

Tales of Transition: From Star Athlete to Career Coach

When Canadian women in sport get together, the talk often turns to a persistent dilemma - how to attract more women to coaching. Particularly puzzling has been the absence, in any significant numbers, of retired high performance athletes from the profession. Consider our outstanding Olympic and world championship performances of the last decade: Women account for a considerable proportion of the highlights. How can we encourage more of these women to enter the coaching ranks? How can we retain those who have taken the plunge?



Julie Stegall

Believing that these and related questions are best answered by women in the field, the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) spoke to three current coaches - former world sprint cycling champion **Tanya Dubnicoff**, former world laser radial champion **Kelly Hand**, and former Olympian moguls skier **Julie Stegall** - all making a name for themselves as full-time, paid professionals. As "Tales of Transition" clearly reveals, much work remains to be done before high performance coaching becomes a viable and rewarding career option for the many women whose technical know-how, experience, commitment, and passion are too often denied Canada's athletes. - Sheila Robertson

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Tales of Transition: From Star Athlete to Career Coach

by Sheila Robertson

Although few barriers remain to impede the upward movement of women in most professions in Canada, the numbers continue to be low in high performance coaching. Despite various initiatives, coaches move on and out at a worrisome rate.

An obvious source of womanpower, one would expect, is the talented and productive pool of female high performance athletes, but few step out of the pool. And too often, the athletes who do choose a coaching career don't last long. Lost to the system in recent years are such talented coaches as former national basketball team star **Bev Smith**, 10-time Canadian table tennis champion **Mariann Domonkos**, and softball pitching ace **Lori Sippel**. Worn down by the under-funded Canadian system, in 2001 Bev became head coach of the women's team at her alma mater, the University of Oregon. After close to a quarter century of coaching, including many years as a national coach, Mariann resigned in 2002, ready for other challenges. For Olympian Lori, a first assistant coach at the University of Nebraska, opportunities in Canada simply could not match what she has in the United States.

Although various theories have been floated, there is no simple explanation for the scarcity. It is interesting that, almost without exception, women leave coaching with their passion for their sport intact. That passion is a powerful motivator and goes a long way toward mitigating unpleasant and difficult circumstances. Certainly this is true for three of Canada's newest high performance athletes turned high performance coaches - **Tanya Dubnicoff**, **Kelly Hand**, and **Julie Stegall**. Given past history, one wonders what it will take to keep them.

To find out, the [Journal](#) asked the three coaches 11 questions. Although the women have never met, there is a similarity and consistency to their experiences, philosophies, and goals, allowing a clear picture of their circumstances to emerge.

How did you decide to start coaching?

Julie Stegall is moguls development team head coach with Freestyle Ski Acrobatique (FSA). From 1990 to 1996 she was a member of the national team, and she represented Canada at the 1993 and 1995 world championships and the 1994 Olympic Winter Games. Three serious injuries within three years left her feeling stagnant and forced her to turn her thoughts to the future. "I started thinking of what else I could do aside from competitive skiing because I was in pain all the time," she says. "I was getting back to where I left off every year, but never improving because the injury was holding me back." Hearing of an opening at the National Coaching Institute - Calgary (NCIC), she decided to apply. "I hadn't done what I wanted to do with skiing competitively - winning an Olympic medal wasn't necessarily a goal, but winning World Cup medals was, and I never did. I was totally OK with letting that go once I had aspirations of being a coach."

Although she lacked a university degree, the native of Stittsville, Ont., was accepted into the NCIC in 1996 on the basis of her lengthy skiing career, her years of coaching

experience with Ontario's provincial team, and having completed 3M NCCP Level 3.

Tanya Dubnicoff, the sprint cyclist who was Canada's flag bearer at the 1999 Pan American Games in her hometown of Winnipeg, burst onto the international scene at the 1991 Pan American Games with the first of many major victories. Until her retirement after the 2002 Olympic Games, this record-breaker added three more Pan American gold medals, two Commonwealth gold medals, and gold, silver, and two bronze world championship medals. She also appeared in three Olympic Games, where her best finish was sixth place.

