

Coaching and Motherhood: Staying in the Profession

That the coaching profession is demanding is a hard fact of life. The strains and stresses are well documented – odd hours, working weekends, frequent travel, lengthy away-from-home training camps, parental interference, under-funded programs, demanding boards. The list goes on. Balancing these demands are the rewards – guiding athletes to develop physical and social skills, building their self-esteem and positive self-images, enabling them to achieve and even exceed their potential, making a positive difference in their lives.

When asked what drives them, most coaches cite passion for their profession as a powerful motivator. It's an emotion that can conflict, often irreconcilably, with the equally passion-inspiring state of motherhood. This conflict drives many women coaches from the profession, some forever and others for extended periods.

Does it need to be so black and white? No. Committed coaches are finding ways to combine career and motherhood without stepping away from coaching for prolonged periods. It isn't easy, but it is becoming more doable. The times, as Dylan says, are a-changin', and none too soon. – Sheila Robertson

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APRIL 2007 FEATURE

Coaching and Motherhood: Staying in the Profession

[by Sheila Robertson](#)

In a matter-of-fact tone, [Sheilagh Croxon](#) talks about her decision of five years ago to not renew her contract as head coach of Canada's synchronized swimming team. Fresh from coaching her athletes to the team bronze medal at the 2000 Olympic Games and two world championship medals in 2001, she asked Synchro Canada for a seven-month maternity leave when she became pregnant with her third child.

The organization agreed, but when Croxon requested some compensation, she was turned down flat. After a period of reflection, she decided to move in new directions. "I felt I had no choice. My position was based on a yearly contract and provided no benefits. Nor was I eligible for unemployment insurance. [Marley](#) was born on February 6, 2002, one week after I stepped off the pool deck. I would have preferred to have stopped coaching earlier, but I wasn't going to get paid."



Sheilagh Croxon and her family

Croxon, whose other children are 12-year-old **Nicolas** and nine-year-old **Natalie**, had stated her case in writing to the Synchro Canada board. She felt herself to be in a strong position. The Olympic medal (one of Canada's 14 won at the Sydney Games) and the world championship medals indicated a national team on the upswing after several down years. Implicit in her argument was her belief that refusing her leave with compensation would send a negative message to the organization's coaches, all of whom were women. "I wasn't looking for anything huge, just some sign of good faith, something to show that they valued me, that they understood, but they said no." No reason was given other than that the board would stick to her contract as written. End of discussion.

Although Croxon fulfilled the balance of her contract after taking the seven months off without pay, her decision to move on was firm. "I would have stayed had the environment been more supportive. Since it wasn't, I realized I had to look out for myself and get into a better working arrangement, one that allowed some family consideration. It was painful, a real slap in the face, almost humiliating. I thought they would understand, and when they didn't, I took it as a sign that it was time to move on."

Croxon had fared better with her first two pregnancies, both of which occurred when she was a club consultant, even though she only took eight weeks off with each child. "I made the case for some support, and my club board paid someone else to coach for me and paid my salary as well. It may have been because a board of parents knows you better than a national board does. Maybe my personal interaction with that board made my situation more human for them."

Croxon also has a supportive husband, **Jean Constantin**, who took paternity leave for each child. When Nicolas was born, Constantin took a leave-of-absence so that the family could relocate to Edmonton for nine months when the team was centralized there before the 1996 Olympic Games. "The move was possible because Jean said he would come, and that shows what an open-minded man he is," says Croxon. "Some people are not that supportive, because it goes against the norm."

Once her decision was made, Croxon put her disappointment behind her and moved on to work that not only is good for her but is improving conditions for other women coaches. She is the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC)'s consultant responsible for its Women in Coaching Program, a national campaign to increase the number of coaching opportunities for women at all levels of sport. In demand as an international consultant, Croxon has worked with Olympic and national teams from around the world. Within Canada, she is a regular presenter of clinics, camps, and consultations and is a mentor to several National Coaching Certification Program Level 4 candidates. In 2005, she established the Toronto-based International Centre of Excellence, where athletes and coaches flock to work with her. She served on the executive of the Canadian Professional Coaches Association (now Coaches of Canada) and, these days, is the chair of the Coaches Association of Ontario.

