

### **What It Takes To Win: Perspectives from Vancouver 2010**

Inspirational stories of women coaches and athletes from the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games

In the aftermath of every major sporting event, post-mortems inevitably focus on medals won. Of equal interest are the ones that got away. For Team Canada, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games being staged at home meant enormous pressure to succeed. The nation rejoiced when our Olympic athletes broke the magic mark in winning 14 gold medals, the most ever by a host nation at a Winter Games, and took third spot overall behind the United States and Germany. The Paralympians, with 10 gold, 5 silver, and 4 bronze medals, captured third spot, with the Russian Federation and Germany in first and second respectively: outstanding results by any measure.

Understanding that achieving peak performances is a multi-faceted endeavour, the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) commissioned an article to examine the factors that influenced the performances of several athletes and coaches who either met or exceeded expectations. We assigned the task to **Dr. Penny Werthner**, a consultant in sport psychology who worked with our women's curling and freestyle ski teams during the Games, an author (with **Debbie Muir**) of the [Own the Podium Beijing Report](#), and a founding member of the [Journal's](#) editorial board.

The resulting article demonstrates an interesting symmetry in the factors that contributed to each medal performance. They may seem obvious, but, not so long ago, the approach to high performance was far less detailed. The Vancouver athletes were committed, talented, and very hard working. So, too, were their coaches. In today's world, this is no longer enough. Today's medallists need to be supported by well-developed, detailed, and well-executed plans that cover all facets of their athletic lives and include assessment, adjustment, and analysis. Interestingly, self-knowledge was revealed as a key ingredient of success and is, as Penny notes, "the first step to change."

The [Journal](#) believes that this article contributes strongly to the important post-Games discussions. In sharing their stories with frankness and openness, the coaches and athletes you will read about are making an important contribution to the dialogue that can never stop if Canada is to continue to produce outstanding athletic performances. — Sheila Robertson

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## JULY 2010 FEATURE

### **What It Takes To Win: Perspectives from Vancouver 2010**

Inspirational stories of women coaches and athletes from the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games

by Penny Werthner

In high performance sport, where millimetres and hundredths of a second make the difference between a medal and oblivion, it is always useful to take time to look back and analyse what happened at a major event. For the purposes of this article, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games are the point of analysis. What is it we as coaches or as a team missed? What is it we did superbly? What is it we can learn that can help us at subsequent World Cups, world championships, and the 2012 and 2014 Games?

Certainly sport organizations and teams are beginning to do a better job at this type of analysis, but there is always room for improvement and learning. To continue to get better at learning from our Olympic and Paralympic experiences, this article looks at the reflections of a number of key women coaches and athletes at the 2010 Games in Vancouver and Whistler. But before I get to what they had to say, let's take a few moments to reflect more broadly on how to conduct an effective analysis of sport performances.

I would argue that most of us who have been involved in high performance sport over many years know, on some level, what the "formula" is to help create the environment for successful performances at an elite level. We need committed, hard-working, talented athletes. We need committed, hard-working, talented coaches. We need well-developed plans, both physiologically and psychologically, that are implemented and then regularly assessed and adjusted. We also need ongoing, in-depth analysis of training and performance using multiple perspectives.

#### **Ingredients for success**

One attempt in doing just that resulted in the [Own the Podium Beijing Report](#), for which Debbie Muir and I interviewed 30 coaches and 27 athletes from the Canadian Olympic team in an attempt to better understand what contributed to or hindered performances at the 2008 Games. A key finding of this report was the crucial nature of a strong relationship between a coach and her or his athlete. This relationship was a fundamental ingredient of an exemplary performance.

However, we also found that while this relationship was a necessary factor, it was not sufficient, in the sense that several athletes who "under-performed" in Beijing (and what is meant by "under-performance" in this context is an athlete who had a legitimate chance at a medal and did not achieve it) had very good coaches, but something else was missing from the environment that hindered the ultimate performance. Sometimes it was poor planning in terms of training and competing in the year leading to the Games. Sometimes it was mismanagement of injuries or the rest-and-recovery phases in the year of the Games. Sometimes it was a small but significant mental error within two weeks of the Games; it takes only a small error to compromise a performance.

A second key ingredient for ensuring optimal performance was that the athletes had, over a number of years and many competitive experiences, developed a clear sense of who they were and what worked for them in terms of training and competing. Together with their coaches, they had developed comprehensive, well-thought-out plans for training, travel, and competition based on that knowledge. One of the athletes from Beijing said, "As a small

team, we worked through our issues, and it was a conscious choice to do so, especially after a poor previous Olympic result." This quote provides us with a glimpse of the depth of reflection and self-awareness necessary to really give oneself a chance to win a medal at an Olympic Games.