Her immediate priority was moving to Chicoutimi, Que., for four months to learn French. "That was the best decision," she says. "I had always wanted to learn French, but it was more about cutting ties, separating myself from everything I'd known. Moving from Calgary, where I had lived and trained for years, really helped my identity in terms of *who* I was, not *what* I was. No one knew me, and it was nice to be normal."

Upon her return to Calgary, Tanya let the Calgary Cycling Centre, which operates from the Olympic Oval, know that she was interested in a coaching position. In the meantime, she got summer work coaching at the Oval, supplemented her income making coffee at Starbucks, and dabbled in a coffee business. "I loved it; coffee is one of my passions." Eventually, she was offered a position at the Oval doing part-time coaching along with work in communications and athlete services. Having a focus is key, she says, to a successful transition. "Once an athletic career is over, you're lost, because there is no sense of gratification. You don't leave a regular job at the end of the day saying, 'I'm one step closer to making it to the podium!' So it's a real shift. The biggest thing is to understand and accept that life is different now and you just have to look elsewhere to find that gratification." Now into her second year as a coach, Tanya has an "awesome" full-time position coaching 18 athletes in a junior elite program.



Kelly Hand

Kelly Hand is the national coach of the Canadian sailing team. The climax of her athletic career, which spanned the 1990s, was victories in laser radial at the 1999 Pan American Games and world championships. Before that, she endured plenty of disappointment, including failing to qualify for the 1996 Olympic Games, which she attributes to a lack of solid coaching. "I was really devastated, because I felt I was much better than I turned out to be. A coach could have brought me down to earth and told me the reality of my situation," she says. Deciding to concentrate on earning an honour degree in contemporary studies and history from Dalhousie University in Halifax, she put her sailing career on hold.

Kelly spent a good part of her athletic career involved in coaching, although a coaching career was never in her plans. She began because she needed to earn money to support her athletic aspirations. Boats in the single-handed women's class cost between \$10,000 and \$12,000. To pay for hers, she obtained a loan from the Manitoba Sailing Association, worked as a waitress and boat builder, coached youngsters, and gave weekend clinics in her home province of Manitoba - she comes from Carman - and in Nova Scotia. In the summer of 1997 she was appointed to a summer position as a provincial coach of Manitoba's sailing team, based at Gimli on Lake Winnipeg. "My funds had dried up and I really needed to make some money, so I took a break from my own athletic career and invested the summer in coaching to make enough money to get back on the national team."

Part of the job entailed coaching Manitoba's Canada Games team, with ex-national team windsurfer **Kelly McCaig** as her assistant. She has mixed emotions when she looks back on the experience. "For some reason, people seem to put a lot of responsibility on me right away, and I've stepped up to the challenges. Coaching the Canada Games team was fun, we had a great time, but I feel I kind of stumbled through it. I was only able to spend a month with the team before the Games, and they weren't as successful as past teams, even though we worked really hard. Thinking back, we, as athletes, trusted our instincts, giving the team what we would have liked and needed, and that helped. Because I was only 22, some parents were sceptical about my coaching abilities, so I felt a lot of pressure."

That fall, Kelly won the national championship for the first time. She attributes her success to the skills she acquired watching and working with the Manitoba team. "Certain fundamentals of sailing, especially tactics, are intangible. You have to think in angles and assess weather and wind conditions; it is really cerebral at that level, and it was something I could never wrap my brain around. I was a successful athlete because I was strong and motivated, but I could never compete when it came to the thinking part until I had that coaching experience." Winning the title secured her a spot on the national team and funding from the Canadian Yachting Association (CYA) and Sport Canada, enabling her to focus on both sailing and school.

