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A Practical Lesson About Developing Women Coaches

Last winter an idea was born, and within a few short months it had become reality. In this issue of the *Journal*, consultant Rose Mercier describes the rewards of bringing a concept to life and acknowledges the people and organizations that made its success possible.

Canada's hosting of the 2001 Jeux de la Francophonie provided the opportunity. With teams coming from more than 50 countries, the Games would be an ideal venue for an apprenticeship program for women coaches, decided Cyndie Flett, director, Women in Coaching, for the Coaching Association of Canada.

A golden opportunity, certainly, but imagine the challenges. Convincing the Games organizers of the value of such a novel program. Identifying coaches in less developed Francophone countries. Selecting qualified, French-speaking, female Canadian mentor coaches. Managing the logistics involved in bringing the women, several of whom had never been beyond their country's borders, to Canada, not once, but twice. Securing accreditation and opportunities to work with the apprentices' national teams, always a formidable task in the androcentric world that is sport.

In the end, the challenges were overcome and the Jeux de la Francophonie Apprenticeship Program was pronounced a success, producing impressive results for everyone involved and the promise of a lasting network.

For the talented and committed apprentice coaches, the program has fostered deep relationships and boosted their confidence in their coaching and leadership abilities. The experience was equally rewarding and confidence-building for the mentor coaches, who embraced the experience with enthusiasm.

In telling the personal stories and the sharing the experiences of the people who made the Jeux de la Francophonie Apprenticeship Program happen, it is our hope that other women coaches will be encouraged to act whenever, and however, an opportunity presents itself to make a difference. -Sheila Robertson

A Practical Lesson About Developing Women Coaches

By Rose Mercier

The Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching has examined the challenges facing women coaches and discussed general approaches and strategies for bringing about positive change. In this issue, you will read about one specific program, the individuals involved, and the program's impact. While it is important for leaders to identify and understand issues, taking action is the real expression of leadership. The Jeux de la Francophonie (JDLF) were held in Canada in the summer of 2001. Alongside the exciting athletic and cultural competitions taking place in Hull, Que., and Ottawa during those hot, humid July days was a less visible but equally exciting

happening. Seven women coaches from countries competing in the Games and their Canadian mentors engaged in a groundbreaking venture that produced many highlights. This is their story.

Apprenticeship Programs for Women Coaches

Since its inception in 1987, the Women in Coaching program of the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) has consistently introduced innovations designed to encourage and support women coaches.

One prime example is an apprenticeship program that got under way with a short-term project involving Canadian women coaches in apprentice coaching at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria. Five years later, a similar project involved coaches at the 1999 Pan American Games in Winnipeg.

The three-year Long-Term Apprenticeship Program (LTAP), involving 17 women coaches in winter and summer sports, is now in its second year. Although the LTAP doesn't have a major Games focus, there is an expectation that coaches will be involved with international competitions and high-level athletes in their sport. With the opportunity presented by the JDLF being held in Canada, it seemed timely to create yet another opportunity for developing coaches. The result was an apprenticeship program for JDLF coaches.

The basic design of Women in Coaching apprenticeship programs involves several elements:

- identifying developing coaches who are interested in coaching in the high performance levels of their sport
- matching each apprentice coach with a mentor coach
- designing a learning program that includes opportunities to be involved in guided training and competitive opportunities with the mentor (and other) coaches and leadership development and technical seminars
- financially supporting the facilitation of practical coaching and educational activities
- creating a strong support network among apprentice coaches.

The Jeux de la Francophonie Apprenticeship Program

The program design was a cooperative effort between the CAC's Cyndie Flett, director, Women in Coaching, and Trice Cameron, senior policy analyst at Sport Canada. They agreed that the target coaches would be women in less developed Francophone countries. After modifying the program design to fit the time frame and circumstances, Cyndie and Trice presented their proposal to the Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie, based in Paris. The four-part plan offered:

- a four-day leadership seminar prior to the Games (tentatively scheduled for April)
- a visit by the mentor coach to the apprentice coach in May/June
- involvement by the apprentice coach with her sport's JDLF team
- a second four-day leadership seminar to take place immediately following the Games.

Once funding was approved, there were many challenges to be met.

- Who would identify the apprentice coaches?
- Who would facilitate the leadership seminars?
- Who could be mentor coaches?
- How would the involvement of the apprentice coaches with their national teams be organized?
- How would access to the Games be guaranteed for the apprentice coaches?

