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The CAC and Ontario Universities: Working together to create successful female coach mentorships

By Sheila Robertson

Much has been written about mentorship as an essential tool for preparing women to coach at the highest levels of sport. Now comes a promising example of the components necessary to ensure mentorships succeed. Reflecting its commitment “to embrace the true value of coaches and champion a collaborative coaching community,” the CAC has formed strong partnerships to develop a mentorship pilot that is quickly producing positive and sustainable outcomes. Universities and colleges, especially CIS athletic directors, take note: here is a model that could and should be emulated throughout Canada. – Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.

Introduction

In spring 2015, representatives from the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) met with Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) to discuss the status of women in coaching and how to work collaboratively to create a more equitable environment within university sport in particular and the Canadian sport system overall.

While much remains to be done, one encouraging outcome is the Ontario CIS Coach Mentorship Pilot, an initiative of CAC and three Ontario universities – the University of Ottawa (UOttawa), Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont., and Ryerson University in Toronto – launched in mid-summer 2015. Retiring female athletes and coaches interested in developing and enhancing their skills and abilities would be given an opportunity to transition to permanent coaching opportunities within the Canadian university sport system.

“We recognized that there are many challenges in achieving social change and that the chance of success increases when partners commit to supporting change and creating affirmative action plans with concrete milestones and measurements,” says CAC CEO Lorraine Lafrenière.

The starting point: mastering mentorship

The chosen mentor coaches – Lionel Wood from UOttawa, Matthew Holmberg and Beth Barz from Queen’s, and Lisa Haley from Ryerson – were first required to complete CAC’s one-day, intensive National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) Mentorship Module, which prepares coaches to step into the mentor role with confidence and clear purpose. The training affirms and strengthens the mentor’s abilities and skills, expands knowledge of the mentoring process, establishes standards and protocols for implementing mentoring within the coaching community, develops an understanding of the mentoring concept and the process of cognitive coaching, and enables the mentor to effectively acquire and perform the necessary communication skills.

Three Universities, Three Success Stories

UOttawa

CAC agreed to partially support a season-long coaching pilot operated as the University of Ottawa Women in Coaching Mentorship Program (WCMP). UOttawa Sport Services agreed to nominate a qualified female mentee to work as a fully-integrated member of the Gee-Gees Women’s volleyball coaching staff from September 2015 through to March 2016. Guided and supported by mentor coach Lionel Woods, the mentee would develop an objectives-based professional development plan and be paid a part-time salary.

Woods joined the Gee-Gees in 1988 as an assistant coach and student athlete therapist, becoming head coach in 1992. Led by him, the team's accomplishments are impressive: 12 OUA (Ontario University Athletics) appearances, two gold, five silver, and two bronze medals at the championship tournament, and four appearances at the CIS (now U Sports) championship tournament, including a fourth-place finish. A three-time OAU East Coach of the Year, Woods has bachelor's degrees in human kinetics and education and a master's degree in human kinetics.

Coaching held an early attraction for Woods, dating back to his high school years when a broken leg forced him to the sidelines of his soccer team. "I was bored and so started coaching; coaching and teaching became an immediate passion, although getting involved with volleyball was a total accident," he recalls.

As a student at UOttawa, Woods took a class with Al Jeffrey, then the volleyball team's head coach. Offered the chance to become involved in Jeffrey's program, he quickly accepted. "I didn't say a word for two years, just hit balls and learned," says Woods, who received an honorarium and supplemented his income by supply teaching. Mentored by Jeffrey and welcomed by the volleyball community and its coaches, Woods thrived. "I was a very technical coach early; I loved biomechanics and volleyball fits very much into that." When Jeffrey retired, Woods was well prepared to take over. By 2000, he could call coaching his full-time career, even though his were piecemeal contracts until 2007.

Woods has long advocated female coaching and managed to occasionally offer a bursary or a half scholarship to emerging female coaches. The pilot provided the stability he wanted in terms of involving them in his program. "The hardest thing for me is to consistently get female expert coaches involved, and to stay involved."

Mentee coach Kalyn Mostert came to UOttawa after two seasons as a right side hitter at the University of Albany in New York. Initially focused on academics, by 2011 she was bored and asked Woods if she could help coach the Gee-Gees. "She is someone I would handpick to be a head coach in the future," he says. "She has confidence and awareness of what leadership really is. A natural captain of teams she played for, she also challenged her coaches in a positive manner, asking questions, wanting to understand why, providing valuable input, and showing signs of what a coach is – always inquisitive, always expanding, always challenging what's been done before."

In 2012, Woods arranged a graduate assistant scholarship towards Mostert's tuition. However, after graduating with an honours degree in psychology and gerontology, she found that juggling coaching and part-time jobs was becoming untenable.