Back at Dalhousie, Kelly was approached by four athletes from the double-handed men's and women's teams, who asked her to take the year off to train them to qualify for the 2000 Olympic Games. Eleven months into the contract came the final qualifier on Lake Balaton in Hungary. Neither team made the Olympic standard; in fact, says Kelly, the regatta was a disaster. "We failed in every way. There was no wind, and the athletes freaked out, and I didn't keep control of the situation." Putting the experience behind her, she went on to several coaching contracts, including one with her former training partner, **Beth Calkin**, who had qualified for the one Olympic spot. "That closed the Olympics for me, and I put my own sailing behind me." Kelly coached Beth throughout the summer of 2000, went to Sydney as Beth's coach, and then returned to school, finally graduating in October 2001. By then, she had been appointed national coach.

Were you encouraged in your transition?

Mentorship has not played a large role in launching these three coaching careers. Only Kelly's national sport association suggested that she follow that path. As 1999 world and Pan American Games champion, she was naturally well known within the CYA, which supported her coaching and frequently sent contracts her way. Although it wasn't formally acknowledged, she sensed that she was being groomed for a larger

role. Still, to be named national team coach at the age of 26 came as a surprise. Instrumental in her selection was high performance director **Ken Dool**. "Ken has always been extremely supportive. He felt it was important for the association to look ahead and not be daunted by the fact that I was young and female."

Julie was intent upon avoiding a gap between her retirement from competition and the start of her professional career. Without outside encouragement, she set about laying the groundwork for acceptance into the NCIC. As a competitor, she wasn't aggressive; her strengths were passion and technique, both of which she believed she could pass on to young athletes, and a strong interest in biomechanics and physiology. "Exploring the NCI courses really motivated me to enter coaching. It was also a chance to get the education I had missed out on because I travelled so much." When the time came, she was ready for retirement. "I had acknowledged that my goals weren't met and made peace with it right away. I had no negative transition, because I was so focused on the next stage. It can be extremely hard if you're not prepared."

Tanya calls her shift into coaching the easy route. "I encouraged myself and didn't find the transition difficult; cycling is what I know. I'm learning so much, but who knows what I'll be doing later on. Life is all about challenge and striving and reaching, and if I can't find that here, well, I'll find it somewhere. In the meantime, this is great; being involved with these athletes is awesome. Is this my life career? I'll be involved in some capacity, I'm sure."

Did you take any 3M NCCP courses as an athlete?

Kelly is hard at work on 3M NCCP Level 4/5. "I've been catapulted into this position, so I'm doing it on my own time. I'm travelling all the time, so it would be impossible to attend an NCI on a regular basis."

As an NCI graduate, Julie has 3M NCCP Level 4 and several Level 5 courses. While an athlete, she took the Canadian Ski Instructors Association's Level 2 and Level 1 with the Canadian Ski Coaches Federation. "While coaching was an attraction even then, my motivation in getting certified was to earn badly needed extra cash. When you coach, you get paid."

After being hired as a coach, Tanya moved quickly to get her 3M NCCP Level 3, but it wasn't easy because the time frame was narrow and the only course available was in Ottawa, where she moved for the duration. Although she understands and accepts the necessity of coach education, she finds the on-the-job experience and being connected to the Oval's network and resources even more valuable. "There are the sport science people at the university, its high performance centre, and a lot of experienced coaches - lots of people to talk to about issues like the signs of bulimia, gender, sexuality, things that we never talked about in Level 3. I'm not saying I need a guide, but coaches need a lot of life skills; otherwise, we could miss the boat."

Did you consciously emulate your own coach?

Perhaps surprisingly, in developing their personal coaching methodology and philosophy, none of the three coaches was overly influenced by her own coach.

Julie was trained by three coaches - **Peter Judge**, **Steve Desovich**, and **Lisa Downey** - and what concerned her was whether she agreed with their coaching

philosophies. "I certainly didn't observe them from the perspective that I was going to be a coach and what could I pick up from them." Of greater concern to her was deciding her moral stances on issues that mattered to her. Freestyle skiing was a fairly new sport, and the FSA was still developing selection criteria. "As an athlete in an individual sport, you either agree or disagree with the selection process and you try to keep an open mind as you decide where your morals sit. I have always been really interested in this moral aspect and in figuring out how to create better selection criteria."

