



# ***CHANGING THE***

# ***GAME***

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## **A Playbook for Girls' Sport in Saskatchewan**

### **Section 2: Beyond the Sidelines**

#### **A Playbook for Welcoming Women into Sport**

 **SASK SPORT**

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## Introduction

When girls leave sports in their teens, they often don't come back as adults.<sup>12</sup> This leaves a big gap. For local clubs, adult women (ages 18 to 90+) are a huge group of potential players, volunteers, and leaders. Engaging them is not just about growing membership; it is about building a true "sport for life" culture that benefits everyone.

Bringing women back to sport, or engaging them for the first time, is good for everyone. For women, it improves health, lowers stress, and builds friendships.<sup>1,7,20</sup> For organizations, welcoming women builds a community that is livelier, stronger and includes everyone. It brings in fresh energy and new points of view. It also creates positive role models for the next generation.<sup>9</sup>

This guide helps you bridge that gap. We will look at why women play, what stops them and how you can create a welcoming space where they feel they belong.



### Introduction to Belonging in Sport and Physical Activity

#### [Introduction to Belonging in Sport and Physical Activity \(Sport for Life\):](#)

Want to dig deeper into what it really means to belong? Check out this resource to help you cultivate a true sense of belonging for everyone in your club.

### Expanding Our View of 'Sport'

To get more women involved, we need to think bigger than just "sport." For some women, the word "sport" has baggage—it sounds aggressive, difficult, or only for "jocks."<sup>18</sup> Many women are not looking for high-intensity, high-commitment leagues; they simply want to move.<sup>18</sup>

Your organization can offer different types of activity:

- **Sport:** Organized, competitive, and structured activities with rules, often played in leagues (Ex. a women's soccer league).
- **Recreation:** Activities done for enjoyment, fun, and social interaction, often in a less formal or drop-in setting (Ex. a "learn-to-play" night, a weekend hiking group).
- **Physical Activity:** Any bodily movement that uses energy (Ex. walking clubs, gardening groups, or dance classes).

By offering different choices, you can meet women where they are and invite them into your community, regardless of their previous experience.

## A Note on Language

Throughout this guide, we often use the term “women” as a broad term. We want to be clear that this is intended to be an inclusive term that includes girls, transgender women, and gender-diverse individuals, such as nonbinary and Two-Spirit people. Our goal is to create a welcoming sport system for everyone.



## Continuing the Journey

This guide is just one part of the picture. To explore how to support women in other roles within sport, check out the other guides in this series:

- **Section 1:** On the Field: Creating Programs Where Girls Thrive
- **Section 3:** On the Field of Play: Women as Technical Leaders in Sport
- **Section 4:** From the Sidelines to the Boardroom: Empowering Women in Sport Leadership
- **Section 5:** The Organizational Playbook: Strategies for Growth and Sustainability

## Dig Deeper

This guide is your starting line. To help you keep going, we have gathered a collection of helpful tools, reports, and websites. Check out the Dig Deeper: Useful Resources section at the end of this guide to find more ways to build your knowledge and take action.

## Part 1: The Current Landscape: Understanding Women’s Sport Today

### Women’s Sport Participation

Right now, less than two in ten Canadian women aged 16 to 63 play sports.<sup>12</sup> This number drops even more during big life changes.

- **Motherhood:** Women report significant decreases in their physical activity levels after giving birth to their first child.<sup>20</sup> Parents are generally less active than non-parents, and this is especially true for mothers.<sup>20</sup>
- **Older Adults:** Until recently, older women were not expected or encouraged to play competitive sports.<sup>13</sup> Masters-level sport has created new paths, but many women still face stereotypes from others and from themselves about what is “appropriate” for their age.<sup>13</sup>
- **Women with Disabilities:** Adult women who report having a disability are significantly less involved in sport compared to their able-bodied peers.<sup>8</sup>

This isn’t because women don’t want to play. It’s because the system isn’t built for their lives.

## Understanding Her 'Why': What Motivates Women?

To design programs women will join, we must understand what they value.

- **Social Connection:** This is a main driver. Women often prefer exercising in groups.<sup>7</sup> They are looking for community, a way to make friends, and a chance to connect with people like them.<sup>5</sup> For mothers, sport is a key way to share experiences and build a support network.<sup>20</sup>
- **Health and Wellness:** Women look at health in a big-picture way. They want to manage stress, boost their mental health, have more energy, and stay strong as they age.<sup>5,17,20</sup> Research shows that women keep participating longer when they focus on fun, challenge, and friendship, rather than just body shape or weight.<sup>20</sup>
- **Personal Growth:** Women want to feel capable. Learning new skills is important at every age.<sup>4</sup> Healthy competition is also a big motivator, as long as the environment is supportive and fun.<sup>14</sup> For older women, sport is a way to stay strong, challenge stereotypes about aging, and feel good about themselves.<sup>2</sup>
- **Role-Modelling:** Moms who play sports set a healthy example for their children. Active moms often report feeling happier and healthier, which helps them feel like better parents.<sup>20</sup>
- **Community Wins:** Getting women aged 55-70 active brings revenue to club and community programs and ultimately saves money on health care.<sup>5</sup>
- **Leadership Skills:** Sport is a training ground for the leaders our communities need. It is no surprise that 94% of women in top jobs played sports. In fact, 74% say that sport helped their careers take off.<sup>8</sup>

### Why It Matters

When women are active, the positive ripple effects go far beyond just their own personal health.

