

Olympic Experiences: A National Coach Speaks Out

Each year at Sport Leadership, the Coaching Association of Canada's annual conference for leading coaches, sport administrators, and coach educators, the CAC's Women in Coaching program hosts a luncheon that turns the spotlight on women coaches and women's leadership in sport. The luncheon has evolved from a small gathering for women into one of the most popular events of the conference. This year was no exception.

One of the keynote speakers in 2004 was national sailing coach **Kelly Hand** ([Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#), "Tales of Transition", April 2003). Her frank and moving account of her experiences in the months leading up to and including the 2004 Olympic Games held the audience's attention. Speaking from the heart, Kelly's words struck a strong responsive chord in men and women alike as she laid bare emotions that most coaches keep well hidden. Judging from the overwhelmingly positive reaction to her speech, Kelly broke down many barriers that afternoon. The [Journal](#) is proud to share her experiences with our readers. It is our belief that what she has to say will interest everyone who cares about women who coach. — Sheila Robertson



Kelly Hand

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Meet Kelly Hand

Competitive sailing has been Kelly Hand's lifelong passion and career driver, an interesting fact considering that she was born and raised in Manitoba. As an athlete, she won five national titles, a world championship, and a Pan American Games gold medal.

In 2001 Kelly was hired as full-time national sailing team coach and played a key role in developing and implementing the national program that resulted in Canadian sailors **Ross Macdonald** and **Mike Wolfs** leaving Athens with the silver medal in the Star class. She provided the on-water support at all major international events and was the only woman in the world to hold a national team coach position. Getting Canada's athletes to the Olympic Games was no easy feat. With over 45 athletes, poor international performances, and skimpy resources, the task was daunting, but in 2002, results went up by 30 per cent, in 2003 by another 22 per cent, and in 2004 by 29 per cent. Six Olympic classes and two Paralympic classes qualified for the Games, a huge success for Canadian sailing.



Kelly Hand at the Athens sailing venue.

Spending an average of 175 days a year on the water coaching and the remainder of her time planning, fund-raising, and programming, Kelly brought enthusiasm and an infectious energy to the task. Canada's performance in Athens was not only a win for the country and its athletes, but was also a resounding endorsement of Kelly's skills, coaching savvy, and dedication.

Kelly holds a degree in Contemporary Studies and History with joint honours from Halifax's University of King's College and Dalhousie University. She claims it was the philosophical focus at King's College that allowed her to comprehend and eventually master the extremely difficult tactical aspect of sailing.

Kelly has coached with the International Sailing Federation's Youth Trust program, providing coaching to athletes from countries such as Uruguay and South Africa, which could not afford coaching at an international level. As she furthers her development work with young coaches in Canada, she is already planning for the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

My Road to Athens by Kelly Hand

I'd like to thank the Women in Coaching Program for giving me the opportunity to share some of my experiences and thoughts about coaching.

There can't be anything scarier than talking about coaching in front of Canada's best coaches. So I'm just going to roll with that thought — being afraid — and maybe some thoughts on coaching along the way.

The reason I am going to talk about fear is because in standing up here today, my fear is coming back full circle. When I was at Sport Leadership 2003, I sat in a back corner and, as I was listening to the speakers, I was pondering my coaching career, what I was missing, why my teams weren't better, and how on Earth I was going to get them to the Games. Throughout the conference, I had been listening to people who had found success in coaching. It was all very inspirational, but, to be honest, it left me with a pit of anxiety and fear in my stomach.

The Olympics were less than a year away and my teams had a lot of work to do. How was I going to bring success to my teams and my sport? I was feeling intimidated and daunted by the year ahead. Then **Daniel Igali** [the Olympic wrestling champion who was the final keynote speaker in 2003] said something I have always remembered: "Never let the fear of failure stop you from doing anything your heart tells you to do."

I thought a lot about this because, for me, fear plays such a big part in performance and coaching. It's time for me to let this dirty little secret out of the closet: Yes, I am afraid. As much as I was inspired by Daniel, I still find his words difficult to put into practice. My fears are like pickles in a barrel: As soon as I pick one off the top, another floats up to take its place.

Since that moment, trying to not fear failure became my mantra, and I've reached new and exciting places.

I have been coaching national team athletes for seven years. In 2001 I was hired by the Canadian Yachting Association (CYA) as the only national team coach in Canada. I have coached at two Olympics: Sydney and Athens. Each Games represented very different stages in my development as a coach. In Sydney, I was a hard-working rookie, and although I tried not to show it, I was scared of everything. Most of all I was scared that I did not deserve to be there. In Athens I was only scared of most things. I was the designer of a winning program, my athletes were performing beyond their dreams, and between the two Games I had grown. Sometimes I imagine it as four full years spent overcoming fears. I gained my own four-year imaginary degree in Adrenaline Management at the University of Kelly Hand.



Jennifer Provan and Nikola Girke tackle the Olympic course.