Clearly, it is important for an athlete to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of her coach and to winnow out what is best for her. "There are certain skills you take and others you leave," says Tanya. "You've got to understand what you like and what you dislike about your coaches. Is it because you're not good at the skill they're teaching or unwilling to admit it's too difficult? Once you figure things out, you decide whether you can use the information or not."

In Kelly's case, she never spent much time with any one coach. Instead, many people supported and encouraged her. "I had a lot of coaches come in and out and a lot of people who made a huge difference to my sailing, but I've never had one person there through my development. There wasn't much coaching when I was an athlete; unlike now, it wasn't rare to do it on your own."

As a former high performance athlete, what do you bring to your coaching?

In common with most successful athletes who become high performance coaches, Tanya, Kelly, and Julie insist that the experience is a huge asset.

Tanya says her background gives her clout because "I've done it. I'm not just someone standing on the sidelines blowing smoke out my ears. I was there. I know what it's like to struggle. Struggle is part of growing as an athlete, and if you think it's going to be easy, walk away." At the same time, she points out that the lack of an athletic background is not always a drawback to being a successful coach. "One of my best coaches never ran track and field in his life, and he was a track and field coach. He had a lot of really good mechanical thinking and the ability to apply mechanical principles to my sport, and I could understand that." What is essential, in her opinion, is perceptiveness coupled with understanding each athlete's strengths and weaknesses. "Sometimes you have to push when an athlete doesn't want to and you have to recognize the critical point where either you make a breakthrough or send them backward. I am willing to take that risk, even if it takes more energy from me."

Kelly believes that being of similar age and experience accounts for the strong relationship she enjoys with her athletes. Egalitarian in her approach, she works hard to get to know them as people, believing that this understanding enables her to bring out the best in them. Uncertain about how this might change when she is older, for now she draws on "being able to relate so well to what the athletes are feeling - what they're going through - because just yesterday I was in their shoes. It could be called more of a sport psych approach than one of technical expertise." Although she possesses a wealth of technical knowledge as a single-handed sailor, Kelly points out that her responsibility for 13 classes means that it is impossible to be technically expert in all the different aspects of sailing. Instead, she concentrates on teaching the fundamentals. "I really believe in the basics, and my policy is if I need technical expertise, I find the money to bring people in or the resource that has

the necessary information. This is working out well with the core training groups we've formed for the first time. We can't afford to bring experts in for individuals, so for the athletes to take advantage of that kind of resource, they have to be willing to work together and be committed to doing better as a Canadian team, which is difficult in an individual sport where they compete against each other for international spots."

Julie draws on her extensive World Cup and Olympic experiences as a six-year national team member. "When I get my athletes, they haven't had any international experience, so I pass on what I learned doing 14 events over a four-month period every season. I stress things that were really important to me when I was travelling, like nutrition and coping with time changes."

What are some of the key impacts you have made?

In common with most young professionals, the three coaches brim with enthusiasm, energy, confidence, dedication, fresh ideas, a desire to make change, and a solid work ethic.

The core training group concept and its accompanying component, centralization, is new to sailing, and Kelly cites it as a good example of the "great and different training ideas" she brings to the team. "Because I'm coaching a lot of people I've known for a long time and have friendships with, they trust me enough to relocate to work with me in Kingston [Ont.]. Last year, 12 of the 47 national team members did that."



Kelly Hand

Ken Dool handles all the high performance paperwork and negotiations with Sport Canada and the Canadian Olympic Committee, leaving Kelly free to coach. "Ken was really strong on that from the minute I was hired, steering me away from the admin to make sure I am there for the athletes. I'm really lucky. This is the kind of job that can be amazing or hell; it all depends on who you work for. Ken and **Marianne Davis**, our executive director, give me room to develop. They know I'm still growing and they support and back me. That gives me the strength to make tough decisions."

