

## **Making the Case** **Coaching as a Viable Career Path for Women**

As author **Penny Werthner** notes in her provocative article, "Making the Case: Coaching as a Viable Career Path for Women", a fundamental question for Canadian sport has long been why we would need or want women in the coaching profession. And when women are encouraged to aspire to the highest levels of coaching, through programs such as the Coaching Association of Canada's Women in Coaching Program (WiC) and its National Team Apprenticeship Program (NTAP), what is being done to ensure that they continue to progress long after their involvement with NTAP is past?

Until "Making the Case", there were few satisfactory answers. This article tackles the questions head-on and provides straightforward and practical solutions. Penny began her investigation by speaking to leaders of several national sport federations (NSFs) that have supported NTAP in providing opportunities for women coaches to work with their national teams at major Games. She then investigated recent findings in gender differences in communicating and in learning.



The participants in the Annual Women in Coaching Workshop, held in March at Jackson's Point, Lake Simcoe, Ont.  
Photo credit: Susan Kitchen

Penny's investigation strongly supports the case for women and high performance coaching, confirms the importance of NTAP to women coaches and their career prospects, and allows the reader to feel cautious optimism — optimism, that is, if we agree with Penny's eminently sensible contention that the essential ingredients for successfully developing women coaches at the national team level are a supportive NSF, the identification of a coach who demonstrates the desired talent and qualities, and the provision of a structured mentor coach situation. Her answer for keeping women in the system, "so simple and yet so seemingly hard to do in Canada", is salaried coaching positions, surely plain common sense.

The challenge now facing WiC is to build on Penny's findings by putting in place mechanisms to keep women in coaching once they reach the national team level. Then, and only then, will women coaches be in a position to play a major, positive role in two very important ways: one, in ensuring excellent individual and team

performances by Canada's athletes and, two, in utilizing their skills to the benefit of the Canadian sport system.

As indicated by the recent increase in government funding, which reflects a multi-year commitment to sport, and the unequivocal recognition from every sector in sport of the value of the coach to performance, the timing is right. We foresee a future when NTAP apprentices hold national team positions not because it is the fair and equitable thing to do, but because of the skills they bring to the job and the unique and valued contribution they make to athletic performance. — Sheila Robertson

### **Coaching Association of Canada and Gatorade Spark a Partnership**

The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) and Gatorade recently announced their partnership in support of CAC's Sport Nutrition program.

Under the terms of the agreement, Gatorade is the supporting sponsor of CAC's online "Sport Nutrition for Athletes and Coaches" service designed for coaches, athletes, parents, and leaders in high performance and developmental sport. Gatorade will work closely with CAC's Sport Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) to develop all the website content.

Gatorade also announces the establishment of the Gatorade Sports Science Institute (GSSI) Canadian Advisory Board, which is made up of six sports nutrition professionals from across Canada. The Advisory Board will be led by **Lawrence Spriet**, Ph.D., of the Department of Human Biology and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Guelph. Together they will help raise awareness of the GSSI and its extensive network of research north of the border and will also conduct Canadian specific research. The Canadian research is expected to begin in late 2005 and will focus on cold weather training and hydration. The GSSI's mission is to help athletes optimize their health and performance through research and education in hydration and nutrition science.

GSSI has conducted and published research and educated sports health professionals and athletes on sports nutrition and exercise science. The information provided to athletes helps them understand how they can fuel themselves so they not only perform better, but also feel better when training or competing.

The GSSI website, [www.gssiweb.org](http://www.gssiweb.org), is an informative and educational site where coaches and athletes can find a wealth of knowledge about training, nutrition, injury prevention, and sport psychology.

Visit [www.gssiweb.org](http://www.gssiweb.org) for more information or email us at [gssicanada@qtgcanada.com](mailto:gssicanada@qtgcanada.com).

