability to incorporate athletes' feedback, a focus on long-term athlete development, and a desire to advance skills and improve coaching tactics (Meier, 2015; Norman, 2013). In addition, research demonstrates women coaches tend to approach coaching with a dual-emphasis on helping athletes to reach their full potential as competitors, while also developing as people within and outside of sport (Norman, 2013). Furthermore, it is important to have women in coaching roles so that female athletes have role models to encourage sport participation (Kerr & Ali, 2012) and challenge the negative stereotypes in sport concerning gender and leadership in a male-dominated environment (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Research also suggests an increase in women in coaching roles will lead to more girls and women entering and remaining in sport (Meier, 2015). Further, the 2022 Canadian Women & Sport Rally Report found that of the 4,500 Canadian girls and women surveyed, 75% think more efforts are needed to get women into sport leadership roles and 80% agree that girls would stay in sport if they had more female role models.

Despite the importance of women in coaching, significant barriers remain for women to begin and/or continue their coaching journeys across all levels of sport. Examples of barriers include, lack of self-efficacy in coaching abilities, family-work balance, competing domestic responsibilities, low pay or an unclear career pathway, gender role assumptions and marginalization, issues of harassment, perceived lack of value of women in sport, and a lack of

programs designed to mentor and develop women coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Kerr & Ali, 2012; Kerr & Banwell, 2016; Norman, 2013). Evidently, these barriers limit the number of women entering and staying in coaching and other leadership positions in sport. As a result, more efforts are necessary to recruit, train, mentor and retain women in sport leadership positions, including coaching (Demers et al., 2019).

In the Guelph Soccer community specifically, there has been a 60:40 boy to girl ratio for participation over 20 years and prior to the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program (i.e., 2019), there was a 5:1 men to women coach ratio. Despite attempts to increase female participation in the Guelph Soccer community, these numbers have not changed. Therefore, the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program is focused on alleviating the barriers that women face when entering and remaining in the coaching profession to advance women in coaching and positively influence gender parity in soccer participation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The overarching purpose of Guelph Soccer’s “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program is to increase the number of women in coaching positions across all levels of their Club through targeted recruitment, training, and development of women coaches. The pilot program attempts to address barriers and facilitators to women in coaching by providing strategic supports for girls and women to participate and develop as coaches, such as, organization-funded coach training, a social support network, and free childcare. By increasing the number of women coaches in the community, Guelph Soccer hopes to achieve gender parity in participation over time (e.g., 50:50 ratio male to female players).

This program is designed and delivered to address evidence-based challenges to women in coaching such as, lack of confidence in coaching abilities, childcare, domestic responsibilities, time scarcity, and the financial burden of coaching certification costs. In order to overcome these barriers, the program offers a breadth of resources to all participants. For instance, the program funds all participants’ NCCP courses (i.e., online and in-person), which allows them to maximize their potential as a coach through access to the education necessary to develop their coaching skills. NCCP courses available for access by participants include Active Start (U4-6), Fundamentals (U6-9 for boys, U6-8 for girls), Learn to Train (U9-12 for boys, U8-11 for girls), Soccer for Life (U13+ for boys, U12+ for girls), and the C-License. In addition to funding coach certifications, the program also offers mandatory and optional online modules (e.g., Respect in Sport, Making Headway – Concussion E-Learning, Keeping Girls in Sport, and NCCP Emergency Action Plan Workshop) and monthly coach huddles for further education and participant connection. Sample topics covered in coach huddles include learning about the coach education pathway in Canadian soccer, open dialogue regarding the challenges faced as female athletes and leaders in sport, and insights on research regarding advancing and supporting women in sport, particularly as it relates to the creation and implementation of “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach.” Examples of invited speakers for the coach huddles include

Canada Soccer personnel, female student-athletes from the University of Guelph Gyphons varsity soccer team, female leaders from other soccer clubs, and researchers who specialize in gender equity in sport. To build community and support for women learning or developing skills of the game, the program also offers a weekly women's league for participants that is free of cost. During all of the women's league games, the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program provides childcare for participants' children to assist in eliminating the childcare barrier.

At the outset of the program, it was anticipated that decreasing the existing barriers to women in coaching would increase the potential for women to begin or continue their coaching journeys. While the program aims to increase the number of girls and women coaching, it also hopes to decrease the gender gap of participation in soccer and increase the rates and retention of female players in Guelph Soccer programs.

The "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program is a three-year pilot funded by Sport Canada through their Innovation Initiative. As part of the funding agreement, Guelph Soccer arranged an independent evaluation of the pilot through the E-Alliance Gender Equity+ Research Hub. The following report details the evaluation of Year 1/Cohort 1 of the pilot program.

Year 1 of the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program took place from October 2021–September 2022. In the summer of 2021, Guelph Soccer initiated the program by engaging in the process of participant recruitment and program marketing. Cohort 1 consisted of 50 registrants and their ages ranged from 16 – 48 years old. Once participants were registered for the program, they were invited to participate in a pre-participation survey facilitated by the E-Alliance that occurred in the fall of 2021. While the pre-participation surveys were conducted, Guelph Soccer began program implementation, which included coordination of online coaching certification courses, in-person modules, coach huddles, facilitation of the winter women's league, and marketing program activities. These core components of program implementation occurred between fall/winter 2021 and spring 2022. During this time, participants completed all program requirements and the newly trained coaches were integrated into the club to begin their coaching journeys. Following engagement in the core components, the E-Alliance conducted focus groups in the spring and early summer of 2022 to learn about participant experiences and then invited participants to complete post-participation surveys following summer coaching experiences. The information gathered from focus groups and survey data were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the program and provide recommendations to program facilitators regarding possible refinements to the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" pilot program as recruitment began for Year 2/Cohort 2. The following report is an overview of the evaluation results and recommendations at the culmination of Year 1/Cohort 1.

DESIGN OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

For the purpose of this evaluation, we implemented an ethics-approved mixed-methods design that included quantitative pre- and post-participation surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The qualitative interviews were implemented through focus groups, although there was one individual interview conducted to accommodate a participant who was unavailable for the focus group dates. A mixed-methods design allowed us to obtain an initial broad assessment of participants' perspectives as they began the pilot program. The surveys assessed perceived barriers and facilitators to coaching, participants' feelings towards the program prior to participation, and anticipated benefits of the program. Then, we used the information gleaned from the survey to refine the interview guide with the purpose of probing more specifically about these constructs in focus groups at the mid- to end-point of the program. We concluded the evaluation of Cohort 1's experiences with the program through a post-participation survey that explored participants' perceptions of the ways in which the program potentially influenced barriers and facilitators to coaching, their feelings toward coaching following engagement in the program, the potential benefits of engagement, and future plans for coaching. To ensure the relevance and applicability of the data gathered through the surveys and interviews, we engaged in a collaborative development process with Guelph Soccer where we created initial drafts of the surveys and interview guides, Guelph Soccer staff provided feedback or suggested revisions, and we incorporated their input into the final versions. The evaluation is critical to assess the effectiveness of the program and inform future initiatives of this nature for programs across Canada.

OVERARCHING EVALUATION QUESTIONS

This report addresses Year 1/Cohort 1 of the three-year pilot program. The overarching research questions explored in this evaluation include:

1. What are the general barriers and facilitators to women in coaching?
2. Does the pilot program work in recruiting and retaining women in coaching?
3. What are the key ingredients to an effective program? What strategies were effective in reducing barriers to coaching and what facilitators supported engagement?
4. What are the perceived outcomes of participation in the pilot program?
5. In what ways may Guelph Soccer refine or improve the pilot program going forward?

DEMOGRAPHICS OF EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS

With the assistance of Guelph Soccer, we recruited forty-three participants for the pre-participation survey, seventeen participants for the focus groups, and seventeen participants for the post-participation survey. For the pre-participation survey, the demographics of the participant sample included forty-two participants who identified as women and one participant who identified as non-binary and their ages ranged between 16 and 48 years-old. To respect the gender identities of all individuals engaged in the program, we will refer to them as “participants” throughout this report. The highest level of education varied amongst participants, with the majority having completed an undergraduate degree (35%), and the remaining having completed some post-secondary (10%), graduate degrees (9%), post-graduate diploma/certificate (7%), and high school diploma (3%). Additionally, two participants identified as current high school students. All participants confirmed previous engagement in organized sport as recreational (28%), competitive (67%), or national level (5%) athletes and the majority participated for more than fifteen years in their respective sports. Interestingly, seventeen of the forty-three participants were athletes in sports other than soccer, such as volleyball, basketball, gymnastics, dance and athletics. Of the forty-three participants, 49% did not have children enrolled in Guelph Soccer programs, 37% did have children currently enrolled, and 14% did not presently have children enrolled but had in the past. In terms of coaching, 70% of participants in the program had previous experience coaching, the majority of which occurred in recreational settings in sports other than soccer (e.g., volleyball, badminton, ultimate frisbee, hockey, wrestling, roller derby, gymnastics, ringette). Despite coaching experience, most participants reported that they had not received formal coach training and/or were not trained/certified prior to this program (93%). Although there were more participants in the pre-participation survey, the overall demographic information aligned with the post-participation survey.

RESULTS OF EVALUATION: YEAR 1/COHORT 1

The results of the evaluation of Year 1/Cohort 1 confirm that ***“She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” is successful in recruiting, training, and developing women coaches.*** Through pre- and post-participation surveys and mid-point focus groups, participants identified the barriers, facilitators and key motivators of their coaching journeys and suggested the ways in which the design and delivery of “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” alleviated these barriers and offered key supports that facilitated engagement (e.g., strategic supports, intention and care, program structure). Participants also reported personal and professional development gleaned through their participation in the program. Each of these broad themes will be discussed in detail in the following section. Further, each section will conclude with “key takeaways” that summarize the major findings of each theme of the evaluation.

BARRIERS, FACILITATORS, AND MOTIVATORS FOR WOMEN IN COACHING

The purpose of the pre- and post- surveys and focus groups were to obtain participants' perspectives on the barriers and facilitators of their coaching journeys, and the ways in which "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" eliminated these reported barriers and supported engagement in the program.

Perceived Barriers to Coaching Prior to Participation in Program

To identify the barriers perceived by the participants in Year 1/Cohort 1, questions were asked related to their current caregiving responsibilities and personal and professional factors that would make it challenging to engage in coaching. The following chart demonstrates participants' self-identified current caregiving responsibilities:

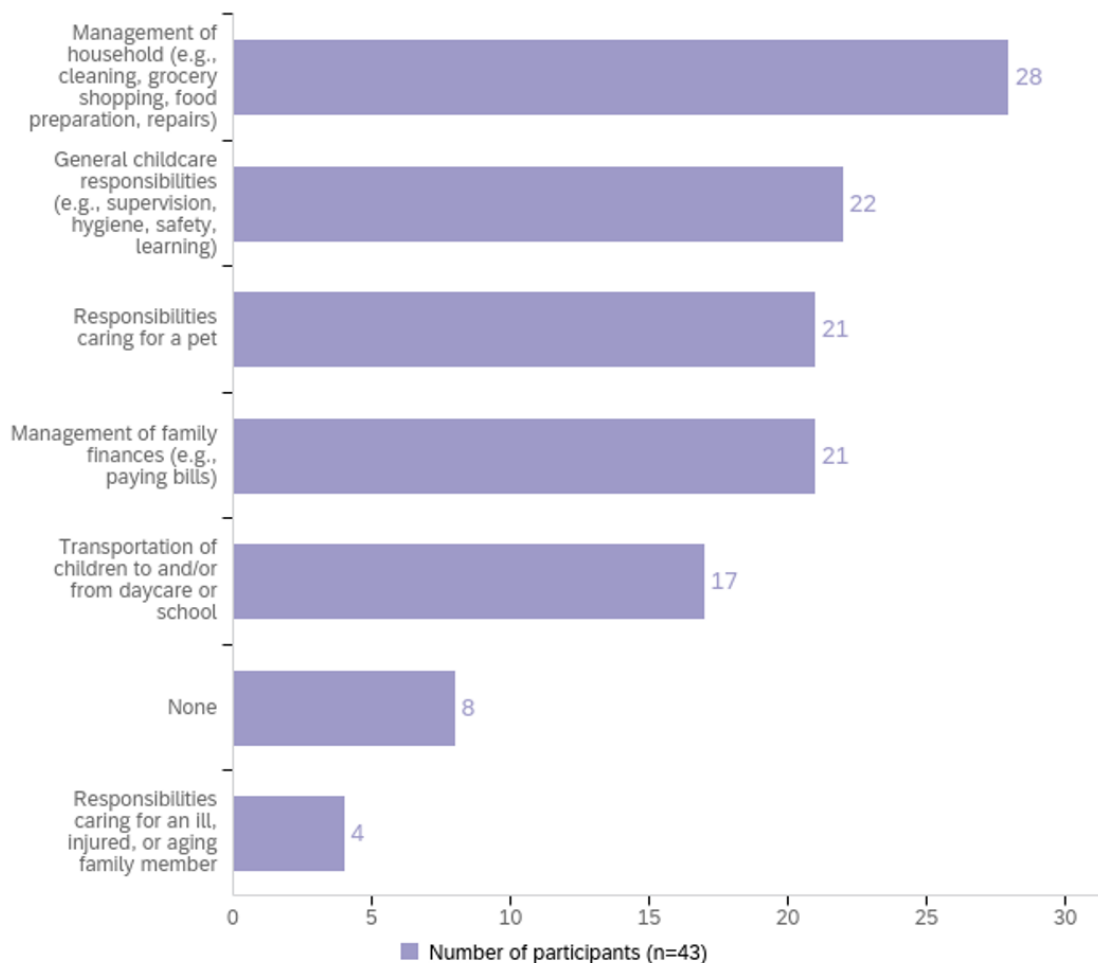


Figure 1: Participants' Reported Caregiving Responsibilities

Evidently, most participants indicated having a breadth of household and childcare-related responsibilities that may serve as a general barrier to engagement in activities beyond the home. In addition to competing caregiving responsibilities, the most commonly reported personal and professional barriers were personal time restrictions, competing employment responsibilities, lack of confidence, cost of certification, fear of failure, and lack of awareness about roles and responsibilities of coaching. To elaborate on personal time restrictions as a barrier, one participant stated, “In our household, I juggle a lot, and I’m taking on more and more professionally as well. It’s just a lot.” (Coach 5). Another participant cited the transition time between work and coaching as particularly challenging: “I think the hardest part is getting your kids home from school, yourself home from work, getting food on the table, and then getting [to the soccer field]” (Coach 1). Further, some participants viewed a perceived lack of knowledge as a barrier to confidence: “One of the barriers for me is not feeling like I know enough to be able to stand up and coach” (Coach 6). Expanding on this notion, the participant suggested that this perception may also extend to others who encounter women and girls in the coaching context:

