

### Laurie Eisler: Lessons Learned from a Champion Coach

Laurie Eisler has built an enviable reputation as one of Canada's most talented university coaches. Leading the University of Alberta's Pandas volleyball team to six consecutive CIAU\* titles in the 1990s cemented her reputation as an accomplished, savvy, and gifted coach. She seemed to have it all - great career, happy marriage, healthy and thriving family. Her world turned upside down on June 13, 1999, with the premature birth of her second child, Jenae. Laurie recently talked to me about her coaching career before and since the "life-altering" experience of Jenae's birth and traumatic early months. The *Journal* believes that women coaches have much to learn from her experiences. We applaud and thank Laurie for her candour. - Sheila Robertson



The Eisler family: Terry, Laurie, Clayton, and Jenae.

\* the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union, now known as Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS)

## DECEMBER 2002 FEATURE

### Laurie Eisler: Lessons Learned From A Champion Coach

My daughter, Jenaë, was due in September 1999 and when she was born prematurely, in June, that pretty much rocked our world. At first I was on medical leave and didn't go on my maternity leave until she came home from the hospital in August. I ended up being off for about a year.

That long leave was thanks to our athletic director at the time, Ian Reade. Ian was there for me whenever I needed his support (which was almost daily). He fixed things that could be fixed, helped me to "not sweat the small stuff" and to recognize what the small stuff was. He believed in me as a coach and trusted my judgment with regard to what was the best for my team. He helped me to make the right decisions *for me* (rather than what was good for everybody else). It's hard to put in words — he was a big brother, an advocate, a sounding board, an adviser, a loyal supporter, and my boss all rolled up in one.

Ian is committed to taking down obstacles and finding a way for people to coach through a lifespan. Coaching is never easy, but when you're 25 and single, or married with no kids, you can, if you choose, completely focus on coaching. Having to balance family and coaching is entirely different. In many ways, it's better — children don't care whether or not the Pandas won. However, it's very challenging to devote the time and energy the job often requires.

Specifically, Ian asked me what I needed and found a way to make it happen. There are written policies around issues like maternity leaves and over and above that, Ian advocated to ensure that coaches are treated fairly and our special situations accommodated.

A maternity leave for a coach is fundamentally different than the "average" maternity leave because of the nature of our jobs. In my two experiences, I never felt that I *really* left.

The first maternity leave began the day of the 1997 CIS quarterfinals and ended when school commenced in the fall. I had Clayton on Thursday morning, spent the night in the hospital, and came back and coached Friday and Saturday. Needless to say, I waited a few days before beginning the leave; there were a lot of loose ends to be handled over the next month, and that was the hardest time due to experiencing delivery and making the transition to motherhood.

After I had Clayton, I never thought about not going back. I enjoyed my "mat" leave a lot, but I don't think I could do that life day to day. Because I had the support of Ian and the university, I came back full time, but it wasn't by any means full-time hours. I told Ian what I required and worked a shortened workday - at least by normal standards for coaches, who, in mid-season, can work 70-hour weeks. It was my decision and my acceptance that I couldn't do everything at the level I was used to; there wasn't enough time in the day and I wasn't going to be away from my child more than I "had" to be and it was up to me to define that. We are never expected to punch a time clock at U of A nor, because of the nature of our jobs, are we asked to teach at 8 a.m.

Also, I had Clayton with me at practice every day so I had that contact with him and I had trainers who were compensated for helping with child care. During a game, they would shift their focus from the athletes to Clayton. We were fortunate that we

didn't have any significant injuries during the matches that would have pulled the trainer back to that role. There was only one match where Clayton "lost it" and I had to have him on the bench. Luckily the official was very understanding and tolerated Clayton's presence on my lap.

With Ian's support, Clayton travelled with us. It was a time when the team was becoming very mature and didn't need coaching as much as they had in prior years, so having him along didn't seem to faze anybody. Obviously it is always easier to travel without your kids, but for me, emotionally, it would have been too much. I just couldn't be without him.

Was there precedence for how the university treated me? Not really. Trix Baker (she coaches the basketball team) and I were hired at the same time. She was pregnant when she was hired, but she didn't really take a "mat" leave because she and Doug, her husband, co-coached that first year. A lot of it can be attributed to a family-friendly faculty and to Ian, who was light years beyond most athletic directors. Ian's now the university's director of integrated marketing, but his successor, Kim Gordon, follows the same philosophy and is equally committed.

From the dean of the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation down through the various levels of management, there is a history of support for faculty and staff in relation to family matters. One of my requests was to change the traditional late afternoon practice time to mid-afternoon. This was a big issue in our faculty since that time was always reserved for academic classes. However, after looking over the academic schedule for the coming year, I saw the possibility of creating some gym time during the afternoon if a class was changed from one location to another.