Fear has been my biggest motivator and so it is my best friend. My fears have also held me back. Being responsible for performances was a scary place, and I worried about letting everyone down. In retrospect, I was digging my grave a little bit. Coincidentally, I came across this quote recently: "The world has a way of giving you what is demanded of it. If you are frightened and look for failure you will get it. Expect victory and you will make victory."

At the beginning of my coaching career, when I was a contract coach, I realized immediately that coaching was harder than I had anticipated. It seemed as if my fears were coming true and nothing was going right. As an athlete, all I had to worry about was myself. Not anymore. Within weeks, I started re-adjusting my goals and I started appreciating more simple things. A successful day was not one where we won every race, but one where no equipment broke, the coach boat didn't break down, and everyone on the team was still speaking to everyone else. My reality began to change. My team was hardly thriving; in fact, we were hanging on to the bare minimum of survival.

Coaching is like being in a video game. Your little character is there and you have your mission, but you are in this maze. The pathway forward is unclear; you are putting together clues and navigating a hazard-filled course. In the distance you can see the podium, but the minute you get comfortable, something always comes down the pipe. Sure enough, soon you're dodging fireballs and tsunami waves, and just when you're out-running your competitor, your engine fails.

As a coach, just when I got on a roll, something would inevitably happen. My fireballs have ranged from last-place results to athletes quitting regattas after three of 12 races, finding my coach boat on the bottom of the ocean, floating out to sea after engine failures, and trailer, car, and coach boat breakdowns and break-ins. But to put things in perspective, after your coach boat sinks, life seems so simple when all you have is angry athletes and bad results!

What I didn't understand then was that to keep learning I needed to give myself the freedom to fail and to go through these things, as opposed to wishing for freedom from failure. These moments are when the learning curve becomes its steepest. Looking back, worrying about what would happen was a bit of a waste of time, since obstacles came at me whether I feared them or not.

One such obstacle came at the beginning of July. We were ready to go and the team vibe was good. My women's double-handed team (470) had the world's performance of a lifetime and qualified for the Games. We were on our way. Athens here we come. I sent the athletes on ahead and drove the three-day trip from Northern Germany with a trailer-load of boats. After missing one ferry in Venice, I didn't reach Athens until 2 a.m. The athletes had already been there for four days, so they were keen to get going. We agreed to meet at 9 a.m. I pulled myself out of bed, exhausted from the trip but keen. I reached the street and, on a street that had been completely empty not six



On her first morning in Athens, Kelly Hand discovers her boats buried in a sea of fruit and vegetables.

hours earlier, I found that a produce market had been set up and there was no way I was going to be able to dig out the car and the boats. Sometimes it doesn't matter what you do. Those obstacles, mistakes, setbacks — whatever you want to call them — happen. Maybe they are "opportunities for learning". Anyway, we missed the first day on the water. They say that time plus tragedy equals comedy. I can see that now, but a few years ago I would hardly have laughed.

So much anxiety. And when I was hired as the national team coach, I suddenly felt more pressure. I felt responsible for many more athletes, my employers, and anyone watching Canadian sailing results. I was fearful of how it would all turn out. I knew I had much to learn, but I was ready to learn and do my best. Always an optimist, I felt that if CYA put their faith in me, it had to be for a reason; it would all work out in the end. But I was still fundamentally insecure. I remember a conversation I had with a friend that went something like: "Oh, my God, why did I take this job? At this stage it's likely that no one qualifies for the Games. If no one qualifies, it's going to be all my fault. Can we possibly succeed? This is shaping up to be a lose-lose situation."

For many years, I was almost completely motivated by the fear of failure. Many times I did not do what I should have because of that fear. I did not ask enough questions for fear of looking like a rookie. I did not trust the athletes enough, because I needed to look like I had it all in control. And since I was determined not to fail, I just put my head down and went forward with more energy than ever.

Did I ever work hard! Once, while training athletes for the 2000 Games, I was on the road coaching our double-handed teams leading up to their final chance to make the Canadian Olympic Committee standard. I followed them around the water for the six months leading up to the world championship and, when I look back, I can honestly say that not once in that six months did anything I do seem to make a positive difference.

It didn't matter that we were competing with the best in Spain, France, and Australia. I was technically challenged. I was coaching a class of boat I had never sailed. I simply did not know how to make this boat go fast. The worst part was that I had no clue that we were going nowhere. I thought we were doing everything we needed to do. We were up at the crack of dawn, running and being fit, spending more time on the water than anyone else, and I blew whistles and ran drills like a madwoman. Though the fundamental technical aspects were flying right over my head, I thought I was super coach. We got to the worlds and it was a disaster. As a team we had some of what we needed. We had the odd great race, but that was natural because every athlete and coach comes with their pre-packaged strengths. When the conditions and stars line up properly, those strengths will shine, but the stars weren't that nice to us, and eventually our weaknesses became as blatantly obvious as our bad results. The five of us went in five very different directions and, to this day, not one of us is very close to any other.

My "hard work equals rewards" formula should have been replaced by the definition of insanity: repeating the same behaviour but expecting different results. I was repeating with the athletes what I was good at, but not looking at what we were missing and what they were needing. I needed to think more intellectually about what was happening to the athletes during their races and then diagnose our symptoms. Instead, I had one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake.

