

Examining the Impact of Coaching Apprenticeship Programs

Personal experience strongly supported the conviction that apprenticeship programs designed by and for women coaches would be instrumental in expanding both numbers and skill sets. Several years after the launch of two such programs, participant response upheld that belief, but formal authentication was deemed essential if the programs were to continue. Subsequent evaluation of two apprenticeship programs—the Women in Coaching Canada Games Apprenticeship Program and the Female Apprenticeship Program run by the Canadian Colleges Athletics Association—produced positive evidence. Going one step further, it was decided to go beyond cold facts and solicit direct responses from a representative group of apprentices from both programs. Entrusted with the task was **Rose Mercier**, who has been heavily involved in developing and facilitating the Canada Games program. The resulting article provides solid evidence of the value of each program, of the professional development vacuum each fills, and of the importance of continuing and expanding such programs and thereby contributing to the overall health of sport in Canada. — Sheila Robertson

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Examining the Impact of Coaching Apprenticeship Programs

by Rose Mercier

Two apprenticeship programs for women coaches that have been operating for several years recently conducted evaluations on their impact. Although anecdotally and intuitively the programs seemed to be on target, the Coaching Association of Canada's (CAC's) Women in Coaching Program (WiC) and the Canadian Colleges Athletic Association (CCAA) wanted evidence that their investment was delivering the desired results. While the evaluations reveal that both programs are having a positive impact in terms of supporting women to continue coaching, this article goes beyond the numbers and gets the perspective of eight coaches who have been participants.

The Programs

The WiC Canada Games Apprenticeship Program (CGAP) is a partnership among CAC, the Canada Games Council, the provincial and territorial governments, Sport Canada, and the Provincial/Territorial Sport Organizations (P/TSO). Coaches are recommended by the P/TSO and selected by their respective provincial or territorial government. Up to two coaches per jurisdiction can participate in the program at any one time. They are supported by the program's partners to experience the full period of preparation and competition of their sport's Canada Games team while working with a mentor coach. This facilitates their completion of Level 3 of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP), which is compulsory for all Canada Games coaches. The apprentice coaches also attend two professional development seminars designed and facilitated by WiC.

To date, three programs have led up to the Canada Games in 2005, 2007, and 2009. Currently, a group of 19 apprentice coaches are involved in the CGAP preparing for the 2011 Halifax Winter Canada Games. Excluding the 2011 participants, there have been 61 participants from 24 sports in 10 provinces and two territories; only Nunavut has yet to have a participant.

The CCAA Female Apprenticeship Program is entering its sixth year. The program is aimed at the rich source of potential female coaches in the ranks of graduating student-athletes and at creating a new coaching position for the apprentice coach. The CCAA's goal is to have at least one female coach on the staff of each women's sport program. Institutions that offer apprentice coach positions within the CCAA sports of soccer, volleyball, basketball, badminton, golf, and cross country running receive a grant. The grant is identified for professional development opportunities in either NCCP or related coach education and for operational costs associated with the apprentice coach.

Since its beginning in the 2005/06 academic year, the program has supported 76 apprentice coaches; in 2010/11, 20 apprentice coaches are being supported.

The Evaluations

The CGAP evaluation report was completed in March 2010. The report was based on an online survey that solicited input from all previous participants; 50 per cent replied. The survey reported that 70 per cent of the apprentices are currently coaching, with 27 per cent indicating that they are planning to return to coaching in the future. The report also found that 74 per cent of the respondents had advanced their coaching certification status; all were NCCP Level 2 certified and 23 per cent were Level 3 certified. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that the program assisted with advancement in their coaching career.

The CCAA evaluation covered the 2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08, and 2008/09 programs. The evaluation was completed in 2008/09 and utilized an online survey and follow-up interview. The survey had a 54 per cent response rate. Of those who responded, 63 per cent were still coaching, with just over half now CCAA assistant coaches; another third were still involved with a CCAA apprentice program. During the program, 65 per cent completed NCCP Level 1 Theory and Technical components, 56 per cent completed Level 2 Theory and Technical components, and 13 per cent completed Level 3 Theory and Technical components.