Interested in how sport builds leaders? Check out *Section 4: From the Sidelines to the Boardroom: Empowering Women in Sport Leadership*.

## Barriers to Participation

For most women, the barriers are a complex and connected web of practical, social and psychological factors.<sup>4</sup>

### Practical Barriers

- **Time and Life Commitments:** Time is the biggest hurdle. Women are often juggling jobs, housework and caring for kids or aging parents.<sup>20,21</sup> This "sandwich generation" (caring for both young and old) often puts their own needs last.
- **Cost:** The cost of fees, gear and travel adds up. This can be a real roadblock, especially for newcomers or women aged 55-70.<sup>4,5</sup>
- **Childcare:** If childcare isn't cheap or easy to find, many moms simply can't join. For them, a lack of childcare is often a "game-ending" barrier.<sup>20</sup>

### Program and "On Ramp" Barriers

- **Lack of Opportunity:** Women often say there simply aren't enough programs for them. The ones that do exist might not offer enough variety or might not be very good quality.<sup>4,5</sup>
- **The "Wrong" Type of Program:** Many programs happen at times that just don't work, like evenings when moms are busy with bedtime routines. Others ask for too much commitment, like signing up for a long, expensive season.<sup>5,20</sup>

- **The “Skill Gap”:** There is often a “missing middle” in sports. Clubs usually have programs for total beginners or for high-level competitors. This leaves nowhere for the woman who “used to play” and just wants a fun, recreational game.<sup>4</sup>

## Mental and Social Barriers

- **Lack of Confidence:** This is a big roadblock. Women often worry they are “too unfit,” “too old,” or “not good enough.”<sup>8</sup> They fear looking silly or not being able to keep up.<sup>5,18</sup>
- **Guilt:** Many mothers feel deep guilt when they take time for themselves. They feel selfish, as if their sport is taking time away from their children or their housework.<sup>20</sup>
- **Body Image:** Worrying about appearance or wearing tight uniforms can stop a woman from joining. For some, traditional gyms feel scary or exclusive.<sup>21</sup>
- **Social Environment:** The fear of “cliques” or not fitting in is real. Also, if a partner or their family doesn’t support them, many women won’t even try.<sup>5,14</sup>
- **Cultural Barriers:** For some newcomers to Canada, their home culture may not encourage women to play sports. They might not know how the Canadian sport system works, or they may feel that sport spaces aren’t meant for them.<sup>4</sup>

## The 55+ Athlete

Women aged 55 to 70 and beyond are a vital group. Sport helps them stay strong, prevents falls and keeps them independent. However, we often market to them incorrectly. While younger women live online, some older women prefer paper registration forms or posters in community centers. Mixing your marketing methods helps reach everyone.<sup>5</sup>



### Active for Life

To help older adults stay active, consult [Durable by Design](#) from Sport for Life. It shares ideas to make movement fun, easy and part of everyday life at any age.

## Women with Disabilities and Para Sport

It is important to distinguish between two groups:

- **Aging with a Disability:** As women age, rates of disability increase (like hearing loss or mobility issues).<sup>8</sup> Program adaptations help keep these women active.
- **Para Athletes:** These are athletes with disabilities who want to train and compete. Participation for adult women with disabilities is low (13%).<sup>8</sup> A major barrier is the assumption that they can’t or don’t want to play. Creating specific Para sport pathways—and not just assuming they will fit into “seniors” programs—is essential.

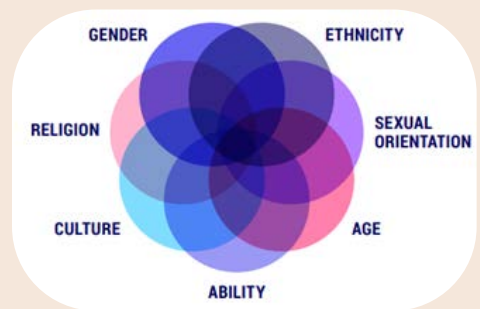


### No Accidental Champions

To navigate the opportunities and challenges for persons with disabilities in sport, consult [No Accidental Champions: Long-Term Development for All 3.1 from Sport for Life](#).

## Understanding Intersectionality

Intersectionality means understanding that a person's experience is shaped by many different parts of their identity happening at once. For example, a Black woman does not just experience barriers because she is a woman, or just because she is Black. She experiences unique barriers because she is both a woman and Black. She might deal with sexism and racism at the same time. To be truly inclusive, we need to consider individuals' intersectional realities to support their development as woman sport participants.



## Part 2: The Environment: Creating a Culture of Belonging

The single most important factor for attracting and keeping women in sport is the environment you create. Women are looking for a community, not just a game.

