

Three Pioneers: Women Who Coach Male Athletes

Myths abound when it comes to women in the coaching profession. Over the years, the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) has tackled all of them, from the one that suggests that marriage and children spell an end to her coaching career—sure it is difficult to successfully combine the three, but studies and role models point to support on the home front as the key ingredient—to the one that positions the woman coach as (too) emotional. Anyone who follows televised sports would be hard put to advance that erroneous claim for more than 30 seconds. Emotions certainly play a part in good coaching, and while all generalizations should be suspect, women tend to bring to sport those that tilt toward fairness and balance as opposed to the more commonplace bravado and posturing of their male counterparts. More to the point is the fact that there are as many styles of coaching as there are coaches, but the one that works is inevitably based on mutual respect.

In this issue, the [Journal](#) disproves yet another myth, the one about women coaches lacking the ability, knowledge, and commitment to successfully coach male high performance athletes. Their numbers may be small, but they do exist and flourish, as author [Claire Carver-Dias](#) discovered.

Track and field coach [Brenda Van Tighem](#) has developed sprinter [Sam Effah](#) into a legitimate contender for a spot on Canada's 2012 Olympic team.

Appointed in 2003 as the first woman head coach of a Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) men's basketball team, [Olga Hrycak](#), who heads the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) program, began with raw rookies—the team was a first for UQAM—and captured the Quebec championship in 2009/2010.

Multi-decorated long track speed skating coach [Xiuli Wang](#), who has drawn accolades for her stellar coaching of such female stars as [Clara Hughes](#) and [Kristina Groves](#), has also enjoyed considerable success with a large number of male athletes. As Claire points out, strides are being made as growing numbers of men are being exposed to female leadership in the workplace, in business, in government, and elsewhere in the public sector. Only in coaching is such progress proving to be elusive and for reasons hard to fathom given the encouraging examples discussed in this article. Let us hope that the coaching world takes notice and acts to dispel one last myth.—[Sheila Robertson](#)

The views expressed in the articles of the [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.

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Three Pioneers: Women Who Coach Male Athletes

by Claire Carver-Dias

It is widely acknowledged that the full-time woman coach at the high performance level is an all-too-rare creature. But there is an even more rarefied group of coaches out there: high-level women coaches who coach men.

Let's look at the broader Canadian community. Increasingly, men are exposed to female leadership in the workplace—women with varied modes and styles of leadership. We are also seeing an increase in women leaders in business, in government, and elsewhere in the public sector:

- The current Canadian government has the highest percentage of women Cabinet members in history. The House of Commons currently has 67 women (Statistics Canada, 2010).
- Women are also increasing their participation in other aspects of Canadian life. Currently, women make up the majority of full-time students in most university faculties (Statistics Canada, 2010).
- The labour force participation rate for working-age women (15 to 64 years) has risen from 68.2 per cent to 74.3 per cent since 1997 (Statistics Canada, 2010).
- There has been a long-term increase in the share of women who are working in managerial positions (Statistics Canada, 2010).
- [Fortune](#) 500 executive officer positions held by women in 2010: 14.4 per cent, or 735 of 5,110 officers. This is an increase from 13.5 per cent in 2009 (Catalyst Census, 2010).
- [Fortune](#) 500 corporate board seats held by women in 2010: 15.7 per cent, slightly higher than the 15.2 per cent in 2008 and 2009. This is also up from 14.8 per cent in 2007 and 14.6 per cent in 2006 (Catalyst Census, 2010).
- [Financial Post](#) 500 corporate officer positions held by women in 2008: 16.9 per cent, up from 15.1 per cent in 2006 and 14.4 per cent in 2004 (Catalyst Census, 2010).
- [Financial Post](#) 500 corporate board seats held by women in 2009: 14.0 per cent, up from 13.0 per cent in 2007, 12.0 per cent in 2005, 11.2 per cent in 2003, and 9.8 per cent in 2001 (Catalyst Census, 2010).
- Women now fill 27 per cent of corporate officer jobs at Canada's 44 largest federal and provincial Crown corporations, almost double the 14 per cent of corporate officer positions filled by women at publicly traded companies in the private sector (Catalyst Census, 2010).
- Major universities, including McGill, Carleton, Calgary, Alberta, and Regina, are headed by female presidents.