I think there are still comments or situations from people who don't think or assume that women can also be just as competent of coaches as men... I think that [stereotype] still kind of exists. Male coaches who have coached for a long time are just automatically the defaults, and they know everything. And there are many very great, knowledgeable male coaches out there... but I think there is also a lot of potential for females who are great leaders and great communicators to also help athletes thrive. - (Coach 6)

Interestingly, of the seventeen personal and professional factors posed to the participants as potential barriers through the pre-participation survey, a ‘lack of desire to coach’ was the least common factor influencing participants’ capacity to begin or continue coaching; only two of forty-three participants indicated this factor as relevant to their circumstances.

Perceived Facilitators of Coaching Prior to Participation

In contrast to the barriers, participants reported facilitators that would help them become a coach or remain involved in coaching, including but not limited to, funding of coach certifications, knowledge of the sport, past coaching experience, being personally asked to coach by an individual or organization, flexibility in their work lives, financial compensation, support with caregiving responsibilities, and free childcare. When asked to rank the top three factors that would facilitate their coaching journeys, participants recognized funding support for training and certifications, knowledge acquisition and experience as most important. Please see the following chart to illustrate the reported facilitators identified by participants:

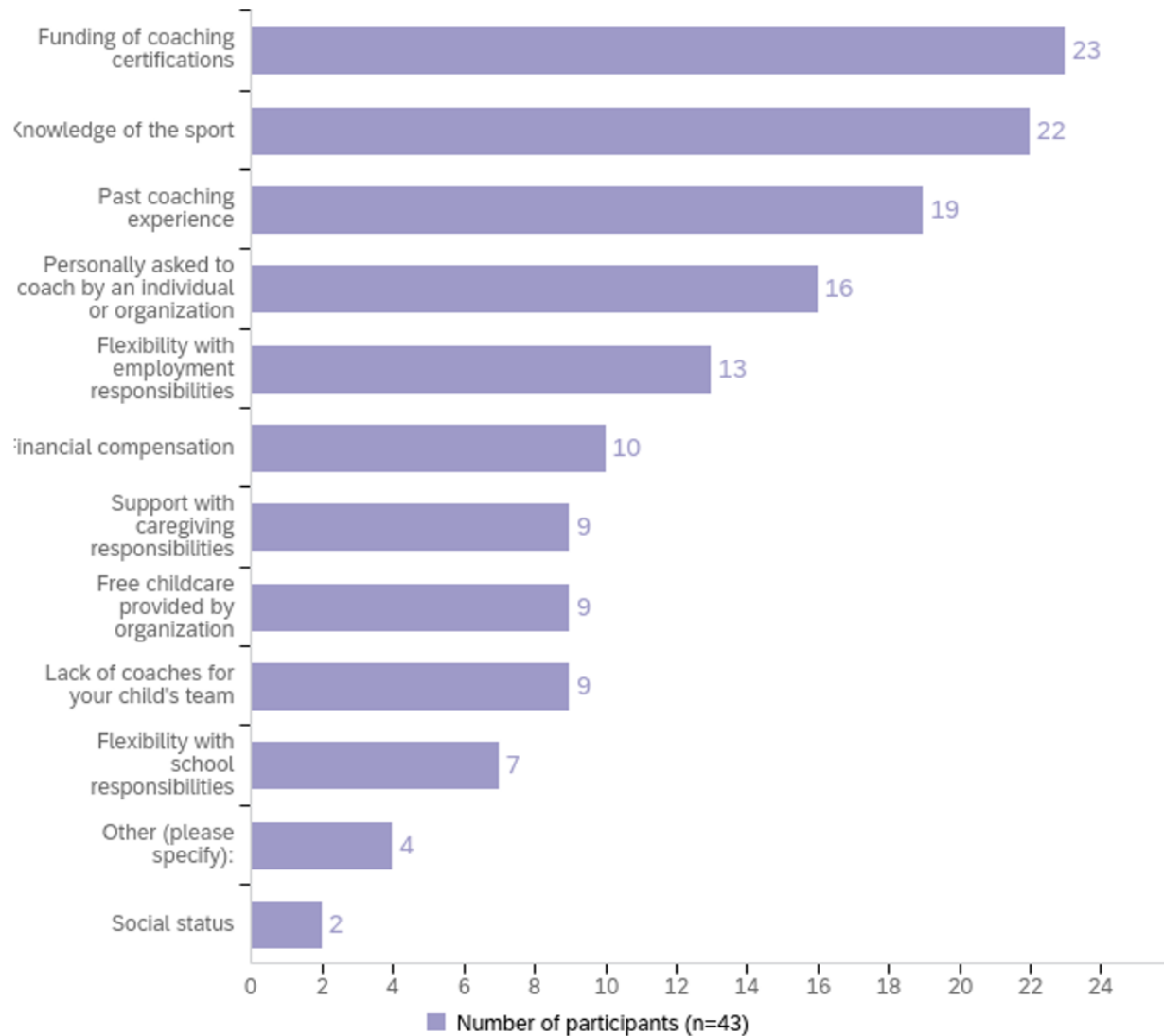


Figure 2: General Facilitators of Coaching Reported by Participants

Reported Motivations for Engagement in the Program

Through the pre-participation survey and subsequent focus groups, participants shared general motivations behind their participation. For one participant from the pre-participation survey, excitement for participation was grounded in the potential for professional development:

I am very excited to become a certified coach as I am in school for Kinesiology and my dream job is to be an athletic trainer. With the experience I have gained, and hope to gain, I will be more confident going into my future roles. I also hope to

continue to positively influence young adults to pursue physical activity their whole lives!

Another participant suggested the skills developed would help her be a better leader: “This [program] makes me more fired up to take advantage of programs where I can be a more educated and qualified female role model and leader and professional in the soccer and sport community.” (Coach 6). Further, one participant was motivated to increase female professionals in soccer and fulfill the gap she experienced as a player:

You know, in the 20+ years that I've been playing soccer, and most of it competitively, I've never had a female coach in all of that time. And, I think I really could've benefitted from at least one. So, seeing what Guelph Soccer is doing... I want to be part of that; helping get [female coach] numbers up, and help the eight-year-olds I once was to see coaches who look like them. - (Coach 9)

A lack of women coaches throughout participants' athletic journeys was commonly reported by others, too:

In all of my years of competitive [sport], I've had one female assistant coach... it's just wild to me when I hear more and more women say they've never had a female coach. That's a huge motivation for me to be in this program... I'm just all about having more women in coaching and positions across the board in all sports. - (Coach 7)

Finally, another participant drew motivation to sign up from the opportunity to be a female role model in her community: “To be able to pay it forward and to be an encouraging, supportive role model for the girls [in the soccer programs] is going to be pretty amazing for me” (Coach 15).

Participants were also motivated by the potential facilitation of personal development, as described by one participant in the pre-participation survey: “I am trying to break out of my shell and continue with a sport I love!” Some participants also viewed participation in this program as the next logical step in their soccer careers. For instance, one participant stated, “I've had a couple knee surgeries by now and realized I can't do the playing side anymore... I got into [coaching] as my next step in my athletic journey” (Coach 10). Similarly, another participant stated: “Coaching is a good step for me. I can't play anymore, but I feel like I can still be part of the game by coaching.” (Coach 14). For some, the anticipated design of the program also stimulated positive feelings about becoming engaged, as one participant shared on the pre-participation survey: “I think the idea behind the program is wonderful. I believe it will be an engaging and rewarding process.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS: BARRIERS, FACILITATORS AND MOTIVATORS

- Most significant barriers reported by participants: breadth of household and childcare responsibilities, personal time restrictions, competing employment responsibilities, lack of confidence and fear of failure, cost of certifications, and lack of awareness of roles/responsibilities of coaching
- Most significant facilitators reported by participants: funding of coach certifications, knowledge acquisition, and coaching experience
- Motivations for participation reported by participants: personal and professional skills development, a lack of women coaches, and the opportunity to be a female role model in their community

HOW DID THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF THE PROGRAM REDUCE BARRIERS AND SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT?

Based on the data gleaned from the focus groups and post-participant surveys, the pilot program is successful in recruiting, training and retaining girls and women in coaching positions. In their evaluation of “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach,” participants predominately appraised the program and their participation in it as very positive and identified three key components of the design and delivery as critical to the success of the program, including, provision of supports, intention and care for the program, and the program structure. The following section will review each of these themes in depth.

Provision of Supports

In general, the post-participation survey indicated all participants perceived the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program provided critical supports to address some of the most significant barriers confronted by participants in becoming or continuing their journeys as a coach (e.g., lack of confidence, time restrictions, costs of certification, fear of failure). Specifically, the provision of informational, emotional, and instrumental supports throughout participants’ engagement in the program was referred to as a significant positive aspect of the design and delivery of the program.

Informational Support. Informational support refers to the provision of program updates, advice, feedback, and ongoing communication with participants. In general, participants identified the overarching organization and communications from Guelph Soccer as a significant benefit, with one participant summarizing, “[Guelph Soccer] just really lay

everything out and they've been really clear with, like, next steps and each stage of the program so you can envision what things are looking like going forward" (Coach 7). Some participants made specific mention of the informational support provided by the program lead through ongoing communications: "[Program Lead] was a really great communicator; she was super organized and clear about expectations and what our timeline was" (Coach 6). Another participant recognized the specific approach to online communications as beneficial:

The e-mail communications have been great. They've been really easy to follow, if that makes sense; they're very well constructed and things are bolded, and that may seem like a little thing, but when you're getting a lot of e-mails – just in general, not even just from this program – that's really, really helpful. - (Coach 7).

Participants also reported that the provision of informational support assisted in keeping them on track with the program: "The communication has been fantastic; letting everybody know well in advance that the different events, like the coach huddles or the on-field sessions are coming up, with lots of time [in advance] so that everybody knows" (Coach 4). Further, another participant stated, "[The staff] are very good with keeping you updated for things... sending out messages saying, 'this is what's happening in the next couple months so don't forget to do X, Y, & Z'" (Coach 8). Finally, some participants recognized the benefit of Guelph Soccer's commitment to providing continuous communication, advice, and assistance, when needed, especially beyond their participation in Cohort 1:

Guelph Soccer has been saying recently that, although this Cohort is ending soon, the resources and communications will not end, so if you have any questions while coaching during the summer, it's not like you're just plopped down into your coaching positions and you're sort of just left. There's going to be avenues where you can, you know, reach out and ask for help or get advice or you know, coaching plans or something. I think that's going to be really helpful too, so you're not just in the middle of the ocean. I really, really appreciate that. - (Coach 12)

Emotional Support. Participants also referenced the provision of emotional support characterized by the empathy, understanding, and community offered to participants throughout engagement in the program. Specifically, participants most often referenced this type of support in the context of Guelph Soccer's understanding of participants' needs to balance personal responsibilities with the program components. For instance, one participant stated:

I think it's nice that [program components] are optional. It doesn't feel as overwhelming. Like, I've missed some of the online coach huddles, but it's okay.