She is heartened by the fact that **Biz Price**, her immediate successor, was made a Synchro Canada employee, and although Price's was also a one-year contract, she got benefits equivalent to those of the national office staff. Better still, incumbent **Isabelle Taillon**'s contract is long term. Says Croxon, "I felt that by leaving, I could do some good for the coaches who followed. My decision woke up a few people and made a difference, because now the coaches have acceptable working conditions. I've always been a groundbreaker. I've had to fight for everything in my coaching career, but there is some satisfaction in knowing that you have made a difference for those who follow."

These days, one-year coaching contracts are generally frowned upon because they do not build stability or show long-term vision. Nor do they acknowledge that, in sport, it takes more than one year to produce success. “It is people like me, people who come up short, who spark change for the next generation. That’s often the way it is,” says Croxon.

Croxon is committed to encouraging sport organizations to understand the importance of creating conditions that work for the woman coach. “They need to realize that good people are everything, and that intellectual capital is not easily replaced. Key to that is identifying champions for women within Canada’s sport system – men and women who really understand what being a mother is all about and what the demands are on the coach.”

The next generation is already breaking into the upper levels of coaching. Four of the brightest lights are also young mothers, and their stories illustrate the complexities and challenges of combining coaching and motherhood to the detriment of neither.

Stand your ground



Natascha Wesch and her daughter Machaela at the age of nine months.

Natascha Wesch is an upwardly mobile rugby coach. She has coached Rugby Canada’s U-19 women’s team and the Ontario U-17, U-19, and U-23 teams, and she is the head coach of the women’s varsity team at the University of Western Ontario, where she is working on a doctorate in sport psychology. She spent five years as the Ontario Rugby Union’s director of women’s rugby. In December 2006, she became head coach of the National Women’s Sevens Team. And oh, yes, on December 5, 2005, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter named **Machaela**.

Wesch greeted the news of her pregnancy with delight and, like so many first-time mothers, assumed that her life wouldn’t change. “To be honest, and I think it’s the same for everybody, I had no idea what to expect and I

didn’t believe it when people told me I was crazy to expect to carry on as usual.”

Throughout the pregnancy, she coached non-stop, even flying with the university team to the national championship in her eighth month. And she informed Rugby Canada that she would coach after the birth and spelled out how she intended it to happen.

Wesch was frank about her needs. “I told them that it was my personal choice to nurse my daughter for one year, meaning three training camps were involved. I said that if you want me to coach this team, she is coming with me, and I need somebody to take care of her, and I expect the costs of a flight and a room for a babysitter to be incorporated into the budget. When it was suggested that I bottle-feed her and leave her at home with her dad, I said, ‘Then I’m going to tell you that you’ve just lost your head coach!’ It was black and white. As long as I wasn’t paid a salary but was coaching as a volunteer, this was how it was going to be.”

The wrinkle, says **Eva Havaris**, who as manager of rugby development was responsible for Wesch’s budget, was that Rugby Canada lacked policies to cover Wesch’s situation. Havaris contacted several organizations, including CAC and the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, looking for a policy that would protect the interests of both parties. “Of course there weren’t any, and there should be if we want more women involved in sport without creating barriers for them. A maternity leave policy is a matter of a best practice. I would like Rugby Canada to take a stand, be the first sport organization to do it, and be seen as a supporter of women coaches.”

In the end, Rugby Canada agreed to factor Wesch's expenses into the budget. Ultimately, the decision was Havaris's. "I really believe in what she does. She bends over backwards, and everybody in the coaching community in Canada knows that and her accomplishments. This is someone who is going to continue to contribute. It's not as though she has hit the pinnacle of her career. In some ways, at the national level, she's just starting."

The lesson, says Wesch, is to know what you want and to stand your ground, which admittedly is not always easy. "I know my value. I am the only highly certified female rugby coach, and they want to keep people like me involved, so I knew I had leverage."

At the university, Wesch's situation was different. Coaching the varsity team is part of her workload, and the season, which runs from the end of August to mid-November, was over by the time Machaela was born. When the 2006 season rolled around Machaela was nine months old and ready for afternoon day care. Wesch is with her until 11 a.m., and Wesch's husband, **Chad Dawson**, whose work permits a flexibility that other spouses might not have, picks Machaela up at 4:30 p.m., leaving Wesch free to coach until 6 p.m. "We made the decision that I wasn't going to turn into a little housewife and he the breadwinner. It was going to be equal. We had 50/50 input into making her, so we were going to be 50/50 in caring for her. It's all about flexibility and having a spouse who is extremely supportive."