Without the support of Dean Art Quinney and Ian, this would not have been possible, given the university's traditional way of thinking. The new practice time also needed the support and flexibility of the athletes because they needed to do some creative scheduling of their courses. We were very fortunate to train in mid-afternoon for the fall term for a couple of years; this year we've reverted to a later schedule due to the athletes' difficulties with scheduling, but I know now that if the stars align, we will be able to do it again in the future.

#### **FAMILY-FRIENDLY BEST PRACTICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

- child with coach at practice every day
- trainers who were compensated for helping with child care
- child allowed to travel with coach
- family situation is considered when decisions about workload, committee membership, teaching assignments are being made
- flexible workday when necessary

It helped that when Clayton was born, I was offered the head coaching job at the University of Saskatchewan. That gave me some negotiating leverage. I said, "OK, I am going to stay here, but this is what I am going to need." It became pretty obvious that I could dictate a lot more of my working conditions than I ever thought I could. For me, salary has never been the most important factor - it's the work environment and intangibles such as support.



Laurie Eisler and her one-year old son Clayton, proudly holding her medal, celebrate the Panda's third straight CIS title, won in 1998.

Clayton's birth was a big story - everybody was talking about it - but the *really* big story was in 1999 and Jenae being born at two pounds, six ounces, and the battle she went through. That's a life-altering experience; everything is in a different perspective now.

The second maternity leave was very different because I needed to be replaced for one year. Finding the right fit for the team wasn't easy. I was very fortunate to have an experienced coach, Lorne Sawula, take over, but even so, the athletes have to be flexible enough to accept and welcome change. This is very difficult for those who see 'different' as wrong. And this time, practical difficulties were combined with the emotional challenges. I came back just in time for the playoffs at the end of the 1999-2000 season. It was the sixth championship, and I was very much in a supporting role on the bench, there to help out where I could.

My thoughts were often with the team. Watching them from the bleachers was very difficult. I found the silly little mistakes were much more frustrating than from the bench. I was much more nervous, probably because I had no control over the outcome. And I was still president of the coaches association (what was I thinking?), so I had those tasks to occupy me in between diaper changing and feeding.

Recruiting was a major issue. It's very difficult to have someone else do your recruiting for you. The athletes want to know who will coach them and most coaches want to see the athletes themselves before they make commitments such as scholarships and selection.

A lot of the day-to-day things I do - program administration, fund raising, event planning, promotion and marketing - aren't covered in a policy manual so you can't just walk away and hope the replacement (if you're able to get one) can figure it out on their own. I needed to stay in touch and be prepared, at the minimum, to be a resource for the person covering my position.

The team has had to cope with all of these changes in my life over the last five years. It affects everything. Having kids split my career in half. It puts a whole different spin on everything for a long time. Children do that anyway, but when a baby is clinging to life, that makes it really rough to re-enter the "real" world.

Now I'm in the post-trauma era, the second phase of my coaching, trying to find out if I can still do this job. Even though I had this winning record and this reputation, it felt like so long ago. When I came back, I felt like a stranger in my own job.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE

- Nothing happens without strong, flexible, and innovative support from the key decision makers.
- Explore creative solutions to roadblocks.

### Developing A Co-Coaching Model

Lorne Sawula first helped me for half of the 1996-1997 season when I was expecting Clayton. I was really, really worried about being pregnant and not knowing what to expect or how much I'd be able to do. I shied away from any of the physical part of coaching. I went to Ian Reade and said, "Listen, Ian, this is happening. What are we going to do?" He asked what I needed and I said I needed a full-time, senior coach; part time through the fall is fine, but full time in January. I wanted to know that if I had to bail out on my team, they were going to have someone there for them. The baby was due in March - yes, bad timing for a university coach, but these things happen.

I only worked half days from January on, once Lorne started, to try to conserve energy. At that time, I really didn't know Lorne well. He had coached the Regina-based national team when I was playing at the University of Saskatchewan, and that was the extent of my experience with him. Him coming on was a big decision when I look back. I knew he was the most qualified, but it took me a really long time to build my confidence as a coach. I still question myself all the time, and for me it was a borderline threat to have someone as competent as Lorne in my gym. What if he found out I really don't know anything about what I'm doing? It was a case where you just do whatever's best for the athletes. It was hard, but Lorne is unbelievable. He has no ego motivation, and I can't speak enough about how great he is to work with. There are no issues around power and control; it's all about the team and getting the job done. I was really, really fortunate that he was available. At the same time, it was really good for me to put myself in that environment because I needed to learn more about the game - and what a great teacher.