It's just nice to be able to pick and choose, sort of, what level of participation you have time for and like, what you're able to do. – (Coach 3)

For some participants, allowing program components to be optional ensured continued participation in the program: "... if [the program components] weren't optional, I probably wouldn't be in the program anymore" (Coach 2). Participants also described other moments where Guelph Soccer demonstrated flexibility for an individual's personal circumstances, including an instance when one participant's child appeared on Zoom during an online coach huddle: "You know, they're not so strict... Like, when we have our Zoom calls, [the staff] aren't strict about them and they don't care when a kid pops their head in and goes 'hello!', right?" (Coach 4). Evidently, empathy and understanding for participants' personal circumstances encouraged continued engagement in the program.

Instrumental Support. Finally, participants recognized instrumental support offered by Guelph Soccer as critical to their engagement and success in the program. Instrumental support refers to the provision of tangible or concrete assistance, including financial, childcare and coaching support. In general, the post-participation survey indicated the top two factors that have helped facilitate participants' coaching journeys are increased knowledge of the sport and funding of coach certifications. More specifically, across the focus groups, all participants – regardless of age or life circumstances – recognized the financial support provided by Guelph Soccer as fundamental to their engagement in the program, especially as it relates to obtaining coach certifications. As one participant stated:

The accessibility and support [provided by Guelph Soccer] in terms of financials for getting access to training was huge. I don't think I would have had the financial resources to bite the bullet on some of the coaching courses that are hundreds of dollars, even with my intrinsic desire to coach. I think [the financial commitment] itself would prevent me from having the credentials to be able to step on the field and coach... if coaching training is something that is standardized and required then having the ability to get sponsorship from Guelph Soccer is huge and paramount in being able to actually access [the training]. - (Coach 13)

In another example, a participant said, "since I'm a high school student, I wouldn't have otherwise done the coaching [training] because it was so much money. But, with the cost coverage, it was great for me because I didn't have to worry about the money and I could just take this opportunity and experience" (Coach 16). Further, another participant stated, "the program made for me, personally, doing those certifications and trainings much more accessible and much more real" (Coach 8).

In addition to instrumental support offered through the funding of coach certifications, those with children discussed the significance of free childcare offered to participants during

the weekly women's league games. Specifically, some participants remarked that they sometimes overlook opportunities within or outside of sport because they are cognizant that participation requires adequate childcare and presents an additional obstacle or barrier to participation. By offering childcare during the league games, Guelph Soccer reduced this barrier at the initiation of the program. One participant described the impact of this initiative by stating:

The childcare option really helped with me because I find that is a big barrier for not only participating in soccer but participating in lots of things, just because the lack of childcare and just being like 'well, I know there's nobody to look after the kids, so I shouldn't... I shouldn't go or I shouldn't do this.' So, I think [providing childcare] really attracted me to the program as well because the bad excuse is gone now; you can, you can really access the opportunity. - (Coach 12)

Some participants also suggested the benefits of childcare extended beyond alleviating logistical barriers to providing an opportunity for participants in the program to be a role model for the children attending: "the free childcare for the league, I thought, was awesome. And I thought it was really helpful – especially for the kids that are there – to see adult women playing soccer. On top of just the babysitting, I think it was a really helpful thing" (Coach 7).

Participants also recognized the opportunity to co-coach or be part of a coaching team as another form of instrumental support offered through Guelph Soccer. They reported that having a coaching team helped balance the coaching duties with other responsibilities and suggested that coaching with another person can enhance enjoyment. Coach 1 shared her experience with co-coaching:

The support in the coaching team has been great because I think a barrier for me of wanting to coach is, like, I would never want the [sole] head coach responsibilities because I feel... like my life with work and kids, I would be stressed all the time... But after this year of working with other coaches, I understand the role a little bit better and how to do things. And, I feel like I've learned a lot from the head coach that I'm working with. And you know with COVID, people have been out and can't make it some weeks. And with a team of coaches, we're like no problem, we're going to be there. So, I really like the team coaching atmosphere.

Similarly, Coach 5 also shared an interest in partnering with another coach and Guelph Soccer's willingness to facilitate this request:

I think one thing, for sure, that this program has got me thinking about is that coaching is way more fun with somebody else. And you know, last summer, I kind of inherited a team, and so, when [Program Lead] and Guelph soccer asked again about coaching this year, I said I would like to coach for sure. Is it possible to partner up with someone? And she had someone in mind already.

Finally, Guelph Soccer's sample coaching plans and practice templates for participants to use while coaching were recognized as a significant offer of instrumental support. For some participants, receiving these plans and templates prior to engagement in coaching proactively alleviated potential stressors or anxieties related to coaching:

I wasn't aware that Guelph Soccer would send you practice plans, which is amazing! I was like, like that's a big stress, right? It's like, what am I going to do out there? How am I going to teach these strategies and tactics? I know how to play, I know the basics of the game, but to teach it strategy by strategy... that was huge to know I was getting a practice plan. Like, a starting point to work from. I think even just knowing that, for the new coaches, would be motivating and maybe take away some of the anxiety and like, 'hey, you have someone helping you out here with coaching material'. - (Coach 1)

Instrumental supports designed to increase knowledge of the sport and a more formal process for learning and translation to practice (e.g., coaching plans, practice templates) were also recognized by participants in the post-participation survey as critical factors that have helped them become or remain involved in coaching.

Intention and Care for the Program

The next positive aspect of the program structure recognized by participants centred on Guelph Soccer's perceived intention and care for the program. From a broad standpoint, all participants recognized the effort behind the program as beneficial. As one participant stated, "you can tell there's care and intent with everything on Guelph Soccer's part and they're trying to have that engagement, so you do want to reciprocate that" (Coach 7). More specifically, for some participants, intention and care was exemplified by Guelph Soccer's research into barriers to women in sport and subsequent mitigation of those barriers through intentional program design: "this program is well-researched and it's well planned out and [Guelph Soccer] have tried to go above and beyond to eliminate any of those potential barriers like removing the financial component, providing childcare, offering free entrance to the league, like all of these things. I really feel like you can't lose" (Coach 7). In addition, participants also suggested intention and care for the program was demonstrated by Guelph Soccer staff's continuous

encouragement through follow-up communications. For one participant, the ongoing encouragement enhanced her engagement in the program:

I don't know, I feel like I was expecting... not the program to be a throwaway thing, but I wasn't expecting the constant communication. Maybe I was expecting one e-mail reminder before the in-person session and one reminder about a coach huddle. But instead, you'd get things like 'don't forget to join our women's league that's starting soon!' or 'make sure that you're doing your online courses and remember to register here!' All of that communication made me think they are really invested in this program and they want us to take advantage of it and all of their effort that they're putting into it. - (Coach 8)

Elaborating on this perspective, she suggested Guelph Soccer's investment in the program also increased her commitment:

[Guelph Soccer's investment] made me very committed to get all of my online courses done on time and to attend the coach huddles because I knew that there's just so much work and effort going behind it. I think it affected how I approached the program. It's very easy especially in the last two years of the pandemic to just, like, blow off my things, you know what I mean? So, I think Guelph Soccer's commitment sort of helped shift my mindset. - (Coach 8)

This perspective was shared by another participant, who stated that Guelph Soccer's continuous engagement and desire to create meaningful connections amongst participants enhanced her commitment to the program:

I didn't do any of the courses for the first, maybe, three months or so, but because of [Guelph Soccer] follow-ups, I eventually did all the online courses and went to the in-person events and now I'm quite invested... it's very difficult to create connections online and I think Guelph Soccer perseveres through that and I don't think I'd be in the coaching program if it weren't for this system. - (Coach 10)

Further, some participants reflected on the female leadership team at Guelph Soccer and suggested the composition of the leadership team may have facilitated additional intention and care for the program. As stated by one participant:

Something that I've been thinking about is how the team at the club is very strongly women-led and quite involved with this program. It really shows how much they care about [advancing women in coaching] while also running a club. I think that's a huge factor in why this program for its first cohort is so successful. It's coming from a female leadership team (Coach 11).

Program Structure

Finally, from a structural standpoint, participants perceived the age range, breadth of program offerings and the timing and flow of the program as significant benefits.

Age Range. First, from a broad perspective, participants suggested that the program encouraged girls and women across a variety of ages to interact and learn from one another's perspectives and experiences. As one participant noted, these interactions also enhanced enjoyment of the program: "The age range [across the program] has been really fun. You know, because you've got [participants] that are older and those that are younger but it's been easy" (Coach 4). Similarly, another participant stated, "I like that too, that there are a variety of ages... I hope, you know, the younger generations can see the value of having that age range" (Coach 5).

Breadth of Offerings. Second, in terms of the breadth of offerings, participants suggested that the combination of the women's league, online and in-person training, coach huddles and guest speakers (e.g., Canada Soccer personnel, researchers, female varsity athletes and community leaders) contributed to a comprehensive and balanced program that offered opportunities for learning, skill development and social activity. In reference to the extent of program offerings, Coach 3 stated:

I like the variety of [components] offered within [the program]. Like, having the soccer league but also the huddles and the training. I think it's been a nice like, um, it feels very rounded out and I'm not missing a social aspect or training aspect. It's all encompassed in the program.

Another participant agreed, suggesting the design and delivery of the program provides a holistic soccer experience:

I like that there's a big picture. You know, we've had representatives from other organizations, we've had players in the Guelph Soccer organization speak to us, we've had researchers speak to us in our coach huddles. We've done the practical component of coaching, we've done some social components of coaching, we've done the playing component through the league. So, I think, it's a really good

holistic view of the sport; the sport in Canada, the sport in Ontario, and the sport in Guelph from an organizational standpoint... I think [Guelph Soccer] has done a really good job of showing so many facets of playing, coaching, and progressing in this sport in this part of the world. - (Coach 5)

More specifically, participants emphasized the women's soccer league and in-person trainings as particularly valuable. In terms of the league, participants felt it created a collaborative and positive learning environment for the girls and women in the program and served as an outlet to interact with one another in person, develop or refine soccer skills, and learn the game. As one participant stated, "I recommend the league. It was definitely one of my favourite aspects of the program – being able to play. I love playing soccer and playing with other women is such a joy" (Coach 15). Participants particularly appreciated that the league was inclusive of a range of player skillsets and past experience (or lack of) with soccer. Coach 7 described her experience playing in the women's league, despite having minimal experience with soccer at the start of the program:

[My friend and I] played in the league in the fall and that was nice to have someone, a friend. We weren't on the same team, but we were both, like, the people that have never played soccer really before. So it was also socially nice to be like, okay, I know there's someone else in this building that also doesn't have that soccer I.Q.

Finally, participants recognized the substantial value of the in-person trainings offered to them free of cost. These trainings were perceived as an opportunity to connect with other program participants, seek support, and learn the fundamentals of coaching soccer. As described by one participant, "access to the coaching clinics, I think that was huge. A lot of great tips and tricks during those sessions... one instructor was really motivating in terms of 'even if soccer wasn't your main sport, you can do this!'" (Coach 14). For other participants, the in-person training sessions provided a foundation from which to build their coaching skills: "I have more tools in my toolbox from going to the on-field trainings... drills or activities you could run and ways to build on them and make them more fun week to week or progressions week to week" (Coach 9). Similarly, another participant stated: "for me... before [the in-person training], I wasn't 'winging' practices and stuff but they just weren't as organized and as structured. So [the practical learning component] gave me a really good toolbox and framework within which to build and structure my practices which will be really helpful for me coaching this summer" (Coach 8).

Timing and Flow. Lastly, participants cited the timing and flow as benefits to the delivery of the program. In general, participants referred to the overarching timeline of the program as positive and noted that despite some pandemic-related interruptions, the program

felt organized and well-paced across the course of the year. More specifically, most participants appraised the program timeline, including start and end dates (i.e., October 2021-August 2022), and corresponding program elements as appropriate and beneficial to their learning and progress. As one participant stated:

I would say the combination of playing throughout the fall and winter, and then coaching in the spring after doing the coaching training – I don't know if that's how everybody else did it – but generally, that's the flow of how it worked. I think that was really great because we, like, get to know each other [through the league]... I hadn't played soccer for a while, so even just getting back into, like, a soccer kind of mindset. And then, you go and look at the content, you're like, okay, yeah, I can relate to that. Or, you know, I experienced that in my game on Sunday so I can understand that a bit better. I think that flow was really nice; the playing and learning at the same time. And then, in spring doing the practical courses and having the summer to do and try things out and get experience with it and implement what we'd learned. – (Coach 6)

KEY TAKEAWAYS: YES, THE PROGRAM WORKS!