Wesch stresses the importance of establishing priorities. "Is it having your child with you? Is it being a mom? Is it being a mom and a coach? Whatever it is, stick to your guns and know what you want. Know clearly ahead of time what you want to accomplish and how you want to involve your child. I knew I wanted time to be my own person and have my individual life back, so to speak, but I also wanted to raise my daughter and not have her in day care all day long."

Despite having a clear picture of how she would do her mothering, Wesch found it wasn't cut and dried. Unable to "carry on as usual", she faced some hard choices. "For the first three months I tried, unsuccessfully, to keep doing what I was doing before, and I was just getting frustrated. I went through a very difficult time with postpartum depression. It hit me like a rock and flattened me for seven months.

"What hit me the most was my inability to get things done. My PhD was on hold. My coaching career, which absolutely matters to me, was on hold. I was questioning everything, which is totally unlike me. I couldn't get out of the house and I couldn't exercise. Although I love my daughter, it was like I had a ball and chain attached to me, limiting where I could go, and when it was really bad, I wanted to quit everything."

Realizing that something had to give, Wesch made some decisions. She didn't run again as an Ontario Rugby director and she stopped coaching the Ontario and national U-19 teams to focus on the university team and the women's sevens. She resumed her exercise routine and put Machaela in part-time day care. "Although I felt really guilty, things started to feel so much better because I was able to be me for half a day."

Wesch supported Havaris contacting Croxon to ask if Wesch was asking too much and what they were allowed to do. "Sheilagh told them that if they wanted to keep me, then they should accommodate me as much as possible. They could have said, 'Too bad, we're finding someone else,' but they knew the value I bring to the sport and the association and said, 'OK, that's the way it is.' Keep in mind, though, that I wasn't asking for a lot."

Ask for what you need



Isabelle Taillon and Frédéric Bessette and their children Evans (left) and Matis.

Isabelle Taillon, the head coach of Synchro Canada's national A team and the mother of three-year-old **Matis** and 18-month-old **Evans**, is a beneficiary of the changes that arose directly out of Croxon's experience. She is also fortunate that she lives in the province of Quebec, where maternity leave is guaranteed (see www.rqap.gouv.qc.ca).

Hooked on coaching while a 19-year-old student at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Taillon landed her first position in 1992 with the Dollard Synchro Club's junior program. Her progress was aided by seasoned coach **Diane Lachapelle**. "She gave me great athletes to work with, to prove I could make the most of them and get results on the national scene. I was gaining confidence and learning and was able to show what I could do." Invaluable

international exposure came when she landed a consulting contract with Hungary before the 2000 Olympic Games.

Taillon's relationship with Synchro Canada dates back to 1997, when she was offered the position of national junior team assistant coach. Except for a brief stint as head coach of the national B team, she remained with the junior team until 2003.

Thirty-six weeks pregnant at the May 2003 national championships, Taillon returned home, delivered Matis in June, and began her maternity leave. "I wasn't planning to do anything with the national team that summer, but I was really torn because it is difficult for a coach to take a leave. You wonder what's going to happen when you come back. Will you have the same relationship with your athletes or will they do better with your replacement? I was also wondering if I, as a new mom, would be able to continue my coaching career. You never know until it happens what's involved in being a mom."

That September, Taillon's life was turned upside down when Synchro Canada asked her to become head coach of the 2004 Olympic team. The lure proved irresistible, new baby or not. "I wanted so badly to be part of the Olympic adventure. Sometimes an opportunity comes and you just have to go for the challenge. I made the decision quite quickly and was supported by everyone around me. I had a lot of encouragement and solution-oriented suggestions on how to manage this with a newborn."

As head coach, Taillon was expected to relocate to the national training centre in Toronto, a move that was delayed for several months while the pool underwent repairs. In the interim, the team trained in Montreal, giving her welcome breathing space. By January, however, the move could no longer be postponed, and Taillon moved to Toronto, leaving her husband, **Frédéric Bessette**, and Matis behind, a circumstance she still has difficulty speaking about.