In the end, the program differed somewhat from the plan. By the time the funding and program proposal was approved, it was too late to schedule the on-site visits of the mentor coaches. The second leadership seminar was significantly abbreviated

and combined with a coaching seminar held in Montreal. Nevertheless, the program became a living demonstration of the power of partnership and collaboration and a testimony to the effectiveness of sharing experiences.

Designing the Leadership Seminar

Leadership seminars have always been an integral component of Women in Coaching apprenticeship programs. The seminars are designed and facilitated by Penny Werthner and Rose Mercier, regular contributors to this Journal. The JDLF seminars, however, needed French-speaking experienced facilitators with a background in coaching, leadership, and women in sport. Preparing the facilitators involved first providing them with some exposure to the existing leadership material and then modifying the design. During this exercise, it became clear that partnerships needed to be formed.

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), the Canada Games Society, and the 2001 Canada Summer Games Organizing Committee agreed to join the program. This made it possible for the following preparatory steps to be taken:

- A women's leadership workshop, facilitated by Penny and Rose, was held in London, Ont., in March for Canada Games volunteers, providing them with enhanced leadership skills and an opportunity to network with other women in leading volunteer roles. The workshop, free of charge to participants, was offered as volunteer recognition, a concept that provides a template for Canada Games volunteers in the future.
- Sylvie Béliveau, Guylaine Demers, Ariane Loignon, and Linda Marquis were identified as potential facilitators for the JDLF program and they attended the London workshop. They worked with Penny and Rose for a day and a half following the workshop and another day and a half at the end of April to design the seminar for the JDLF program.
- CAAWS's collaboration brought the association several benefits. The London workshop gave CAAWS visibility with a new group of women. Four Francophone facilitators are now available for CAAWS leadership workshops, and the handouts needed for the seminar have been translated. As a result, CAAWS is positioned to establish a stronger presence in Quebec.

The Apprentice Coaches

Six of the seven apprentice coaches come from Africa; the seventh is from Lebanon. CONFEJES (Conférence des ministres de la Jeunesse et des Sports), the organization under whose auspices the JDLF are organized, was responsible for identifying the apprentice coaches.

Once the names of the apprentice coaches had been received, Sylvie Béliveau, the former coach of the national women's soccer team, who had been hired as project coordinator, was left with the challenge of contacting each coach and arranging her travel to Ottawa for the leadership seminar at the end of May. Accommodating time differences, playing long-distance telephone tag, following up less than dependable e-mail access, arranging and rearranging air travel schedules became Sylvie's daily routine. Finally, seven coaches arrived – eager, nervous, excited, tentative – and the program began.

Meet the Apprentice Coaches

"I met all of them for the first time this summer," says Sylvie. "These were women from abroad, bringing their own culture, background, and knowledge, and women from Canada who, before this project, were as much strangers to me as the apprentices. For so long I have felt alone in my own little world. I looked for others

who would understand my needs as a woman in sport. I had searched for women I could look up to and ask for guidance. I longed to share ideas with other women like myself. It took this kind of project to bring together women who were looking for the same type of bonds.

"As the project coordinator, I was able to meet everyone (by e-mail, phone, and exchange of letters) before we assembled. The women arrived a few days before the start of the May seminar. Some travelled alone; others had the chance to meet during their trip."

Ratompohary (Fara) Hendrisimahay from Madagascar was the first to arrive in Ottawa. As a result of her involvement in the JDLF program, Fara had the opportunity to be one of two assistant coaches for her country's women's basketball team. At home, two hours away from the capital, Antananarivo, Fara is creating programs for youth. Although reserved, she showed tremendous leadership abilities when it came to basketball. Even though she did not have a prominent coaching role with Madagascar's team at the Games, she was still able to demonstrate her excellent coaching skills. She came away from the program with more confidence and the reassurance that she is indeed a good coach.

Athletics coach Pauline Makdessi from Lebanon joined Sylvie and Fara a day later. Pauline is a throws specialist in discus. She works at a school and coaches her athletes in both a school and a club setting. She proved herself as a coach during the JDLF and was asked by the Lebanese team to join their world track and field championship staff in Edmonton later in the summer. Unfortunately, that didn't happen due to lack of funding. Pauline was instrumental in maintaining contact among the international coaches between May and July and has been the prime mover in initiating an international coaches network.