Here's how:

- The program provides ongoing *informational support* (e.g., advice, updates, feedback), *emotional support* (e.g., empathy, understanding, community), and *instrumental support* (e.g., financial and childcare support, coaching plans/templates) to participants
- The intention and care for evidence-based design and delivery of programming by Guelph Soccer enhanced participants' commitment and engagement in the program
- Participants had an opportunity to learn and interact with women and girls of a variety of ages, engage in a breadth of program offerings, and design their experiences based on their personal schedules (i.e., opt-in or out of certain activities)
- The overarching timing of activities and trainings were identified as beneficial to participants' learning experiences

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL OUTCOMES OF PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM

Through the pre- and post-participation surveys and mid-point focus groups, participants identified their feelings toward coaching prior to engagement, considered anticipated benefits of the program prior to participation, and discussed actual benefits of the program following engagement, including professional (e.g., global soccer IQ, technical skills, meaning of being a coach) and personal development (e.g., building and advancing self-efficacy). Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Feelings Toward Coaching Prior to Engagement in the Program

Prior to engagement in the program, participants were prompted to identify their top five feelings about their upcoming engagement in the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program through the pre-participation survey. The following chart demonstrates the range of feelings identified by participants prior to participation in the program:

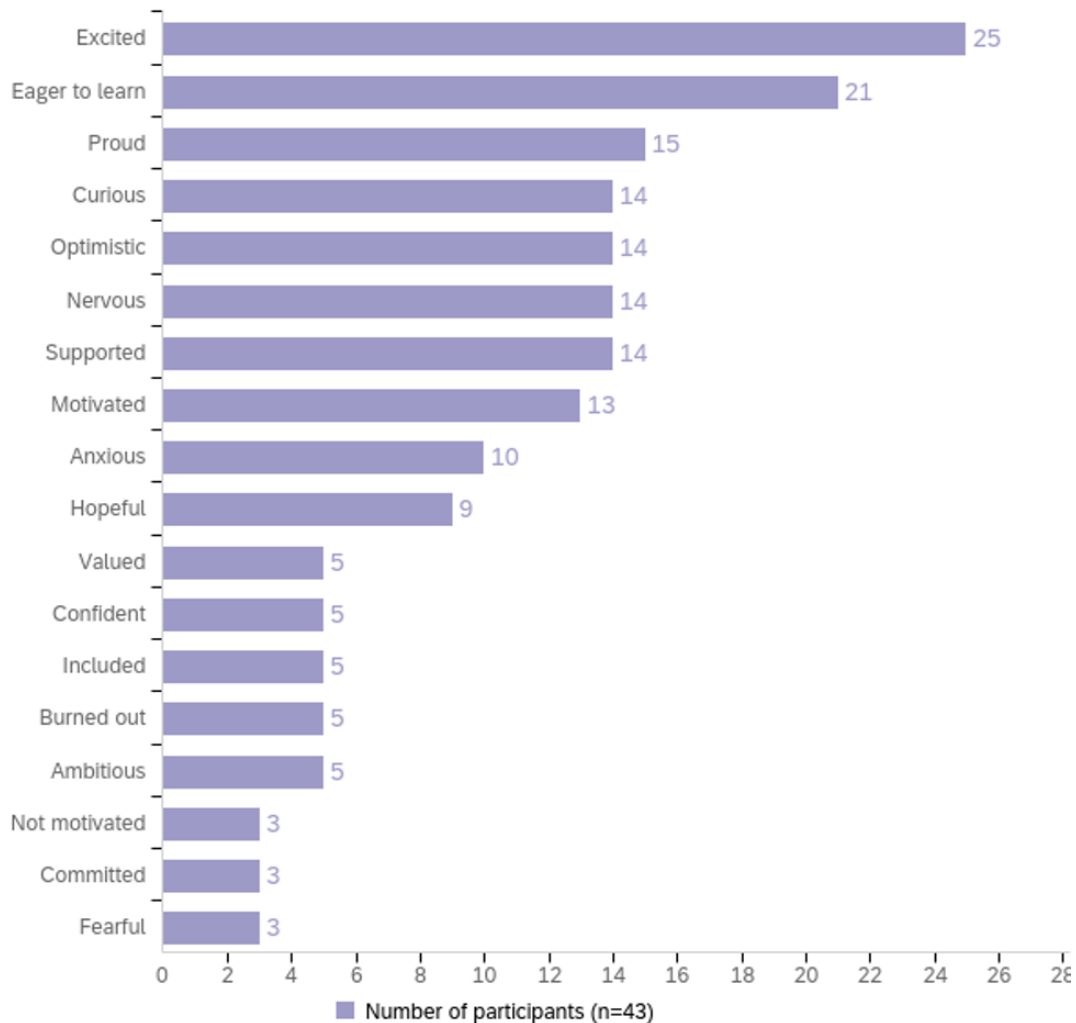


Figure 3: Participants’ Reported Feelings Prior to Engagement in the Pilot Program

As demonstrated in the chart above, prior to engagement in the program, participants reported a range of feelings, including excitement, pride, eagerness and optimism, as well as nervousness and anxiety.

Anticipated Benefits of the Program Prior to Engagement

Participants were also asked to identify the top three anticipated benefits of engagement in the program. The findings indicated that the anticipated benefits of the program were mainly community-based in nature as opposed to personal benefits, including serving as a role model and advancing women and girls in sport, having an opportunity to give back to their community, and contributing to the health and well-being of the players in Guelph Soccer programs. The following chart outlines the participants' responses:

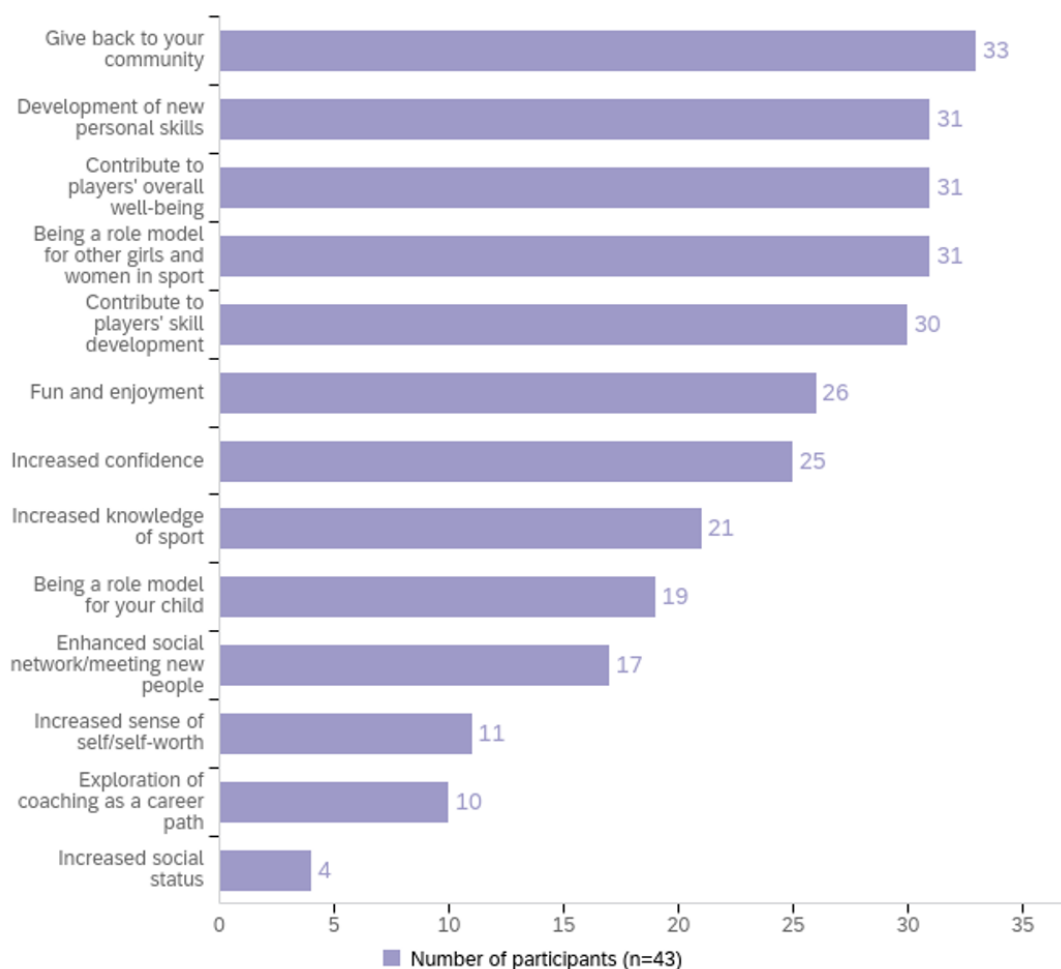


Figure 4: Anticipated Benefits of Program Reported by Participants Prior to Participation

Perceived Professional Benefits of the Program Following Participation

Increased perception of general coaching skills. In the post-participation survey, we assessed participants' general perceptions of their coaching skills and related program supports by asking them to rank statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants also had the option to select values for "somewhat disagree" (2), "I don't know" (3), and "somewhat agree" (4). The following chart outlines the average ranking score (i.e., mean scores) amongst the participants for each statement related to coaching skill development following participation in the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program:

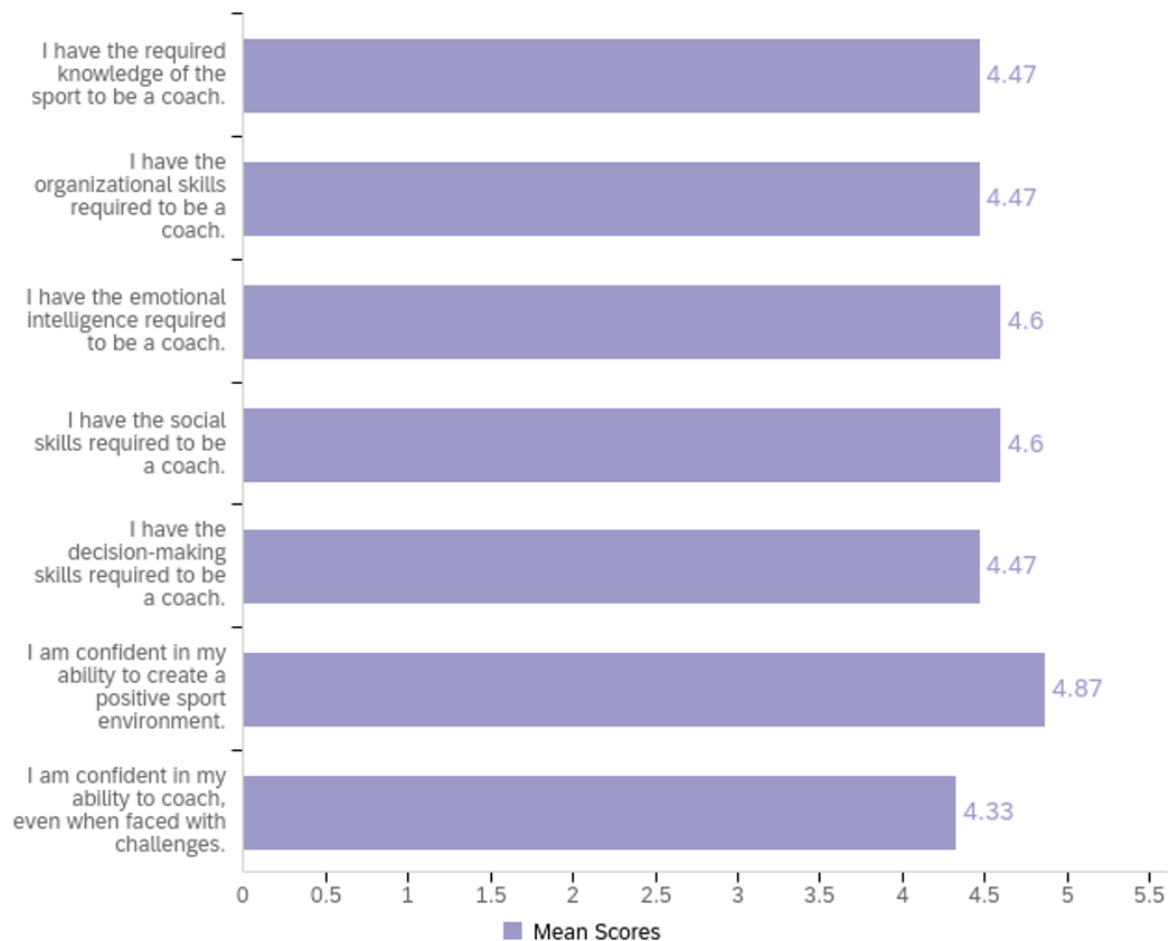


Figure 5: Participants' Feelings About Coaching Skills Following Engagement in the Program

As illustrated in the chart above, participants averaged between "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree" for all statements about perceived coaching skills. To contextualize these results, please see the following chart extracted from the pre-participation survey that posed the same statements to participants for ranking on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