She asked for, and was granted by Synchro Canada, a scheduling adjustment that freed her from coaching on the weekends and enabled her to leave for Montreal by train on Friday afternoon, returning in time for Monday morning practice. She paid her train fare and, later, her plane fare when train travel proved to be too tiring. She also paid her day-care costs. Faced with a 20-day training camp, Taillon asked Synchro Canada to cover her babysitter's room and board. Having her request granted was "amazing".

Asked why she didn't seek more financial support from Synchro Canada, Taillon points to her lack of experience. "I was too young to ask for much and so I didn't negotiate anything in particular to help me through this. I relied on my family support system and I still do. What should I have asked for? For trips exceeding two weeks, that Synchro Canada pay for my babysitter and my children to come with

me. For Synchro Canada to top up the government maternity leave payments. For a small bonus for day care.”

Day care is a trigger, especially now that the family includes Evans (born in August 2005, just after the World Aquatic Championships). “My babysitter is my mom, but I pay her, and if Fred isn’t available and I’m away, she puts in far more than the usual hours. A regular day-care system or babysitter isn’t possible because of a coach’s hours and travel.” Taillon hasn’t considered a nanny because that is not the norm in Quebec. “Only the really wealthy seem to have a nanny. I don’t know anyone who does.”

Taillon, who signed a four-year contract after Athens, says that Synchro Canada is open to her situation. “I know they realize it’s a challenge, and when I do ask for little things, they always do what’s possible, but I find it difficult to ask because I assume I have to figure it out.”

Now only months away from the 2008 Olympic Games, Taillon describes her efforts to be national coach and mother as “a work in progress. The main reason I can do it is my husband, who always says we’ll figure things out, and my strong family network.” It also helps that this quadrennial the team is centralized in Montreal, so no more commuting to Toronto.

Her passion for coaching is why Taillon’s life is a juggling act. “Is it totally fair to my children? Is it totally working? I don’t know. I am sure women in other professions do a lot of innovative thinking to make everything work, but the travel and the weird training and competition schedules make coaching even more difficult. Is it worth it? Yes, because I have two families, my biological family and the team family. That’s the reason I do it – for the athletes I coach, for the people I work with, and for the Olympic adventure. That and the passion for coaching that still consumes me.”

Supported by the workplace and by a different tradition

Like all of the Olympic Oval’s speed skating coaches, **Xiuli Wang** is an employee of that facility and, as such, comes under the employment policies of the University of Calgary. A portion of her salary is paid by Speed Skating Canada (SSC), although the organization does not directly provide benefits to coaches nor does it have an official policy covering women coaches and maternity leave. “However,” says **Mylène Croteau**, SSC’s manager of communications, “we have been very understanding in such instances in the past and have on occasion paid for a new mother’s husband to come to meetings and competitions to assist with care for their baby.”

Wang informed management of her pregnancy early in 2003 to allow plenty of time for her replacement to be selected. An arrangement was subsequently worked out with **Arno Hoogveld**, with whom she had worked since arriving in Calgary in 1997. “The Oval was totally supportive and so was SSC. We discussed which coach was best suited to fill my spot. It was very important to me to have a strong partner coach because I didn’t want anything to go wrong. I totally trust Arno and had no problem with him coaching my athletes. I believed he could do a good job, and he did. I really appreciated him.”

After the 28th week of Wang’s pregnancy, when air travel was no longer covered by insurance, Hoogveld took the skaters on the road and Wang coached those who stayed behind. According to **Moira Marshall**, the Oval’s director of sport and a two-time Petro-Canada Coaching Excellence Award winner, this is a fairly standard arrangement at the Oval. “We often have coaches pair up and co-coach so that one can travel to World Cups and one can stay home with the skaters who did not qualify.” As well as covering situations such as maternity leave, Marshall says that this approach also gives the coaches a break from having to travel extensively for many years in a row.”