Support from CAC senior consultant Isabelle Cayer led to participation in the pilot and a full-time position for Mostert. It could not have been more timely, she says. "I wanted to stick around with the team, but I needed a full-time job to support myself. The mentorship pilot was super helpful. I hadn't really thought about becoming a full-time coach; I know it's tough to live off the salary of a coach so coaching was more of a hobby ... I do love coaching so if eventually I can find something that allows me to do that, I would love to."

Woods and Mostert focused on potential opportunities for her to continue developing post-pilot; professional development opportunities such as conferences and clinics; and day-to-day opportunities within his program. Mostert's goal was to soak up all the information Woods could give her, including how he makes decisions, his approach to his players, how he designs practices. "Anyone would be lucky to be mentored by Lionel. He knows so much about the game ... our coaching philosophies are similar in that we want the players to enjoy themselves and yes, work really hard, but regardless of the outcome, if every player has given 110% of her all and comes to practice with a smile on her face ... it means we are doing something right."

Woods stresses the importance of CAC's NCCP Mentorship Training Module in preparing him to mentor Mostert. "It was awesome and added structure to what my role needed to be. It reminded me that it wasn't all on me to direct, that it was more of a leading process, leading Kalyn into questioning and designing programs and ensuring she was part of the direction."

Outcomes

During the 2015-2016 season, Mostert landed a full-time job as a commissionaire, which cast doubt on her ability to continue coaching, at least in the short term. Eventually she made the decision to “take a year away from the gym” and consider other career options. She hopes to return in a part-time role if that can be arranged.

However, the mentorship pilot is far from finished. To the contrary, it has become a full-fledged funding program for three female coaches, all alumnae, working with Woods. Christina Grail is senior assistant coach focusing on setter development. She commits 11 to 20 hours a week to the team and has long-term coaching goals. Myriam English is assistant coach and mentor and specializes in winger hitter development. A past national team athlete and professional player, she teaches elementary school in Ottawa and spends five to 10 hours a week with the team. Stephanie Theiler is also an assistant coach mentor whose expertise is libero development. She helps run her family farm in Winchester, Ont., and, like English, is with the team for five to 10 hours a week.

Roger Archambault, assistant director, high performance, is enthusiastic. “UOttawa is fully committed to women’s coaching and, through partnerships with key stakeholders such as CAC, we are striving to provide coaching opportunities for female coaches within our Varsity programs such as our women’s volleyball team where the contribution of female coaches has been extremely positive, productive, and impactful.”

Queen’s University

Led by director of high performance Sean Scott, Queen’s University developed four objectives to describe its participation in the mentorship pilot: professional development based on a plan supported by mentor Matt Holmberg, the head coach for Women’s Hockey; involvement in CAC workshops and seminars to provide networking opportunities with female coaches in other sports; assistance in securing NCCP qualifications; and honorarium support.

Like Woods, Holmberg has built an enviable record during his seven years as head coach of the Gaels, making the playoffs each season, twice winning the OAU Championship silver medal, and taking bronze at the 2010-2011 CIS Championships. The Pembroke, Ont. native holds the team’s record for most wins by a coach, including playoffs.

A multi-sport athlete, Holmberg played varsity hockey at the U of O and coached an Atom league team, which included female players who, he noticed, wanted to listen and to learn. After graduating from Queen’s law faculty, he practiced litigation law in Pembroke for four years. Returning to Kingston in 2002, before long he joined the Gaels as an assistant coach. The experience rekindled his enjoyment of coaching female players. Nervous before his first solo practice, he found the players to be “respectful, quiet, making eye contact, and listening to me. They really wanted to learn more, were interested in how I can make them better, and were receptive to new ideas ... for the women, it’s still for the love of the game, love the competition, love their school. And that’s why they want to be there. With the exception of the national team, university hockey is the pinnacle of women’s hockey ... their passion rubbed off on me.”

On becoming head coach in 2008, Holmberg quickly added female assistants to the all-male coaching staff. His intent was to bridge his link to the players and provide women who wanted to coach with the opportunity to do so. “I wasn’t going to have them just push pucks around in practice; I wanted them providing feedback, trying things on their own, and for us to have a constant two-way dialogue about their experience. That’s the role of a mentor and makes the experience more meaningful so they’re better prepared for the next step if they want to take it.”

Apprentice coach Morgan McHaffie, who is a full-time insurance adjuster, played for Holmberg for five years and was team captain, an All-Star and OAU Player of the Year, and winner of the Queen’s Athletics Outstanding Performance of the Year award. She had been an assistant coach with the Kingston Jr. Ice Wolves, the Kingston Midget AA Ice Wolves, and the St. Lawrence College Varsity Women’s Rugby Team. “I got into coaching because I wanted to give back what my coaches gave me; I couldn’t have asked for better people in my life. And it’s the values of sport, the teamwork, the leadership skills, setting and reaching goals, pushing yourself and improving.”