### Creating a Positive Social Environment

Unlike getting fit, making friends doesn't happen automatically in sport. Program leaders need to make it happen on purpose.<sup>7</sup>

- **Make Time to Chat:** Build social time right into your practice. It can be as simple as encouraging conversation during warm-ups or using activities where participants have to talk to each other.<sup>7</sup>
- **Connect Outside of Sport:** The bond doesn't have to stop at the field. Organize a potluck, go bowling or attend a local event together. This builds friendships that keep women coming back.
- **Spot the Signs:** Watch for signs that someone is pulling away, like giving less effort or talking less. When you see this, connect with them. Remember that women have competing priorities and can't always give their best effort.<sup>7</sup>
- **Support, Don't Sideline:** If a woman is injured or having a tough week, encourage her to come anyway. Remind her she is part of the group, even if she isn't actively participating.<sup>7</sup>
- **Open the Door:** Let participants know the best way to reach you with questions or worries. Clear communication builds trust and stops small problems from becoming big ones.<sup>7</sup>

### Body Positivity

How a woman feels about her body can be a major barrier to participation.<sup>2</sup> Create a space where women feel confident and comfortable. Create a "Body Talk Free Zone." This is a shared commitment to avoid all comments about weight, shape and appearance, and to challenge "body talk" when it occurs.<sup>2</sup>

#### WHAT IS A BODY-TALK FREE ZONE?

- **Body Talk:** Any comment or conversation that reinforces appearance-based ideals. This includes negative comments ("I feel so fat today") and seemingly positive ones ("You look great, have you lost weight?") that still focus on appearance.
- **Body Talk Free Zone:** A space where teammates and leaders commit to avoiding and challenging body talk.

## Practical Strategies for a Body-Positive Space:<sup>2</sup>

- **Set a Zero-Tolerance Rule:** Be clear from day one that body shaming and negative comments about bodies, including our own, are not okay.
- **Focus on What the Body Can Do:** Shift your praise away from how athletes look. Instead, celebrate their strength, effort and the new skills they are learning.
- **Welcome All Bodies:** Make sure your team is a welcoming place for everyone. Show that you value diversity in size, shape, race and ability.
- **Encourage Listening to the Body:** Build a team culture where it is normal to rest when tired or take a mental health break. Focus on enjoyment, not just performance.
- **Be a Role Model:** Show a healthy attitude toward your own body. Also, try to make sure your leadership team includes women from different backgrounds.



### Body Confident Sport

To help tackle negative body image on your team, check out the [Body Confident Sport](#) program for practical tools.

## Supporting Women During Pregnancy and After Birth

Physical activity is a key part of a healthy pregnancy and recovery after birth. It is generally safe and highly recommended. In fact, staying active can lower the risk of gestational diabetes and high blood pressure by up to 40%.<sup>3,20</sup> Getting moms active can be a powerful way to support their mental health.

Leaders and coaches should be supportive and informed, creating a space where women feel comfortable participating. However, coaches should also know their limits. They should actively encourage women to seek advice from healthcare experts, such as an OBGYN or a pelvic floor physiotherapist.

- **Follow the Guidelines:** The official Canadian guidelines say that almost all pregnant women should be active. The goal is to get at least 150 minutes of moderate activity (like brisk walking) every week, spread over at least three days.<sup>3</sup>
- **Encourage a Check-Up:** Remind new and expecting moms to talk to their doctor or healthcare provider before starting or changing their exercise routine.<sup>20</sup>
- **Be Flexible:** Encourage women to listen to their bodies. They shouldn't push too hard.<sup>20</sup> Be ready to change things up. For example, if lying flat on her back makes a woman feel dizzy or sick, help her find a different position.<sup>3</sup>
- **Focus on the Basics:** Returning to sport after a baby takes time.<sup>1</sup> Remind moms to start slow. Focus on the basics first—like breathing exercises, pelvic floor training and walking—before moving on to harder activities.<sup>3,15</sup>
- **Try an “Exercise Snack”:** Engaging in “exercise snacks” – short 10-15 minute bursts of activity, like stretching while the baby naps.<sup>1</sup>
- **Build a Team:** Encourage women to build a support system. This includes asking for help with childcare so they can actually find the time to get active.<sup>1</sup>

### Know the Warning Signs

A woman should stop exercising and see a doctor right away if she feels pain, dizziness or other warning signs.<sup>20</sup> While exercise is good for most, there are some medical reasons (called Contraindications) why a woman should not exercise. These include things like unexplained bleeding, premature labour, or uncontrolled diabetes. \*\*Always tell a participant to ask her doctor for advice.\*\*<sup>3</sup>

## CSEP Guidelines

For detailed safety information, refer to the [2019 Canadian Guidelines for Physical Activity Throughout Pregnancy](#) by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP).

## Supporting Women Through Menopause

Menopause (and perimenopause) can be a tough time. Women are often juggling busy jobs and caring for families while dealing with hard symptoms like exhaustion, hot flashes, anxiety and joint pain.<sup>21,17</sup> This is a big reason why 30% of women become less active during this time.<sup>21</sup>

Sport and recreation can help manage these changes. Regular activity helps keep bones and muscles strong, improves sleep and lowers the risk of depression.<sup>17,21</sup>

- **Talk About It:** Many women feel embarrassed about their symptoms and feel alone.<sup>21</sup> They might lack confidence or feel that sport isn't "for them" anymore. Acknowledge these feelings openly.
- **Focus on How It Feels:** When promoting your programs, highlight the benefits that matter most right now: better sleep, feeling happier and connecting with other women.<sup>21</sup>
- **Start Where They Are:** Offer gentle, beginner classes. Create a friendly space where no one judges anyone else. Remember the pressure these women are under and remind them that just showing up is a win.<sup>21</sup>
- **Build a Team:** Encourage a "buddy system" or create an online group. Having a support network helps women face their fears and try new things.<sup>21</sup>

## What is Perimenopause?

Perimenopause is the time leading up to menopause. It usually starts in a woman's 40s and can last 4-8 years. Symptoms include irregular periods, hot flashes, sleep problems and mood changes. It is a normal life stage, but it can make sticking to a sport routine challenging.<sup>17</sup>

## The Power of Words: Using Inclusive Language

The language we use shapes the environment of our program. Inclusive language is simply a conscious choice to use words that show respect and make every everyone feel safe.