One of the first things that Julie did when she was hired - as an assistant in 1998 and as head coach in 2001 - was assess the strengths and weaknesses of the program to decide how and where to make improvements. Major changes have been upping the off-season training from 12 to 63 days and adding more training camps. Also important to her is openness with the athletes about the structure of the program and the politics of the sport. "When I was competing, and even when I was an assistant coach, the selection protocols weren't public, and the athletes didn't

know exactly what they had to do to qualify for funding and for teams. I made a pact with myself to be open and honest about these things." Now freestyle athletes are given a handbook that explains how to qualify for Sport Canada and FCA funding, how to qualify for world championship and Olympic teams, and how to make World Cup and development teams. This, and a lot of open conversation, equips athletes to ask coaches exactly what they have to do to achieve their goals. "When I was an athlete, those things weren't there. There were walls between athletes and coaches and athletes and the association, and it wasn't a healthy environment. I am upfront and honest with the athletes, on the hill and on paper. I keep telling them it's about business, about getting you to the World Cup, about becoming one of the best mogul skiers in the world - it's not about your personality. I think my approach helps to develop better, more positive relationships."

As an athlete, Tanya was known for her energy, enthusiasm, and motivation, and naturally she brings these traits to her coaching along with an eye for talent. For her athletes, she enjoys painting a realistic picture of the success that hard work can bring. "I say, 'It's going to be awesome, great. You're going to be scared to death, but that's good - that's all part of it. Yeah, it's going to be hard, but nothing's easy.' They seem to have faith in my judgment, which I think is good!" Not that assessing potential is easy, and certainly not when a coach is responsible for 18 athletes, as Tanya is. She suggests that the 3M NCCP courses should emphasize evaluation. "When I was at Sport Leadership 2002 and heard **Danièle Sauvageau** say that everything to do with the 2002 women's Olympic ice hockey team was written down, that every player knew exactly what her responsibilities were, I thought, 'That's brilliant.' I want to be able to say to my athletes, 'Look, this is where you are and this is where you need to be. It's up you to get there.' It's the responsibility of the athlete to do the work."

Do you have any coach role models? Do you see yourself as a role model?

Nowadays, role models are considered vital to an individual's personal and professional growth. Apparently, it all depends on whom you come across.

Although Julie reads coach biographies for ideas and inspiration and encountered good coaches throughout her career, there is no one person she credits as a role model. "If I read about or see a strength that will really help my athletes, I definitely try to adapt it to my own coaching style; I don't close the door to any opportunity to get us success." For the most part, however, she prefers to put her own vision to work, breaking it down and figuring out how to get the best results. Her vision? Coaching her athletes to World Cup finals, getting them ready for the 2006 and 2010 Olympics, and landing one of the coveted coaching spots at Turino in 2006.

Julie believes in being a role model for her athletes and takes the responsibility very seriously. "I set examples, for sure. When it's the 7 a.m. warm-up, I'm doing it, too. I eat the right food - we never stop at fast food restaurants when we're on the road, but always at the healthier choice - and I buy nutritious food. The athletes live by the philosophies I set out, so I'm a role model whether I intend to be or not. They are very impressionable at that age, especially when they give their heart and soul to you. For a lot of athletes it's, 'Here's my brain, here's my body - do what you want with them to make me good.'"

Tanya was also inspired by Danièle's co-presenters at Sport Leadership 2002 - former national synchronized swimming head coach **Sheilagh Croxon** and rowing

head coach **Brian Richardson** - speaking on motivation, commitment, and success. "It was great to listen to all three of them." Although she doesn't set out to be a role model, she is not averse to being seen that way. "I just try to be honest. It's almost like the karma thing - do good karma; get good karma. Don't get into anyone else's business, be nice to people, and the legend will live on."

