

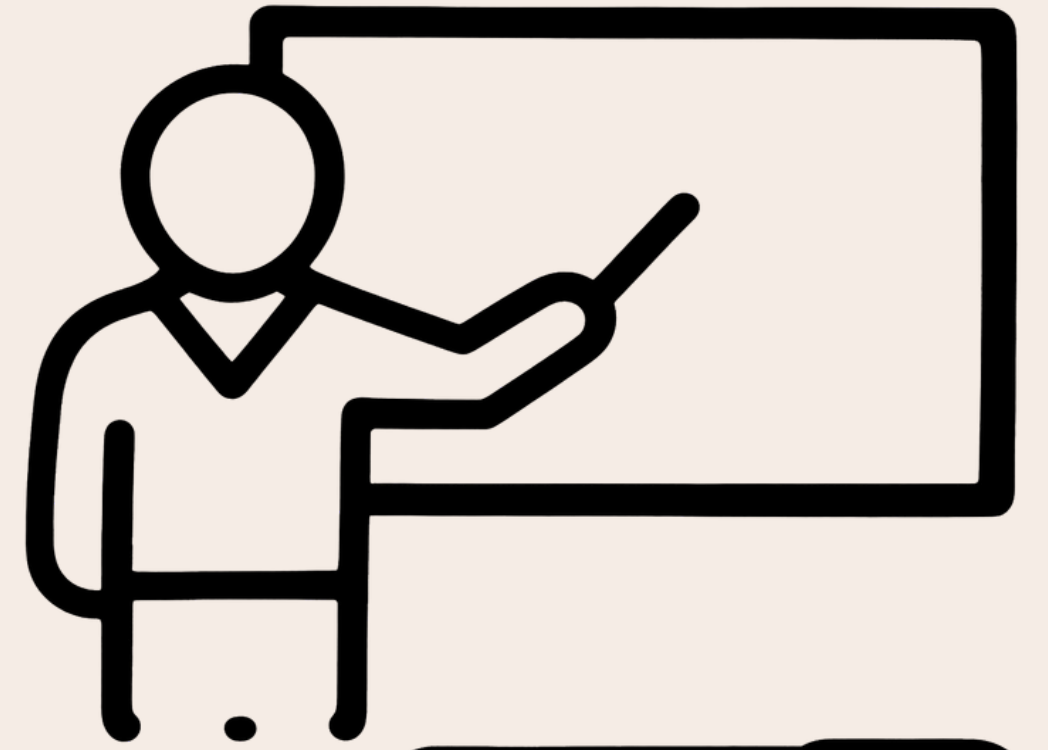
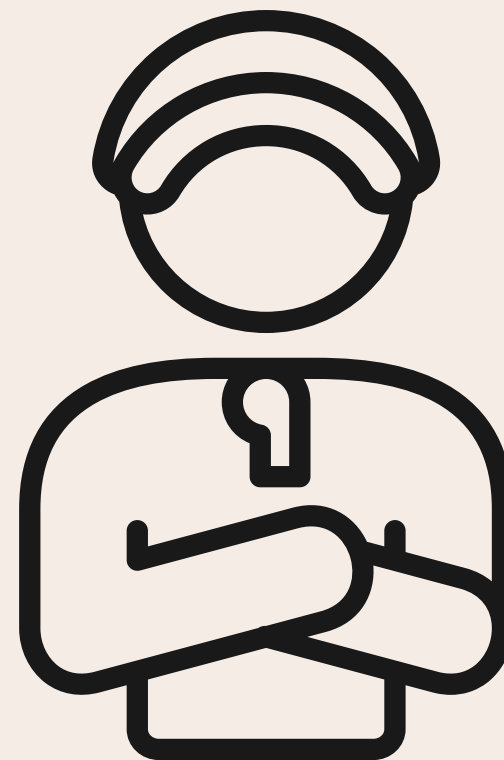
# Keeping Women and Girls Engaged in Soccer Across Life Stages

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# Why this matters?



## **Common assumption in sport:**

Girls and women leave because they lose interest.

## **What we actually see:**

- 1 in 3 girls drop out of sport during adolescence (compared to 1 in 10 boys)
- 75% of girls say they don't feel like they belong in sport culture by their teen years.
- Lack of visible female role models (coaches, refs, leaders) contributes to the dropout rate.
- Many women still love the game, but the environment no longer fits their lives

**The challenge is not interest in soccer, but designing environments where women can stay connected as their lives evolve.**

# What Research Shows Us About Girls in Sport

The Tucker Center of Research and Coaching HER both emphasize:

- Girls are not small boys.
- Social, psychological, and emotional needs differ.
- Girls thrive in relationships-based environments.
- Confidence dips sharply for girls starting around age 11.
- Many girls report they don't feel heard or understood by coaches.