- **A Shared Commitment to Respect:** Language changes over time, and keeping up with new terms can sometimes feel overwhelming. It is important to acknowledge that everyone is learning. The goal isn't perfection; it is showing a willingness to learn and adapt so that every participant feels seen.<sup>7</sup>
- **Focus on Impact, Not Intent:** Sometimes, a participant might use a phrase that is outdated or hurtful without meaning to cause harm. When this happens, it is important to address it gently but clearly. Frame it as a value of the program rather than a personal criticism. Focus on how the words impact others, regardless of the original intent.<sup>7</sup>
- **Avoid Assumptions:** We often make quick guesses about people's lives—assuming a woman has a husband, or that she identifies a certain way. By using open and neutral language, we create space for everyone, including 2SLGBTQIA+ women and those with diverse family structures.<sup>6</sup>
- **Be an Active Ally:** As a leader, your words set the tone. By using inclusive language yourself, you model that your program is a safe space. If you hear discriminatory jokes or comments, addressing them quickly shows that you prioritize the safety and dignity of everyone in the group.<sup>6</sup>

- **Simple Swaps:** Instead of “Hey Ladies”, try “Hey Everyone.” Instead of “Mom and Dad”, try “Parents or Family”.

## Person-First Language

Words matter. Generally, it is best to use “person-first” language. This means putting the person before their condition, like saying “an athlete with a disability” instead of “a disabled athlete.” This reminds us that they are a person first. Note: Some people prefer “identity-first” language (like “Autistic person” or “Deaf person”). The most respectful thing to do is simply ask the individual what they prefer.



### Inclusive Language Guide

To help create a sense of belonging through the words you use, consult the [Inclusive Language Guide](#) from the Ottawa Sport Council.

## Building Inclusive Environments

- **Indigenous Women:** Many Indigenous cultures view wellness as a balance of the physical, mental, spiritual and cultural. Programs that honor this connection—and involve family and community—build the most trust. Also, be mindful that Indigenous women often report higher barriers related to body image, so creating a safe, supportive space is key.<sup>8</sup>
- **Muslim Women:** Consult with Muslim women in your community to see what they need. You may need to offer women-only sessions in a private space (where men cannot see in). Be mindful of holidays like Ramadan, when fasting might make high-intensity exercise difficult.<sup>22</sup>
- **Women with Disabilities:** Inclusion means adapting. It means changing a rule or using different equipment so everyone can participate. It also means ensuring your building is accessible from the parking lot to the playing surface.<sup>5</sup>



### Indigenous Communities: Active for Life

To equip local champions with the tools to create sustainable sport programs, utilize the [Indigenous Communities: Active for Life](#) resource from Sport for Life.

### Hijabi Ballers Toolkit

To implement inclusive practices for female Muslim participants, check out the [Hijabi Ballers Toolkit](#) from viaSport British Columbia.

## Designing for All Abilities: Universal Design

Inclusion for women with disabilities involves a commitment to adapting to fit the needs of the athlete. This means changing drills, equipment or rules when needed. It also means making sure the facility is easy to access, all the way from the parking lot to the playing surface.

**Universal Design** means creating programs and spaces that work for all women right from the start. It isn’t about fixing things later; it is about building them correctly so everyone can participate fully and confidently.

Here is what Universal Design looks like in action:

- **Inclusive Program Design:** Programs should be flexible from day one. Offer multiple ways to participate, compete and lead.
  - Examples: Use tiered levels of competition (like recreational and competitive), modify the rules to fit the players, and offer different roles like athlete, mentor, coach, official or volunteer.

- **Flexible Pathways:** Recognize that every woman starts at a different place. Provide multiple ways to enter the sport and move up.
  - Examples: Offer “Try-It” days for beginners or combined practice sessions where different skill levels train together.
- **Flexible Equipment:** Equipment should allow everyone to play safely and meaningfully, regardless of how they move, see or think.
  - Examples: Use high-contrast balls (easier to see), balls with bells (easier to hear), and have adaptive gear available (or clearly say where to get it).
- **Clear Communication:** Make sure all information is easy to access and understand.
  - Examples: Use online registration forms that work with screen readers. Give instructions in multiple ways: visually (pictures/diagrams), verbally (spoken), tactilely (touch), and in plain language.
- **Universal Coaching:** Good coaching supports different learning styles.
  - Examples: Demonstrate skills in multiple ways (show it, say it, let them feel it). Give feedback that is specific to the person. Keep the practice structure predictable so athletes know what to expect.
- **Safety and Belonging:** Create a space where women feel safe mentally and emotionally.
  - Examples: Train coaches in disability literacy and inclusive coaching. Have a zero-tolerance rule for ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities) and exclusionary behaviours.
- **Accessible Costs:** Financial barriers often impact women with disabilities more than others.
  - Examples: Offer “sliding scale” fees (pay what you can), provide loaner equipment so participants don’t have to buy expensive gear just to try, and share information about grants.
- **Understanding Overlapping Barriers (Intersectionality):** Recognize that women often face more than one barrier at a time, such as disability, race, being a newcomer, living in a rural area or having less money.
  - Examples: Avoid “one-size-fits-all” approaches. Offer support for transportation or virtual training options for those who cannot travel.
- **Design Together (Co-Design):** Include women with disabilities in the planning process from the very beginning.
  - Examples: Hold focus groups, collaborate with disability organizations and pay advisors with lived experience for their time and expertise.