For Kelly, Ken Dool stands out for his experience and for coaching **Richard Clarke** to the Finn class number one in the world ranking. "Ken has done an awesome job. He's been able to balance things, keep them in perspective, and take the high road all the time. He doesn't get wrapped up in things and isn't overwhelmed by politics; he just does what he thinks is right and that's that." Of the several international sailing coaches she admires for their techniques and philosophies, all share the ability to keep things simple. "Keeping it simple is so encouraging." She strives to emulate them by bringing the sport of sailing down to five fundamental categories to be taken care of one by one, step by step, laying things out like a road map. "Sailing can be complex and overwhelming, and this approach unravels the complexity and makes problem areas graspable to the athlete." Like Tanya, she admires Sheilagh and Danièle. Other role models are sport psychologist **Penny Werthner** and **Dru Marshall**, former national women's field hockey coach. "I met so many really amazing women at the Women in Coaching retreat last spring (see the October 2002 Journal). It was awesome."

Although she has been told she is a role model, that's not how Kelly sees herself - at least, not yet. "I think I'm still at the stage where I'm looking to other people. I feel I am learning so much as a coach. The sport confused me for so long, until 1999 when I won Pan Ams and worlds and felt really satisfied with my level. I haven't yet made that connection as a coach."

What are your toughest coaching challenges?

Given the complexities and responsibilities of the profession, coaches face many tough moments. What those moments are and how they are handled differs with each coach.



Tanya Dubnicoff

Despite her lengthy and illustrious athletic career, Tanya wonders if she knows enough. "That's always the question: Am I doing the right thing? You've got to go with what you've learned and with how the athletes are reacting. Listening to athletes is huge. I talk to them and ask questions, and I don't take 'no' or 'OK' for an answer. I pry deeper, because I need that feedback to know how my program's

operating. It's not a challenge getting them to talk; I just have to ask the right questions."

Kelly finds coaching to be undefined, with plenty of grey areas and no fixed formula. "The challenge is to believe I'm doing the right thing, and I don't always know that for certain. Normally things work out if I trust my gut instincts." With Ken as her mentor coach, she has someone solid to turn to, but when coaching on the other side of the world, she's on her own, and that can be disconcerting to a young coach.

She has also been asked if she is a "real" coach and isn't certain whether that's because of her youth or her gender. "Perhaps they have a set idea of what a coach is, and I don't fit that mould. I've had parents spend a lot of money to hire a personal coach when I was available. Most of the time I understand where they're coming from, even if I don't agree at all. I don't mind being the underdog and having to prove myself because, unequivocally, I haven't proved myself yet. I know I'm not where I will be one day; it's too soon."

Although things are improving, Julie has struggled with parents and athletes who do not understand the selection criteria. "They apply their own perceptions and complain with their son or daughter or themselves in mind, and they need to realize that when the association makes selections, we do so to put together the best team." She must also deal with athletes deserting the sport for the financial rewards of the well-paying terrain park skiing that can pay an athlete \$10,000 to \$20,000 per event in contrast to the expense of following the Olympic dream, which pays nothing.

What do you want to accomplish as a coach?

Kelly, Tanya, and Julie hold clearly defined coaching goals, and each has a clear idea of what she wants to bring to coaching.

Over and above the obvious goal of international success by the national team, Kelly wants to attract more coaches to the sport of sailing. She attributes her own progression to the lack of qualified coaches during the 1990s, which forced athletes to turn to friends for advice. "I was fast tracked because there wasn't a pool of well-trained coaches; numbers were actually very small." In her opinion, coaching development should encompass all levels, from club to high performance. One reason for the scarcity is a gap that exists between the instructional and the racing sides. "We've lost a lot of potential athletes because they were introduced to sailing in a recreational context - which is well known in Canada for being very good - but little effort is made to connect with racing and the national team, which is where we want people to go."

