



Nikki Gnozzio has worked hard to earn a position as a college strength coach.

Breaking Barriers: Women in Strength Coaching

Strength coach Nikki Gnozzio is changing perceptions in her profession

BY LAANNA CARRASCO, MA

You could call them your secret weapon. Or your quiet iron. They are strength and conditioning coaches, and they work tirelessly to provide the building blocks to get athletes bigger, faster and stronger and to

in a college weightroom and transformed them into a career making other athletes better. A First Team All Mid-American Conference field hockey player at Ohio University, Gnozzio is now an assistant strength and conditioning coach at

her job is that she gets to know and train almost every athlete on campus (of which there are over 300), something sport coaches don't get to do.

PC's strength program is designed so that athletes do a team lift at least

...a recent report found that nearly 85 percent of Division 1 strength and conditioning coaches are male.

keep them injury free.

Nikki Gnozzio is one of those coaches whose influence reaches beyond training her athletes to reach new levels of physical excellence. Like many strength coaches, Gnozzio helps build mental toughness, camaraderie and teamwork among her players while giving them skills to excel in a future career, whether in the athletics world or outside of it.

Gnozzio took the physical tools and inspiration she experienced as an athlete

Providence College (PC), in Providence, Rhode Island. She chose to become a strength coach because she has always enjoyed lifting and was highly influenced by her own strength coach at Ohio, Sonny Sano.

"He always motivated me to train hard and enjoy the training for more than just preparation for my sport. I absolutely loved every minute in the weightroom," Gnozzio says, adding that strength training is her calling. One of the things Gnozzio enjoys most about

once a week, with additional small group or one-on-one training sessions to work on each athlete's particular needs. This means Gnozzio trains the men and women equally, and she says that having confidence in her knowledge of exercise science and technical experience performing and teaching the more difficult lifts have allowed her to excel as a coach.

Being a female strength coach is a somewhat unique situation; a recent report found that nearly 85 percent of Division 1 strength and conditioning

coaches are male. However, Gnozzio's co-assistant at PC is a woman, Natalie LaSalle.

PC head strength coach Ken White says that he hired both women because they were the best candidates for the

job. White provides a strong base of support for his assistants by mentoring, teaching and encouraging them to excel in coaching the athletes.

"Coach White instilled in me a confidence to believe in what I am

doing and to try to improve a little bit every day," Gnozzio says, adding that her experience negotiating the demands of being a student-athlete has helped her to connect and relate to her athletes. "Knowing what it is like to

Providence College Athletics photo.

David Silverman photo.



Lauren Fletcher (volleyball), Jen Abrams (softball) and Justin Gates (ice hockey) are a few of the athletes Gnozzio has trained at Providence College. Gnozzio is shown working with Gates, along with (l-r) Abrams, Laura Veharanta (ice hockey) and Fletcher.

David Silverman photo.



Gnozzio was a scholarship field hockey player at Ohio University and is now training in weightlifting, representing the Team BFS Weightlifting Club.

be midway through the season, lifting, taking exams and staying on top of the little personal life you have, is something you can't learn from a book but is extremely valuable when designing a strength program," she says. This ability to coach athletes with compassion, along with her education (she holds a BA in Sports Management and an MA in Coaching Education, and she did course work in counseling), her technical knowledge of basic strength movements and her ability to power clean, snatch, squat and bench press impressive weights means she can "walk the talk." Anyone who may



University of Ohio photo.



have questioned her expertise is soon won over by the effectiveness of her methods in the weightroom.

A recent study on the role and

effectiveness of female strength coaches found that mentorship and technical knowledge are two factors that are helping women successfully cross the gender

So You Want to Be a Strength Coach

If you are interested in pursuing a career in strength and conditioning at the college or high school level, here are a few tips to join the women who are leading the way:

1. Start lifting in a program such as BFS at a young age so that you learn to perform and teach the more technical lifts such as the squat, power clean and snatch correctly.
2. Train regularly and develop your own strength and conditioning so that you can "walk the talk."
3. Get a college degree in the exercise sciences. This is essential if you want to be a college strength coach because you will need to become a certified strength and conditioning specialist (CSCS) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association in order to get a job at a university, and a prerequisite to take the test is a bachelor's degree.
4. Volunteer or intern with a high school or collegiate strength program as soon as you can. Develop your coaching style and résumé by learning from as many coaches as possible.
5. Plan to get a graduate assistanceship in the strength and conditioning program at the university you go to for graduate school. This is an important step to getting a full-time position as an assistant.
6. Try to find a mentor coach who has successfully coached athletes. Learn from them and cultivate the mentor-mentee relationship.
7. Develop a network of coaches, sports administrators and, especially, other women who also have a passion for excellence in sports and strength coaching.
8. Once you have a BA, get a master's degree in the exercise sciences or a related field. All strength coaching positions prefer you to have an MA, and getting one will put you on a level playing field with male candidates for jobs.
9. Go to coaching seminars and conferences. Although it may be intimidating to be one of a handful of women out of hundreds of men at a training clinic, the experience is critical and you will be forging the way for other women.
10. Show your passion for training and for coaching. A commitment to excellence and hard work and a love of helping athletes will go a long way to establishing yourself as a coach.
11. Have confidence in your abilities and don't let anyone discount you in the strength and conditioning field because you are female.
12. Understand that strength coaching requires hard work and long hours. It's not uncommon to start coaching athletes at 6 a.m. and not finish until 7 or 8 at night during the school year. On the other hand, you may get summers off, or work much shorter hours when many students are away from campus.