Statistics show that there is an increase in female leadership across most sectors, and interestingly enough, the statistical growth in female leadership in sport (executive directors, board members, and executive or board committee members) is higher than the national average in other sectors, [except](#) in the area of coaching.

While the participation level of women in sport is growing, there is little evidence of an increase of women entering coaching ([Women in Coaching: A Descriptive Study](#), 2006). It follows, therefore, that it is men who have taken on the coaching of this influx of new female participants. And among the women who are currently engaged in coaching, very little crossover occurs with women coaching men beyond the grassroots level.

In this article, I share and celebrate the success stories of three women coaches who have excelled in coaching men. Also included are the views of some of the male athletes they coach. It is my hope that readers will be enlightened and motivated to engage more women in high level

coaching positions and not just in positions where they coach women, but also in positions where they coach men.

Brenda Van Tighem: The Individual Approach



Athletics coach Brenda Van Tighem
Photo Courtesy of University of Calgary

Brenda Van Tighem grew up believing she could do anything. It never occurred to her that there were some things that most women didn't do, like coach top athletes or, even more radical, coach men.

As a youngster, Brenda played and excelled at a wide range of sports in her small hometown of Trail, B.C., in the Kootenays, the home of a number of track and field stars. She watched and cheered as many women around her pursued sport and succeeded. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), she pursued her interest in teaching and coaching with the encouragement of the late Lionel Pugh, the UBC cross country and track and field coach from 1964 to 1987. She began her teaching career in Chase, B.C., and while there coached a girls' basketball team to the provincial finals. When she moved to Kamloops in central B.C., she continued coaching both girls and boys.

In her early years as a coach, Brenda coached long jumper **Lana Joly** to a Canadian junior championship, and the following year she led three juvenile athletes to national Legion medals. Over the years, many of Brenda's high school athletes moved on to Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) schools.

"It was very rewarding to see my athletes achieve and exceed their goals... I really started to love coaching," says the National Coaching Certification Program Level 4 certified coach. "So when I was asked to coach with the Dinos [at the University of Calgary], I knew that it was the right thing for me."

Over the years, it struck her that there were very few women professional coaches and, specifically, that she was a female coach in a male-dominated sport. She still never really gave much thought, however, to the fact that she was one of the very few women coaching men at the elite level. According to Brenda, that just happened. And as she began to coach her athletes to higher and higher levels in sport, it happened more and more.

"A great deal of time and effort is needed to get an athlete to the world level, and I've been willing to put that time in, sometimes unpaid," she says. "The funny thing is that I never chose to coach males or coach females; I just chose to coach."

Brenda's work with her athletes is governed by a strong coaching philosophy: "My first priority is to do everything I can to help all of my athletes reach their potential, regardless of their gender," she says. "I care for each athlete and I do everything possible to make sure each of them gets what he or she needs. Whenever possible, I do what I can to take care of extra work or distractions, so that the athlete can focus on performance."



Sam Effah in action at the 2009 World Athletics Championships

Photo Credit: Claus Andersen/Athletics Canada

One of her star athletes, Sam Effah, the current Canadian 100 metres sprint champion and 2012 Olympic hopeful, sees Brenda's adherence to this philosophy as the key to her success as a coach and one of the reasons why he chooses to work with her. "Brenda is always looking to assist, whether you are a great athlete or not. There is no discrimination in any way and she is always doing her best to coach," he says. "With her knowledge of our sport, she has brought me from being a mediocre athlete to an elite, world-class athlete on the verge of breaking the 10-second barrier." She would, he says, commit the same energy to any athlete.

Despite Brenda's success on the field, she remains an unpaid coach and manager. She notes that women coaches may have a more difficult time than their male counterparts in gaining the respect they're due, even after repeated successes. Sam agrees that when he first began working with her, she didn't always get enough credit for her coaching accomplishments, but that is slowly changing.

"When I was starting out [with Brenda], I didn't think I gained the respect I deserved through my performances.