## MAY 2005 FEATURE

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#### Meet the Apprentices

Laryssa Biesenthal: Rowing



Jadine Cleary: Synchronized swimming



Joanne Devlin-Morrison: Sprint canoe



Sherry Doiron: Field hockey



Tobie Gorman: Artistic gymnastics



Karina Kosko: Trampoline



Lisa MacDonald: Ice hockey



Georgette Reed: Athletics



Beth Richardson: Badminton



Lisa Thomaidis: Basketball



Natascha Wesch: Rugby



The Coaching Association of Canada's (CAC's) Women in Coaching Apprenticeship Program (WiCAP) was established in 1999 and has been previously discussed in the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching \(October 2003\)](#).

The 2003–2005 edition of this two-year program — the National Team Apprenticeship Program (NTAP) — has had a new focus. NTAP continued with the learning opportunities of seminars and mentor coaches offered by WiCAP, but also brought together coaches with strong coaching experiences and solid athletic backgrounds. Like all of the previous participants, these apprentices shared an eagerness and openness to learn. However, they also brought strong coaching experiences to the program and, as a result, were ready to take on national and international experiences.

For example, NTAP includes **Laryssa Biesenthal**, ([November 2004](#)), a former Olympic medallist in rowing who started coaching when she retired after the 2000 Olympic Games and has progressed through the Athens Olympics. Today she is one of Rowing Canada Aviron's national coaches. **Tobie Gorman** is a gymnastics coach with many years' experience operating and coaching in her own club in Ottawa. Having developed two athletes — **Heather Purnell** and **Melanie Banville** — good enough to qualify for the Athens Olympics, Tobie was selected by Gymnastics Canada to be an Olympic coach in Athens.



Tobie Gorman and Laryssa Biesenthal  
Photo credit: Susan Kitchen

**Natascha Wesch**, a former national team rugby player and currently a PhD student at the University of Western Ontario, coaches the University of Western Ontario women's rugby team, the junior national team, and the under-23 Ontario team and was recently named Ontario's Female Coach of the Year.

These are just three examples of the strong, skilled women coaches in NTAP. Certainly the program has helped these women continue to develop. It has created a learning environment with a structured mentor coach situation that has enabled the women coaches to have experts, both in coaching and in sport in general, with whom to interact on a regular basis. These mentors have played key roles by being open to sharing their knowledge and being excellent teachers and facilitators of learning. And without question, the national sport federations (NSFs) have played an important part in the success of their coaches in NTAP. Their willingness to identify top women coaches for the program and then, more importantly, to continue to support their advancement has been crucial.

**Lise Simard**, high performance director for Gymnastics Canada's women's program, says, "CAC and WiCAP provided us with the money to help Tobie develop into an international level coach. We certainly needed a good candidate, with a good attitude, willing to learn, and willing to share, and with Tobie we had that. But she was inexperienced at the world championship and Olympic levels, and we needed this program to help create ways to complete that learning. Plus, this program provides other experiences that we do not offer." Lise and Tobie both speak of the value of the mentor coach, **David Kenwright**, and the national coach, **Andrei Rodionenko**. "Tobie had the unique opportunity to work with both these coaches as mentors, and each provided expertise at the Olympic level for Tobie and her two athletes," says Lise. "As an example, David worked closely with Tobie despite the

fact that their respective clubs and athletes were actually in competition with each other. It truly was a remarkable mentorship."

Tobie feels that "both Andrei and David recognized my abilities and the abilities of my athletes. They each worked to help me. They gave me such an immense amount of their time and they were so open to my questions. Importantly, they recognized how I needed to learn. They encouraged me and raised my self-confidence. Having both of these coaches work with me was such valuable learning."

**Brian Richardson**, high performance director of Rowing Canada Aviron during Laryssa's apprenticeship, believes that NTAP provided "enormous value both to her and to our sport. The program gave Laryssa the opportunity to commit fully to coaching, which allowed her to get the experience needed to get a full-time job. Getting that experience and to then get hired is always the difficulty, and this program helps enormously. Amateur sport is still male-dominated, and so the opportunities are limited for women to gain those coaching experiences. NTAP has been tremendous for our sport. Certainly the individual has to have the ability, but Laryssa is a good coach. She can now stand on her own."