What was missing? Was it my understanding of coaching? Was it my understanding of sailing? Or was it my understanding of me? Could it be that the same demons that made me fear racing as an athlete were haunting me as a coach? I needed to change something, but what? I found that when my skills plateaued, so did the athletes' performances.

Eventually I started noticing that far too often I held back on decisions because I didn't trust myself, when in the end I would have been right. And that by holding back out of fear and lack of confidence, I held myself and the whole team up. I got to the point where I was going to go crazy if, once again, we failed because my instincts were right but I didn't trust myself. There is a line in Richard Bach's book, *Illusions*, that states, "There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. We need problems because we need their gifts."

Here's why I found that trusting myself was not as easy as it sounds. The most accomplished coach in double-handed sailing is **Victor Kovalenko** from the Ukraine. His team won Olympic gold in 1996, and shortly after that he was recruited by the Aussies. He swept into their program and ended the next quadrennium with men's and women's gold medals. This coach is known as "the medal maker". I felt extremely intimidated by his profile. He is about 55 years old. He has a perfect Eastern Bloc accent that is perfectly intimidating and he has the perfect amount of intimidating grey hair. And his results were perfect. He knows what he's doing, and every move he makes projects winning confidence onto his team. That confidence was such a necessary element of winning. His team knew that where they were was where it's at.

As for me, was I going to always be a scared and intimidated young woman, or was I going to start figuring out what they had that we didn't? I needed to embrace who and what I was — a young, energetic, educated coach. I was open to learning, and I was eager to ask questions. Athletes related well to me, and I could get on their page easily. I realized that thinking results was a waste of time, and so we focused on more tangible goals and became more humble about what it meant to win.

Why hold back if you think you're right? Just go the direction you truly believe in, and see what happens. Worst-case scenario: You fail, but you learn and your team as a whole moves forward. Best-case scenario: You're right, and you're launched.

We went to Australia for the winter to get a few things straightened out, with only six months left to turn our ship around. With the pressure of time, I became even more focused and really started to pay attention. Analysing minutia became my priority. We logged every wind strength and every setting change until we started seeing trends. In one month, we competed in three regattas, with 12 races each. It was not necessary to win every race but to evaluate everything we were doing against the very best.

After five hours of racing, if speed was the issue, we stayed out for another two hours in order to change settings and get the boats moving. If manoeuvres were the issue, we ran drills and changed our approach. If equipment was the issue, we talked to our builders to see if others were experiencing similar difficulties. Each day we worked to find the answers we needed, and the next day we tested all over again.

Once we had our data we mapped out a plan so that the team knew where we were going, when and why and with whom, and what we were to gain. People thought we

were working too hard, but when you have a method and the team understands the method, everyone is motivated because there is a mutual understanding of the importance of today.

It was about making decisive judgment calls regarding our program. When faced with another decision, I decided to go for it and do what the pros would do. Weighing risks was important, but so was putting myself and my team where we needed to be. If it didn't work out, we would learn. It's better than never knowing. CYA gave me the chances to go out into the field and learn and bank experiences. And even on days where I had to call **Ken Dool**, our high performance director, to say the boat had sunk or report other such disasters, he was never upset; he knew it was part of my process.

When I stopped fearing potential failure, I experienced a fresh new reality. To not fear failure was, for me, the moment I realized I was confident in myself. No one can read the future, but I trusted my process, and from there grew a true faith that I would deal well with whatever happened, win or lose. Failure can be a friend that teaches you the skills to have confidence and trust and faith. With this by your side, you can start believing and using your intuition. Intuition, trusting your heart, is what I believe makes a great coach.

Sport is hard to do and hard to learn, but I think that technical aspects can be passed on quite easily, and imparting this knowledge efficiently will leave more time for new coaches to learn the art of coaching. In order to continue improving, I need to spend more time with my mentor, Ken Dool, and continue taking part in activities such as the Women in Coaching's amazing National Coach Workshop. Formalizing mentorship is a huge time-saver.

In the past year, the team I coached became Olympic threats and top performers. In one year my program saw them jump 30 places. To have won a medal in Athens, I needed to have the skills and understanding in year one of the quadrennium that I had in year four. Our team finished 13th at the Athens Olympics. They are not yet on the podium, but they're getting there. Had I developed quicker, maybe they could have made it in time. However, I have to tell you that 13th overall was one place in front of guess who ... the Aussie gold medallists from the 2000 Games and their coach, Mr. Medal Maker himself.



Coach Kelly Hand (left) and Jennifer Provan and Nicola Girke, the Athens double-handed team in the 470 class, at the Opening Ceremony.

Good coaches around the world are where they are because they have failed; in other words, at one point, each was given "opportunities to learn" in the field. Maybe that's why coaches don't get to stand on the podium. Because the game is never over or won for us; we just keep learning and pushing ahead.

In the meantime, young coaches need mentoring and their own opportunities to learn. Coaches are not just hired, but made. And they can be made right here in Canada.