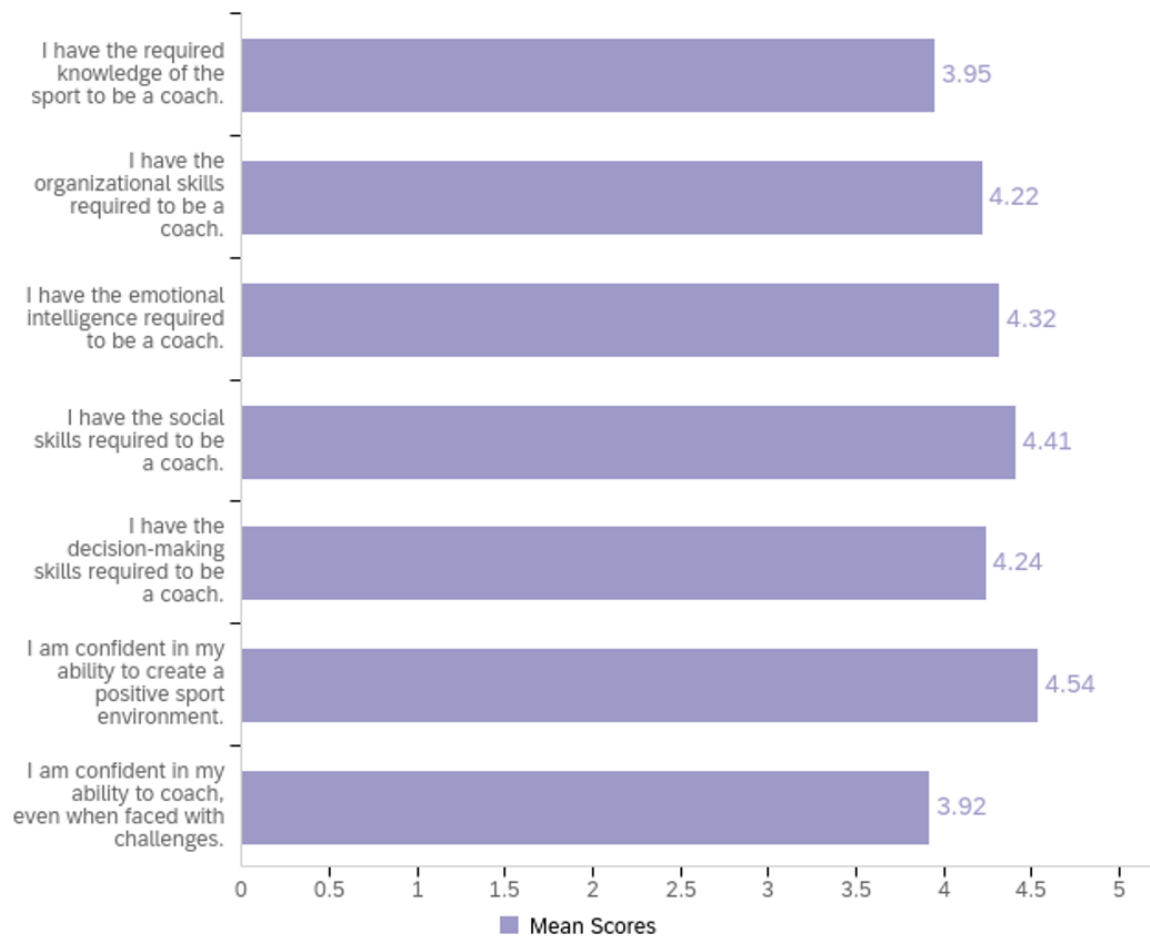


Figure 6: Participants' Feelings About Coaching Skills Prior to Engagement in the Program

When comparing the average ranking scores across the pre- and post-participation surveys, it is evident that engagement in the program enhanced participants' perceptions of their general coaching skills in all areas identified. These increased scores were particularly pronounced in participants' perceptions of their coaching knowledge and their confidence in their abilities to coach even when faced with challenges, which increased by 0.5 and 0.41 of a point from the pre-participation to post-participation surveys. This increase suggests participants feel more confident in their knowledge base as coaches and their abilities to apply this knowledge in practice following the formal (e.g., coach certifications) and informal (e.g., women's league, coach huddles, template plans) learning provided by Guelph Soccer.

In addition to general perceptions of coaching skills appraised in the surveys, participants discussed the professional skills gained through the various program aspects, including technical skill development and an increased depth in understanding and meaning of "being a coach." Each of these outcomes will be discussed in turn.

Technical skill development. From a broad perspective, participants developed a variety of technical skills throughout the program. For some participants, the nature of technical skill development emphasized building and enhancing their soccer I.Q. and global understanding of the game. For these participants, developing a stronger understanding of the game helped inform their overarching approach to coaching. For instance, Coach 1 stated, “I’ve learned so much actually [through the program], with how to teach soccer and strategy and tactics.” Another participant expanded on this idea by discussing how the women’s league, specifically, helped her and fellow participants strengthen their soccer knowledge in different ways, while also providing an opportunity to develop positive relationships with other program participants:

With everything virtual, it is hard to connect through a screen, so having the league as an outlet to meet in person, and then to also engage within the sport was extremely valuable to the program. It was cool to play in the league because there's a wide range of skill levels so to see some participants who have never played feel comfortable to participate in that league and to see other players like, I guess, kind of coach them or guide them in terms of how to play, or what would be the best decisions in certain situations so that they can grasp a better handle on the game and translate it into coaching their own teams. I think just feeling welcome in that environment versus other leagues that might not be as welcoming. In this league, it definitely had a different vibe, like, everyone's there to have fun. - (Coach 11)

In addition to their broad understanding of the game, participants also reported developing their technical skillsets for day-to-day coaching responsibilities. For instance, participants suggested that engagement in the program helped facilitate the skills and competencies necessary for coaching training, games, and implementing contemporary coaching practices. For instance, Coach 10 suggested, “I think the program really modernized my coaching knowledge, approach, and [understanding of] how the game is played now.” In addition, some participants referenced the ‘soft skills’ development encouraged through the in-person courses. For example, Coach 9 discussed learning about the importance of communication with athletes:

New tools in my toolbox [from the trainings] are things like tone and how to provide feedback in a way that gives [athletes] the confidence to try again. Not in the way that's like, 'oh, coach said that I did something wrong'. Now it's approaching [coaching] like 'we're just going to help you figure out how to do it differently, or in a way that you might see more success'. I think with little kids, especially, and even young girls, tone is very important and delivery is very important. And, I got more practice with that, which is helpful.

In another example of day-to-day responsibilities, participants reported enhancing their abilities to manage the many unknowns of coaching by anticipating challenges and creating possible solutions, such as contingency plans for issues or injuries that may arise. For example, Coach 8 recalls the in-depth program training on sport concussions and the importance of planning ahead for potential injuries:

Some of the online modules that we did, like, I've done little concussion modules here and there before, but the one that we had to do as part of this program, it was very specific and in-depth and talked about making a concussion plan. That was something that I had never given specific and meaningful thought to before. So, it was just good to know, 'okay, I need to have some sort of plan in place' that I prepared so that I don't really have to worry about it in the case that it should come up.

In summary, participants described global and day-to-day technical skill development through engagement in the program, including increased knowledge of the game, enhanced soft skills, and advanced awareness of possible situations that may occur in the context of coaching and potential solutions if they arise.

Enhanced understanding of what it means to be a 'coach'. In addition to technical skill development, participants also suggested their understanding and meaning of “being a coach” evolved in three specific ways. First, engagement in the program strengthened participants’ understanding of a coach’s influence and role on players’ development within and outside of the sport context, which informed their approach to coaching. For instance, Coach 13 recognized a coach’s role extends beyond the teaching of technical skills:

In general, it can be easy to get sucked into the technical side of coaching, without recognizing the profound human development pieces that are so important. I think that by going through the coaching modules – even beyond just the context of soccer coaching – just thinking about working with youth or working with children and understanding where they're at and how we can play supportive role models through coaching and other similar roles was insight for my personal and professional development.

In another example, a participant shared the positive and negative influences of two former coaches on her self-esteem and the ways in which these experiences inform her current approach to coaching youth:

A coach I didn't love so much because he didn't make me feel very nice about myself, he quit... I got a new coach for my team at that time and that new coach undid, like, years of self-doubt in a very short amount of time. And, I was like, 'wow, this is what a great coach can do for a player when they need it'. I think learning how to be that type of coach to build up players, especially female players... makes me feel better and definitely makes me want to keep coaching. - (Coach 9)

Further, participants suggested the training courses helped them recognize that their influence on players may shape players' lifelong journeys with physical activity and sport. As stated by Coach 11, "the courses have definitely opened my eyes to how great an impact coaching can be versus just having a knowledge of the game."

Second, participation in the program highlighted the value of coach certifications for facilitating these more positive, developmentally-appropriate methods in practice. For example, Coach 9 discussed the ways in which the certifications were helpful for avoiding common pitfalls of coaching:

Before I took the course, a worry of mine was that I was going to coach the way I had been coached; or that I was going to rely on previous experiences being coached and what my coach said as the way to do it because that's all I knew. And so, taking the course, it modernized coaching for me. Even though it was fairly recent that I was playing, even just 8 years ago, the curriculum has changed since my previous coach took it. And, I feel better about the experience that I'm going to give the kids that I coach... Now it's more setting up the kids to want to come back, like, to have fun; setting up the kids to grow and yes, to be competitive, if that's what [they] want, but only if it's a positive experience, you know?

Coach 9 elaborated on this notion, stating that the coach certification courses helped her differentiate modern coaching approaches from her previous experiences as an athlete and ensure the provision of a positive learning environment for the children she coaches:

When I started getting coached competitively, I was 10, 11, 12, 13, that age range. Even my coach then, you know, very competitive and very drill-based. Different than what we have just learned in the online and on-field training. I think it's healthier this way. This style of learning that we were taught, it makes mistakes feel less intense and more just, you know, figuring it out and learning. It's more gentle. I think that helps kids come back.

Further, another participant recognized the learnings gleaned from coach certifications as particularly important for coaching younger players:

I think my perspective on coaching has really changed through this program, especially for the younger kids. Originally, I thought the training would be a lot more technical. But especially for Active Start, for example, the practices are more just like playing and activities, instead of a structured soccer game... to be more considerate of how the children are developing physically and mentally, instead of just being worried about 'do they know how to play a game?', 'do they know how to play soccer?' and scores and what not. That was a really neat change, like, from what I had experienced [as a player]. – (Coach 16)

Finally, participants recognized the potential translation of coaching skills learned through the program to life outside of sport. For instance, one participant emphasized the opportunity to refine professional skills through coaching that are relevant to her future career, “you don’t lose [being part of this program]. It’s professional development in soccer, but also so many skills apply to things other than soccer: leadership, communication, planning, organization to name a few” (Coach 9). In another example, a participant who works in the healthcare field benefitted from learning about and working with young people through engagement in the program:

I’ve definitely grown an appreciation for working with youth in their formative years. I really enjoy that age group, which I didn’t know going into [the program]. I work in [healthcare] and it’s really opened my eyes to working with more youth in those age ranges, growing upon their physical literacy skills, and how I can work my profession into being a positive role model on and off the field. – (Coach 11)

In summary, participants reported building a wealth of professional skills, such as, increased knowledge of the game, enhanced preparation and confidence, and development of global and day-to-day technical skills. Participants also suggested strengthening the meaning of being a coach and the opportunity to refine transferable professional skills as professional outcomes of engagement.

Perceived Personal Benefits of Participation in the Program

Developing and advancing self-efficacy. Following participation, participants reported the building and advancing of their self-efficacy or self-confidence in their abilities to coach, as a positive personal outcome of engagement in the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program. Participants perceived self-efficacy was developed and enhanced through

engagement with other women in the program's community and through increased coaching knowledge and practice.

Building self-efficacy through community and engagement with other women. In general, participants recognized the importance of learning to coach in an environment with fellow women and girls. References to the “community” of women developed through this program was very common across the focus groups, in particular. Participants reported that building this supportive community was one of the most valuable aspects of the program, especially for the development of self-efficacy. Specifically, participants suggested that the “She’s Got Game - She Can Coach” program provided them a space to connect with like-minded women in the Guelph area, play soccer with new people, create a community during the time of the pandemic, build coaching teams, and learn from and with women through a new experience.

A sense of community was important for participants as meeting new girls and women who share similar interests, lifestyles, and struggles helped them feel more confident and have a sense of being “in this together.” For instance, Coach 9 shared that having a community of women present at in-person courses made her feel more comfortable: “Social anxiety is a big one for me, but once I got there... everyone was nice and there were significantly more women in the room than men, which is also very nice in a stressful environment where you have to put yourself out there. Everyone was kind and not threatening.” Another participant supported this sentiment by sharing the importance of community in fostering a positive learning environment:

This program provides, like, a big community of women. It's a safe space, you feel calm, you gain confidence with other women around you. We saw that in the coaching clinics, especially the one I went to: Soccer for Life. I think there were more women than men in that clinic! It felt really good and you felt confident and you were able to speak and you weren't, you know, scared or anything. - (Coach 12)

Coach 12 elaborated that the positive community extended beyond navigating soccer-specific topics: “Definitely this community makes it a safe space to figure out different issues that we may all be feeling, right, with balancing work, and home life, and trying to do this program and also with confidence.” In another example, Coach 2 claimed the community serves as a built-in network to talk to, learn with/from, and receive support as they embark on their coaching roles: “There's definitely advantages to having a network of people to draw upon if you have questions or need support in [coaching]”.