Ariane Bissik from Cameroon was the most experienced coach in the group and has a strong education background. She was working towards completion of her thesis during the summer. Ariane coaches some of Cameroon's top track athletes and is her country's top jumps coach. She was enthusiastic in her praise of the initiative it took to make this program a reality. She found the discussion and sharing of ideas related to conflict resolution to be of particular interest.

Jeanne-Solange Nkouongmoua, also from Cameroon, is a national judo coach. Both Jeanne-Solange and Ariane were challenged by the fact that Cameroon did not include them within their country's Games delegation. The Cameroon women found strength in the support of the group. By the end of the Games, they were able to enact practical strategies developed in the May seminar to achieve their objective of being accepted within their national delegation. They focused on coaching tasks rather than the politics of the situation. By applying some of the communication and listening skills introduced at the first seminar, both women succeeded in being integrated within their Games' team.

Florence Agbo from the Ivory Coast is an experienced athletics coach for able-bodied athletes and athletes with a disability. She attended the Atlanta and Sydney Games where her athletes performed successfully. Even though she is a full-time employee of the athletics federation of the Ivory Coast, Florence regularly faces challenges as a woman coach. She put her leadership skills into action and created an association for women in sport in the Ivory Coast in the time between the May seminar and the JDLF two months later.

Chitra Mooloo from Ile de Maurice has been coaching athletics for more than 11 years. In addition, she is continuing her studies and is an active 400m runner. The JDLF was Chitra's first experience as a coach in a major event. The May seminar so inspired Chitra that upon her return home, she took it upon herself to start gathering women in a park to introduce them to physical activity. It seems that the women had

been waiting for the opportunity and are now pursuing the activity, whether or not Chitra is present.

Delphine Koumsongo from Burkina Faso is also an athletics coach. A teacher of physical education, Delphine coaches jumps and throws at a club in the evenings. She had never travelled outside Africa before May, and had only travelled once outside Burkina Faso when she took part in a group discussion in the Ivory Coast on the involvement of women in sport.

The Mentor Coaches

Once the apprentice coaches were identified, the next challenge was to find Canadian women coaches in matching sports who are French-speaking. This proved challenging, as the pool of potential coaches is quite small. Fortunately, several experienced coaches were prepared to be part of the program and work with the international coaches.

The Canadian mentors met their international apprentices for the first time at the leadership seminar.

Linda Marquis was the mentor coach for basketball. Linda has been the assistant coach of the women's national basketball team for the past four years and has been a coach at the Université Laval for 17 years. Linda and Fara share a similar passion for their sport and Fara learned very quickly with the support and guidance Linda provided.

Kim Chapdelaine is an athletics coach. A former international athlete, she is one of the few Canadian women qualified by Athletics Canada to coach at the international level. Kim brought energy and enthusiasm to the program; she needed both as she was working with three apprentices. Each was highly appreciative of the content Kim provided and the different approaches to teaching technical skills she shared.

Julie Côté is an athletics coach who specializes in endurance events. Julie was a coach with the Canada-Quebec team at the Games and that allowed Chitra and Ariane a close look at a model of major Games coaching. Not only did Julie gain experience as a mentor, she also learned from her fellow mentors. Kim and Julie combined their efforts in some sessions so that the apprentice coaches gained a "big picture" of athletics.

Louise Champion was the judo mentor coach. A 3M NCCP Level 4 candidate, Louise has been a New Brunswick Canada Games coach and is an active coach in her hometown of Mont Joli, Que. The JDLF was her first international coaching experience. "It was a wonderful and unique experience for me," she says. "It was great to meet other women who face the same problems and it also feels good to realize that I am not the only one facing similar challenges. This project made me question my attitudes, my decision-making, the way I was communicating. It made me reflect on my values, something that we don't do too often, which causes us to lose our path at times. I realized that it was OK to feel the way I do at times, and that it's OK to speak up. The leadership seminar taught me how to say it better and not walk away."

Leadership Seminar

The leadership seminar was held at the headquarters of the JDLF organizing committee (COJF) in Ottawa. Coaches stayed on-site, as did the project coordinator and the leadership seminar facilitators. The content, based on the CAAWS Women in Leadership workshop, had been modified to fit the particular needs of this program. It was with some trepidation that workshop leaders Guylaine Demers and Ariane Loignon greeted participants.

A veteran basketball coach, Guylaine is a professor in the Université Laval's Department of Physical Education. She holds a PhD in physical activity, specializing in coaches process planning. She is a 3M NCCP Master Course Conductor and has a

key role in the transition of the program to competency-based education and training.