When I was expecting Jenae and knew I would be out for the whole 1999-2000 season, Lorne came back. During the season, I came to practice once a week and talked to him on the phone, but as the playoffs neared, the pull was strong in both directions. I'd coached some of those athletes since they entered the program at the age of 18. There was that tie, and I really wanted to be there for them and give them as much as I could, although in my opinion it wasn't much. I was kind of the head cheerleader on the bench, offering moral support, a source of calm, reassurance, confidence for the athletes. I think the team just felt it was more complete. Some were turning to Lorne as their coach, but Jenny Cartmell was in her fifth year, and there was Christy Torgerson and Maria Wahlstrom. It was their last match as Pandas and I felt really strongly about seeing them close out their careers and supporting them as much as I could. Sometimes coaching is just making eye contact, or a pat on the shoulder, or a little connection.

My first year back coaching after Jenae was born, I was able to have Lorne paid for some of his work as a co-coach. Even though I was back full time, I felt I needed a senior coach on staff to take over if I couldn't be there. Again, the support of our new dean, Mike Mahon, and Ian made this possible. Lorne and I co-coached the team and we didn't designate a head coach. On game day I was listed as the head coach, but in all aspects we were co-coaches. That season, for the first time, we didn't make the playoffs. We went from the top of the world to the bottom.

This past season, 2001-2002, Lorne went to the national team and I resumed the head coaching responsibility with a staff of assistant coaches [see "Laurie's Support Staff"], and that's the coaching status right now. It's back to a "normal" structure, more of the traditional coaching staff style. At the championships, we lost to UBC, which went on to finish third, so we feel we're close to being back on track.

One thing that has enabled me to work shorter hours is the purchase by our alumni foundation of a video editing and statistical system that has reduced my video viewing time from more than 20 hours a week to four. This has translated into more time with the family, which more than justifies the roughly \$7,500 the system cost. I should mention that the system only saves me time if I have someone taking care of the technical side, and that is the role of assistant coach Mike Noble.

We are somewhat known for having a number of people involved in the program. Last year I was able to hire Melanie Sanford as a full time assistant coach. She worked with us full time, teaching and helping with some of the team administration. (She has just been hired as the University of Regina's head coach.) Her appointment was made possible through the support of the academic side of the faculty - she was assigned a number of courses to teach and that helped to pay her salary - an assistant coach honorarium from the department of athletics, and other monies I was able to scrape together. This year there is nothing out of the ordinary being done on my behalf, but I have learned that if you are creative, there are possibilities out there.

Again this year we have quite an extended staff. They are all at the assistant coaching level as well as consultants in specific areas. I'm really excited about exposing the undergraduates to what we do because you've got to start young. If we want women coaching, they have to do a lot of work at an early stage. I guess I'm emulating my own early experiences. I want to create opportunities for people on their own terms, to be involved in the program, and to have a taste of what we do and then, if a fire lights under them, they can run with it; if not, I'm not going to push anyone who doesn't want to do it. Coaching is too demanding a job to do if you don't love it.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE**

- Negotiating skills for coaches are essential.
- Clearly communicate what you need to do your job effectively and successfully while meeting the demands of raising a family.
- When in a position to do so, give back by creating opportunities for women to experiment with a career in coaching.
- Have the self-confidence to surround yourself with quality people.
- Develop skills that enable you to collaborate and effectively take advantage of the expertise around you.

### **Laurie's Support Staff**

Jenny Cartmell is a five-time CIS champion with the Pandas who has recently retired from the national team and pro career. She is a full-time practicum student with me, completing her BPE. Jenny works in the office and on the court as an assistant coach. It is her first year in this capacity.

Linda Merrick is in her third year with the program. A 3M NCCP Level 3 coach, she has coached primarily at the younger levels. She aspires to be a Canada Games coach for Alberta.

Mike Ling is a junior high school teacher. Last year he head coached his club juvenile team to the provincial championship and was a guest coach of Youth Team Canada. This is his third year with the Pandas.

Mike Noble is the assistant coach of stats and video and does an incredible amount of work behind the scenes with our video editing and statistical system. He also attends training and competitions when possible. It is his third year in this capacity.

Mirka Pribylova is a four-time CIS champion recently retired from the national team and pro career. She is completing her BPE, and works with the team's setters part time.

Shandra Doran is a four-time CIS champion working on her PhD. She conducts team-building meetings with the athletes and travelled with the team to Japan this summer.

Dr. Pierre Baudin is a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. He is a former coach of both the Bears and Pandas and technical consultant to the Pandas. He works in-season and off-season on skills with the athletes in small groups.

