

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Number of Women Coaching in College Has Plummeted in Title IX Era

By JERÉ LONGMAN MARCH 30, 2017

DALLAS — Friday’s opening game in the women’s Final Four here will feature two of the most prominent female coaches in college basketball.

Tara VanDerveer has won two national championships at Stanford and coached the American women to a gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Dawn Staley, the recently named 2020 Olympic coach, won three gold medals as a player and has guided South Carolina to the national semifinals for the second time in three seasons.

Yet even as VanDerveer and Staley again appear on their sport’s most visible stage, the opportunity for women to coach female collegiate athletes has stagnated after a decades-long decline.

In 1972, when the gender equity law known as Title IX was enacted, women were head coaches of more than 90 percent of the N.C.A.A.’s women’s teams across two dozen sports. Now that number has decreased to about 40 percent.

“I want to think sexism is too simple of an answer, but what is it if it’s not that?” said VanDerveer, the only woman beside Pat Summitt to have won 1,000 career

games in Division I. “Anytime someone hires a male coach and says, ‘Coaching is coaching,’ well, why aren’t more women in men’s basketball?”

The most successful coach in women’s college basketball is Geno Auriemma of Connecticut, which has won 111 consecutive games and is seeking its fifth consecutive national title — and 12th over all. In the second semifinal of the N.C.A.A. tournament on Friday, UConn will face Mississippi State, also coached by a man, Vic Schaefer.

Earlier in his career, Auriemma said he felt some antipathy toward his success because he was a man, but no longer.

“I would like to think I’ve done too much for the growth of the game for people to resent the fact that I’m a man,” he said.

Several high-profile female coaches agreed, saying that they respect what Auriemma has achieved and that he hires women as his assistant coaches.

“Coaches don’t really specifically talk about Geno,” Staley said. “They probably more talk about dethroning him.”

On Thursday, Auriemma said fewer women wanted to coach because they had far more career opportunities beyond teaching, and basketball, than they did when Title IX was enacted.

“It’s quite simple,” he said.

But that characterization would be vigorously disputed by a number of female coaches.

“Basketball is not a gender,” Staley said.

She added: “I do think that women should be given the opportunity to coach women. I think a lot of times, maybe administrators are going through the process of hiring somebody with the mind-set of a male. When you go into that mind-set, you don’t give women an opportunity to be heard.”

“Where are the women?” the N.C.A.A. asked in an exhaustive examination of the issue this winter by Rachel Stark in the organization’s Champion magazine.

The answers Stark found were numerous and complicated: As more money and higher salaries came into college sports, men became increasingly interested in coaching women’s teams. (In October, Auriemma signed a five-year contract extension that will pay him at least \$13 million).

The same opportunity did not run in the other direction. Only about 3 percent of men’s teams are coached by women. Meanwhile, 80 percent of college athletic directors are men.

From conversations with female coaches, Stark found other factors leading to their stagnating numbers: “The increasing demands of the job. The strain on working mothers. Fear and discrimination among lesbian coaches. Lack of mentors. Lack of networking opportunities. Perceived gender biases.”

Muffet McGraw, the longtime women’s coach at Notre Dame who won the 2001 N.C.A.A. championship and is a member of the board of the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association, said in a telephone interview: “We seem to lose women, and so we’re looking to see: Is it because of a lack of a work-life balance? It’s a demanding profession for men and women, but a lot of women have other responsibilities at home.”

The number of female head coaches varies widely, depending on the sport, at 86 universities at the highest level of Division I competition, according to a study conducted by the University of Minnesota’s Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport.

Field hockey, lacrosse, golf, equestrian and softball received a grade of A from the research center in 2016-17 for the percentage of female head coaches of women’s teams in the American Athletic Conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big 12, the Big East, the Big Ten, the Pacific-12 and the Southeastern Conferences.

Women's basketball received a B, with 53 of 86 head coaches being women in those leagues. But the percentage of female coaches dipped to 61.6 percent from 64 percent in 2015-16. Of the eight head coaches hired in 2016-17, two were men who replaced women.

Among the women's Final Four programs, Stanford and South Carolina were given a C for their hiring of women as head coaches, and UConn and Mississippi State were given a D by the Tucker Center.

"My biggest concern is that young women are not often getting the opportunity to have a female coaching role model," said Nicole M. LaVoi, the co-director of the Tucker Center. "That's detrimental to development."

When McGraw last had an opening for an assistant coach at Notre Dame, she said, the proportion of male applicants compared with women was about 70 percent to 30 percent.

Women may be more reluctant to switch from one college to another than men, McGraw said.

"I don't think it's generally about the money and business part of it, so much as they like the quality of life where they are," she said. "The work-life balance, I think, is a bigger issue for women than it is for men."

It is also clear that some women have been dissuaded from pursuing coaching careers.

Kara Lawson, who played for Summitt at Tennessee from 1999 to 2003, was early into her W.N.B.A. and broadcasting careers in Sacramento when she asked to attend a practice of the Sacramento Kings of the N.B.A. The Kings declined, she said, saying she might "distract" the players and offering only to let her watch the workout through a one-way mirror.

"I look back on that and I'm like, is my life totally different" than it might have been?" said Lawson, now an ESPN commentator. "I wanted to be a coach."

The Women's Basketball Coaches Association has been trying to change the narrative. Sixty-one graduating female players have been invited to its convention this week in Dallas. They are participating in a workshop, So You Want to Be a Coach, that is intended to raise their awareness and spur their interest.

This season, Staley found an innovative way to add another female assistant coach at South Carolina. She hired Melanie Balcomb, who had been the head coach for 14 seasons at Vanderbilt, to be in charge of analytics, a groundbreaking role for women's college basketball.

An appealing feature of the job for Balcomb, who has two young children, was that she did not have to travel or recruit during the season. But there was another important reason to choose South Carolina, she said Thursday. Balcomb and her female partner, who are both white, adopted African-American children.

For these reasons, she said, "we haven't been welcomed everywhere, and Dawn welcomed me and my family. It's been an unbelievable experience."

Homophobia, Balcomb added, "is the white elephant in the room that doesn't get talked about."

Anucha Browne, the N.C.A.A.'s vice president for women's basketball championships, said it was vital for both male and female coaches and administrators to give women more coaching opportunities.

"It's critical that we need to do something to stem the decline of women in the coaching profession," Browne said.

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