Further, a sense of community was also established through connections with external partners or organizations, such as professionals and learning facilitators from Ontario Soccer and Canada Soccer. Opportunities to connect with external representatives provided

participants with an additional confidence boost and enhanced feelings of legitimacy as a coach. In addition, representation of the “She’s Got Game - She Can Coach” program at other Guelph sporting events or on t-shirts and merchandise helped further participants’ self-efficacy and sense of community, illustrated by Coach 14:

When we got the “She Can Coach” t-shirts and I walked into the soccer area where we were playing, and I saw a whole bunch of other “She Can Coach” jerseys, it just felt really nice to see. I’m like ‘okay, we got this’ like I’m not alone in here. I feel like that was a really really nice moment where I thought like, ‘okay, I can do this.’

Building self-efficacy through knowledge acquisition and practice. Women reportedly gained self-efficacy in their coaching abilities through knowledge acquisition, including the completion of online and in-person training certifications and education components. For example, Coach 11 explains the ways in which the educational components helped her become more confident on the field than she was prior to completing the program:

I feel more confident going into the season this summer, just having done the certifications and having that understanding and experience. It can be nerve wracking going into coaching a team as a younger female and having parents compare your appearance to, you know, another team that’s coached by two dads and like ‘oh I want my kid on that team versus this team’. I think this program has given me a bit more confidence to just show up and not let it be something that affects me as much as it did last summer [prior to the program].

Another participant highlighted the on-field education component as an important vehicle for developing self-efficacy and enhancing coaching knowledge:

Now that I’ve done [the on-field training], I feel more confident going into those settings where I have to coach. This past winter, I was coaching a skills program and I wish I had done the course first, because I know now that I, if I were to [coach] again, I would have more confidence now and carry myself differently. I probably could have made the experience more fun for the kids or they could have learned more, grown more. I don’t know, but after going [to the in-person trainings], I feel a lot more excited to coach again and do a good job, I guess, now that I have more tools in my toolbox. - (Coach 9)

The importance of possessing this “coaching toolkit” for one’s self-efficacy, especially as a female coach, was also highlighted by Coach 10:

I think the more training and knowledge you have, the more confident you are in your ability. There is the issue where sometimes women get questioned more on their abilities, they have to prove themselves while others are assumed to have that [skillset]. By having [the training and knowledge], you don't get any of, or maybe less of, that imposter syndrome feeling (Coach 10).

Finally, some participants suggested that the knowledge-based self-efficacy developed through “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” was encouraging and helped them recognize the value of learning new skills across the lifespan. As stated by Coach 7:

I guess personally, my personal skills... it's just been so fun to see, like, that you can learn a new sport and those skills later in life... just to take on a new sport and new coaching techniques and stuff, not later in life [laughs], but you know, midlife. It has been interesting and sort of just a fun personal thing...I do look forward to, maybe as my kids get older, learning more coaching. I definitely do feel like I've built more confidence with the game.

Establishing and Advancing Gender Equity. Another positive program outcome related to the ability for participants to establish and advance gender equity through their participation in the program. This occurred in two key ways: reflection on participants’ own sport experience and importance of female coaches and enhancing meaning through advocacy.

Reflection on participants’ own sport experience and importance of female coaches. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants shared that they either did not have female coaches or that it was a very rare occurrence to have a female coach during their sport careers. While participants re-examined their own sport experiences, they developed an increased awareness of the gender inequities in sport broadly. Coach 8 recalled her sport experience:

In soccer, at least growing up, I didn't grow up with a lot of female coaches. I only had one and I recall, as a young kid, not taking her seriously and not thinking she is as good as the male coaches. I think attitudes towards women in sport is a big barrier. I don't know how to say that, more specifically, but just not being taken as seriously as my male counterparts and maybe doubting myself too, wondering 'am I doing as good of a job as my male counterparts?'. So, just that self-doubt is a bit of a barrier and not thinking that you have as much to contribute to the sport or to the team you coach and perhaps somebody could do it better than you when really that's not the case.

In another example, Coach 10 discusses the importance of recognizing inequities in order to embark on the path towards change:

I only had one female assistant coach in my sporting career... It's good to see more and more females out there [through this program]. Even in the in-person training session, there were two coaches: one male and one female leading the program... It was good to see her and she was really knowledgeable and it's just good to see females in those roles because it makes it the norm, it reduces the stigma. You're not the only one... if there's more [female] coaches around then it's normalized and no one thinks of it as something out of the ordinary.

Further, through an evolved understanding of the inequities in sport coaching, Coach 10 was able to recognize the unique skills brought to the environment by women coaches:

I don't think I really noticed [not having a female coach] while I was playing at the time because that's just sort of how it was... Now that I have become a coach... the girls in the co-ed group always go the extra three steps to come to talk to me [the female coach], and you know, tell me about their day in a kid sort of way. You know, 'I'm going to my grandparents tomorrow!'. The girls in particular would take those few extra steps to come tell me these things. Maybe, I made the space more comfortable. Maybe, they were more excited to see me. I don't really know what was going through their mind but I can imagine I might have had a similar experience when I was little [playing soccer].

Increased meaning through advocacy. Participants also suggested that an opportunity to advocate for gender equity through participation strengthened the meaning behind their engagement in the program because it helped them recognize gender inequities in sport first-hand and allowed them to see the impact of their involvement, give back to their community, and increase women's visibility and representation in the sports coaching realm. This is illustrated by Coach 14:

So I feel like being a part of this group has really helped me again to say like, 'hey, look at this inequity'. The more you're aware of it, you start to notice more differences too, in terms of how much support [women] get, how much TV time, and other things like that. And I feel like to point that out to my son and daughter is really great. They're still very little so they'll grow up with it just being the norm that women and men play equally.

While participants recalled never or rarely having a female role model during their time in sports, they noted how important it is for them to be that role model for the next generation. Participants with children often referenced the importance of being a role model for their children and demonstrating the possibilities for and contributions by women in sport, as Coach 12 shared:

I hardly had any female coaches growing up and just to be like a coach with girls is what really drew me to this program. I have two girls of my own so to be that role model would be really great and to help them through and stick with soccer because I know, during the teenage years a lot of girls do stop playing sports for a variety of reasons.

Are Participants Satisfied with their Coaching Experiences Following Participation?

Following involvement in the pilot, participants reported being “extremely satisfied” (67%) or “somewhat satisfied” (33%) with their coaching experience gained through “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach.” These satisfaction rates contrast with the results of the pre-participation survey, which indicated the majority of participants were ‘somewhat satisfied’ (78%) with coaching experiences prior to this program, while lower rates were observed for “extremely satisfied” (18%) and some indicated they were “somewhat dissatisfied” (4%). Based on these pre- and post- comparisons, participants seem to be more satisfied in their coaching experiences following engagement in the program. General reasons reported by the participants to account for higher satisfaction levels included feeling more equipped to coach, an improved knowledge base, stronger preparation and confidence, increased pride in coaching, improved organizational skills and general approach to coaching, and enjoyment of meeting others with common interests and passions.

Do Cohort 1 Participants Plan to Keep Coaching Following Participation in the Program?

One of the core overarching objectives of this pilot program is to develop women and girls as coaches to increase gender parity in the Guelph Soccer system with the hope it will encourage more female participants to join and continue participation in Guelph Soccer programs. As a result, it was critical to understand whether the women and girl coaches in the program planned to continue coaching beyond Cohort 1. The following chart outlines participants’ plans to engage in coaching and “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program components (e.g., women’s soccer league) as indicated on the post-participation survey:

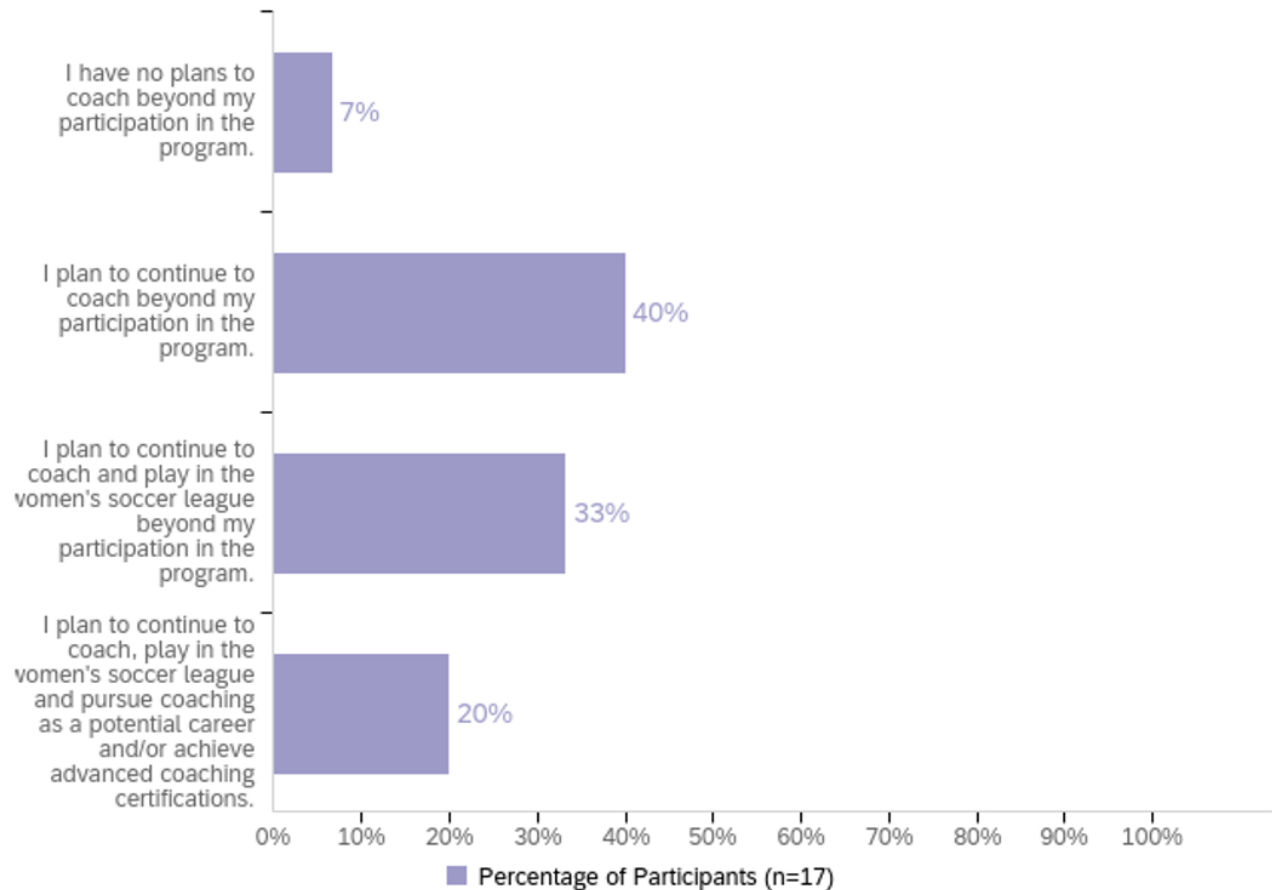


Figure 7: Participants' Plans for Coaching Beyond Cohort 1

As indicated in Figure 7 and confirmed through focus group data, the program designed and delivered by Guelph Soccer has encouraged the women and girls participating in the program to continue their coaching journeys. Specifically, 93% of participants who engaged in the post-participation survey indicated their interest in continuing to coach and in some cases, expressed their intentions to engage in further program components, such as the women's soccer league and additional coach certifications (e.g., C-License).

In the focus groups and post-participation survey, we also asked participants to indicate whether they would recommend participation in the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program to other women and girls in the Guelph area and beyond. Participants unequivocally confirmed their support for the program with 100% of them indicating they would recommend participation to others. In addition to the variety of reasons covered in this report, participants succinctly summarized a few reasons why they would recommend the program. For instance, one participant stated, "it was a holistic way to learn more about coaching, meet women in the community, participate in playing, and get certified." In another example, a participant

suggested the program helped her expand her understanding of all the elements that make a great coach:

Prior to this [program], my conception of being a coach was strictly related to game play and skill development, which for many (including myself) can be a barrier to coaching. However, after this program and participating in the training, I realized coaching provides far more than that. As a coach, there is a huge opportunity to be a positive influence on a child's/children's development with physical activity, social skills, and confidence. Learning this gave me a new perspective on what it means to be a coach and made me realize I do have the skills to create a fun, welcoming environment for kids. Similarly, many women possess these skills too and are not venturing into coaching because of the perceived notion that one must have experience in the sport they are coaching. This program created a safe space for moms and other women in the community to realize the value of being a female coach goes beyond the game itself.

Similarly, another participant from the post-participation survey stated, “this program has taught me so many life skills beyond the sport and has provided me with the skills and opportunity to be involved and make a difference in my community.” Finally, for another participant from the post-participation survey, the main reason for recommending the program to others was simple: “Women rule and we need more of them in sports!”