Zonghang Zhao, Xiuli Wang, and their son Yan Kun

On December 29, 2003, Wang and her husband, **Zonghang Zhao**, welcomed their son, **Yan Kun**, and Wang went on a two-and-a-half-month maternity leave, during which time the university contributed funding to the Oval to cover her replacement. Wang continued to write the skaters' programs at home, with Hoogveld implementing them and covering travel. Although she could have taken one year of maternity leave, she chose the shorter period in order to be involved in the high performance decision-making meetings that take place in Ottawa every spring. "I didn't want anybody to make a decision for me that I didn't know about."

Also in the mix was coach **Kevin Crockett**, who was hired to work with Marshall during her maternity leave, which overlapped Wang's. He then moved over to assist with Wang's non-travelling skaters. "In my opinion, the Oval went above and beyond what is expected in these situations to ensure that the athletes were looked after properly," says Marshall.

Olympic Oval director **Mark Greenwald** says that although the Oval may not have specific policies for maternity or paternity leaves, it does have a strong record of supporting individuals and working them back into the system if they desire to return. "Given the extreme amount of commitment to developing these individuals and the experience they eventually possess, we would be remiss to not be supportive during these times," he says. "Coaches need at least the opportunity to attempt to lead balanced lives, and coaching should not be a limiting factor or detriment to having a family. I've certainly struggled with the logistics of balancing a coaching team when one coach is on such a leave, and there have been times when the timing wasn't great, but we always make it work."

Wang, who has won five Petro-Canada Coaching Excellence Awards and two SSC Female Coach of the Year awards, as well the 2006 Jack Donohue "Coach of the Year" award, notes that the timing of Yan Kun's birth could not have been better. "I tried to plan for the baby to come and not affect the job too much. After December, the really major training is pretty much done and the skaters go to competitions, and that was during the time I was off. I never thought about not going back. My skaters were the best in Canada in the distance disciplines, and I believed it was my responsibility to get them to the podium in Torino."*

Even though Wang's employment situation could be considered enviable, she believes it would have been difficult to fulfil her coaching responsibilities had it not been for strong parental support. Her parents, who were visiting when she learned she was pregnant, stayed on until Yan Kun was two years old. He is now cared for by his paternal grandparents. "I cannot imagine doing this job without family support. Without the grandparents, that is a big question mark. In Chinese culture, we have really close family relationships. We don't send our parents to a nursing home when they get older, unless they are very sick. It's our job to take care of our parents, and our parents have no problem taking care of the grandchild."

*Wang succeeded admirably. **Clara Hughes** won the 5000m race and shared the women's team pursuit silver medal with **Kristina Groves**, who also won the 1500m silver medal. Two other Wang skaters, **Arne Dankers** and **Steven Elm**, were silver medallists in men's team pursuit.

University of Calgary Leave Policies

Maternity leave: This is for the mother for up to 18 weeks around the birth of the baby at 100% salary, inclusive of the payments received from Employment Insurance. For maternity and adoption leaves, the unit receives salary replacement funding from the central administration.

Parental leave: This is for up to 35 weeks, although one week of maternity leave counts as parental leave. This can be shared by the two parents. This leave must be completed within 52 weeks of the child's birth. This is a leave without pay.

Partner leave: The spouse or domestic partner of a pregnant woman shall be granted a maximum of 10 work days with pay around the date the child is born.

Adoption leave: In the case of a child under 6 years of age, there can be up to 18 weeks of paid leave or 35 weeks of unpaid leave. These can be combined, as long as the total leave is 35 weeks or less. For maternity and adoption leaves, the unit receives salary replacement funding from the central administration.

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So far, so good



Laryssa Biesenthal, Iain Brambell, and Avery Biesenthal Brambell

Avery Biesenthal Brambell was born in December 2, 2006, to **Laryssa Biesenthal**, Rowing Canada Aviron's (RCA) lightweight women's coach, and **Iain Brambell**, a veteran of the men's lightweight four. Her arrival was timely, as the sport's down time is in December and January and there is a traditional Christmas break. "I was thinking, OK, she's coming on December 6, so I can coach right up to that point. I did a dryland week just days before she was born because I thought it would be easier to get to hospital being on land than on the water."