### **Time to think**

One book that explores this kind of in-depth thinking and development of self-awareness is *Time to Think* (Kline 2003), which argues that our job as leaders is to enable others to think for themselves. **Nancy Kline** provides the reader with a framework for thinking that consists of 10 components, and a number of these are useful within the context of sport.

First, she argues, taking the time to think involves paying **attention** and listening to what is being said with respect and interest. Good coaches learn to do that with high performance athletes who have reached a certain level of competence. Coaches and athletes also learn to do this with expert staff they bring on to help them. Kline states that "giving good attention to people makes them more intelligent. To help people think for themselves, first listen."

Another component from Kline's top 10 is asking **incisive questions**, and all of us in sport need to get better at this skill. We always need to be careful about assumptions, and we need to become better at creating an environment where questions such as "How did that happen?" and "How can we go from fourth to first?" are welcomed and asked often.

A third component Kline discusses is **appreciation**, and she means creating an environment where there is a better ratio of praise to criticism. Praise builds a sense of confidence in an athlete, which in turn is a crucial component of great performances. She argues, rather obviously it seems, but for something that is often not the case in reality, that "appreciation of someone needs to be genuine, succinct, and concrete."

A final component for the purpose of this article is that of **feelings**. Kline means that we need to allow space for emotional release before we can expect to think clearly. This is such an important aspect to consider within the sporting context, because high performance sport is so full of emotions, including fears and varying degrees of anxiety. We need to acknowledge and manage these emotions before we can move to effective thinking and analysis. Otherwise, as Kline states, "Repression of feeling represses clear thinking."

### **2010 Olympic Games**

With these concepts of clear thinking, reflection, and analysis in mind, I turn to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games and look at the thoughts of a number of women coaches and athletes who competed at the Games. I was fortunate to speak with the following coaches and athletes: **Brianne Law**, one of four national Para-Alpine coaches; **Lauren Woolstencroft**, winner of five gold medals in alpine skiing at the Paralympic Games; **Celine Feagan**, head coach of Para-Biathlon; **Colette Bourgonje**, who has competed in nine summer and winter Paralympic Games, winning 10 medals in total, including silver in 2010 in the 10-kilometre sit-ski cross country race; **Elaine Dagg-Jackson**, national coach for women's curling; **Cheryl Bernard**, skip of the silver medal-winning women's curling team; **Melody Davidson**, coach of the Olympic champion women's hockey team and player **Meaghan Mikkelson**; and **Marina Zoueva**, coach of Olympic ice dance champions **Tessa Virtue** and **Scott Moir**.

My question to each was simple and open-ended: "What does it take to win an Olympic or Paralympic medal, particularly at a home Games?"

## Financial support

Not surprisingly, a number of these coaches and athletes spoke about how the increased financial support from Own the Podium (OTP)—which provided coaches and athletes with the ability to hire experts in various fields, create effective integrated support teams, develop and benefit from sport-specific research projects, and travel to better training venues and more competitions—was a key factor in excelling in Vancouver and Whistler.\* For example, Lauren Woolstencroft believed that she was helped immensely by a full-time strength and conditioning coach, who created a much more structured dry-land training program than Woolstencroft had had in the past. “All the extra staff, with four coaches rather than two, as we had in Torino, and the medical staff, ski technician, sport psychologist, and physiotherapists, took the pressure off us, so that all we had to do was focus on training.”

Celine Feagan, as the head coach of Para-Biathlon, said that her team’s goal was “to leave no stone unturned. We had the best sport science, best support staff, best information on technique.” She also praised the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary, saying that “they worked very well with us, and were respectful of the Para-Nordic sports.”

In addition to speaking about external factors that positively influenced their ability to optimally perform in the stressful environment of the Games, the coaches and athletes also reflected on their personal drive and commitment to pursue a medal, how they had learned from previous Games, and their paths to developing a deep self-awareness and action plan that enabled them to succeed at the Olympic level.