Melissa Beaudoin is doing a directed studies, undergraduate course with our team. She attends training and home competition, compiling a log of her observations.

Annie Kurokawa is our athletic trainer and strength and conditioning expert. She is a former member of Japan's junior national speed skating team. She is an undergraduate in physical education and an incredible source of knowledge and experience.

Tracy Choptain is doing her master's in athletic therapy and is mentoring Annie. She has worked with the national women's volleyball team and the University of Winnipeg for a number of years.

Dr. John Hogg is our sport psychology consultant. He meets with the team collectively and also conducts individual sessions. He has been with the program for 10 years.

### **The Volleyball Bug Bit Early**

My exposure to volleyball began in Grade 6. Volleyball was the only sport I was willing to get up for early in the morning. I don't know how much my coach, Dale West, knew about volleyball, but he was a real competitor. He had played professional football and he gave us opportunities to practise and compete. He extended our seasons and enabled us to get pretty good for our age. Without him,

the chances of me having ever made a junior high team would have been slim. I went to one of the largest high schools in Regina - Campbell Collegiate High School - and over 100 kids tried out for that team. I was a small kid, but I worked hard, and I was really intense.

What attracted me to volleyball was the chance to compete. I just loved the rhythm and flow of the game, but competing with girls at that age was really difficult. I remember going to a tournament and a keynote speaker talked about wanting to see some intensity, and people laughed. I don't think we were socialized to be intense as young girls. It was inappropriate behaviour at that time - I wonder if things have changed.

My parents were big sports fans. I grew up at Taylor Field watching Roughrider football and watching my parents and siblings curl. My two older brothers taught me a lot of things about competing. I wasn't a Barbie doll girl; I was a tomboy. I was really fortunate to have a junior high coach, Marg (Leask) Simon, who was very strong in her volleyball knowledge and was also a competitor who fostered competition as being something really healthy, something positive. I had a male senior high coach, Bob Brown, who was just phenomenal in his ability to teach us how to compete. There would have been no chance for me in sport if it hadn't been for those three teachers. What they gave to me, the impact they had on my life, is incredible.

The University of Saskatchewan won the national championship in '79, '80, '81, while I was in high school. They were the legends of volleyball; there was a lot of hero worship; we were just in awe of that amazing team. I felt I could never crack the team so I was looking around and thought about going to the States. Then I went to a sport camp at the U of S and met the head coach, Mark Tennant. He asked if I would consider coming to play for the Huskiettes, and I think I almost fainted. I had made the provincial team and the volleyball world is pretty tight-knit so people knew who I was, but I didn't think I had the size - I'm just under 5'7" - but once Mark talked to me, there was no question that U of S was where I was going. The opportunity to be coached by Mark, to play with athletes such as Gisele (Rongve) Kreuger, to be influenced by Melanie Sanford, an assistant coach at the time - these experiences shaped me as an athlete and now as a coach. I am so thankful for the nine years I had with Mark and the Huskiette program.

I was the first in my family to embark on university and I didn't have a clue what to study. All I knew was school so, oh well, I'll be a teacher - and Marg said I had a good gym voice. When I did my practice teaching, I realized I didn't want to teach. I felt like a fish out of water.

At about that time, Mark asked me what I was doing next year. I said I didn't know, but I didn't want to teach. He asked me to work with him as a full-time assistant coach. He managed to eke out a living for me. I've never calculated how much I made per hour; that would have been insane. In other words, I paid my dues. I learned a lot from the work Mark gave me, not only in the gym as a coach, but what happens behind the scenes and the administrative side such as marketing, promoting, event management, recruiting. When you're apprenticing, you get exposed to a lot.

I still can't believe how much Mark trusted me and the responsibility he gave me at such a fast pace. When I was an undergraduate, he arranged for me to teach the undergraduate volleyball class. He gave us so much; he was either crazy or he



respected us and had faith in us. That was a real lesson for me, how much trust you need to have in your athletes. That's harder and harder to do the older I get because they seem so young. And no, I have never experienced a male coach holding me back; I wasn't even exposed to that possibility. That's how lucky I was in whom I had as coaches.

Mark took his sabbatical during my third year of assistant coaching, and on his recommendation, the university hired me to fill his sabbatical leave. I was 23 years old with two years of assistant coaching under my belt and I was the head coach of a top-10 university team! It's incredible that he had that much faith in me and allowed me that opportunity.