Biesenthal, a double Olympic bronze medallist and six-time world champion, began her coaching career in 1996, working with high school teams. In 2002, RCA hired her as a technical administrative assistant for the London High

Performance Training Centre, and she coached at the 2002 FISU Games and Commonwealth Championships. In 2003, she coached at the U-23 world championships and the Pan American Games. In 2004, RCA selected her to coach its Olympic lightweight women's double (see "[An Olympic Coach's Journal](#)") and contracted her for the next quadrennial.

Determined to take only six weeks off after Avery's birth, even though she was entitled to a year, Biesenthal says the short time frame was necessary with the Olympic Games opening on August 8, 2008, and her crew still needing to qualify.

A planner by nature, Biesenthal first consulted RCA's high performance director of the time, **Alan Roaf**, and then spoke to her rowers, letting them know what she thought would work for everybody. "This has been athlete driven. They said that rather than having a new coach for six weeks, they would buy into my suggestion of a cross-training camp for the time I would be off. My idea was to build more power by training on ergometers [dryland rowing machines] to get tougher, which we need to be to compete better internationally. I wanted to get them off the water and try different activities, so I arranged a week of speed skating in Calgary and another of skiing to complement the cross-training. I stayed in touch by phone and through the Internet."

Biesenthal next met with executive director [Ian Moss](#) and national team coordinator [Adam Parfitt](#). Moss reminded her that she could take a year off if she felt she needed to, but Biesenthal explained that while she wanted a family, she also wanted to coach and thought that as long as she structured it right, she should be able to balance both. “Of course, as a first-time mom, you don’t really know what it’s going to be like. Everyone said six weeks was a short leave, and I said, fine, she’ll just fit into our lifestyle, no problem, and so far she has.”

RCA doesn’t have a written maternity policy, but deals with each situation as it arises. In Biesenthal’s case, RCA wanted to give her the options she needed to balance new motherhood with her intentions to continue to drive her program. “We let her tell us how she needed to design things,” says Moss. “We didn’t place any work pressure on her and told her repeatedly to monitor the situation monthly in terms of her needs. Baby and mother come first obviously, and RCA was fully prepared to create whatever scenario is required to give her the time on her own with her family, which she, of course, has every right to, and not worry about the program itself.”

A priority was hiring a nanny, and Biesenthal’s atypical schedule was a stumbling block. “I coach for three hours in the morning, come home for about four hours, and then coach for another three hours. I wanted that time in the middle of the day to myself with Avery.” The solution was to hire a student who is both an experienced nanny and a rower for the University of Victoria. “She totally gets my schedule and it’s working out perfectly. She’s fantastic. She rows with her team in the morning and when she’s finished, we basically hand Avery over and I go to practice.”

Biesenthal, who is thrilled to be back on the water, is finding that the break was good for her athletes. “The women are as enthusiastic as I am; they are really pumped. And it is real life for them to see me having a child plus coaching, and it seems to keep everybody motivated.”

Once she was back at work, Biesenthal and Moss worked out how RCA would provide support. Although the arrangement is a flexible work in progress, the focus is on three key areas. “The intent is to make sure that Laryssa has support to cover the baby’s needs at home while she is coaching if family support isn’t available or if she isn’t able to bring the baby with her to practice,” says Moss. Support will also cover a travelling nanny for training camps and international competitions as required and an interim coach if necessary. “RCA has to set the best working environment for Laryssa and her athletes to continue their focus on Olympic qualification preparation,” says Moss. “This is a critical year and a critical time within that year. The right set-up is for her to determine and for us to accommodate. Ultimately, we both know that we are doing this for all the right reasons, and that is what we are focused on. The details will sort themselves out.”

The first test came in January when Biesenthal flew to Hamilton, Ont., to attend RCA’s annual coaches’ conference, baby in tow and Brambell along to provide child care. Says Biesenthal, “A supportive spouse is essential. Iain was fantastic at the conference. Two other babies were there, the children of a male coach and an RCA distributor, and Iain was totally comfortable walking the mall with the two mothers. We call him ‘Super Nanny’.”

The experience has convinced Biesenthal to try to travel a day ahead of the team. “The more I can make it smooth, the more we’re not in the spotlight, not holding anything up, the more I can do beforehand so it’s seamless, that’s the best way to make everything work.”