## Mindset

Cheryl Bernard, who led her curling team to the Olympic silver medal, spoke of how, in the past, as an important bonspiel progressed, she would get tighter and tighter, which inevitably led to losing important final games. She said she had to personally develop “a total change of mindset.” She spoke of how she learned to go from “Oh, my gosh, this is so stressful!” to “I am loving this pressure!” and to actually recognizing that she loved to be out there playing. Bernard also spoke about how she and the team made a conscious decision, several years before 2010, that they wanted to do well, and that led to the understanding that they therefore needed to be open and willing to listen to experts. “We learned so much leading up to trials, and then through the trials, with our daily planning and debriefing meetings: the importance of staying relaxed, of being together as a team, of managing our emotions, of not getting distracted.”

Bernard also talked about the whole team learning how to truly relax and breathe effectively, which “allowed us to go out and play like we knew how.” Her examples show us an individual who had competed in the sport of curling for many years. With the desire to win the Olympic trials and represent Canada, she stepped back and took the time to think about what she needed to change, to critically reflect on her own weaknesses as well as her strengths, and her team’s weaknesses and strengths, and then gather the resources to help her address the weaknesses.

\*As a country, Canada won 14 gold medals, the most of any nation at these Games, and finished with 26 medals in total. This was an improvement from the 2006 Olympic Games in Torino, Italy, where Canada earned 7 gold medals and 24 medals in total.

This team had **Dennis Balderston** as their personal coach at the Olympics, but Elaine Dagg-Jackson, as the national women's coach, played an important additional role in helping the team create a plan from the time they won the Olympic trials to the Games. When I asked Dagg-Jackson how she thought this team won the silver medal, she said that she had never seen a curling team "stay at this level for so long—from November to February—at the top of their game for three months." She echoed a number of Bernard's comments: "They knew what they needed to do, as individuals and as a team. They made good decisions about what they needed to do, and they refused to be distracted." Dagg-Jackson, as the national coach, brought a great deal of experience to the team, knowing first-hand that the "incredibly long two-week period of play requires exceptional focus." Her role was twofold: to have a finger on the pulse of everything that was going on at the Olympics and to create an environment that would work for the team and help "minimize the noise" of all the distractions that exist at an Olympic Games.

### **Hockey gold**

Meaghan Mikkelson was a member of the gold-medal winning women's hockey team. She joined the national team in 2008 after being part of the under-22 national team for three years. "When I was picked for the national team in 2008 ... that was a huge accomplishment for me." She spoke of how she accelerated her skill development in a number of different ways to ensure that she was ready to contribute to winning the gold medal. "I am someone who is always asking the question 'What can I do better?' and working on what I am not good at." For example, she spent hours watching game tapes "looking for what I could get better at," and then spent an extra 45 minutes several times a week, after regular practice, shooting. She said that she felt that what it takes to win a medal is very individual and that "you have to go find it for yourself." Mikkelson also spoke of how the skills of the coaching staff were crucial to the team's success, and that the 2009/2010 plan the coaches put into place was "genius".

Head coach Melody Davidson pointed to a number of factors that enabled the women's hockey team to win the Olympic gold medal. First, she stated that one significant factor was doing a thorough analysis of the 2009 season, which identified several weaknesses relating to strength, power, and mental toughness. As a result, a plan was put in place to specifically address those weaknesses.

Second, she felt that, as a result of being a full-time coach for the four years leading up to Vancouver, she was able to plan and coach more effectively and to have the time to spend with each athlete individually, to ensure they were getting what they needed to be their best. Davidson also felt that the opportunity to be together as a team for a significant period of time leading to the Games enabled the players to take personal responsibility for their own improvement and, to an extent, hold their teammates accountable for improvement. Importantly, part of the planning was to create a tough and demanding training environment and play many games, in front of full rinks, all season. In this way, the team was well prepared for the Olympic Games—"It would be nothing new." Under Davidson's leadership, the reflection and analysis that evolved into a solid, well-thought-out, and well-executed plan was clearly the key to the success of the women's hockey team.

### **Listen to your body**

When I spoke with Colette Bourgonje, a multiple medallist from many Paralympic Games and a silver medallist in 2010, it was evident that she was committed to excelling. Over her years in sport, she had developed a deep understanding of what she needed to do to perform at an optimal level. For example, she emphasized the need to listen to her body and adapt her training accordingly. This is a skill many experienced high performance

athletes draw upon. She had two excellent coaches, **Robin McKeever** and **Bruce Craven**, but she still needed to reflect from time to time on what they had planned for her and to adjust their plans depending on how her body was reacting. Bourgonje also demonstrated her drive to excel by taking a year off from her job as a teacher. She moved from Saskatchewan to Canmore, Alta., to train with other athletes and to train at altitude. She acknowledged that the OTP “Top Secret” research projects on sled design helped her a lot, given the soft snow conditions in the Callaghan Valley, which was the venue for cross country ski. She also noted that Celine Feagan, head coach for Para-Biathlon, provided her with invaluable support on actual racing days during the Games. Feagan herself stated that she helped Bourgonje with her warm-up and with changing her skis, and in general she was there to ensure everything was in place on race day. She said that all the coaches in biathlon and cross country ski worked well together as a team.