I must have been demonstrating certain qualities, but I wasn't really aware of them. I remember Mark asking me to present at a coaches clinic - I think it was my fifth year of eligibility - and I was thinking, "What am I doing talking to coaches? I'm just a player." I was introduced by one of our assistant coaches as an "up-and-coming coach who's going to have a great future." Obviously they saw something - I think it's my competitive nature. I'm driven, and spending nine years in the gym with Mark Tennant you learn a lot about the game. It's like a clinic every day. So the technical part came almost passively. I'm really passionate about sport in general, I'm really competitive, and I think there are leadership qualities that I hope are getting more effective as I get older and wiser.

Looking back, I don't think I was a very effective leader as an athlete. I was developing qualities, but was too immature to be able to do anything with them. I was team captain and that role started really young for me. I think it would have been good to play under a seasoned veteran, but there was a big turnover on our team, and the role came a little bit too soon, as I look back, and that made it a bit tough, especially because you're dealing with women who are not necessarily equipped to handle competitive environments very well.

Many young women in our society have never been socialized to compete in a healthy way. Competition is so intense and so emotionally charged that it can at times bring out the very worst or the very best in people. This calls for a leader who understands the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the athletes as well as possessing leadership qualities to ensure that the group is coping in a positive manner. It never fails to amaze me how unprepared many of our athletes are to deal with the stresses of competition and the requirements of working effectively with groups. They tend to have pretty decent skills and athletic ability; however, they are quite immature in other aspects of sport.

In 1989 Mark took his sabbatical and let me coach the team. It gave me a chance to try out this career, but not have to commit to it. I saw some things I didn't like about the job and a lot of things I was excited about. I saw some really unethical behaviour in other coaches around how some female athletes were being treated. I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted to be around. However, I really enjoyed being with the athletes and being a part of that process and the training, and still being in the game. At the time, I was in a serious relationship with Terry Eisler. He was starting his teaching career in Saskatoon so I decided to do my master's in phys ed and specialize in sport psychology.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE

- Take advantage of assistant coach and apprentice coach opportunities to get exposure to all aspects of coaching as a profession.
- Build relationships with your athletes that are based on mutual trust.
- Competition calls for a coach who understands the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the athletes and who possesses leadership qualities that can influence the group to cope in a positive manner.

### Unexpectedly, A Career Break

I was one year into my master's and newly married when the Alberta job came open. U of A asked Mark if he could recommend any women because they were committed to hiring a woman, and he suggested me. The acting dean, Dr. Jane Watkinson, had created a position funded centrally in the university with the hope of hiring a woman. I put my application in and didn't hear anything for the longest time. I learned later that Lorne applied for the job, and they went into immediate negotiations with him because he was a hundred times more qualified than any other applicant. His application put a "wrench" in Dr. Watkinson's plan because he was almost overqualified for the position. However, when he withdrew his name, I believe the selection focus returned to hiring the best available coach, and preferably a woman.



An intense Laurie Eisler monitors the action during the 1998 CIS championship game.

I was quite content to stay in Saskatchewan. I hadn't yet won a national championship there, but chances were good because we had finished second the year prior. I was in the second year of my master's program on a pretty decent scholarship, Terry had a job, and we were quite content. Alberta would be a huge leap for us and I don't think I would have done it without some gentle nudging from Mark who said, "Laurie, there comes a time when you have to leave the nest." I would have worked with him the rest of my coaching days, but I listened to him and started the job the middle of July 1991.

Terry was going to join me after one year because he didn't want to bail out on his school. Then I had a tragedy in my life. My father died accidentally that September. He was only 57. Just coping was hard - a new job, not knowing anyone in the city, no family, completely isolated. Terry's school was great and let him go in January. Terry was incredibly supportive of my career path and sacrificed his permanent teaching position so we could be together.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE

- There is no substitute for a supportive partner/spouse; it is a necessity when combining family commitments and a successful coaching career.

### Quick Results Set The Standard

Success came quite early. In '92-'93, my second season, we made it to the championship for the first time in the school's history. We upset Manitoba in the semifinal, the defending champions. We had no success against them that year, and then won the semifinal. I think we shocked ourselves as much as them. We lost to Winnipeg in the final, but it gave us a taste of things to come and gave the athletes a chance to be there and really understand, OK, this is what she's talking about, this is what we're striving for. It was an important part of the learning; it was the first year for a lot of those athletes and they went on to have decent careers.

We haven't always been the best technically or tactically. Thinking back to some of those early years when we won, the experts in the stands must have wondered how we got away with some of the stuff we were doing, but we were doing other things really well. Certainly there is no way I could have experienced so much success without the athletes who could do it on the court. Through the '90s I was blessed with athletes who were very gifted, open, really committed to the process. Without the athletes, you're just a coach - you can't do anything without the athletes.