**Graham Barton**, high performance director of the Canadian Canoe Association (CCA), feels that NTAP provides opportunities to educate women coaches at Level 4 and opens the door for them to coach at the national and international levels. Certainly **Joanne Devlin**, who has been working through Level 4 at the National Coaching Institute (NCI) Calgary, coaching at a number of international regattas, and giving birth to her first child, has found the opportunities and learning invaluable. "This program has given me opportunities that I would not otherwise have been able to have — learn at the NCI in Calgary and attend international regattas with the Canadian national team. As well, my mentor coach, **Mark Granger**, in his work with the men's kayak program, allowed me to observe and be part of all the planning and work that goes into preparing a team for the Olympics." Barton, however, emphasizes that although the CCA can help and encourage, ultimately it is up to the coach to decide whether she wants to continue on to become an established head coach of a national team.

Clearly, from the perspectives of both the women coaches in the program and their NSFs, the elements of the apprenticeship program — the mentorship component, the learning seminars, the opportunities to discuss issues and learn with other coaches, and the national and international coaching opportunities— while not perfect, are working.

Nonetheless, a comment such as that voiced by Barton raises important questions: How do we ensure that these women, and others, continue to coach long after their involvement with NTAP is past? Even more importantly, how do we ensure that a much greater number of women develop into national coaches? And perhaps before we try to answer those questions, we need to answer the often unspoken but underlying question: Why do we need or want women in the profession of coaching?

## Why We Need Women Coaches

It would be useful to first reflect briefly on the characteristics and qualities of an effective elite amateur sport coach as well as on research into gender differences in communication.

Lots of anecdotal evidence and some recent research point to several specific and necessary qualities that most successful coaches possess. Interviews with 15 of Canada's current best coaches at the Olympic level (five women and 10 men, with "best" based on the Olympic and world rankings of their athletes or teams), identified three key qualities.

First, all of these coaches, both women and men, spoke of being open to learning and seeking out mentors or experts in a number of areas to help them continue to learn. At first the focus of the learning tended to be in technical or strategic areas, and then it might have turned toward a communication or team issue or conflict management area. What needed to be learned was consciously sought by the coach. Importantly, the coaches all saw this learning as a necessary and ongoing process.



Rugby coach Natascha Wesch

Second, the coaches spoke extensively about the importance of being open to listening to and learning from their athletes, particularly at this level of sport, where the athletes are, for the most part, very aware and knowledgeable.

Third, each spent an immense amount of time in self-reflection (thinking about how things were going, what they needed to do differently, what they might be missing in the training or competition) and in enabling those around them — athletes and assistant coaches — to also reflect on these issues.

These latter two key qualities or characteristics also created strong, clear-thinking, independent athletes and, therefore, an environment where great performances occurred.

There has been a vast amount of research on gender differences and how we, as women and men, learn and communicate. An earlier article in the [Journal](#) on the differences in gender communication and sport, based on the work of [Deborah Tannen](#) ([May 2001](#)), clearly delineates the differences between how women and men communicate and why this is a significant consideration for coaches and their athletes. Also important is a recent book by Leonard Sax, entitled [Why Gender Matters](#), that has rekindled the debate about the differences between how females and males learn and think. Sax suggests that girls' and boys' brains develop differently and that the sexes "hear" differently and respond to stress differently. The research that backs these claims needs to be closely examined, but anyone who has coached both female and male athletes knows that they must take into account differences between what women and men athletes want and need in order to perform well.

I suggest that it is important to take both these areas of research — gender differences in communicating and in learning — into consideration when trying to answer the fundamental questions of why we need women as coaches and how, if we agree we need women, we can keep them in the profession.



