

Why Great Coaches Should Walk Away (and Come Back Stronger)

A coach's case for building sabbaticals into contracts to keep our best leaders longer

By Marci Kornegay

We're Losing Coaches Too Soon

Coaches don't burn out because they stop caring. They burn out because the profession still expects self-sacrifice as proof of commitment. Coaches are the first one's there and the last to leave. We're losing coaches in their prime - not because they've fallen out of love with the game, just the opposite... they can't leave it, because the system still treats time away, quitting and recovery like weakness. A sabbatical isn't a vacation, it's a dang maintenance plan for longevity. If we fail to normalize it, we'll keep bleeding out our best minds, culture-builders, and future leaders until coaching becomes a place people survive instead of thrive.

Why a Planned Break is a Power Move

In most high-performance professions, stepping away isn't optional, it's expected. Professors take sabbaticals to research and rebuild. Surgeons step back for advanced training because precision depends on recovery. Executives take structured resets to think, learn, and innovate. Clergy take time away for serving outside of the church, on missions, authoring books, Coaches? We grind until we break, then call it passion. It's not passion, it's poor system design. And it needs to be a wake-up call! A planned break should be built into every coach's career arc; a chance to breathe, study, travel, or rediscover the joy of the work. Because waiting until you hit the wall means it's already too late.

The Data Doesn't Lie

- The 2024–25 WeCOACH & Tucker Center report shows women now hold 47.7% of Division I women's head-coaching jobs - only 7.5% are women of color.
- NCAA head-coach turnover stays between 17–25%, and burnout ranks among the top three reasons women leave.
- According to the Women's Sports Foundation, girls drop out of sport by age 14 at twice the rate of boys and one of the biggest retention factors is seeing women in coaching and leadership roles. When women stay in coaching longer, girls stay in sport longer. It's that simple.

But this isn't just a U.S. collegiate issue—it's global.

- The Australian Institute of Sport's *Performance Wellbeing for High-Performance Coaches* (2024) report found that chronic overload and lack of structured recovery are eroding creativity, leadership, and retention.
- The UK Coaching Council's 2024 survey echoed the same pressures.
- Studies from Canada and Europe show the same pattern: elite coaches across sports are burning out not because they can't handle the work, but because the system still treats rest like weakness.

Recovery isn't a reward for performance—it's part of it."
- AIS Performance Wellbeing Report, 2024

My Story

I didn't walk away on my terms, I got pushed. Fifteen years into collegiate coaching, I was fired with a year left on my contract, and to this day, I can't give you a straight answer as to why. I refused to fire my assistant coach, I asked a few questions about gender equity, and that was apparently enough to make me "a problem."

That was almost ten years ago. The language has evolved, the hashtags have changed, but the same power dynamics are still playing out. Women coaches are still being quietly pushed out for speaking up, for protecting their people, or for daring to challenge the rules of a system that was never built for them.



Blindsided. Furious. Guttled. For the first time in my adult life, I didn't have a team to lead, so I led myself. I thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, from Maine to Georgia, 2,200 miles. For five months, I walked and thought. No golf balls. No tournaments. No constant proving or providing. And somewhere in those miles, I found what I didn't know I'd lost: curiosity, patience, boundaries, humor, and the deep joy of being part of something bigger than the job.

Later, I joined WeCOACH, the national organization supporting women in coaching in the US and learned how many other women coaches were on the edge too. When COVID hit, our small team was furloughed even as our programming quadrupled. I stepped away, this time, on purpose.

I thru-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada, 2,650 miles through the deserts and High Sierra regions of California, Oregon and Washington. Navigating lessons in survival from dangerous flooding, lightning, wildfires, and lack of food and water. Through that chaos, I came back clearer, grounded, and determined to help women coaches lead with their voice, their platform and to recognize they must do this from their health, not depletion.



I joined the WeCOACH team again rejuvenated, eager to lead, willing to go "all in" again. Then I did something wild: I moved to Australia to build a business and start writing.

If I'd taken a planned sabbatical before the firing, perhaps before signs of burnout, I might have come back an even stronger coach, with so many more life lessons to share with my program and community. That's what I want for others: permission to pause before you break.

The ROI of a Planned Break

Imagine if every 5-7 years, your contract guaranteed structured, funded time off - to rest, learn, and return with a clear path back. We know that women coaches are most likely to leave the coaching profession around the seven year mark for various reason, like starting a family, burnout, lack of time for other hobbies and passions. That single shift could transform coaching.

Program ROI:

- More years in the profession, less turnover
- Healthier leaders making sharper decisions
- Stronger athlete and staff relationships
- Real succession planning through interim leadership
- A deeper, more diverse coaching pipeline

Personal ROI:

- Time with family or partners that restores connection
- Cultural exploration that builds empathy
- Freedom to pursue passions outside sport - writing, service, creativity, travel, learning
- Physical and mental renewal through adventure
- New relationships and ideas from beyond your usual circles

The coach who returns isn't softer or irrelevant - They're sharper, calmer, and far more effective and more equipped to answer the ever-changing landscape of student-athlete environments.

What About the Coaches Who Can't Afford to Step Away?

That's the heart of it, isn't it? Most coaches don't have the financial cushion, job security, or administrative support to just "take time off." That's exactly why this conversation matters.

A sabbatical shouldn't be a luxury item reserved for those with big contracts, it should be baked into the system as a sustainability tool. Paid, partial-paid, or at least job-protected time away, the same way research professors, military personnel, and corporate leaders have structured renewal time written into policy.

For coaches at smaller programs or lower divisions, it doesn't have to be six months in the Alps. It could look like:

- A one-month funded professional leadership development tour, including similar, but outside industry workshops and conventions
- A summer without recruiting demands
- Become an exchange student of sorts and shadow counterparts in other sports, cross-country, globally

- Take on a structured service project
- A rotation system that allows assistants to step up and lead while the head coach steps back

The point isn't luxury. The point is sustainability and longevity.

Proof It Works

1. Tara VanDerveer stepped away from Stanford in 1995–96 to coach the U.S. Olympic Team to gold. She returned and retired in 2024 as the winningest coach in NCAA basketball history.
2. Katrina Dowd led Brown to its first-ever NCAA Lacrosse Tournament berth in 2024 after a nine-month sabbatical in Germany during COVID. She will serve as head coach of Australia's Women's Sixes team for LA 2028.
3. Martha Richards stepped away to work in golf tech in live scoring and stats, served as a high-school athletic director, then returned to the University of Denver, where she's led her team to multiple Summit League titles and NCAA appearances.

Time away didn't derail their careers. It refined them. Each of these women gained valuable experiences that lead to being more curious leaders, building greater relationships, and broadening the level of experiences to bring back to their programs.

The Next Generation is Watching

If all young coaches see is burnout and exits, that's what they'll expect. Let's show them something better. Let's show them a coach who steps away with a plan and is guaranteed to come back stronger, more resilient, eager to be all in.

Your athletes are watching how you lead:

How you rest.

How you ask for help.

How you let others lead.

How you return and raise the standard.

"High performance requires recovery." Say it out loud. Model it. Teach it.

The Ask

Athletic directors, this part's on you. Build sabbaticals into contracts. Fund them as professional development, not perks. Normalize interim roles as leadership labs, not stopgaps. Guarantee a clear, respected path back. Don't wait for another resignation or burnout headline. Protect your people before they walk away. We can't lead a changing sports world while running on fumes. Plan the break. Take the break. Lead longer.

And to leaders in sport, consider the same for yourself. You look exhausted too. We're all in this together.

Research & Reports

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