A core of athletes won the first four championships. One starter, Jenny Cartmell, held over for the next two. She was joined by a recruit from Sweden, Maria Wahlstrom, an older player with a lot of experience with success, and Christy Torgerson, who played for us for a couple of years, played pro a year, and then came back. She had been on our bench and this was her chance to play. She is a real winner by her nature. We had some young players who were keen and enthusiastic. Another strong, big-time performer was Katrin Schnadt, a German athlete who was a visiting student and a part of the fifth year we won, which was the year everyone had pretty much written us off because we had graduated five starters. That was the year when our toughness, our ability to hold up, really showed itself because we weren't the best team at that championship. It was proven over and over again during the season that there were teams better than us, but we were the best team that weekend. We always felt that if we could just get to the championship, we could make things happen.

What sets me apart as a coach? I understand the demands of competition, and what I've been able to do in the past and am committed to doing in the future is helping the athletes equip themselves with the skills they need under competition. Some of those are technical, some are tactical, some are physical, but a large part of the difference between a champion and a non-champion is psychological skills and the ability to hold up under pressure. We've been known as the team that the closer it is to playoff time, the more the Pandas thrive.

Before having a baby, I needed to get some things behind me such as my master's. I had committed, both to U of A and to myself, that I would finish that degree when I came here. It wasn't one of their requirements, but it was unwritten; they wouldn't have fired me, but Alberta likes coaches to have some academic credibility. I was having a hard time finishing; I was extending and extending my deadline because that was a really full year. We won our second championship and I made my debut as a beach volleyball coach and went to the Atlanta Olympics with the women's

team. I finished my master's that summer and then it was time to move on to the next phase. I had Clayton in the spring of 1997.

### **LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE**

- A large part of being a champion is possessing strong psychological skills and the ability to hold up under pressure.

### **Coping With Trauma**

It wasn't until my second pregnancy that all hell broke loose. That was '98-'99, the fifth championship. I had been feeling a little bit funny, but nothing major until I had some spotting and that set off the alarm bells. I spent three-and-a-half weeks in hospital on bed rest and then went into labour. Jenae stayed in hospital for nine weeks following her birth and I returned home after a day. We live about 10 minutes from the hospital so I'd get up in the morning, take Clayton to the day home, spend pretty much the whole day at the hospital, pick him up at 4 or so, have supper, and then go back in the evening. It was like a full-time job, right? It was incredibly stressful, both at the hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit, and at home, where every minute we wondered how she was doing.

One night Ian dropped by the house. He and all the staff were heading to a baseball game, a night for the coaches to get together, and he asked me to come along. I said, "No, I have to get back to the hospital." He said, "Just come for a couple of innings and something to eat." I went and have never felt so disoriented in my life. I'm watching the game, and one of the coaches asked how recruiting was going. I didn't even know the names of the recruits; I couldn't remember. I had only been away a couple of months, but it felt like a lifetime.

I realized right there that I was living on a completely different planet than my colleagues and things I was preoccupied with a couple of months ago now had no relevance. I pretty much stayed on that planet and just really focused on the kids until I came back in February 2000.

Did I have any qualms about going back? I was more worried about it [than after Clayton] because I felt so distracted and there was concern about Jenae's future, about whether she would have developmental difficulties. When she came home, she weighed less than five pounds, and Clayton was an active two-and-a-half-year-old. There was a lot on my plate. She was colicky and even now, at just over three years old, she has only slept through the night once. So, combined with being "out of the loop," I was dealing with some pretty severe sleep deprivation. I am just realizing now, as she's starting to sleep better, that I was only functioning on I don't know what per cent.

I feel so bad that I was giving the athletes so little, but I didn't have anything more to give. The practice plan just completely overwhelmed me because I couldn't organize my thoughts that year. I was really fortunate to have Lorne my first year back. He did all the practice planning and practices. He took that load off my plate and I was head coach of the competition. We came up with what we felt was a really neat coaching structure, with two head coaches. Frankly, there's no way I could have done anything but that; I wasn't capable of any more.

If I hadn't had Ian's support - they wouldn't have fired me, but ... I see all these other women coaches and the only difference between them and me is I have some

championships that give me the security of a name, a record. Anybody else pulls off the record we had the last two years, her job's on the line. Nobody cares about the fact that you might be pushed to the limit and can't give any more, but you have to because that's your job. I really, really feel for women out there; I know I'm not the only one in the country who has these kinds of pressures in trying to balance life, trying to find a way to be a good mom, *and* a good wife, *and* a good coach - trying to do it all.