In the shorter term, Kelly is focusing on meeting the standards of the Canadian Olympic Committee and securing 2004 Olympic spots for the single-handed, double-handed, and board classes. For Canada to do that, it must train at the same level as its competition. "Many other countries are going crazy with huge, well-funded programs, and that may be why we feel our performances have taken a bit of a dive recently. Our athletes have become a lot more professional and there's more coaching, but, in common with our sports, we're rebuilding after all the budget cuts. My challenge is being one of the people responsible for fixing it, and that can be overwhelming sometimes."

Tanya likes measurable outcomes. "I want to be able to go through a chain of events and see my athletes progress and succeed. It could take one year, it could take a quadrennial, depending on the athlete." Winning is not her only benchmark, but certainly it matters. "If an athlete just wants to have fun, that's fine, but this is not the right program for them. For the level of coaching I'm doing, results are important."

Julie acknowledges that much can happen in the intervening years, but her sights are fixed squarely on the 2006 Turino Olympics. "That's my goal, mostly because of the athletes I've developed. I want to be there with them and see them do their best." One potential obstacle is her very heavy travel schedule and the toll it takes on her family life. Her husband, **Rafael Guembes**, understands better than most partners because he is also a freestyle coach, but it is a strain, nevertheless. "This year, we were in Whistler for close to six weeks, home for three weeks, back to Whistler for three weeks, home for two weeks, at a training camp for close to four weeks, and then it's competition season, and it's even worse - away for four weeks, home for five days at Christmas, away for five weeks, home for two days, away for three weeks, home for five days, away for four weeks, and finally, home for four weeks in the spring after the season finishes."

What do you need to continue coaching?

Tanya's future in coaching will rely heavily on self-evaluation. "Although it is early in my career to give a definitive answer, I will consider my growth, what I've learned, and what I still need to know."

Aside from a new coach boat, Kelly says the CYA's backing is critical to her doing her job well. "I need to continue to be supported in the same way I am now. The relationship is so positive, effective, and efficient, unlike that of a lot of coaches who say the biggest source of negativity in their careers is dealing with their associations, poor pay, and constantly facing a brick wall. For me, as long as our relationship continues to be so mutually respectful, I can do the job."

Julie has what she needs to be an effective coach. "Our association has been so good in recent years. When we ask for support to make this team the best they can be, we are usually given it, limited only by money." Initially in charge of everything, from arranging travel and accommodations to handling on-hill coaching, she asked last year for the services of a sport psychologist and a strength trainer. "It was crazy. I'd be on the road all that time and come home to making training programs and booking travel. There was no down time. A national team coach should have a professional in each aspect of developing an athlete. One person should not be in charge of everything. Coaches don't have the time and we're not experts in every area, only in the technical area, and national team athletes deserve the best we can give them. The association listened and gave us what we needed."

Why don't more women athletes become coaches?

There are no easy or clear answers to the question, although for many, motherhood looms large.

In Julie's case, motherhood wasn't something she considered when she entered coaching, even though her relationship with Rafael was serious. The maternal instinct came later, and now that it's here, the close to non-stop travel threatens to

interrupt, if not end, her promising coaching career. She and Rafael intend to have a family after the 2006 Olympics, and she sees no option but to leave the profession. "An occupational hazard of freestyle coaching is travelling 10 months of year. I'd like to keep doing this - it will be hard to put aside all that I've invested in my coaching career - but I don't think I could have a child and be away so much. As in my transition from being an athlete, I am trying to prepare myself."

Julie suggests that the reality of family life is a weighty reason for keeping women out of the profession. "Women coaches who dream of finding a partner and raising a family see that, at this level, motherhood is impossible." Other key factors include only four national team positions in moguls and the poor pay at all other levels. "In moguls, coaching is not a career unless you are at the national level."

"I feel like I have already gone through two careers, one as an athlete and one as a coach. These have been my major goals in life, and if I died tomorrow, would I be happy and content? I absolutely would be."