This all changed when people saw me continuing to improve with Brenda as my coach, and I began competing and winning against athletes who had been training for years with other, 'better' coaches," says 22-year-old Sam. "At first people looked at me differently, because we were a different coach-athlete pair, and I think people expected me to be coached by someone else. Now people have noticed that her coaching has helped not only me but my training group become one of the best in the country. We have had people all over the world and from different sports come to train with us, due to the results of Brenda's coaching."

One of the things that Sam says sets Brenda apart from her male counterparts is her caring and supportive approach that looked not just at his performance on the track, but took into consideration his life off the track.

"[Brenda] cared about my personal struggles and the hardships I've been through. She cares for me as a whole, not just my track career but me as a person," he says. "[With Brenda] I don't feel pressure to compete, but am able to relax and perform at an optimal level with no extra worries."

Sam is eager to dispel the myths around what women coaches are really like, particularly the false notion that women coaches aren't tough enough and may not take coaching seriously. When he thinks of Brenda, he sees her commitment to addressing the **whole** athlete's needs with a level-headed, individualized approach, and that's what has led him to the top of the ranks.

"There's the stereotype that women are too soft and may not be serious, but it is not true. Out of all my rivals starting out in high school, I was the only one to train on to the world level because I was free of injury and was not over-run, which is a problem with most athletes," he says. "Many of the people I started out in track with stopped running due to over-use, the fear of practice being too hard, and just the sheer volume of running in practice. But [Brenda] has done the research with the programs and methods she teaches me. She has enabled me to peak and perform at the best times of the year and be injury free, so I've never missed a season of running. She continues to support not only me but my family life, and I trust that with her continued hard work, she will bring both me and **Amonn Nelson**, my training partner, to the Olympics next year."

Evan Kimick, another of Brenda's athletes, and a double gold medalist at the 2006 Alberta Summer Games in the 400 metres and 800 metres, has taken note of a few differences in the approach and styles of male and female coaches.

"Before training with Brenda, I was coached by a male coach... I noticed that some male coaches tend to be more authoritative or more in control of a training program and quite often, they tell the athletes to **just trust** the training program," says the 21-year-old athlete. "Many female coaches are also very active at practice. However, one of the biggest differences is that they seem more willing to learn and work with the athlete through the training process." Evan sees both methods as effective, but says that having a coach who is willing to learn and work on a program together with the athlete enhances training and makes the pursuit of a goal more enjoyable.

Like Sam, Evan appreciates Brenda's support of his life and needs off the field of play. "Brenda is very encouraging and supportive not only at practice and track meets, but also outside of track, in each of our everyday lives," he says. "And she emphasizes all the small things that aid athletes in becoming more successful such as recovery meals, ice baths, stretching, athletic therapy appointments, supplementary weights, having a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night, and so on. Not only will Brenda stay for the full duration of track practice, including weight training, she also comes to many athletic therapy appointments to support the athlete."

Brenda is hard-pressed to identify key differences between the needs and attitudes of male and female athletes. Rather, she sees each of her athletes as a unique individual with differing talents, differing styles, and differing needs. The gender of her athletes doesn't seem to alter the way she approaches her work. With both women and men athletes, she makes sure she invests the time in finding out their personality and style, their unique fears and challenges, and what they need from her to help them attain their personal best in the sport she knows so well. As for the effectiveness of her approach, her athletes' results speak for themselves.

Olga Hrycak: Making It Amongst Men



UQAM men's basketball coach Olga Hrycak
Photo Credit: A. Dobrowolskyj

In 1967, during her last year as a student at the Université de Montréal, Olga Hrycak was called by her former high school physical education teacher and asked to coach a junior girls' basketball team. Little did Olga know she was at the starting line of a 43-year-long (to date) journey as a coach. Now the NCCP Level 3 certified coach is in her eighth year as head of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) men's basketball team program.

Along the way, she has collected a long list of impressive credentials, including becoming an NCCP Master Conductor, acting as an apprentice coach for the 1988 men's Olympic Team, serving for 16 years as Chef de Mission for Canada Basketball, three years as a member of the International Basketball Federation's Technical Committee, 16 years as a Canada Basketball board member, and a stint as president of Quebec Basketball Federation, and authoring several basketball-related resources and publications, not to mention a long list of coaching-related awards.