From the recent coaching research outlined above, it would appear that the essential qualities of our “best” coaches can be learned and demonstrated by both women and men. This research is early evidence that all these skills or qualities are required at the highest levels of amateur sport to ensure excellent individual and team performances. Are women inherently better at possessing or honing these qualities? We do not know the answer definitively, but I would argue, based on my research and on my work over many years with many coaches, that women, to paraphrase **Charlotte Whitton**, a former mayor of Ottawa, “are certainly not worse”. Women coaches are often willing to seek out experts for help, are skilled at listening and “reading” their athletes, and are skilled at reflecting on their actions. The best male coaches are also excellent at developing these skills. But I have observed many male coaches at the national and international levels, from Canada and from other countries, who have great technical sport skills but who dismiss women athletes’ concerns and their need for greater dialogue and explanation in training and who resort to yelling, sometimes harsh personal comments, and telling the athletes that they are not tough enough.

It is my belief, based on experience, that technical skills are not enough to be an excellent coach. These coaches do not produce great results. They produce athletes who get angry, lose self-confidence, change sports, and often drop out. Does this mean that only women should coach women athletes? Perhaps not — I will sit on the fence on that one for a little longer. Certainly we have in Canada many excellent male coaches coaching women athletes very well and clearly understanding their needs and concerns. And these working relationships have resulted in many Olympic medallists. I would not want to see that end! But it does mean that we need a whole lot more women coaches in the Canadian sport system. Women coaches need to continue to work on these so-called “softer” skills, but what they also need, and what this NTAP provides, is experience in coaching at world levels. They need that work experience to develop what **Dorothy Leonard** and **Walter Swap**, in *Deep Smarts: How to cultivate and transfer enduring business wisdom*, called “deep smarts” — the valuable wisdom and instincts that come only from having lived through such situations as the following: being on the floor at Canadian Interuniversity Sport national championships with two minutes to go and your team up by just one point, being at the Olympics with one day to go before your heat and suddenly having to deal with a damaged boat, being at the world canoe championships and finding out that one of your athletes cannot compete due to an injury, or being at the aerobics worlds when the athlete competing just ahead of your athlete crashes and breaks her neck.

### **How We Keep Women in Coaching**

Perhaps the above opens the debate a bit wider on why we need many more women coaches. CAC’s NTAP is helping to increase the numbers. However, we then come back to the first question posed. How do we keep these women in the system once they start the process? The fundamental answer — so simple and yet so seemingly hard to do in Canada — is salaried coaching positions. We need only look to the university system, where coaches are paid, albeit not very well in many universities, to see a much greater number of women coaches of women’s teams and occasionally of men’s teams. But when we look to national teams, as we know all too well, the number of women coaches still sits at about 17 per cent. If we had the money in the national sport system to pay coaches well — and this is an issue for all coaches at this level, men and women — we would be able to attract many more individuals to coaching.

Salaried positions are hugely important for women coaches because, whether we choose to admit it or not, women continue to bear the brunt of child care and home care. With paid positions, coaching could become a viable and attractive career option. We would hear more women say, "I will train to be a coach." Certainly, with the increased monies in the system due to the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, we are perhaps moving in this direction. Also importantly, with coaching as a paid profession, we would be able to hold coaches accountable — in the best sense of feedback and performance review — for coaching well and for ensuring they have all the qualities and skills necessary to be effective coaches. We could perhaps begin to value the communication skills, the listening to athletes, and the managing of conflict as much as we value the technical skills. All those skills must be in place for coaches to succeed at the Olympic level of sport.

CAC's WiCAP is a key component in this process, but its ultimate success is tied to ensuring that the sport system clearly understands and appreciates the skills that women bring to coaching and the still very real need for many more decently paid coaching positions.



## PENNY WERTHNER

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Penny was the sport psychologist for the canoe/kayak team at the 2004 Olympic Games and is team sport psychologist with the national freestyle ski team. A leader and innovator in international sport and in women and sport issues, she is an NCCP Level 4/5 presenter for Tasks #7, #8, and #17. A former Olympic track and field athlete, Penny represented Canada internationally from 1970 to 1981.



Penny Werthner