barrier in the college weightroom. The study also found that although women have an increasingly important presence in the weightroom, they are still very much a minority and, unfortunately, advancement opportunities are scarce.

The main concern for a female strength coach in the NCAA is the difficulty in advancing to a position as head coach, particularly at schools that have a football program, since the head strength coach typically works with the football team. Gnozzio mentions her goal is to be a head strength coach someday, but she adds that there are currently no female head strength coaches except at all-women schools. Still, Gnozzio thinks it is a reasonable goal if she finds an athletic program that is as supportive as the one at PC. “Every generation of females in this industry needs to keep doing their part to reach gender equity,” she says, acknowledging that it won’t happen overnight and “will require time, perseverance and hard work.”

There are select instances of female head strength coaches. For example, in 1984 Meg Ritchie-Stone was hired as the head strength coach at University of Arizona, making her the first woman ever to be appointed as head strength coach of a Division 1 university. Presently, Andrea Hudy is head strength coach for the University of Kansas men’s basketball team and holds the title of Assistant Athletic Director of Sports Performance, making her essentially a head strength coach, although there is a male director of the football strength program at KU.

Another obstacle for female strength coaches in the NCAA is the view that male teams will perform best with a male strength coach. Correct or not, a study on Division 1 athletes’ attitudes toward male and female coaches found that the male athletes

would prefer working with a male strength coach no matter how qualified the female might be. “The results were very disheartening and made me nervous,” Gnozzio says about her feelings after she read the article in college. “Luckily, in my personal experience it hasn’t been a problem,” and she adds that what it really comes down to is athlete coachability and the respect that athletes have for their coaches.



Head strength coach Ken White with Gates, Veharanta, Gnozzio, Abrams and Fletcher.

Gnozzio suggests that making athletes comfortable training with a male or female coach depends on finding a coaching style that will fit each athlete and team. “If we as coaches are genuinely there to improve our athletes, they have no problem accepting us and using us as a tool to help them reach the next level,” Gnozzio says.

The authors for the study on gender preference, Magnusen and Rhea, suggest the responsibility to change male athletes’ perspective toward female strength coaches lies with athletic departments to help diminish bias towards female coaches. Magnusen and Rhea also suggest that male athletes be exposed to female strength coaches earlier in their sport experience – both

valid suggestions.

The responsibility lies just as much with the women who want to be coaches. “I know I have a better chance of changing what I do than what other people do,” Gnozzio says, suggesting a very proactive method of change. “A lack of women in any field can be based on how females perceive a position, not just on how men perceive the field to be.”

There’s no doubt that as more and more girls grow up strength training in programs such as BFS, they will develop the technical skills and love for being strong and fast. With this background and the growing presence of women coaching in college weightrooms, girls and young women will feel the freedom to pursue a career in strength coaching. By looking at how the personal training industry has evolved over the past decade, it’s clear that women have a passion for fitness and strength.

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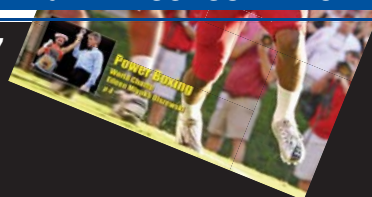
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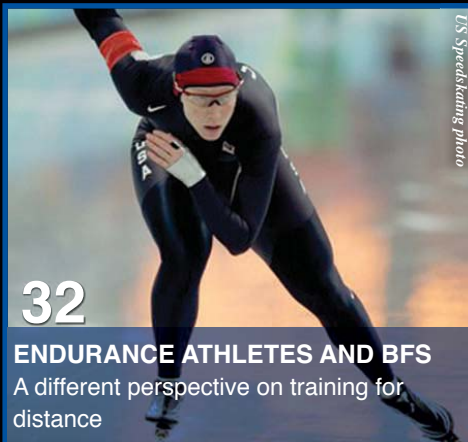


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