**In a player-centered environment, how then does this shape our coaching/organizational behavior?**



**“Boys need to play good to feel good.  
Girls need to feel good to play good.”  
- Alicia Pelton**

# What We Can Do



## Create an Environment of Belonging

- Girls stay when they feel connected
- Role of teammates and relationships is central
- Create leadership opportunities for all, not just the top-tier athletes

## Confidence is a Skill

- Girls often underestimate their abilities
- Praise as loud as you critique
- Create a culture of positive self-talk, and “no body talk”
- Offer specific, actionable feedback
- Praise effort over outcome

## Puberty and Body Image

- Normalize development and protect dignity
- Keep menstruation products in first aid bag
- Don't comment on body size, comment on strength, balance, agility, effort, etc.

**Girls thrive in relationship-based environments.**

**But relationships require representation.**

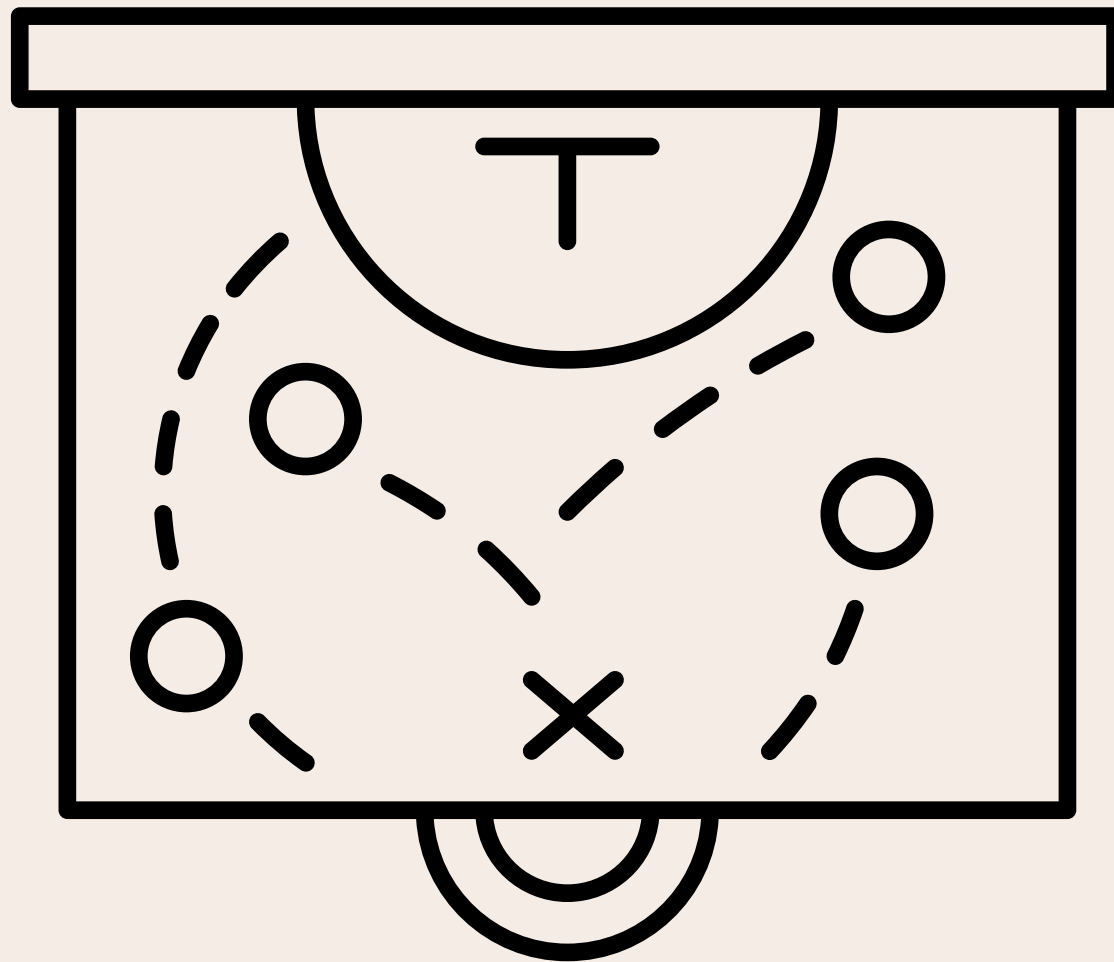
**If girls rarely see women coaching or leading,  
we lose one of the most powerful retention  
tools we have.**

# The Female Coaching Shortage

Less than 28% of all youth sports coaches are female.