### Part 3: The Program: Designing for Engagement and Access

Even the friendliest group won’t work if the program itself doesn’t fit into women’s actual lives. The golden rule is simple: Change the offer to suit women; don’t expect women to change to fit the sport<sup>18</sup>

#### The Golden Rule: Ask Them What They Want

Don’t guess what women want. The best programs are designed with participants, not just for them.

- **Consult:** Use simple surveys, focus groups, or just chat with women in your community. Ask them what activities they like, what times work for them and what stops them from joining.<sup>5,11</sup>
- **Involve Women in the Design:** Invite local women to help build the program. When people help create something, they are more likely to champion it and bring their friends.<sup>5,20</sup>
- **Listen and Adapt:** If you ask for advice, take it seriously. Be ready to change your plans based on what you hear.<sup>5,11</sup>

## Flexible Scheduling (Fixing the “Time” Barrier)

Time is the number one barrier. Flexibility is the number one solution.

- **Offer “Off-Peak” Times:** The standard 5:00 PM or late-night slots often clash with work and childcare. Try offering programs at lunchtime, mid-morning (after school drop-off) or later in the evening (after kids’ bedtimes).<sup>5,18</sup>
- **Support Shift Workers:** Remember that not everyone works 9-to-5. Nurses, first responders, and hospitality staff often work shifts. Offering sessions at different times of day—like weekday mornings or afternoons—gives these women a chance to play, too.
- **Concurrent Programming:** Run a women’s program at the exact same time and location as a kids’ program. This allows moms to participate while their daughters practice, solving the childcare and transport issue in one go.
- **Lower the Commitment:**
  - “Try-It” Events: Offer a one-time, low-cost session. This lets women try an activity without worrying about time or money.<sup>43</sup>
  - Short-Term Seasons: Run a six-week session instead of a six-month commitment.
  - Drop-In Options: Allow women to pay as they go. This flexibility is huge for those with unpredictable schedules.<sup>18</sup>

## “On-Ramps” for Every Level (Fixing the Confidence Barrier)

Women need comfortable “on-ramps” to enter and re-enter sport. A tiered model lets you meet every woman exactly where she is.

- **Tier 1: ‘Learn-to-Play’ / ‘Beginner’**
  - **Who it’s for:** Women who are brand new or haven’t played in decades.
  - **The Focus:** A safe, low-pressure atmosphere. The goal is simply learning the basics, meeting people and having fun. This is vital for the woman who feels “not sporty.”<sup>21</sup>
- **Tier 2: ‘Recreational’ / ‘Social’**
  - **Who it’s for:** The largest group—women who know the basics and want to play.
  - **The Focus:** Fun, friends, and movement. The emphasis is on playing the game in a supportive environment, often with a social element built in (like coffee after the session).<sup>14</sup>
- **Tier 3: ‘Intermediate’ / ‘Competitive’**
  - **Who it’s for:** Women who want a higher skill level and structured competition.
  - **The Focus:** Refining skills and strategy. This includes formal leagues and masters-level competition.<sup>14</sup>

### A Note on Mixed Skills

In adult competitive leagues, you often have a mix of players. You might have a woman who played university sport alongside a woman who is athletic but new to the sport. Coaches need to be ready for this. Focus on the strengths each brings—one brings strategy, the other brings energy.

### Intergenerational Play

Create opportunities for different generations to play together. A “Mother-Daughter” tournament or a “Grandmother-Granddaughter” hiking day can be a powerful way to build connection and keep women active.

## Removing the 'Hidden' Barriers

Sometimes, the barrier isn't the sport itself—it's the logistics around it.

- **Childcare Solutions:** This changes everything.
  - Offer on-site childcare, even if it's just a supervised "kids' corner."
  - Run "Mommy and Me" or "Family Fun" sessions where kids can join in.<sup>18,20</sup>
  - Partner with a local daycare or community centre for a reduced rate during your program hours.<sup>20</sup>
- **Financial and Equipment Solutions:**
  - Offer "Bring a Friend" discounts or 2-for-1 deals.<sup>5</sup>
  - Create an equipment library or a swap-program so women don't have to buy expensive gear just to try a new activity.
  - Offer payment plans to spread out the cost.

## Building Physical Literacy

It is never too late to learn. Many adult women missed out on learning basic sport skills when they were young. Programs for women should include chances to learn and refine skills in a "mistake-friendly" environment. Building physical skills builds competence, and competence leads to confidence.<sup>7</sup>



### Getting Started with Physical Literacy

Need a primer on how we learn to move? [Getting Started with Physical Literacy](#) by Sport for Life introduces the key elements of creating a supportive environment for developing skills.