Ariane was a world champion long track speed skater who is now coaching her own club. She works with the Quebec Games and was a member of the national board of directors of Speed Skating Canada. Although she didn't have a wealth of facilitation experience prior to the seminar, her understanding of the coaching requirements of international athletes and her ability to listen to others and develop empathy made her a natural. Her confidence to lead similar events was boosted.

As they began to design the workshop, Ariane, Guylaine, Linda, Penny, Rose, and Sylvie wondered how the workshop content and interactive format would be received by the apprentice coaches and their mentors. Exceptionally well, as it turned out. The feedback from the coaches reflects a strong appreciation for the approach.

Rather than telling them what to do, the workshop created the opportunity to identify issues, share experience and knowledge, and work together to develop strategies and possible solutions. The coaches valued the climate of trust and openness that evolved from the learner-centred approach of the workshop. This encouraged the shyer coaches to share their ideas and feelings and tell their stories, which had a positive impact on the working relationship created between the mentor coach and her apprentice.

Guylaine, who had travelled to Africa to lead coaching workshops, commented that the leadership seminar was very different from teaching technical skills where the leader is often presented as an "expert." Once the coaches realized this difference, their participation and confidence in sharing their experience and expertise was unqualified.

The schedule shown below cannot fully communicate the full impact of the three days. The content generated animated discussions and full participation. The coaches found many points of similarity in their work and lives as women coaches.

Day 1

Day 2

Day 3

Morning

Introductions and Ice Breakers

Leadership – reflecting on personal experiences and creating a shared vision of leadership.

Morning

Women and Sport – Personal View on Barriers and Challenges and Taking Action

Introduction to Communication with Athletes, Coaches, Officials and Administrators – When It Works and When It Doesn't

Morning

Communicating Clear Messages

Managing Conflict in Coaching

Afternoon

Identifying Key Leadership Skills

Leadership and Coaching Values

Afternoon

Communication and Gender

Practicing Effective Communication

Afternoon

Developing a Partnership Plan – Canadian mentor and international coach.

Evening

Women and Sport – The Canadian System - CAC Programs and Actions

Evening

Music and Dance around a meal at a restaurant

Working Together

The apprentice coaches and their respective mentors agreed to communicate a couple of times between the May leadership seminar and the JDLF. The Canadian mentors were preparing technical packages and other information to offer; the apprentices were impatiently waiting to meet again. There were many exchanges, not only between the mentors and their apprentices, but also between the apprentices. Clearly, each coach realized the value of this international network in supporting her work.

When the coaches reassembled in July, it was as if they had never been apart. Although they arrived from different parts of the world and stayed in different residences, it did not take long for them to find each other. However, this time there were immediate challenges to work out, including how to integrate with other team coaches, who were predominantly male, and how to deal with administrators. Most importantly, there were athletes with whom to work.

Another significant partnership was key to making the program work. The COJF and, in particular, Anne-Marie Brunet, director of sport competitions, played essential roles in obtaining full accreditation for all the participants, Sylvie, and Cyndie, as well as bed-space and meal access for the coaches. In past programs, obtaining this type of accreditation and access has been a big stumbling block. The COJF's progressive approach is a standard that other organizing committees should strive to meet. Some of the international coaches had more direct exposure to athletes than others. In some cases, adjustment, great tact, and professionalism were needed to meet the program's objectives of providing coaching experience in a major Games environment. All of the coaches rose to the occasion, gaining credibility as a coach and individual.

Reflecting on the Experience

It's been almost two months since the JDLF ended. Here are one coach's comments about the experience.

Delphine Koumsongo:

"I learned a lot from this program. My technical knowledge grew tremendously as a result of my experience at the Games and Montreal conference in the company of my mentor coach. Observing the athletes with my mentor coach really gave me confidence about my coaching. On a professional level, I gained a big picture view from the content that was presented. I know now the role of a leader, her attributes, and the challenges women face in this role. More particularly, I learned how to take action in the face of problems. Learning how to listen and communicate effectively were skills that were really beneficial since I didn't do these very well before. The fact that communication and relationships are the basis of effective interventions has stayed with me. I treasure the friendships and links with other coaches that grew in this program. As a result of this program, I think I am more responsible in my coaching and more considerate in my relations with other coaches and athletes. These types of programs are very rare in Africa, especially for women."