Is life getting more manageable? Yes and no. We have a woman who comes into our home. She started a year ago and has been a real godsend. She comes in on flexible hours and takes care of the kids for seven, eight hours a day so that's my workday. Sometimes it's 9 to 5, in season it's 10:30 to 6:30. Clayton is in kindergarten now and that has forced us to actually have a bedtime and get him up in the morning, which is a bit of a stressor. Terry is finishing his second season as a full-time assistant coach with the Bears football team. and is mid-way through the second year of a leave-of-absence from the Edmonton Public School Board. Juggling the demands of two coaches has been a challenge, to say the least.

When Jenae was born, I doubted I would be able to re-enter the workforce. It depended on how she came out of it. If she needed me to be at home, I would be at home. But she is doing really well. The worry is gone healthwise; we found out in March that she has caught up developmentally.

### **Returning To Form**

Our goal every year is to win the national championship. A lot of things have to fall in place to achieve that. We know how hard it is. The Japan trip in August was part of the process. It was an opportunity to train with some of their top university teams. We visited three different teams for three to four days each and spent three to six hours a day in the gym. We also did some sightseeing and some social activities where we interacted with the athletes and made some neat friendships. The Japanese are very good technically and tactically, they're relentless, their competitive nature is incredible, they don't make mistakes. They play volleyball the way we talk about playing volleyball. You can talk until you're blue in the face, but athletes don't get it until they've seen it for themselves, and seen it repeatedly, day after day after day. The conditions are really tough. It's super hot in Tokyo in August - 35 degrees Celsius and 90 per cent humidity - and you ride the subway for an hour or more each way to the gym. I mean, really tough conditions, and if you can play under that, you can do anything. It's part of the process as far as people really learning about themselves and understanding where I'm coming from and what I'm expecting of them. It's a really valuable learning time for our team and something we haven't been able to do since I had the kids, because it would have been impossible. This summer I felt the team really needed it and the children were able to handle the separation.

Our alumni paid one third of our travel and the athletes paid the rest, partly through fundraising. The university doesn't contribute at all. We do it on our own initiative. It shows the commitment of the athletes to the program that they are willing to give up summer jobs plus pay the cost of the trip. We don't leave anybody behind due to economics; we find a way through bingos and such.

Our season is too short in university volleyball. Because the athletes are going to school, you don't get that many opportunities to really do intense training. From that standpoint alone, you get a lot in the bank with the trip. People have pretty much stepped up and said, "Now I know what you're talking about — let's go for it." It

doesn't mean we're going to win any more games this year, but we're more ready than we've been for a number of years.

### **LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE**

- Athletes tend to "get it" when they see for themselves what the coach is talking about - and see it repeatedly.

#### **Looking Ahead**

The future? Coaching itself is a full-time job, but I am very interested in looking at developing the natural links between athletics and academics. We have a new undergraduate specialization in coaching that I've been involved in developing and we're looking at a master's that specializes in coaching. Those things really excite me. I'm at a point in my career where I think my role is much bigger than coaching the Pandas volleyball team. I want to make contributions to coaching in general, beyond just the volleyball team. As the years pass, coaching the team doesn't get easier, but you can start spreading yourself a little bit more.



Laurie Eisler's players listen intently during a crucial timeout during the 1998 CIS championship game.

These days, I'm at a pretty good comfort level about my skills around Lorne, but it took a long time. I don't think he had any clue how it felt for me. I was so stressed about him even being in the gym and I think, unfortunately, this is normal for women. I really didn't think I knew anything; I was "lucky" and it was just a matter of time before they realized the truth. And I heard through the grapevine that I didn't really know what I was doing, that I was just lucky because men were developing my athletes for me. Who wouldn't win with those athletes? When you're not in a really strong place mentally, those remarks cut deep. I'm at a way better place now than I think I've ever been, but I could change tomorrow. The life of a coach is like a roller coaster. You always have different challenges. You think you've seen it all and something else happens.

I had a lot of concerns about aging and what the impact would be. I'm the same age as some of my athletes' parents and they look at me differently. When I first came here I was 25 years old so I was like a teammate agewise. Sometimes I wonder whether, for this age group, that's better for them, whether that connection is what they need, but I don't intend to move aside. In women's volleyball in Canada, coaches' careers end prematurely. I've very quickly become one of the oldest coaches in the country, but I don't think of myself as very old, and I don't think I know it all. There's a whole lot more to learn about the game and that's another thing I'm really committed to.

I hone my skills with mentors in Japan. Last time I was back, I thanked them for all the times they answered my questions. I used to pepper them with questions, and I still do because the Japanese coaches' understanding of the game is awesome. A couple of these male coaches have coached women forever and have had a lot of success, not only on the court, but in their relationships with their athletes. I've really admired that.