## Creating Safe and Comfortable Spaces

The physical environment sends a powerful message about who belongs.

- **Safe, Private Change Spaces:** These must be clean, private and safe.<sup>18</sup> Private changing stalls are important for many women, including those who value modesty for religious reasons.<sup>10</sup>
- **Women-Only Areas:** If possible, designate specific times or areas as "women only" (Ex. a women-only swim time). This can help women feel less judged and safer.<sup>21</sup>
- **Accessibility:** Use principles of Universal Design. This means making a space accessible for people with disabilities—like having ramps, automatic doors and non-slip floors—which actually makes the space better and safer for everyone.<sup>5</sup>
- **Inclusive Uniforms:** Uniforms can cause anxiety. The best solution is choice.<sup>2</sup> Offer different styles, fits, and sizes, including plus-size options and different cuts (women's, unisex and men's). Be flexible with cultural or religious needs, allowing head coverings like hijabs.<sup>10,22</sup>

## View Your Space with Fresh Eyes

Remember, some women have never been inside a sports facility before. A big gym or complex can feel like a maze.

Take a walk through your building pretending you are brand new. Start at the front door.

- Did anyone greet you at the door?
- Can you find the registration desk?
- Is it clear where to go to find the program?
- Is the way to the change room clearly marked?
- Where can you find water or store your bag?

If you have to ask for directions, you probably need better signs. Doing a quick “walk-through” assessment can help you spot barriers you didn’t know were there.



### Facility Accessibility

Looking to evaluate your facility? Check out the Physical Accessibility Evaluation tool from Ottawa Sport Council at the end of this guide.

## Inviting Women In: How to Attract New Participants

Attracting women is about creating a welcoming invitation.

- **Crafting an Appealing Message:**
  - **Use Relatable Images:** Your marketing materials should show women “like them”—women of different ages, body types and backgrounds.<sup>21,18</sup>
  - **Focus on the ‘Why’:** Don’t just sell the sport skills. Sell the benefits women actually want: de-stressing, having fun with friends and feeling strong.<sup>18,21</sup>
  - **Word of Mouth:** This is your most powerful tool. Encourage your current members to invite their friends.<sup>18</sup>
- **Lowering the Barrier to Join:**
  - **The “First Contact”:** Make sure the welcome is warm and informative, from the website to the front desk.<sup>18</sup>
  - **“Bring a Friend” Days:** Women are much more likely to try something new if they have a friend beside them.<sup>18</sup>
  - **Provide Details:** Reduce the fear of “looking silly” by telling them exactly what to wear, what to bring and what to expect.<sup>18</sup>

## Part 4: The Leadership: Ensuring Long-Term Success

Engaging women isn't a one-time project. It requires trained leaders and a supportive organization.

### Training and Supporting Your Coaches

The coach or instructor is the most influential person in a participant's experience. Investing in their training is essential.<sup>11,9</sup>

- **Gender Equity Skills:** Leaders need to know how to ensure their programs are truly welcoming to all women.<sup>9</sup>
- **Teach Empathy:** Train leaders to be supportive and encouraging. They need to appreciate the many pressures women face and understand that their role is to create a positive, non-judgmental space.<sup>21,14</sup>
- **Menopause Support:** Coaches who work with masters athletes (35+) should be trained on how menopause affects performance and how to support athletes through it.



#### Coaching Masters Athletes

To learn more about supporting athletes through different life stages, check out [Coaching Masters Athletes](#) from the Coaching Association of Canada. It addresses the different approach required for coaching adults.

### Evaluating Your Program

Continuous improvement is key. Create simple, regular ways to listen and learn.

- **Use Surveys:** Ask participants about their experience. Are they having fun? What would make it better?<sup>11</sup>
- **Ask and Adapt:** Do your own research. Consult with women in your community, try out their ideas and then check to see if it worked.<sup>5</sup>
- **Focus on Retention:** The most important measure of success is simple: Do the women want to come back?



#### Organization Reflection: Intersectionality

To ensure diverse experiences are represented in your decision-making, utilize the [Organization Reflection: Intersectionality](#) exercise from Canadian Women & Sport.

### Organizational Initiatives

Sustainable change needs support from the top.

- **Train Administrators:** Everyone who makes decisions—from staff to board members—should understand gender equity.<sup>9</sup>
- **Build Partnerships:** Work with other groups in your community (like local businesses, cultural associations or health centres). Sharing resources and networks makes everyone stronger.<sup>5</sup>
- **Find Sustainable Funding:** Look for partners and grants to support these programs, but also try to build them into your core budget so they last.<sup>5,11</sup>
- **Use Technology:** In Saskatchewan, distances can be vast. Using online tools for registration, communication, or even remote fitness classes can help bring women together across the province.<sup>11</sup>

Want to learn more about enhancing your organization? Check out *Section 5: The Organizational Playbook: Strategies for Growth and Sustainability*.

## **Conclusion: The Power to Change the Game**

Engaging adult women is one of the biggest opportunities for sport organizations today. These women are waiting for an invitation to a space that fits their lives—a space that is social, flexible, supportive and fun.