KEY TAKEAWAYS: POSITIVE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL OUTCOMES

- Participants’ perceptions of their general coaching skills and competencies improved following engagement in the program
- Participants’ reported developing a variety of technical skills, including building and enhancing their soccer IQ/global understanding of the game and the day-to-day skills to facilitate training, games, and engage in modern coaching practices
- Participants felt their abilities to anticipate and manage coaching challenges improved
- Participants’ understanding of what it means to be a coach (e.g., role and influence on development of young people) deepened
- Participants developed and advanced their self-efficacy through a sense of community, engagement with other women, and increased coaching knowledge and practice

- Participants drew meaning for the program through reflection on their personal sport experiences, advocating for gender equity and serving as a female role model
- Participants with previous coaching experiences reported higher levels of satisfaction with their experiences following “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach”
- The majority of participants in Cohort 1 of “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” plan to continue their coaching journeys

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROGRAM

Participants recognized three core areas where refinements could be made or new ideas incorporated by Guelph Soccer in future “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” programming: refinements to select administrative and operational components; suggestions for future coach huddles, and; marketing of the program (e.g., recruitment and promotion). In addition, participants made recommendations for the ongoing engagement of Cohort 1 in “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach”. Each of these areas will be explored in the following section.

ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATIONS

The core administrative aspect identified by participants as requiring improvement centred on enhancing clarity in the overarching framework for the program. Specifically, some participants reported experiencing difficulty keeping track of program tasks and navigating the online pathways for educational components of the program. Participants suggested that at certain points in the program, they were unclear about the tasks required to be completed (e.g., online modules, in-person trainings) and corresponding deadlines, where to access information and guidance, and how to navigate across the different websites affiliated with the program (e.g., Guelph Soccer, Ontario Soccer, Canada Soccer, Respect in Sport). The challenges in navigating program requirements were illustrated by Coach 11, who stated:

With all the requirements... sometimes it's unclear of, like, what exactly had to be done, or there wasn't just a firm deadline. Even though this is volunteer and it's online [education modules] and it's kind of do at your own time... I think a little bit more of like a framework or guidance of "by this date, this should be done," like more clear and firm on that. It wasn't until they posted about the weekend clinics and you had to be done the online portions before that I was like, 'oh shoot, I really need to do it'. So I did the online modules the week before... I just need a little bit more guidance and I think that would have benefitted me to keep things a little bit more organized.

In another example, Coach 3 described the challenges with navigating external websites as it related to the educational components of the program:

I feel like I've made accounts on six different websites and I don't know why or what information is stored where. So, it's difficult to go back and try and figure out what you've done [for the program]. At least, for me, I'm like 'oh what website was that on? Was it through Canada Soccer, Ontario Soccer, or was it a Guelph Soccer thing?'

Participants suggested that Guelph Soccer create a “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” landing page on the website with an overarching framework that is accessible and available for download. The framework would indicate key program milestones, steps necessary to complete them, codes required for access, and where to find information related to the milestone before and after completion (i.e., Coaching Association of Canada’s “The Locker”, Ontario Soccer website). In addition, participants recommended that the framework identify pre-requisites to be completed in order to partake in other parts of the program (e.g., in-person trainings), provide approximate time requirements to complete the milestones (i.e., 2-3 hours or an entire weekend), and suggest best practices for achieving them. Participants suggested the overarching framework also have a supplemental summary flowchart or checklist that provides a visual representation of the ways in which the program advances over the course of the year.

In addition to an enhanced overarching framework, participants mentioned that it would be beneficial for new coaches entering the system through “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” to attend an administrative training session and/or basic soccer skill session hosted by Guelph Soccer. Coach 3, a first-time coach, shared her experience with starting the program and offered a few recommendations that may enhance the experience for future participants:

I think some kind of like optional training that's like very basic, just sort of about what the administrative side of coaching looks like. Just for people like me who haven't coached before and haven't really been involved in a house league program for quite a while. Like, I didn't know that practices and games were on the same night until I reached out and asked about it. I didn't know that we were getting those practice outlines for the season. And like, I didn't know if I had to buy the equipment or equipment was provided for me. So just going back and knowing that some people are really just entering this with no idea what's going on. And maybe having an optional night where [Guelph Soccer] run you through what to expect and what they're expected to give you.

Finally, participants suggested that future cohorts may benefit from clarity about the time commitment required to fully participate in the program. As Coach 6 shared:

...A consideration for the next cohort is being a little bit clearer – not that it was unclear – but like, you know, 'you can expect to commit an hour every other week for the fall or an hour a month' or like, you know, something along those lines where people can just be like, 'Okay, you know, realistically can I actually commit to this now that enough people have gone through the program?' And maybe provide some kind of range or, you know, general idea in terms of what to expect going through the content.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS: COACH HUDDLES

Participants who attended coach huddles throughout the program reportedly enjoyed the huddles and found them useful for their development as coaches. The participants also shared recommendations for improving the coach huddles, specifically related to the dates and times of the coach huddles and speaker selection and topics. Some participants shared that the dates and times of coach huddles were inconvenient for their personal schedules and therefore, they were unable to participate to the extent they wished. While they recognized that it is difficult to accommodate every participant, recommendations were made to alternate or rotate dates and times, including lunch hours and weekend options. Inclusion of daytime or weekend options may facilitate increased attendance, particularly for those with childcare responsibilities at night or those who engage in many virtual meetings on weekdays in their careers. Coach 9 reflected on her challenges with the weeknight timing of coach huddles:

One challenge I found was motivation to attend the coach huddles because the huddles are virtual and they're another video call for me. I've been working 9-5 remotely, and so to end my day of video calls, to join another video call was hard...The ones I did join I liked and I'm glad I did. They were useful and I had a good time. But it's the motivation to go, without saying "I can't sit on another video call for another hour today.". That was a bit of a challenge for me at least... there are just some days that I didn't want to click 'join' on another meeting.

Similarly, another participant described the timing of the coach huddles as a barrier to participation – despite a desire to attend – due to her childcare responsibilities in the evenings:

The coach huddles or zoom meetings where the team got together, they were almost always at night... I really need to help a lot with putting [my children] to sleep so I missed a lot of the coach huddles and Zooms... I mean, I know it's hard to

schedule around work and weekend schedules, so, it's more of a personal thing not being able to make those... But it would help to have a weekend or smaller sessions, maybe over the lunch hour... It's going to be hard to get everybody in but yeah having multiple sessions would probably be the best option to get everybody or some variety in the times or days.

In addition to more variety in times and dates of coach huddles, participants also suggested increasing diversity in the guest speakers recruited to present in coach huddles. Although participants found the guest speakers recruited for the coach huddles to be very helpful, they also suggested it may be beneficial for the program to recruit speakers from outside of the Guelph community to learn more about the broader coaching landscape. Coach 6 shared her thoughts on improving the diversity of guest speakers in the coach huddles for future cohorts:

I think having a variety of stakeholders in sport in [the coach huddles] was valuable to get a better understanding of the bigger picture. And I would say definitely continue on that. And even if that can be diversified a bit more beyond just the Guelph community because you know, we are serving the Guelph community, but we're a little tiny ecosystem in the big broad scope of Ontario and Canadian soccer. So, continuing to have different stakeholders and then having new voices or different voices with different experiences would probably just add to the richness of those mentorship calls, above and beyond what they already were, which was really great.

Participants also suggested standing agenda items and topic recommendations for future coach huddles that may be beneficial to future cohorts. In general, participants appreciated the overall agenda of coach huddles but one participant suggested they would be enhanced if each huddle began with an overview of program updates before moving into the more specific topics of the coach huddle:

I do like how the huddles incorporated some type of webinar or learning aspect at the beginning... But apart from the second one, where there was some info provided, I think it would have been good if, at the beginning, [Guelph Soccer] kind of provide an update on the program, where they state where we are, what's coming up so that you get some useful information and then they could have the guest speaker. Then, if you want to socialize, you can do that at the end or you can leave the Zoom. - (Coach 10)

With regards to specific topics, one participant recommended that discussing the ways in which coach practices have evolved and strategies for implementing these practices might be beneficial:

Something that could be helpful in maybe like a huddle topic... is acknowledging some of the ways that coaching training has changed in the last decade or two. I know the coaching clinics that I attended were 180 degrees different from coaching that I've experienced before, coaching that I've seen, coaching that I'm familiar with, and so I think even just having spaces to identify, unpack, unlearn and relearn how to coach. We have the fundamentals of what coaching training now looks like, but then, how do we make sure that we're not reverting back to like growing up and playing competitive at 7, 8, 9, 10 and keeping scores, and all those pieces. How do we make sure that we actually are implementing the newer styles of coaching? I know it's been around for long enough, but for those who might have grown up with the older former styles, it might be a bit of a learning curve to switch up. - (Coach 13).

Similarly, Coach 15 identified the importance of remaining current with coaching knowledge and practice and shared her desire for further education on implementing what she has learned in the program:

I have no idea how to implement all that awesome stuff [regarding changing coaching styles] we learned so far. My background [or sport experience] is super old-school European like not necessarily nice or supportive coaching, you know. And even just being excited to play, like having these kids being super awesome, and they're there to have fun, not to win at four years old, but yeah how to implement all that awesome stuff.

Further, some participants hoped future coach huddles may provide more sessions focused on applying strategies and coaching tactics in a developmentally-appropriate manner:

One gap [that remained] for me going into coaching my first season was figuring out how to – it sounds silly – but positioning and substitutions on the fly and trying to figure out what that looks like best; there is no advice given for, I guess, the age group that you work with, of how that should look like, you know? How much time you should be allowing before you do your substitutions to ensure fair play time and just so that everyone gets to try different positions and have fun. I just kind of went off what I knew from playing, so I can see how, if you haven't played or you don't have as much of a background [in soccer], it would be a little bit of a

challenge for older ages, especially, as you do have to get into more positioning and bigger or more people on the field. - (Coach 11)

In summary, participants suggested that future cohorts would benefit from more flexibility in the scheduling of the monthly coach huddles. Additionally, recruitment of diverse speakers within and beyond the Guelph Soccer community who may increase participants' learning and application of topics related to contemporary coach strategies and practices appropriate to the developmental age and stage of the players in their care, was recommended.

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING

Participants also raised the marketing of the program as an area that might benefit from some refinements in the future, including clarity in recruitment parameters and building upon current marketing efforts.

Clarity in Recruitment Parameters

Several participants noted a bit of initial confusion related to program eligibility given the specific age ranges targeted by Guelph Soccer (i.e., girls transitioning to women aged 16-23 and moms of Guelph Soccer participants aged 25-40). For instance, one participant who fell outside of those specific parameters viewed the recruitment materials and wondered if she was ineligible despite an interest in coaching:

I think when I saw the advertisement, it was promoting the program for high school age or like 30+ years old, and I'm somewhere in-between that age and was like, 'am I eligible still?' And as someone who is not a parent, I was like 'Oh, I don't have a child to coach in the league or to go to the childcare.' So I was like, 'Hmm, does this opportunity still apply to me?' Obviously, it still worked out well. So, I wouldn't say that was like a barrier or negative, just something I was curious about initially. - (Coach 13)

Similarly, another participant also shared concerns of being outside the specific recruitment parameters initially set by Guelph Soccer:

I kind of fall in that in-between. Out of school, don't have children but still want to be involved in some way. So I still applied... I know they were aiming for the university/high school age as well as parents of participants, but they may be

missing another large group of women who might be interested and are not seeing themselves recognized in [Guelph Soccer's] advertising of the program. - (Coach 1)

Further, another participant suggested future programming expand the age parameters to encourage those older than 40 years old to become involved:

When I got the initial e-mail, I remember there was an age range attached to it... I think it was 18 to 40 and I had just turned 40 and I remember I'm like, 'Oh no! I hope I can still be a part of [the program].'... I was just curious what the reasoning was behind that because, you know, I could see someone who was in her 50s being interested. - (Coach 14)

Based on these observations, there is potential interest beyond the initial parameters of participation determined by Guelph Soccer, as those who registered for the program that were initially outside of these recruitment parameters found value in participation. As a result, it is suggested that the parameters for recruitment are expanded to include girls and women in the community who have an interest in learning the game, serving as a coach and role model for youth, joining a network of women coaches and advancing female participation in sport. Further, it was suggested that future recruitment materials include a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section where the targeted population for the program is identified and specific criteria about who is/is not eligible is outlined.