I enjoy my opportunities with the national team, although they're limited. Lorne invited me to the 2001 world championship qualifier so I spent a week with them and that was just awesome; I loved every minute of it. I was head of delegation, which meant a different role, but basically, I tried to be an assistant coach and do whatever Lorne and the athletes needed. I really enjoy that level and that type of athlete. Definitely I have ambitions to coach at that level, but I'm not prepared to move to Winnipeg [where the national team is based] or to go on lengthy tours. Leaving my kids for 10 days last summer was about the limit. I'm not prepared to do more than that. I guess I'm satisfied in what I'm doing now and don't need an escape. I don't know how anyone could ever get bored because things are always changing and coaching is so challenging. I get enough kicks out of what I'm doing that I don't have to try something else. If I can hang in there, and when the kids are older, I would love that opportunity, or if there was a different coaching paradigm where I wouldn't have to be there all the time.

I was so fortunate to go to the national coach retreat [*Journal*, October 2002 feature] and be around those women. I felt like I was living vicariously through them. I envy all of them for having opportunities to do what they do, but I just can't do it right now. I thought to myself, "You could, but you just wouldn't see your kids for the summer," and I'm just not prepared to do that.

I think it's really important for our athletes to see us as something other than volleyball coaches, as human beings with a life outside of the gym. Something that traditionally hasn't been role modelled very well is how to balance your life. In sport, we are often taught that you can't ever cut corners, but if you're going to stick with it, you're going to have to. You've got to be able to prioritize what matters.

I see that in my career now. I used to be pretty anal about a lot of stuff and now I just have to let it go. I can't be perfect at every part of my job. I'm not satisfied with some of the work I turn out and there are lots of things I should be doing that I just don't do because I can't. I never take work home with me and I try not to make phone calls from home. I'm pretty disciplined with that, but sometimes it's tough to do because we're all competitive and trying to find an edge.

## **LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE**

- No matter how long you've been coaching and how successful you've been, search for and find mentors whom you can learn from and commit to personal and professional growth.
- Be willing to take risks and do things differently; develop a new paradigm.
- It is important for athletes to see coaches as human beings with a life outside of sport.
- Set priorities around what really matters; be prepared to revisit your priorities and revise them if and when necessary.

## Laurie's Career Highlights

- Coached the Pandas to six consecutive CIAU titles
- Coach of the Year in the CWUAA (Canada West Universities Athletic Association) three consecutive seasons, has four Coach of the Year awards (1993-1994, 1994-1995, 1995-1996 at U of A, 1989-1990 at U of S), and was CIAU Coach of the Year, 1994-1995
- Assistant coach at U of S for three seasons and head coach in 1989-1990
- Became U of A's full-time women's volleyball coach in 1991-1992
- Joined the U of S women's volleyball program in 1982, started with the Huskiettes from 1983 to 1986, was named a CWUAA all-star four of five seasons, and picked up second-team CIAU All-Canadian honours in 1986-1987
- Graduated as the top academic student of her BEd class in 1987 and has an MSc (sport psychology)

<b>Laurie's Record With The Pandas</b>		
<b>League</b>	<b>Playoff</b>	<b>Overall</b>
129-43	28-11	269-100

(does not include 1999-2000 when the team was coached by Lorne Sawula)

## SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAURIE'S EXPERIENCE

- Nothing happens without strong, flexible, and innovative support from the key decision makers.
- Explore creative solutions to roadblocks.
- Negotiating skills for coaches are essential.
- Clearly communicate what you need to do your job effectively and successfully while meeting the demands of raising a family.
- When in a position to do so, give back by creating opportunities for women to experiment with a career in coaching.
- Have the self-confidence to surround yourself with quality people.
- Develop skills that enable you to collaborate and effectively take advantage of the expertise around you.
- Take advantage of assistant coach and apprentice coach opportunities to get exposure to all aspects of coaching as a profession.
- Build relationships with your athletes that are based on mutual trust.
- Competition calls for a coach who understands the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the athletes and who possesses leadership qualities that can influence the group to cope in a positive manner.
- A large part of being a champion is possessing strong psychological skills and the ability to hold up under pressure.
- Athletes tend to "get it" when they see for themselves what the coach is talking about - and see it repeatedly.



- No matter how long you've been coaching and how successful you've been, search for and find mentors whom you can learn from and commit to personal and professional growth.
- Be willing to take risks and do things differently; develop a new paradigm.
- It is important for athletes to see coaches as human beings with a life outside of sport.
- Set priorities around what really matters; be prepared to revisit your priorities and revise them if and when necessary.