They are not “hard to reach”; our programs have simply been “hard to access.”

By listening to women, being flexible in your programming, and committing to building a true culture of belonging, you can create that space. The power to change the game is in your hands. Start small, pick one idea and extend the invitation.

For more on empowering women as leaders, see *Section 4: From the Sidelines to the Boardroom: Empowering Women in Sport Leadership*.

## Feature 1

### Rediscovering the Joy of the Game: ASTRA Adult Skills for Women Program

For many adults, playing soccer means showing up for a league game, playing hard and going home. But what if you never learned the basics? Or what if you played as a kid but miss the feeling of a good practice where you can actually improve?

The ASTRA Adult Skills for Women program began with a simple observation by program organizer Joan Nash: adult women were an “untapped group” in the soccer world. About 15 years ago, Nash realized that many women—whether they were soccer moms, volunteers or league players—had questions about how to perform specific skills. They didn’t just want to play games; they wanted to learn.

While the idea simmered for years, it truly came to life at ASTRA in February 2022. Nash was looking to bring the fun back into the sport for herself and others. She pitched the idea to Chris Zoller, ASTRA Soccer Academy’s Executive Director, who thought it was a great idea. Nash wanted a place where women could get a workout, learn new things and connect with a community. It started with a single “Try It” session focused on fitness.

The response was immediate and positive. Through surveys and conversations, the participants helped shape the program’s evolution. They asked for more than just fitness; they wanted technical training. They wanted to feel comfortable with the ball at their feet. In response, ASTRA shifted the focus to skill development, offering six-week blocks between league seasons and catered to different levels, from “Skill Builder” beginners to Advanced players.

Today, the program fits around busy adult lives, typically running in the evenings to avoid conflicts with work or kids’ bedtimes. It has become a space where women ages 29 to over 60 come together. The benefits go far beyond the scoreboard. Surveys show that nearly 100% of participants join for fitness and 94% join specifically for the fun.

As one participant, Amber Fusco, noted, “These sessions are a great way to brush up on skills and learn new ones in a fun environment. Whether you’re new to soccer, or an experienced player, I would highly recommend the adult ASTRA sessions.”

ASTRA’s initiative proved that “Soccer for Life” is more than just a slogan. It provides a needed space for women to leave the field feeling happy, tired, and fulfilled, proving that you are never too old to get better at the game you love.



Photo Credits: Chris Zoller  
and Joan Nash

## Dig Deeper: Resources

The following resources can help you continue learning.

### Programming for Adult & Masters Athletes

[Coaching Masters Athletes](#) – Coaching Association of Canada - A guide for coaches wanting to learn more about coaching older athletes.

[Physical Literacy for Older Adults](#) – Sport for Life – A workshop for leaders working with adults 55+ to understand physical literacy.

[Principles of Healthy Aging](#) – High Five® - Training on how to create great recreation experiences for older adults.

[Active for Life: Durable by Design](#) – Sport for Life – Ideas to help people stay active and healthy for their whole lives.

### Building Connection, Belonging, and Retention

[Introduction to Belonging in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life – Equips stakeholders to cultivate belonging.

[Gender Equity Toolkit](#) – Canadian Parks and Recreation Association - Addresses facility use and design for gender equity.

[Actively Engaging Women and Girls: Addressing the Psycho-Social Factors](#) - Canadian Sport for Life - Recommendations to address factors influencing female athlete development.

### Foundational Physical Literacy Resources

[NCCP Fundamental Movement Skills – Coaching Association of Canada](#) – eLearning for coaches to support physical literacy.

[PLAY Tools](#) – Sport for Life & Physical Literacy for Life - Tools to assess and improve physical literacy levels.

[An Introduction to Physical Literacy Workshop](#) – Sport for Life – A broad introduction to physical literacy.

[Getting Started with Physical Literacy](#) – Sport for Life - Introduces how we learn to move and key elements of a supportive environment.

[Introduction to Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life - Helps create developmentally appropriate sport experiences.

[Developing Physical Literacy in Recreation Programs](#) – Sport for Life – A workshop on physical literacy in recreation.

[HIGH FIVE SPORT](#) – High Five® - Training on child development and motivation in sports.

## **Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism**

[A Quick Guide for Accessibility, Inclusion, and Quality Participation](#) – Canadian Disability Participation Project – Describes accessibility, inclusion, and quality participation.

[What is Intersectionality?](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Describes intersectionality and how to apply it to gender equity.

[Organization Reflection: Intersectionality](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Exercise to check if diverse experiences are represented in decision-making.

[What is Unconscious Bias?](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Describes unconscious bias and how to counteract it.

[Intercultural Skills in Sport Toolbox](#) – Coaching Association of Canada - Resources for engaging with participants from varying cultural backgrounds.

[Inclusive Language Guide](#) – Jumpstart – A guide to creating belonging using inclusive language.

[Anti-Racism in Coaching](#) – Coaching Association of Canada - eLearning to help coaches support racialized participants.

[Play Fair. An Anti-Racism in Sports Toolkit](#) – Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network - Designed to address and combat racism in sports.

[Anti-Racism Training – Recreation](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – eLearning on racism within the recreation sector.

[Anti-Racism in Sport for Youth](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – An anti-racism eLearning for youth.