## Why?

1. Structural Barriers in Sport
  - a. male hiring networks
  - b. limited pathways
  - c. coaching cultures designed around men's career patterns
2. Lack of Role Models
3. Work-Life Caregiving Expectations
4. Gender Bias and Stereotyping around Coaching
5. Volunteer Pipeline dynamics in Youth Sports
6. Unwelcoming/unsupportive environments



# Creating a Better Environment

To support women coaches, we must:

## 1. Invite them in

- Women are more likely to coach when personally asked

## 2. Create flexible pathways

- Careers are often non-linear

## 3. Reduce structural barriers

- Rigid schedules and systems limit access

## 4. Build mentorship and community

- Retention requires support, not just opportunity

## 5. Increase visibility and representation

- Promote when possible



**“Do what you can,  
with what you have,  
where you are.”**

**-Teddy Roosevelt**

# A Case Study: Emerging Coach Program



## Rush Wisconsin Emerging Coach Program

- Created for high school girls
- Paid coaching education
- Networking Opportunities
- Mentored entry into coaching
- Focus on leadership, confidence, and identity
- Not just producing coaches, but keeping girls connected to soccer as part of the LTAD Model

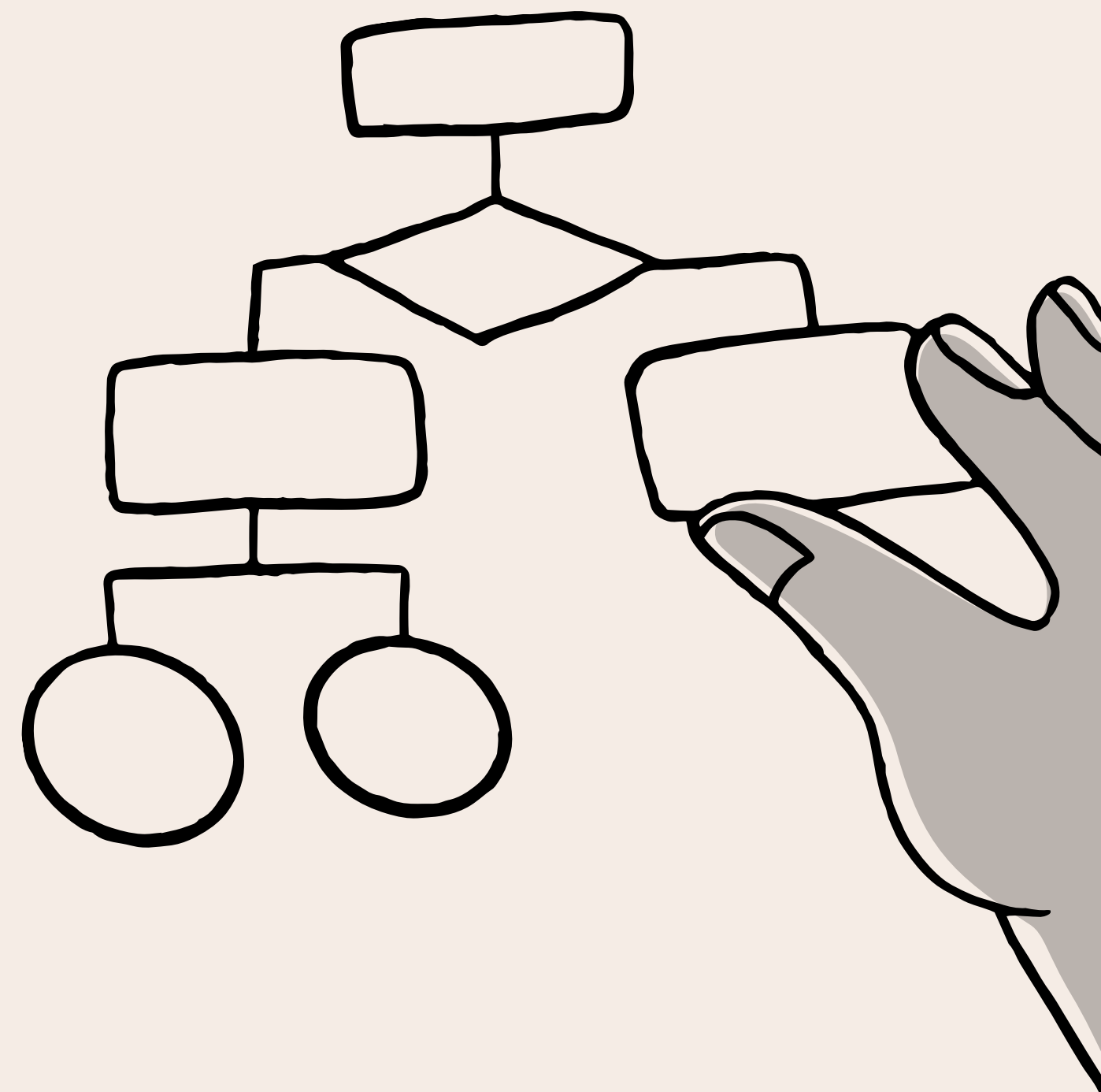
**This is a leadership and belonging program, not just a coaching pipeline.**

# Not all Soccer Pathways are Linear for Female Coaches

Many step away. What can bring them back in?