A synopsis of the evaluation reports suggests that both programs are succeeding in starting and advancing coaching careers. But numbers never tell the full story so the author spoke with eight coaches to get further insight into the impact of their apprenticeship experience.

The Coaches

CAC Women in Coaching Canada Games Apprenticeship Program

Kylie Case (2009, cycling): Currently inactive but planning to return to coaching; completing kinesiology degree

Cheryl Harwardt (2007, female hockey): Assistant coach, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology's female hockey team; head coach, 2009 U18 Alberta team; assistant coach, Team Alberta, 2011 Canada Winter Games

Mandy Johnson (2007, wheelchair basketball): Coaching Manitoba's junior provincial team; part of the pool of assistant program coaches with the women's national team

Ashley Lethbridge (2005, sailing): Coaching on a part-time basis year-round with the provincial program

Elizabeth Mignerou (2007, speed skating): Club head coach; co-coach in a sport-study high school program; master degree candidate in sport psychology, Université Laval

Sara Nielsen (2007, cross-country skiing): Volunteer assistant coach, Yukon ski team, Whitehorse; full-time parks interpretive planner, Yukon Government; assistant coach, Canadian university ski team, 2011 World Universiad, Erzurum, Turkey

CCAA Female Apprentice Coach Program

Kim Whelpton (2009/10): Assistant coach, women's basketball, UBC Okanagan (part-time paid position)

Jackie Wong (2005/06): Assistant coach, women's volleyball, UBC Okanagan (part-time paid position)

What They Said

About their first thoughts on being asked to be part of the program

All the respondents in the study were excited by the opportunity the program presented to enhance their coaching, although Ashley Lethbridge admitted to being somewhat apprehensive, a feeling that quickly disappeared when she began working with the team and discovered a love of coaching that has grown year after year.

Kim Whelpton was encouraged by her college's athletic director to apply to a program that provided a good way to begin a coaching career. Some, like Cheryl Harwardt and Mandy Johnson, looked forward to being able to network with other women who shared their passion for coaching. Mandy also recognized an opportunity to create awareness for her sport of wheelchair basketball.

Elizabeth Migneron and Jackie Wong saw their apprenticeship as a way to gain insight into the level of coaching to which they aspired.

Some saw the program as a way to share a passion for their sport. Sara Nielsen learned about the program at the last minute and wasn't sure what it entailed, but nevertheless saw it as a platform for getting girls and women involved in coaching and skiing.

About the part of the program that has most influenced their coaching

Although all apprentices differ, the roots of their influences today lie in their relationships with their mentors. Occasionally, the opportunity to work closely with a mentor gave birth to a commitment to adopt a different approach to coaching. More often, the relationship created opportunities for important insights.

Cheryl Harwardt related two lessons that have become part of her coaching practice: first, that strong teams depend more on the commitment to shared goals than on having an assembly of the best players; second, that every decision needs to be purposeful.

Mandy Johnson had the unique experience of working with her brother Bill as her mentor and seeing him in the very different light of experienced coach prepared to share his knowledge and insights. A broadened perspective about the demands of coaching at the Canada Games or the intercollegiate level has remained in the form of confidence in current coaching practice.

For Jackie Wong, the opportunity to see what happens when the team is competing on the road resulted in feeling more prepared to take on independent coaching roles.

Being given the opportunity to take a lead coach role with one athlete and to be assigned major responsibilities in team projects gave Kylie Case a real taste of the coaching role she was aspiring

to, helped her to know that she was capable of realizing her goals, and increased her motivation to pursue a coaching career.

Kim Whelpton's mentor, **Heather Semeniuk**, had been her coach when she was playing and is now the head coach of the team where Kim is the assistant coach. The apprenticeship made it possible to build on an existing relationship in a supportive situation, facilitating the successful transfer from athlete interested in coaching to confident coach with empathy for the athletes she works with.

Ashley Lethbridge also credits support—from the program, her sport organization, and the athletes she was involved with—for allowing her to grow as a coach. Whereas several aspects of Ashley's experience were continuing influences, others like Elizabeth Migneron found that the greatest single influence was gaining the confidence to introduce herself, a skill that led her to begin a conversation with **Guylaine Demers**, a professor in the Department of Physical Education at Université Laval. That introduction led to Elizabeth connecting with her masters' program advisor, a situation she admits would likely not have happened without the program's professional development seminars.