Olga's coaching background includes coaching both girls and boys at the high school, CEGEP, university and provincial levels, as well as two years as an apprentice/assistant coach at the national level before settling into her role at UQAM. Even after so many successes over so many years, the 63-year-old Montrealer is as devoted to her coaching career as ever.

"My parents taught me the benefits of working hard at the tasks you undertake," says Olga. "I believe that hard work and teamwork can outdo some of the greatest talent on a basketball court." She applies this learning on a daily basis, one of the reasons she has been able to attain so much success as a coach.

Still, she is often faced with the many challenges that come with being a lone woman in a field full of men.

"If I go out and socialize with other university-level coaches it's usually me and the rest of the group are men," she explains. "It's not that I'm trying to be one of the boys... I just find it funny that after I've spent so many years in the sport, coaching men, and doing it well, that they [the other coaches] don't necessarily see me as one of them."

In order to silence her critics, Olga felt that she had to stay strong, keep at it, work harder, and achieve great results consistently to prove that she could ably coach men. She had to demonstrate that she was serious about coaching.

"When I first started coaching men, I had to earn their respect. I had to be strong, firm, and persistent in what I wanted them to learn," says Olga. "Players got to know me as a coach from clinics I presented across the province. Others who didn't know me challenged me during the first couple of weeks of practice. Once they saw that I was very serious about what I did or that I was passionate and knowledgeable about the game, that I knew what I was talking about, they eventually backed off."

Though she's devoted so much of her life to coaching and basketball, Olga has never once been considered a full-time coach. She worked as a teacher and then for 34 years as a physical education consultant for the English Montreal School Board, packing her non-work hours full of coaching commitments, with little or no pay to show for it, and only a small stipend while coaching at the CEGEP-level. She is now retired from her career in education, and although she sometimes spends more than 40 hours a week on her coaching commitments at UQAM, she is hired only on a part-time basis.

These challenges do little to faze Olga. She loves her job as a basketball coach and is very comfortable coaching men. There are some small differences in the way she manages the role of coaching men versus women, however. For one, she feels it's important that her three assistant coaches be male.

"For example, what occurs in the locker room after a game is important to a coach, and my assistants—**Nevio Marzinotto**, **Mario Joseph**, and **Randy Alexandre**—help me out here, because players go into the locker room after a game and get undressed so I can't necessarily go right in," she explains. "Right after a game, I want to know what the emotions are of my players, I want to know how they're reacting, and I can never appreciate that because I'm not the first one in the locker room so I often have to listen to the comments from my assistants."



STANDING: (left to right) Ouicem Maatoug, Vanessa Contenta (Therapist), Marvin Bazile, Alexandre Bernard, Philippe Tamba, Mathieu Landry, Emmanuel Verreault, Eric Côté-Kougnima, Vincent Champagne SITTING: (left to right) Gregory St. Amand, Frantz St. Cyr, Patrick Kervin, Arthaud Plesius, Thierry Justin, Jesse Memette, Nimoy Lamour
Photo Courtesy of UQAM

Éric Côté-Kougnima, captain of the UQAM team for the past three years, is one of Olga's hardest working athletes. When he found out Olga was to be his coach, the 22-year-old was excited about the opportunity to work with and learn from her. "It didn't bother me at all that she was a woman coaching a men's team," he says. "I found I was excited to get to know her and see how she coached."

Éric considers that perhaps his total comfort was partly due to the fact that he was raised by his mother and has great respect for strong women.

However, Éric has noticed one primary difference between Olga and some of his male coaches from the past. "Olga has the ability to get her players very emotionally involved in their training and the game. She knows how to dig deep and find out what motivates each player and uses that knowledge to get the player out of his comfort zone. So I feel like we have a deeper connection with her as a coach." He adds, "And she's easier to talk to than some of the other coaches, very approachable."

Olga maintains that the gender of her players doesn't change the kind of coach she is.

"I truly believe that 'a coach, is a coach, is a coach' regardless of their gender and the gender of their athletes," she says. "I seek perfection, team cohesiveness, hard work, and discipline, and I teach the basics of the game. These characteristics and abilities are the same for both [men and women]."