Advancing Marketing and Visibility

Participants also generally discussed the benefits of Guelph Soccer's current marketing and promotion strategies (e.g., the organization's website, social media, in-person events) in increasing excitement and visibility about the program. As one participant stated:

I think one thing the club did really well was encouraging the program... They've been very vocal about the fact that they were looking to keep women in coaching and get more women in coaching; the visibility and those initiatives were good... I know if you were to go to, you know, another website of another soccer club nearby you wouldn't see the same thing. I think it makes more of a difference than we even think. If you're a mom, just signing your kid up and you see [the program promoted] on the website, and you weren't even considering coaching, now you're going 'oh, maybe there's other women'. Or, for example, I'm a student right now, I'm still in university. If I were to coach in my school town and I were to go look on their website and see [the program marketed], I would feel more inclined to volunteer my time and make more time to do it... The visibility on this initiative was something that helped me get more excited about it. - (Coach 8)

To advance marketing and visibility of the program and further the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” philosophy, some participants suggested finding additional ways to showcase the program and build upon the initiatives this year, such as the promotion of the program at a Guelph Union game (i.e., competitive women’s soccer team). One participant described the impact of attending the Guelph Union game where “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” was promoted:

My family went to the Guelph Union game to watch the women’s team play and during the half, Guelph Soccer had [the program] up on the big TV with the players talking about, you know, the importance of women in sports and my husband and kids were like, ‘Oh! That’s what you’re involved in!’ It was nice how [the program] was tied in beyond just the kids’ level. It was really nice to see that and be a part of it. – (Coach 14)

It is speculated that continued efforts to weave “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” marketing and promotion across all levels of programming, online platforms (e.g., social media and website) and in-person events will serve to enhance the value, meaning and impact of the program.

Finally, given the success of the program in Year 1, participants shared that it is important to explore ideas for ensuring the program can be sustainable over time and scaled up to other areas across Canada. This would allow the important information to reach more women in sport and support them in their coaching journeys. Coach 13 discussed her hope for the growth of the program:

I would love to see this program elsewhere and everywhere... Having this program as an option in other hometowns or other places where women are, which is everywhere across the country [laughs]. I think that that in itself could really help to mobilize the strong foundation that Guelph Soccer has provided and so, I'd love to see more coaches in communities joining something like this and participating.

FUTURE ENGAGEMENT OF COHORT 1

Given the plethora of positive outcomes reported about the program, most participants expressed an interest in remaining involved in the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” community following the culmination of Cohort 1. Ideas suggested by participants about the ways in which girls and women may remain engaged in the program, included, continued access to core program components, additional opportunities to seek financial resources, and opportunities to serve as a mentor and/or mentee with others in the Guelph Soccer community.

Continued Access to Core Program Components

In general, participants indicated an interest in continued access to all core program components, including access to participation in the women's league, coach education, and ongoing engagement with Guelph Soccer staff and others in the community (e.g., coach huddles). As summarized by one participant: "I think still having opportunities to connect, having opportunities for participating in the league, for professional development, for continued access to clinics and financial resources. I think that would be huge" (Coach 13). Though most participants expressed interest in accessing all facets of formal programming through Guelph Soccer, there was agreement that the level of communication and engagement with Guelph Soccer and other members of their cohort could evolve to be less frequent beyond year one of the program. For example, some participants suggested the monthly coach huddles offered to participants in year one of the program could be replaced by optional quarterly coach huddles in year two. Coach 7 explained her perspective, stating, "if there was something like, you know, a quarterly or even less coach huddle, or an in-person quarterly 'women-in-coaching get together' in Guelph, I would be totally down for something like that after the completion of this year." Some participants also suggested coach huddles in year two may serve as an open dialogue forum to discuss experiences as coaches:

... You know, just to discuss certain topics you might be struggling with during the coach season, or to give advice or to compare notes or something. That would be really good... something like that where we can continue to bounce ideas off each other. That would be really beneficial for me. - (Coach 12)

Another participant agreed with this idea and suggested coach huddles also include Cohort 2 participants, where appropriate, to foster community amongst all program members:

A Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 huddle where everybody's included and there is a speaker that [Cohort 1 participants] haven't heard but that is just broad enough for all of the huddles. I feel like that would be a great way to keep the program growing and keep everyone feeling like they're still a part of it. - (Coach 14)

Participants also expressed an interest in continued proactive informational support from Guelph Soccer, including updates, opportunities, learning resources and facilitation of networking. As stated by one participant, "I'd like kind of a bi-annual or more touch base [from Guelph Soccer]. Where are you at? Can we support you in any way? Here's some new soccer opportunities and resources that we think you might be interested in" (Coach 6). Similarly, another participant suggested an interest in receiving information related to advanced coaching certifications and related opportunities, "I know [the program lead] sent an e-mail out

this week about the C-License program, which is the next kind of level up for coaching soccer. It would be great to kind of be in the loop about those types of opportunities. I'm definitely interested in pursuing that" (Coach 6). One potential solution to keep program members updated on a regular basis might be the distribution of a newsletter in accordance with the quarterly coach huddles.

In addition to updates and resources, participants also indicated an interest in Guelph Soccer serving as a conduit for more informal connections and networking amongst members of the program. Participants identified a desire to connect with others for the purpose of "support, advice for when you're coaching, if you come across something that is a barrier or some parent doesn't agree with you, how to find support within our cohort to help deal with it" (Coach 16), "having the support if we have a question about like, 'oh, I have this issue with my team and I don't know what to do. What did you do?'" (Coach 15), or "even just informal connections to be able to say, like, 'oh, you're coaching at this time, too? Do you want to meet up after and chit chat about how it's going?'" (Coach 14).

Opportunities to Seek Financial Resources

Based on their experiences in the program, several participants indicated an interest in obtaining additional coaching certifications following engagement in Cohort 1. For those participants, opportunities to seek internal or external financial support would assist in the pursuit of these certifications. As one participant shared, "I am someone who has considered taking some of the additional licencing... so I think that having connections back through Guelph Soccer and being a continued part of this program would be huge to continue on that journey" (Coach 13). Another participant elaborated on the opportunity to advance her coaching certifications and posed ideas for financial supports:

Considering pursuing further certifications within coaching, if it were an option... to seek financial support with that as a graduate of this program to continue that coaching journey would be cool to see. Or, if there was an application or something that you'd have to complete to get more financial support, that would be helpful as that is a large barrier to pursuing further certifications. That would be something I would add [for next year] because getting advanced certifications is something that I've been thinking about as well, but right now, the financial barrier is too great. – (Coach 11).

To encourage women and girl coaches to continue their coaching journey, Guelph Soccer may consider providing direct funding to individuals for additional certifications, provide subsidized group learning opportunities, or connect participants with other agencies for grant applications that support women in soccer or sport more broadly, such as Canadian Women in Sport, Ontario Soccer or Canada Soccer.

Opportunities to be Mentored and Mentor Others

The final suggestion put forth by participants to refine or enhance “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” is to embed opportunities to be mentored and engage in the mentorship of others through the program. Most participants envision the mentor-mentee partnership to be established between members of the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” program. For instance, one participant from Cohort 1 expressed an interest in being partnered with a participant from Cohort 2 for the purpose of knowledge sharing, demonstration of skills, confidence-building and camaraderie:

It would just kind of build on this network of, you know, helping our cohort feel like we have enough knowledge. No, we don't have all the answers to every soccer problem, but like, we have enough knowledge and experience that, we could help somebody else succeed. I think that's also a really powerful way to kind of build a community and have a network of female coaches who can, you know, count on each other. - (Coach 6)

Another participant suggested that the partnership would be mutually beneficial as it would allow Cohort 1 participants to remain connected to the program:

I know it's already a challenge to fill all the coaching positions, but I feel like, you know, even if someone from Cohort 2 pairs up with someone from Cohort 1, just to shadow a little bit for a few games or something. I know, for me, that's something that I feel like would really make me feel like I'm still part of the program moving forward. - (Coach 14)

Further, some participants were also open to partnerships with fellow Cohort 1 participants. As Coach 14 stated, “cohort matching would be amazing and I'd even just do it within the same cohort, too.”

In summary, participants suggested Guelph Soccer could make refinements to a few administrative and operational components (e.g., overarching framework, clarity in expectations, future coach huddles) and continue to refine marketing efforts to related to recruitment, increase promotion, and ensure sustainability of the program. In addition, the program may benefit from embedding continued support for Cohort 1 participation, including, continued access to core components, opportunities to seek financial resources, and opportunities to engage in mentor-mentee partnerships.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROGRAM

- Participants would benefit from an overarching program framework – accessible for download or through the Guelph Soccer website – that indicates key milestones, steps necessary to achieve milestones, codes required for access and where to locate information before and after completing each milestone
- First time coaches would benefit from an introductory administrative and basic soccer skills session at the outset of the program
- Coach Huddles may benefit from alternate or rotating dates/times to maximize participation, increased variety of speakers within and outside of Guelph Soccer community, and continued focus on “how” to implement program learnings
- Recruitment strategies would benefit from clarity on participation parameters (e.g., age requirements) and/or an expanded age range for participation
- Future marketing and promotion strategies may focus on additional ways to showcase the program in the Guelph Soccer community and beyond
- Cohort 1 participants indicated an interest in continued engagement with core program components
- Cohort 1 participants are interested in assistance from Guelph Soccer related to seeking internal or external financial support to pursue additional coach certifications
- Cohort 1 participants suggested embedding mentorship opportunities for members of the “She’s Got Game – She Can Coach” community for knowledge sharing, confidence-building and camaraderie

CONCLUSION

It is well-documented in the existing literature that there is a lack of women coaches across all levels of sport in Canada and abroad (Banwell, 2020). Research suggests that women are confronted by unique barriers in coaching, including, a male-dominated environment, overemphasis on winning at all costs, perceived lack of opportunities or job insecurity, low

financial compensation, competing domestic responsibilities, perceived lack of value of women in sport, employers' reluctance to employ women coaches, issues of harassment, and a lack of programs designed to mentor and develop women coaches (Kerr & Ali, 2012; Kerr & Banwell, 2016; Kerr & Marshall, 2007; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Norman, 2013). Although significant progress to advance women has been made in other professional fields (e.g., higher education, business), a lack of women in coaching remains.

Despite facing unique barriers in the profession of coaching, evidence suggests that women coaches provide significant value to sport. Specifically, research suggests women coaches may bring distinct skills and competencies to the sport environment, including, the ability to create a welcoming space, effective communication, empathy, multi-tasking skills, coaching philosophies that extend beyond 'winning' at all costs to an emphasis on psychosocial and life skill development, enhanced understanding of athletes' needs, ability to cater coaching styles to athletes and incorporate their feedback, and a willingness to learn new skills (Meier, 2015; Norman, 2013). Female athletes, especially, benefit from the skills and competencies women coaches bring to sport (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Norman, 2013). Moreover, the presence and influence of women coaches may empower other female athletes and coaches (Norman, 2013) and influence girls and women to play and remain in sport (Meier, 2015).

For Guelph Soccer, specifically, a paucity of women in coaching roles was identified as an area for improvement within the organization. In 2019, the ratio of coaches at the club were 5:1 men to women. To address this existing gap, Guelph Soccer developed the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" pilot program, with the intention of advancing women in coaching through targeted recruitment, training, and development of women coaches. The three-year pilot program began in the Fall of 2021. The pilot program attempts to address barriers and facilitators to women in coaching by providing strategic supports for girls and women to participate and develop as coaches, such as, organization-funded coach training, a social support network, and free childcare. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of Guelph Soccer's first year/Cohort 1 of the pilot program "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" in advancing women in coaching, including recruitment, training, and development of women coaches through pre- and post-participation surveys and mid- to end-point focus groups. The research evaluation is critical to assessing the effectiveness of the program and informing future initiatives of this nature for programs across Canada.

The results of the evaluation of Year 1/Cohort 1 demonstrate that "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" works to recruit, train, and develop women coaches. Participants suggested that the program helped alleviate key barriers, including, costs of coach certifications, perceived lack of knowledge and experience related to coaching, and a lack of confidence. The program design and delivery worked to alleviate these barriers by providing informational (e.g., advice, updates, feedback), emotional (e.g., empathy, understanding, community), and tangible (e.g., financial and childcare assistance, coaching templates, practice plans) supports. Participants also recognized the intention and care for the program by Guelph Soccer, as well as the

opportunity to learn and interact with a supportive community of women, as beneficial to the program. As a result of engagement in the program, participants reported positive personal and professional development, including the development of general coaching skills and competencies, an increased soccer IQ, an enhanced understanding of what it means to be a 'coach', and advanced their self-efficacy through a sense of community, engagement with other women, and increased coaching knowledge and practice. A majority of participants also confirmed their intentions to remain involved in core "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" programming (e.g., women's soccer league) and continue their coaching journeys.

Looking ahead to years 2 and 3 of the pilot program, Cohort 1 participants suggested a few recommendations and future directions, including refinements to administration and operations (e.g., provision of an overarching framework), clarity in recruitment parameters, and a continued focus on marketing and promoting the program within the Guelph Soccer community and beyond. Further, Cohort 1 participants suggested embedding mentorship opportunities within the program, with the intention to expand knowledge-sharing, camaraderie and confidence-building within the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" community.

Overall, based on the pre- and post-participant surveys, as well as the mid- to end-point focus groups, Cohort 1 participants appraised year 1 of the "She's Got Game – She Can Coach" program as a success in recruiting, retaining and developing girls and women into coaches in the Guelph Soccer community.

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