A self-described natural networker, Sara Nielsen learned in a professional development seminar that this ability is one of several sources of power at a leader's disposal; she continues to reflect on the different sources of power she has as well as sharing with others the concept of having power.

About how their aspirations changed during the apprenticeship

For Kim Whelpton and Kylie Case, who had only recently left behind their athletic careers and were wondering if coaching was part of their future, being apprentices helped them realize that, not only did they want to coach, but they were comfortable in the role and able to work well with athletes. Kylie also described as eye-opening the realization of just how much coaches do and the impact they have—and how much she wanted to do the same.

Ashley Lethbridge says her aspirations "definitely changed". Previously, coaching had been a summer or seasonal involvement. Through the program, she came to see coaching as a career and a long-term role. Today she is "as close [she] can get to a being full-time coach" within the current coaching structure in sailing.

The program also changed Mandy Johnson's intentions. Although there are few women head coaches in wheelchair basketball and although coaching was something that Mandy did as a volunteer, she came to see coaching as a long-term career.

For Elizabeth Migneron and Cheryl Harwardt, the apprenticeship shifted their perspectives. Both had thought it would take much longer to coach at a Canada Games, but they became optimistic about their ability to coach at that level and, in fact, to become head coaches.

Jackie Wong's aspirations stayed the same because she enjoys the role of assistant coach and it fits her lifestyle.

Similarly, Sara Nielsen continues to see volunteer coaching as a part of life that includes her career as park interpretation planner. However, the apprenticeship allowed her to see a better balance between these roles.

About how they see their future in coaching

Although the coaching roles the apprentices see in their future are varied and depend on how precise they are about the position they want, the time frame, and future shifts in life circumstances, all the apprentices see themselves continuing to coach. A new family will put on hold one apprentice's intent to coach at a national team level. Others, however, see coaching with the national team as a definite part of their future, their confidence and improved levels of certification making this a realistic goal. Still others see their future as being the head coach of Canada Games teams, provincial teams, or college teams.

About the value of apprenticeship programs

You learn what's out there.

- Other women coaches from different sports—whether with similar or very different situations—can normalize the apprentice's own circumstance, reinforce the benefit of an existing situation, or suggest different possibilities.
- Professional development presents the opportunity not only to learn, but also to work with other "powerful women in sport". Perspectives are expanded through access the programs provide to individuals that the apprentice coaches might not otherwise encounter.
- Learning about other programs and organizations and getting exposure to events like the Petro-Canada Sport Leadership sportif conference or NCCP training become important in gaining a larger view of sport.

You meet a lot of new people who become part of your network.

- Other apprentices become part of a supportive system even if contact with individuals is lost after the program.
- New connections with resource people are made that become valuable in the future.
- Your network of contacts within your sport expands.

You get added value from unexpected extras.

- The access to national or international competitions, provincial or national team training, and other coaches broadens the horizon of a coach if an organization or institution is willing to look at other ways to enhance the experience.
- Organizational support and expressions of confidence in the coach pay dividends for the apprentice's self-belief and motivation to continue coaching.

Your batteries get recharged.

- For a coach who has felt isolated because she wonders if there are any other women out there who are as passionate about coaching or who think it's normal to aspire to coaching at a provincial, national, or international level, finding other coaches who share her goals and frustrations is invigorating.

Your one-on-one link with your mentor is a powerful learning experience.

- The more open and supportive the mentor and the more willing the mentor is to trust the apprentice with independent assignments, the more invaluable the experience.

Your career progress is accelerated.

- The learning curve is shortened by the opportunities that are made available.
- You get a bigger picture about the next level of coaching, your sport organization, and the Canadian sport system.

About their advice to female athletes thinking about going into coaching

There was an unequivocal “Go for it!” when the apprentices were asked about their advice to other female athletes thinking about coaching. They agree that there is a need for more women coaches. They see tremendous benefit not only for the athletes but also for the coaches. They believe that athletes benefit from the female perspective, suggesting that women coaches offer emotional support to young athletes that men coaches often don't.