[Anti-Racism in Sports for Parents](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – Outlines the role of racism in sports and how to be an ally.

[Black Leaders in Sports Day](#) – Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network – Dedicated to the development of equitable leadership pathways.

[Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network](#) – A not-for-profit supporting racial equity in Canadian sports.

[Cultural Calendar & Observations](#) - Jumpstart – A guide for important cultural days for planning the season.

## **Inclusion for Disability and 2SLGBTQIA+**

[Sport Modifications Guide](#) – Saskatchewan Blind Sports Association – A guide for modifying sports for people who are blind or partially sighted.

[Axis to Access](#) – Saskatchewan Arts Alliance – A living document on accessibility in the province of Saskatchewan.

[Transathlete.com](#) - Information about trans inclusion in athletics.

[Leading the Way: Working with LGBTQ Athletes and Coaches](#) – Canadian Women & Sport - Resource for making sport welcoming for LGBTQ individuals.

[2SLGBTQI Sports Inclusion: Playbook to Breaking Down Barriers](#) – Egale Canada - Tips on fostering a more inclusive sport environment.

[Policy Guidance: 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion](#) – viaSport British Columbia - Supports organizations in developing inclusive policies.

[NCCP Coaching Athletes with a Disability](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – eLearning for coaches new to coaching athletes with a disability.

[Coaching Kids of All Abilities](#) – Jumpstart - Helps leaders create inclusive environments for kids of all abilities.

[No Accidental Champions: Long-Term Development for All 3.1](#) – Sport for Life – Opportunities and challenges for persons with disabilities in sport.

[Special Olympics Quality Sport Checklist](#) – Special Olympics Canada – Defines elements of quality sport experiences.

[Long-Term Athlete Development: Supporting Quality Sport Experiences 2.0](#) – Special Olympics Canada – Model for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

[Inclusive Physical Literacy](#) – Sport for Life - eLearning on physical literacy for participants with disabilities.

[Coaching Athletes Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#) – Sport Manitoba - Information for coaching D/HH athletes.

[Evidence-Informed Recommendations: Tips and Tricks for Developing and Disseminating Physical Activity Information for Families of Children with Disabilities](#) – Sport Canada, Active Living Alliance & Canadian Disability Participation Project - Tips for sharing info with families of children with disabilities.

[Inclusive Playgrounds Playbook](#) – Jumpstart – Blueprint for developing inclusive play spaces.

[Physical Accessibility Evaluation](#) – Jumpstart – Evaluates accessibility of facilities.

[Building Welcoming Sport Environment](#) - viaSport British Columbia - Recommendations on 2SLGBTQ+ issues.

[2SLGBTQ+ Inclusion Policy Resources](#) – Sport and Rec - Sport Manitoba - Guidance for safe, equitable spaces.

[Training Athletes with a Physical Disability](#) - Canadian Sport for Life - Supports athletes with a disability through Long-Term Development.

## **Inclusion for Indigenous and Newcomer Communities**

[Aboriginal Sport Circle](#) - Canada's national voice for Aboriginal sport.

[Indigenous Sport for Life: Long-Term Participant Development Pathway 1.2](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle & Sport for Life - Framework responding to Indigenous peoples' needs.

[Indigenous Long-Term Participant Development Pathway – Sport Organization Guide](#) – Sport for Life - Sport for Life - Guide for collaboration with the Indigenous sport system.

[Indigenous Long-term Participant Development Pathway Workshop](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre - Workshop on supporting Indigenous participants.

[Aboriginal Coaching Modules](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle - Training tool for coaches of Indigenous athletes.

[Stepping Stones to Indigenous Sport and Physical Activity Participation](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle – eLearning for culturally grounded programming.

[Aboriginal Apprentice Coaching Program](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre – Professional development for Aboriginal apprentice coaches.

[First Nation Elder Protocol](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – Understanding processes of inviting and thanking Elders.

[How to Take Part in a First Nations Round Dance](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – How-to for a traditional celebration.

[Indigenous Communities: Active for Life](#) – Sport for Life & Aboriginal Sport Circle - Equips local champions to create sustainable sport programs.

[Indigenous Communities: Active for Life Workshop](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre - Support for developing sustainable quality sport programs.

[Welcome to Canada: Engaging New to Canada Participants in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life - Workshop on barriers and solutions for newcomers.

[Cultural Awareness in Youth Sport](#) – Sport for Life - eLearning on modeling cultural awareness.

[Hijabi Ballers Toolkit](#) – viaSport British Columbia - Tools for inclusive practices for female Muslim participants.

[Faith on Ice: How Canadian Coaches Can Support Muslim Athletes During Ramadan](#) – Winnipeg Newcomer Sport Academy - Guidance for supporting Muslim athletes.

[Sport for Life for Every New-to-Canada Participant 2.2](#) - Sport for Life - Outlines barriers and solutions for newcomers.

## **Mental Health and Body Image**

[Mental Health in Sport](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – eLearning for coaches on mental health support.

[BodySense](#) – Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport – eLearning on navigating body image.

[Body Confident Sport – Body Confident Sport](#) - Program to tackle negative body image.

[Take Action on Body Confidence: Help Girls Feel Strong and Capable in Sport](#) - Canadian Women & Sport - Guide to supporting girls' body confidence.

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