Lessons Learned

On each occasion when an apprenticeship program has ended, there has been a purposeful analysis of what has been learned. One of the recurring affirmations is the importance of having opportunities within an open and supportive environment where women can share their experience of being a coach in a male-dominated sport system. There is often surprise and then comfort in realizing that other women have the same challenges. The coaches at the JDLF, like coaches in past and current apprenticeships, found a new confidence in the discoveries they made in these discussions. They realized that others share and agree with their approach to coaching. They are relieved to know that others are not satisfied with the status quo

for women in sport and that others face barriers in achieving their coaching goals. Such exchanges are integral to being able to move beyond individual solutions to more fundamental change.

Women coaches often work in isolation. Great strength and encouragement are found in a supportive network that remains in touch long after the seminars end and the Games come to a close. When coaches return to their home environments, it is important to be able to write, phone, e-mail, and look forward to meeting again at future competitions. However, these networks need to be sustained; the commitment of even one colleague can help to nurture this important link. For the Pan American Games apprentices, that link was Sherry Vanin; for the JDLF program, it's Pauline Makdessi and Kim Chapdelaine.

The importance of more than one coming together of the group was once again confirmed in this program. Developing leadership skills is an ongoing process that requires coaches to put into action the enthusiasm and learnings from a seminar. Over and over again, we have found that action is more likely when coaches realize there is a second seminar (or third or fourth) because an expectation of action emerges. The additional seminars also provide an important forum for feedback and positive reinforcement. You have to start doing things differently, or doing different things, to make change a reality. When you leave a seminar, the realities of your everyday life sometimes make it difficult to implement the best-laid plans. It's often easier to return to old habits or behaviours than it is to climb the learning curves and embrace the discomfort of the unfamiliar.

The changes that had to be made in this program – eliminating a more extended second seminar and relinquishing the Canadian mentor's visit to the international coach's home situation – were substantive losses. More contact would increase the support and the opportunity to increase confidence.

The lesson that seems almost too obvious is one of the most important: programs such as this one cannot take place without collaboration and cooperation among organizations. The ability to work together in the best interests of the goal of developing more women coaches was a hallmark of the many associations who played some part in this success. A big thank you to all: CAC, the COJF, CONFEJES, the Institut intergouvernemental de la Francophonie, Sport Canada, the Canada Games Council, the 2001 Canada Summer Games Organizing Committee, and CAAWS.

One Program, Many Benefits

Some might argue that such short-term programs do not make much difference in the scheme of things. But I'm reminded of a much-told story.

A young woman walked along the beach at low tide. Every time she saw a starfish stranded on the waterless beach, she stopped, picked it up, and threw it back into the ocean. An older woman was walking along the beach in the opposite direction. When they were close enough to speak, the older woman said, "I've watched you throw the starfish back into the ocean, but I can't figure out what you hope to accomplish. There are so many starfish. How can you ever hope to make a difference?" At that, the younger woman bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the ocean also. "Did you see that starfish?" she asked the older woman. "Why, yes," she answered, "But what is your point?" "Well," said the younger woman, "My actions made a difference to that one starfish."

Programs that have a positive impact on individual women coaches by increasing their numbers, enabling them to become more skilled, creating support networks of coaches who are trying to make a difference for girls and women in sport, can play a role in making change. Even one-off programs can make a difference in the life of an individual who may play a key leadership role in the future. Initiating more programs

with similar goals throughout many cities, provinces, and countries would, of course, magnify the impact.

From a Canadian perspective, the benefits of the JDLF apprenticeship program were many:

- New partnerships were experienced that can be a template for future collaboration.
- There is increased capacity to provide French-language coaching and leadership development for women.
- There are more women with experience in mentoring other coaches.

Certainly, we are learning through the International Women and Sport Conferences that have been held biennially since Brighton (1994) that there is much in common in the struggles that women and girls face in achieving equity in sport. Sharing experiences, research, and knowledge is one strategy of many in making a difference. And that, in the end, is the objective of this issue of the Journal – to tell the story of one program and the women who were affected and hope others learn from this sharing of experience and then ... take action themselves!

ROSE MERCIER

Rose Mercier established her independent consulting business after a 20-year career in the management and leadership of sport. An experienced facilitator in leadership and organizational development, she works with a wide variety of organizations within and outside sport. Her clients include Speed Skating Canada, Rowing Canada, the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association, the Aboriginal Sport Circle, Water Polo Canada, the Canadian Child Care Federation, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, and Sport Canada. Rose has served on various national committees and boards and currently on the board of the Social Planning Council of Kingston.