Probably the strongest message from the apprentices was that coaching is one of the most fulfilling experiences in life. Watching athletes grow into “good people”, a coach can see her impact on an athlete's sport experience and life. “You get back tenfold what you give.” One message to athletes thinking about coaching was to reflect on the difference that their most important coach made in their life and ask if that didn't make them want to be that same person in another athlete's life.

Other words of advice:

- Make sure your knowledge base is solid.
- Always seek out knowledge. Ask questions. Ask coaches at different levels if you can watch them.
- Be strong and make yourself recognized.
- Seek a mentor.
- Build a support network.

Good advice—from those who should know.

About what they would do if they were asked to mentor a female coach

While their advice differed, and all realized that mentoring is shaped by the apprentice, the former apprentices demonstrated their understanding of the mentoring process and provided sound guidelines that any mentor would be wise to follow:

- They would say to the apprentice that if she is just entering coaching, she needs to separate herself from the athletes, especially if they have been her teammates. In other words, she needs to establish her professionalism.
- They would be positive and supportive but challenge her to get outside her comfort zone.
- They would emphasize the need for her to be clear about her coaching vision and values. These are the constants in coaching, not strategies and tactics, which can change year to year. The athletes a woman coaches will change, but the kind of people she wants them to become should not.
- They would give the apprentice opportunities to learn firsthand, not just be a sidekick.
- They would build her confidence while making sure she develops the skills she needs to coach at this level.
- They would advise her to avoid getting caught up in the politics of her club, provincial association, or national association and to stay focused on her coaching because it's the only thing she can control.
- They would make sure that she understands the purpose behind any choice—know why she did something and realize that it doesn't always have to be the same as it always was.

About how their sport is developing women coaches

The former apprentices believe that their associations and institutions are supportive of women coaches. Several mentioned that their organizations provide professional development grants but don't really have any proactive strategies. Women who take the initiative will be supported, often by other coaches in the sport.

About what they would ask of Canadian sport leaders on behalf of women coaches

This was probably the most challenging question for the apprentices to answer. However, everyone had a thoughtful response.

Access to training and education was high on the list. "More apprenticeships" was the most common response, almost to a person. Apprenticeships at all levels, not always as extended as a season or a Canada Games preparatory period but smaller-scale programs that have broader reach, are seen as a good approach and would provide more opportunities for more coaches to enjoy the benefit of a supportive learning experience. Coaches saw the opportunity to replicate the CGAP with provincial games.

Another request was to do something so that coaching is recognized as a profession, something where the value of coaching education and the importance of the role is better understood, particularly by parents.

Finally, coaches would ask for family-friendly policies and support to make it possible to manage family and coaching responsibilities.

Beyond the Evaluation

The answers that the former apprentice coaches provided reinforce the positive impact portrayed in both evaluation reports. Apprenticeship programs seem uniquely positioned to encourage women coaches to pursue coaching as a long-term career or vocation. They address in a significant way the lack of mentors and role models, the lack of self-confidence in coaching ability, the lack of peer support, and the lack of educational opportunities. Apprenticeships don't have an impact on the lack of compensation that remains the number one barrier to continuity in coaching careers; compensation of coaches remains a problem throughout most of the coaching community.

Perhaps the most ringing endorsements of the benefit of the program are the enthusiastic declarations of the participants "It was absolutely huge in keeping me coaching," said one coach. Overall, the program seems absolutely huge in causing coaching careers to begin and continue.

About the author



Rose Mercier competed in swimming and athletics, graduated from the University of Alberta with a degree in physical education, and coached club swimming in Ottawa before starting a 20-year career in sport administration. She has worked with Swimming Canada, the Canadian Cycling Association, the International Relations and Major Games Directorate (Fitness and Amateur Sport), and the Tait McKenzie Institute (Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre).

Mercier is one of the founders of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) and received the CAAWS National Historical Award in 1998. She continues her commitment to women in sport through involvement with WiC programs, in particular in writing articles for the [Journal](#) since its inaugural edition in 2000, and through her consulting work in Canadian sport.