Lauren Woolstencroft, with five gold medals in 2010, is definitely one of Canada’s most successful Paralympic athletes. In reflecting on what helped her win those medals, she spoke of both her own personal qualities and the team environment. First, she believed that “growing up with a physical disability, you become skilled at learning because, in the beginning, it takes you a long time to learn anything and, as a result, I am focused, determined, and stubborn.” She thought that those characteristics helped her as a high performance athlete. She also emphasized that she made a conscious commitment to “put my best into everything I did this year—to buy into everything—so that when I stood at the gate, I was confident.” Lauren also said she had four great coaches in Brianne Law, **Jean-Sébastien Labrie**, **Sébastien Michel**, and **Sven Pouliot**, all with different but valuable expertise, ranging from “one who was very detail-oriented to one who was great with skis.” And Woolstencroft stated that she “believed in the plan they were making for us.”

In reflecting on the question of what it takes to win an Olympic medal, Law, who after the Games was appointed athletic director of the Para-Alpine team, stated that one of the factors was that she and the other three coaches worked very well together. They always respected each other, and “communication among the coaching staff was open—it was a team effort.” She also indicated that each coach had different strengths and “that really made our team complete.” The four coaches held regular meetings where they conducted an analysis of each athlete’s performance, asking questions such as “What needs to be changed?” “What variables are we dealing with?” She said they paid great attention to detail, deciding to live outside the Village and create a self-contained environment, with their own chef, gym, and medical team.

### **Creating a revolution**

Finally, I spoke with Marina Zoueva, who coached Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir to Canada’s first-ever gold medal in ice dance. In answer to my question regarding what she did to help make that medal happen, the internationally acclaimed choreographer said: “I really think that when I first saw this team, I knew they could do a revolution in ice dance.” When she started working with Tessa and Scott in 2003, “we were not focused on the Olympics; we were focused on what would work for them.” She went on to explain that in ice dance, the team “really has to feel what they do on the ice and have a feel for the audience. It is very psychological. And this team is a perfect match. They felt as a couple and they felt for their country — they are very patriotic — so the Olympics in Canada was just perfect.” Certainly Marina spoke of the hard work, the constant communication, the experiences gained in competitions. She emphasized that all of this takes time to develop. But what she stated so beautifully was that Tessa and Scott are “a union of souls” and this is what they were able to project so magnificently on the ice in Vancouver.



## Conclusion

When I review each of these interviews, it is clear that there are similarities both to the findings from the OTP Beijing Report and Kline on the need to take time to think in order to function optimally. Developing the ability to really think deeply, to ask incisive questions, to be willing to seek out and listen to experts, and to give oneself the time to reflect on a regular basis are several of the crucial aspects of effective analysis. In the case of high performance Olympic and Paralympic sport, these abilities and qualities are critical to success. Each of the coaches and athletes interviewed for this article demonstrated these abilities, and many were deeply self-aware, which is a first step in change. Many were able to recognize and understand their strengths and weaknesses, and then, importantly, were able to consciously make a choice "to act", to **do** something different. The interviews also show us the immense amount of work the coaches put into planning and subsequent analysis in order to create and manage the optimal environment where the athlete or team could have the greatest possibility of success.

## About the Author



Penny Werthner, PhD, is a professor in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa, conducting research in the areas of the learning processes of coaches and athletes, issues facing female coaches, psychological preparation for coaches and athletes (particularly within the world championship and Olympic environment), coach stress and burnout, values and ethics in sport, and the use of bioneurofeedback for enhancing the performance of coaches and athletes. She is also a consultant in sport psychology who works with many national team athletes and coaches, and she has been part of seven winter and summer Canadian Olympic teams from 1988 to 2010. At the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games, Werthner was the Canadian team consultant in sport psychology. A leader and innovator in

international sport and in women and sport issues, Penny is a National Coaching Certification Program Level 4/5 presenter for Tasks #7, #8, and #17. A former Olympic track and field athlete, she represented Canada internationally from 1970 to 1981.

## Reference

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