Moss adds, “RCA is very protective of Laryssa and her position. She has proven her capability of coaching at the world-class level, and we certainly know that she is fully committed to the future. If anything, we have to remind her that her personal life has now changed and that she needs to take that into account. So we let Laryssa drive the plan and we are always prepared to step in with Plan B if she ever needs it.”

Conclusion

As this article reveals, there are few guidelines, let alone policies, for sport organizations to follow when a coach wants to combine her career with motherhood. It is noteworthy that CAC, through the *Journal*, ([September 2000](#)) is an exception, having published two articles that shed valuable light on women coaches' employment – “[Being Professional about Your Employment](#)” by Rose Mercier ([September 2000](#)) and “[Contracts and Contract Negotiations](#)” by Dru Marshall and Sheilagh Croxon ([January 2004](#)).

Although some organizations do not see it as their responsibility, others are open to supporting the coach – “just tell us how”. This leaves it squarely up to the coach to negotiate a suitable arrangement for and by herself.

Like the other national sport organizations (NSOs) in this article, Synchro Canada does not have a formal maternity or parental leave policy. However, it does have a culture of support, arising directly out of the Croxon situation. [Marian Stuffco](#), currently the organization's interim CEO, says that good negotiating skills are essential. For coaches who may need help, she recommends tapping into the skills of a third-party advocate. “Such a woman coach may have come through a process that benefited her – or not – and may be able to inform the sport organization of the merits of retaining a female coach through her maternity experience and her parenting because of the value that brings to the organization as a whole. The mentoring could take the form of helping the coach to phrase the script or participating in the face-to-face or phone call that outlines the situation.”

Stuffco adds that supporting women coaches builds strong families. “There should be complete facilitation by the NSO to support families who request it. If we are going to say that sport is the answer to social justice, to family unity, to health care, then we had better ensure that in the internal paradigm, we are building strong family support.”

It would be helpful, she says, if sport organizations, led by Sport Canada and CAC, worked together to formulate a policy that could be widely adopted. However, funding its implementation could be a stumbling block. “Where is the money to come from?” she asks. “Sport Canada? CAC? Would the money come out of an NSO's Sport Canada contribution, which in most cases is already stretched beyond the limit? Or might Sport Canada consider establishing a separate pot to be used only for parental leave? This is a discussion worth having because, if the sport community values the contribution of women who are committed to the profession of coaching and who also chose motherhood, we must ensure that they are given the support they deserve so that their athletes continue to reap the benefits of their coaching skills.”

Although agreeing that obstacles remain, Croxon is encouraged by the progress made since her resignation. “Today, we are seeing signs that for women and men alike, coaches' working conditions are more professional, there are better jobs, more money is being put into coaching, and there's starting to be greater recognition of the role of the coach in an athlete's results. A core of women is making coaching and motherhood work, and they will become the role models for the next generation. We must continue to highlight these women who are making it work, as this is inextricably linked to increasing the number of women coaches in the Canadian sport system.

“So, yes, change is coming, but it is going to be slow.”

For a companion piece to this article, we want to hear from women coaches who left the profession for an extended period to raise their families and have since returned and are building successful coaching careers. For more information, contact [Sheila Robertson](#).

Recommendations for Coaches

- Find out what your province or territory's policies are for maternity leave.
- Tell your sport organization about your specific needs.
- Establish your priorities.
- Consider a co-coach relationship.
- Develop a support network.
- Learn how to advocate effectively on your own behalf.
- Find an advocate within your organization.
- Get to know your board of directors so that they can relate to you on a more human level.

Recommendations for Sport Organizations

- Be transparent.
- Create conditions that work for the woman coach.
- Develop a longer term vision.
- Create strategies for re-entry that facilitate the reintegration of women coaches after time off.

About the author



Sheila Robertson

Sheila Robertson has worked as an editor and writer with Canada's sport community for over 30 years. The founding editor of *Champion* magazine, she was also the founding editor of *Coaches Report* magazine and its lead writer from 1993 to 2005. She is the editor of and a writer for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* and *Making the Most of Your Opportunities: A Media Guide for Athletes and Their Coaches*. In 1995, she was the recipient of the Canadian Sport Award for communications. In 2005, Coaches of Canada established the Sheila Robertson Award to recognize a national sport organization that demonstrates a consistent approach in valuing and recognizing the role of the coach internally and to the media and the public.