Even before becoming aware of the pilot, Holmberg had tapped McHaffie for his coaching staff. He knew that her attitude, passion, technical strength, and work ethic worked complemented his own coaching style, philosophy, and personality. “She’s respected by the players, is very caring, positive, supportive, and fun to be around, and I have high regard for her opinions. She understands and reads the game very well and, being familiar with my coaching

tactics and systems, she was able to start coaching immediately. So when we learned about the pilot, we thought it would be a great supplement to our existing coaching plan for Morgan.”

Joining Holmberg as assistant mentor is Beth Barz, now in her 12th season as Gaels’ head coach of women’s rugby. She is an NCCP Level 4 coach, module facilitator, and mentor coach with the Advanced Coaching Diploma. In 2013, her team won its first provincial banner and the CIS bronze medal. Holmberg provides the hockey specifics and Barz brings her experience with provincial and national sport organizations and mentorship programs. “It’s an added layer to the whole process,” says Holmberg. Adds Barz: “Any opportunity regarding mentoring is something I want to be involved in. I’ve worked with many CSI coaches and branching into the pilot seemed a natural extension. Of course, the opportunity to work with Morgan was amazing – she was a major leader on the Ontario Under 17 team I coached in 2007. Having a pre-existing relationship very much led to a helpful mentoring relationship as well.” Barz calls mentoring an appropriate tool for attracting and retaining coaches of any gender. “Relationships that are supportive, non-judgemental, and challenging to personal growth are always positive for those who aspire to coaching,” she says.

Mentors and mentee are strong supporters of the pilot, which Holmberg calls “amazing”. McHaffie agrees: “I look up to and respect Matt and Beth ... and totally recommend a situation like I had where I got to work with a male and female coach. I got to see two totally different coaching styles, two different perspectives, and then apply my philosophy as a coach.”

McHaffie believes the key to her successful experience is knowing Holmberg and Barz well. Trust is mutual and each is comfortable with the other. She feels respected and values the many opportunities she has to express herself and provide advice. She also appreciates how well her coaching fit with her job as an insurance adjuster. “I work Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 4:30, have weekends and nights off. I get to coach and don’t miss anything; if I need time off to coach, the company is great about that. I know a lot of people aren’t that lucky, who can’t commit to coaching because of their job, especially if you are a woman.”

Outcomes

Clearly, the Queen’s experience benefitted all involved. So successful was the relationship that McHaffie, described by Scott as “a very important part of our Women’s Hockey coaching team,” continues as a primary assistant coach in 2016-17. Holmberg and Barz are helping to put an individualized development plan in place in hopes of keeping her behind the Gaels bench in future. “We certainly hope Morgan stays with the program for years to come in order to continue to develop her coaching skills and experience,” says Holmberg. “She is a huge asset, and players and coaches benefit from her involvement.”

And there’s more. When two other All-Star student athletes showed strong interest in an assistant coaching role, Scott made it happen. Julie-Anne Staehli from cross-country running is working with primary mentor coach Steve Boyd, the Gaels’ head coach of the discipline and of distance track; McHaffie has taken on the role of assistant mentor to Staehli. Barz is Laura McEwen’s primary mentor, with Sean Dunleavy, assistant coach of Women’s Rugby, filling the assistant mentor role.

“Queen’s Athletics & Recreation feels very lucky to currently have these three former ‘Queen’s Outstanding Performance of the Year’ annual recipients and All-Star athletes transitioning to roles in coaching,” says Scott. “The pilot represents a tremendous opportunity to provide a highly individualized pathway for them into coaching ... it represents an opportunity for the next generation of women in coaching to develop in a Post-Secondary Institution that has great athletics resources, expertise, and practical opportunities to help them develop into very good coaches. I am a strong advocate for this important opportunity to help increase the pool of women in coaching that will lead to increased support to the student athletes we refer to as the Gaels family. We thank CAC for the opportunity and support that has enabled this great initiative for these three young coaches who represent the future.”

Ryerson University

Lisa (Jordan) Haley’s coaching career is dotted with success: gold at the 2010 IIHF World Women’s Under-18 Championship, the 2007 Nations Cup, the 2006 Air Canada Cup, and the 2014 Olympic Winter Games, and silver at the 2008, 2011, and 2013 IIHF world senior championship as an assistant coach. During her 14 seasons as head coach of the Saint Mary’s (Halifax) women’s team, she led the Huskies to eight appearances in the Atlantic University Sport finals, capturing the league title four times, and to four CIS national championships. In 2011 and

2014, she was a mentor coach at the IIHF women's high performance camp for the top Under 18 players in the world. Her degrees in exercise science and athletic therapy from Concordia University in Montreal equipped her for a career as an athletic therapist at Saint Mary's. "My intent was always to stay involved in the game ... and I saw my future as an athletic therapist."