And for her success is more than just making it in a sport environment dominated by men (which she already has), or proving that a woman can do a great job coaching men (which she has), or winning a championship (which her teams have done several times over the years). She defines success with the words of one of her coaching heroes, the late **John Wooden** of UCLA basketball fame: "Success is peace of mind in knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming."

Xiuli Wang: Cool, Calm, and Collected



Coach Xiuli Wang
Photo Courtesy of Speed Skating Canada

Coach Xiuli Wang knows what it will take to bring athletes from where they are to where they want to go, and she can create a tailored plan for the journey.

The former world 1500 metres long track speed skating champion skated on China's national team from 1983 to 1992 and has been a national team coach, based at Calgary's Olympic Oval, since 2002. Xiuli was named to the 2006 Most Influential Women in Sport and Physical Activity in Canada list. The NCCP Level 4 certified coach has been the recipient of dozens of coaching awards, including the Petro-Canada Coaching Excellence Award every year from 2002 to 2010, Speed Skating Canada's Female Coach of the Year Award every year from 2005 to 2009, and the Jack Donohue Coach of the Year Award for 2006.

With all of her long track speed skating athletes, male or female, she adopts the following approach: "Figure out how to communicate well with the athlete, do my best as a coach, and expect them to do their best."

So far so good.

At the past three Olympic Winter Games, her athletes have earned one gold, four silver, and three bronze medals. And not just women. In her 15-year career as a coach, the 45-year-old has already coached about 30 male athletes.



Arne Dankers
Photo Courtesy of Speed Skating Canada

One of her former athletes, **Arne Dankers**, silver medallist in team pursuit and fifth in 5000 metres at the 2006 Olympics, had four coaches over the span of his competitive career, three males and Xiuli.

He immediately noted a difference in the way Xiuli coached him from the way he was used to: "During competition, some of the male coaches would give big pump-up speeches, and Xiuli would instead tell me what to focus on, in a calmer manner, which I preferred, and am more receptive to," says the 30-year-old.

It was also Xiuli's collected attitude and professionalism in training and at competition that impressed Arne. "During training, some of my male coaches tried to become more like a friend to me than a coach. Xiuli was much more professional and strict, and demanded respect," he says. "I am more of an introverted skater, and I skated best when I was completely focused inside of myself. Some of the male coaches were more extroverted people, which during racing perhaps led to suboptimal performance.

"In training, we were more serious, because Xiuli was more serious with us. I think this was very important, and she gained a lot of respect from us in this way. And in the end, we trained harder, not because she forced us to, but because we wanted her to respect us, too."

Arne claims that there exists a stereotype that women coaches can't handle the pressures and stress of competition. And he insists it's false.

He's right. It's hard to argue with eight Olympic medals.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how three women have experienced success in coaching high performance male athletes. It highlights how, through a steadfast commitment to their individual coaching philosophies, they have been able to dispel some of the gender stereotype biases around women coaches, carve their own paths, gain the trust and respect of their male athletes, and consistently generate success.

All three coaches have demonstrated that a healthy approach to coaching is an individualized one that looks not solely at the gender of the athletes they are coaching, but seeks to understand and cater to the individual needs and style of the athletes regardless of their gender. Xiuli's, Olga's, and Brenda's stories demonstrate that women can coach male athletes at the highest levels and successfully draw out peak performances.

So why don't more women coach men? Brenda aptly sums up the issue and the uphill battle that is its solution: "There are many women out there with the ability to coach athletes, male and female, to the highest levels of performance... The question is not really whether women can coach men. We can. We have. We can do it well. First we need to increase the number of professional women coaches."

In the meantime, we congratulate these three pioneers.

About the Author



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Claire Carver-Dias is a communications consultant with Clearday Communications and an executive coach with Impact Consulting. She specializes in assessments and team effectiveness coaching, using her experiences as an Olympian and business owner to help corporate groups achieve their business goals. She had a 15-year high performance sport career in synchronized swimming that earned her an Olympic bronze medal, two Commonwealth Games gold medals, two Pan American Games gold medals, and over 30 international medals. Claire served as president of AthletesCAN and on the board of directors for the Coaching Association of Canada, the Canada Games Council Sport Committee, and the Commonwealth Games Canada Bid Committee. A published writer, she holds a BA with distinction from the University of Toronto and an MA in English from McGill University. She is