Tanya, who isn't planning a family, suggests that the answer may simply be that other jobs hold more appeal. "Some women may be tired of leading the athlete life and just totally want to leave it and find another challenge in a more structured environment." She adds that entering a heavily male-dominated profession isn't for everyone. "At one meeting, there were 19 men and me! This is just a type of job where there are more males, and the bottom line is that it's not a job for everybody. Why aren't more women driving trucks? Well, traditionally, they've never done it, but now more are. It's the same with women in coaching. As for having a family, that's difficult in any profession, but it is a matter of making a choice."

"I'm not surprised at the low numbers of women in coaching, and no, I don't feel held back because I'm a woman, not at all. Because of my experience as an athlete, a lot of people are supporting me in coaching. And if I wasn't good at it, I wouldn't last very long."

Having a family hasn't entered Kelly's picture. "I've never been obsessed with family or marriage. It is something I'll continually evaluate, because of the strain of my job, being 'on' all the time, the responsibility, and the insane travel, especially as Athens gets closer."

Kelly tells of being involved in a critical technical discussion at the 2002 world championships when a European coach suddenly turned to her and asked why so many women coach in Canada. She was flabbergasted because, aside from her, the only other high performance sailing coaches are **Tine Moberg-Parker**, who coaches at PacificSport Greater Vancouver and who coached the youth team to victory at the 2002 world championships, and **Carmen Denis**, who has been contracted for years to coach board sailors. "It seemed to him that Canadian sailing is totally about women. It's not the case, but certainly there are more of us than in any other country."

She wonders if having more role models will make a difference. "Maybe it's not something a woman athlete pictures herself doing unless she encounters women coaches." Certainly, she agrees, the job is one of extremes. "It's so intense, so difficult in so many ways, yet so much fun, so rewarding." Kelly considers her temperament an asset in her relationship with her athletes, male and female, citing her communication skills, intuition, sharing, and lack of ego. "I know my instincts

work for me, and I believe my temperament is a real coaching tool. "I see athletes with male coaches being turned off by what is being said, and the coach doesn't even see it. I can see it from 100 metres away. I don't know why; you just feel it, especially with women athletes.

"Nowadays half of our sport is women competitors, and being able to support them and draw out the best in them, from the inside out, is something I believe I can do as a woman. I develop my athletes by giving them confidence and the space to discover how to be better sailors. They know it because they've learned it, not because I've told them. As with the growing numbers of women sailors, I think it inevitable that the numbers of women coaches will increase."

Lessons for the Future

If we are to increase the numbers of women high performance coaches who choose a coaching career and stay with it, we would do well to consider the lessons that can be drawn from the coaching experiences of Julie, Kelly, and Tanya. We need to work to create a positive cycle by implementing some basic, step-by-step recommendations:

1. Identify women high performance athletes who show the potential to make the transition into coaching.
2. Recruit these prospects through mentoring, encouraging educational and professional development opportunities, ensuring their awareness of the Women in Coaching scholarship and professional development programs, and ensuring exposure to female role models.
3. Develop creative and workable solutions to travel and commitment challenges, such as co-coaching, day-care support, and creative scheduling.
4. Enact mentoring, continuing education, and professional development programs.
5. Encourage national sport federations to actively support their women high performance coaches.

About the Author



Sheila Robertson

Sheila Robertson has worked as an editor and writer with Canada's sport community for over 27 years. Since 1994 she has been the editor and lead writer of [Coaches Report](#), Canada's only source of national news for coaches. She is also the editor and a writer of the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#). She was the editor and a writer of [Making the Most of Your Opportunities: A Media Guide for Athletes and Their Coaches](#). Over the years, her clients have included Sport Canada, the Canadian Olympic Association, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity. In 1995, she was the recipient of the Frank Ratcliffe Memorial Award for communications, presented annually at the Canadian Sport Awards. [Coaches Report](#) was a finalist for the award in 2001.