Haley began her coaching stint at Saint Mary's as a volunteer, becoming its full-time coach after five years, although not, she pointed out, with a full-time salary. "Once I got a taste of coaching I just loved it and it kept me in the game." Mentored by athletic director Larry Uteck (and later Dr. David Murphy), Haley eventually accepted two casual employment opportunities, half athletic therapy and half coaching, earning enough to keep her from moving into the private world of sports medicine. "Larry was an integral part of me going down this coaching path ... I had a tremendous amount of respect for him and it meant a lot that he gave me the opportunity to get my foot in the door."

Moving to Toronto for personal reasons, Haley, who comes from Westville, N.S., became the first coach in Ryerson Rams women's hockey history in 2011. Margaret Jennings joined her coaching staff as an assistant in the 2015-16 season. She was head coach of the Willowdale Red Wings Midget AA team while serving as an assistant coach of the Leaside Jr. Wildcats. She played two seasons at Princeton University and has a sociology degree.

Given her own coaching trajectory, Haley was immediately interested in the mentorship pilot. "I see young women coaches in the position I was in 20 years ago. I know how difficult it is to pursue and make a living at coaching in the early stages, which is when too many high quality young women coaches are lost. It is important to retain them."

Ryerson's season was underway when Haley learned about the pilot. Still, she signed on and built on initiatives already in place for Jennings, including recruiting and pre-scouting along with traditional assistant coach duties. "The value is that Margaret is gaining all this experience, she'll have it on her resume, and when a full-time opportunity arises, and hopefully it's at Ryerson, she'll be ready. I intend to find a way to make her position full-time paid. We're a few years away from that, so the pilot is huge to bridge until we get to that stage."

Meanwhile, Jennings is committed to doing whatever it takes to succeed as a coach, although she acknowledges it might not be financially sustainable. "I made the decision to pursue my passion wholeheartedly and hope it will come to fruition." To supplement her coaching income, in August 2015 she launched Grindstone Hockey, a company specializing in hockey skill development and promoting player safety and offering private, semi-private, small group, and team training sessions and camps throughout Ontario.

Both mentor and mentee speak highly of the pilot. Haley explains that while coaches like Margaret are "ready, willing, and able" to make the necessary time commitment to coach, full-time positions are few and far between despite the recent growth of women's hockey. "Margaret definitely has the potential to be a very good coach at very high levels, but it's keeping her on this path and not having her forced into a different career path because of a lack of opportunity ... this pilot offers the experiential side of what it is to be a professional coach on a day-to-day basis, and that's exactly what she needs."

Jennings prizes her personal connection with Haley. "The attraction of the position was having the opportunity to mentored by such a great coach and on a daily basis ... Every day you're seeing someone who has literally accomplished what you are setting out to do ... That's invaluable ... You know that experience and wealth of knowledge that comes from the years Lisa has been coaching. I value her insights.

"The pilot is a great initiative and I feel honoured to be part of it. I am grateful this opportunity arose for me to continue to grow and hopefully makes my dreams of a being a full-time coach a reality."

Outcomes

Since Ryerson joined the pilot late last season, 2016-2017 really marks the first chance to take full advantage of the opportunity it presents. Jennings is now the lead assistant coach and, as Haley notes, "things are going very well for her. She has completed the lecture portion of her HP1 and has finished the post-conference tasks. As well, she has been selected as an assistant coach with Team Ontario U18 Red."

Support from Dr. Ivan Joseph, Ryerson's director of athletes, has been important. "I am a big believer in the looking glass self theory," he says. "Meaning that one of the most important things we can do as educators is to make sure our teachers, coaches, and mentors reflect the demographics we lead. I want young women to aspire to the strong female role models who lead them."

Only the beginning

CAC's leadership is adamant in calling for more. "A combination of intentional collaboration and thoughtful challenge is needed by all institutions and organizations to create substantial change," says CEO Lorraine Lafrenière. "University sport is critical to shifting towards an equitable landscape in coaching. This mentorship pilot is a promising step towards achieving change in Canada."

About the author

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor and an author for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*; the author of *Shattered Hopes: Canada's Boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games*; the editor and an author for *Taking the Lead: Strategies and Solutions from Female Coaches*; a contributing author to *Playing It Forward: 50 Years of Women and Sport in Canada* and *Women in Sports Coaching* (Routledge 2016), and the founding editor and lead writer of *Champion* magazine and of *Coaches Report* magazine. In 2005, Coaches of Canada established the Sheila Robertson Award, which annually recognizes a national sport or multi-sport organization that demonstrates a consistent approach in valuing the recognizing the role of the coach internationally and to the media and the public.