One example:

- Athlete
- Coach
- Higher Ed
- Director
- ---2 year Break---
- Executive Director - Coaching Education etc.

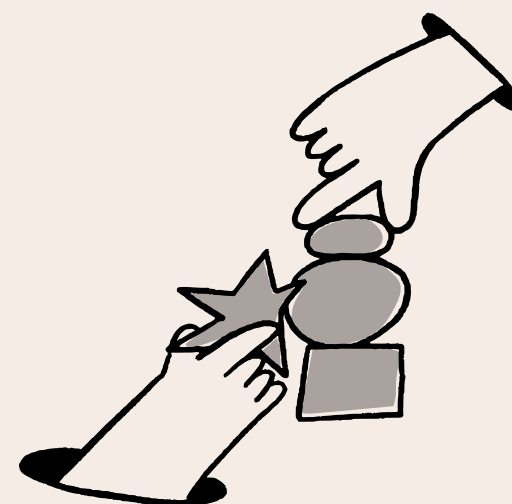


# The Power of Being Invited Back In



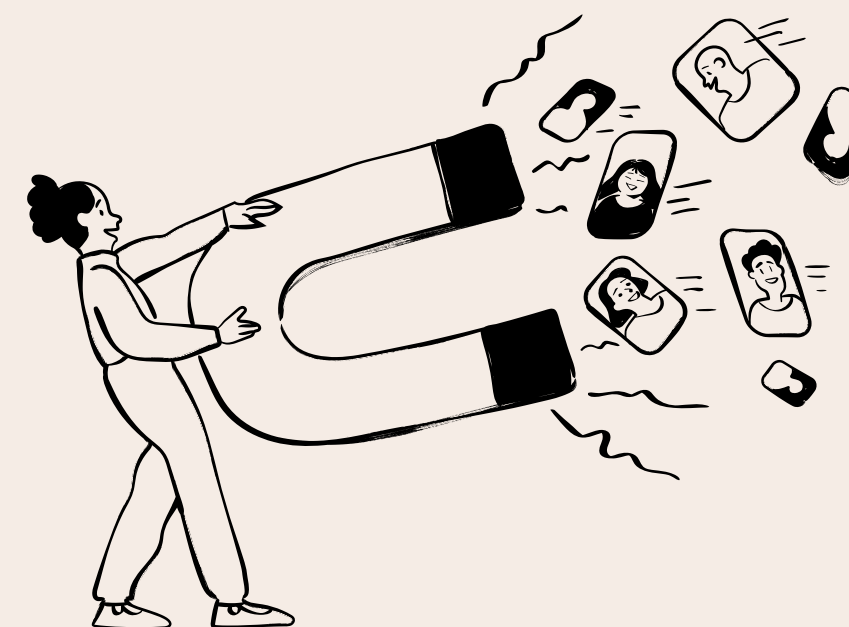
## Low Pressure Opportunities

- Small Jobs
- Flexible
- Stipends



## Nurturing relationships and Network

- Check-ins
- Symposiums
- Coaching Education opportunities
- Club Meetings



## Ready When Timing is Right and Creating the Right Environment

Retention often starts with someone saying, "There's still a place for you here."

Flexibility is not a concession, it is a retention strategy.

# Scaling the Support: Rush Women's Alliance

The Rush Women's Alliance is a strategic initiative of Rush Soccer aimed at fostering the growth and development of female coaches, administrators, and executives within the Rush network. Our mission is to empower women in soccer through dedicated support, professional development, and meaningful networking opportunities.

- National network supporting women in coaching and leadership
- Professional development that respects real life constraints
- Visibility, mentorship, and shared language across clubs
- National structure empowers local action



**When women see pathways and have a support network, they stay in the game longer.**

# Questions to Consider in Your Environment

1. As a coach what is one thing you can change this season to be more intentional to keep girls in the game?
2. What roles exist for women and girls beyond playing in your organization?
3. How can your organization be more flexible during major life transitions?
4. Who is a female coach/leader/former player you can reach out to in the next week to touch base with?
5. Are there micro roles with stipends you could create?
6. Who is a passionate person in your organization that you can mobilize in a mentor/leadership initiative?





# Retention Is About Belonging

And it is built through relationships, flexibility, and intentional pathways.

*Big thanks!*

## **Sources**

<https://tuckercenter.umn.edu/>

<https://www.coachingher.com/>

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/staying-in-the-game-progress-and-challenges-in-youth-sports/>

## **Contact**

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