

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching

Online

Generosity Pays Dividends

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This is a story with many dimensions, but one indisputable conclusion: when circumstances become opportune, women coaches can flourish in university sport as full-time paid employees. Admittedly, benefactors such as Sheryl and Dave Kerr, whose generosity has made McGill University's Women in Sport initiative possible, are rare. However, what is unfolding at McGill could, and should, prompt other Canadian institutions to investigate a similar approach to furthering opportunities for the many skilled women coaches in their ranks. All advocates of women coaches can be encouraged by the career pathways being developed at McGill. - Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

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By Sheila Robertson

Sylvie Béliveau's credentials as a champion of women in sport are well-established. She was the assistant coach of the senior national women's soccer team from 1986 to 1991 and Head Coach from 1991 to 1995. Inductee into the Canadian and Quebec Soccer Halls of Fame. Women of Distinction award winner (Montreal 2011). Canada Soccer's manager of Long-Term Player Development. Member of many of FIFA's Technical Study Groups. Coach of the McGill Martlets in 1996 and 1997. Founding member and current vice-president of Égale Action, which promotes the participation, retention, and advancement of girls and women in sport in Quebec (<https://www.egaleaction.com>).

Béliveau's latest endeavour is the culmination of a lifetime of commitment to bettering conditions for women at all levels of the sport system and, in this instance, is a two-pronged initiative that targets full-time positions for women coaches and creates a path for female student-athletes to transition to successful careers, whether in the sport world or the professions.

Officially titled "Senior Advisor, Varsity Sport Program" at McGill University in Montreal, Béliveau's responsibilities entail leadership of its Kerr Family Women in Sport (WiS) initiative, a 10-year, \$3.5 million endowment from McGill graduates David and Sheryl Kerr to support

programs for female coaches and female student-athletes. Both Kerrs, who have “a long history and deep connections with McGill’s athletic program,” played varsity hockey, and he coached the women’s team during the 1963-1964 season.

Note: The McGill women’s varsity teams were officially anointed as the “Martlets” in 1976, a name taken from a mythical bird in the family crest of university founder James McGill. A martlet is a footless bird that cannot land. Hence it is in a state of perpetual flight, soaring in pursuit of higher learning.

The roots of WiS, announced in 2018, can be traced back to an earlier Kerr initiative, the Kerr Martlet Hockey Coach Endowment, “which created a permanent source of funding for a full-time coach for the women’s team.” Launched in 2007 and amounting to \$1million, the endowment enabled long-time head coach Peter Smith “to relinquish his duties as McGill’s athletics facilities manager” and pour all his energy into coaching. At the time Smith said: "It is a great boost for women's hockey ... Gifts of this magnitude may inspire other potential donors — not just for McGill but hopefully for other university women's programs."

In 2013, when the Department of Athletics assumed responsibility for Smith’s salary, the endowment enabled the hiring of a full-time assistant coach, a position held since 2014 by Alyssa Cecere.

In explaining their vision for the WiS program, Sheryl Kerr said that she and her husband “felt it was important to provide female athletes at McGill with additional opportunities and support networks and to give something back to the program that did so much for us.”

WiS fits well with McGill’s reputation for innovative approaches to education and for what Béliveau calls “a culture of excellence” that provides every possible assistance to its student-athletes and now, thanks to the Kerrs, to women who aspire to make a career of coaching.

As Marc Gélinas, then-executive director of McGill Athletics and Recreation noted when WiS was announced: “At McGill, where student-athletes combine an outstanding academic education with top-level sport, we have a unique opportunity to build a program that will allow our female coaches and athletes to thrive. And thanks to the generosity and vision of the Kerr family, our female student-athletes will become stronger, more confident leaders, reach to enrich Canada’s sports, as well as our profession, culture, and society.”

Female student-athletes who, upon admittance to McGill commit to excellence in their academic, athletic, and career goals, were already well-served by support from academic, career development, and transitioning advisors, professional networking, internships, leadership skills training, mentoring, mental health services, and medical and strength conditioning expertise. Now, thanks to the endowment, Béliveau, working with Dr. Gordon Bloom of McGill’s Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, has hired three mental performance consultants specifically for the women’s teams. The hirings, she says, “are an example of collaboration outside of our immediate environment,” which extends to bringing in role models such as Dr. Guylaine Demers, Women’s Studies research chair at Laval University and a former basketball coach.

On the coaching side, WiS funding has not only enabled creation of Béliveau’s position, it has also

- made possible three full-time assistant coach salaried positions
- created the environment in which to enhance their competencies, stay in coaching, and become prime candidates for head coaching positions whether at McGill or elsewhere;

- arranged professional learning opportunities that entail pursuit of coaching certification;
- enabled networking at relevant events; and
- offered pertinent workshops such as the “Team Behind the Team” with Dr. Jennifer Turnnidge, the Queen’s University professor who is a leader of the Transformational Coaching Workshop* Béliveau has brought to McGill.

Transitioning from Playing to Coaching

The first full-time WiS coaches are McGill graduates Kelsey Wilson, the assistant coach with soccer head coach Jose-Luis Valdes, and Rikki Bowles, who works with basketball head coach Ryan Thorne. Coaching part-time while completing her degree, student-athlete Ashley Norfleet was recently selected to work with head volleyball coach Rachèle Béliveau. She, a 30-year veteran of the team, is the only female head coach at McGill (and Sylvie’s sister).

Kelsey Wilson grew up playing soccer in the Lac Saint Louis region and, as a 17-year-old, began coaching youngsters at the Regional Development Centre. At the age of 19, she joined Valdes in coaching the Lac Saint Louis U-13 team. At the time, she fleetingly thought about coaching as a career, but it did not seem feasible as she was still completing her undergraduate degree and focusing on her playing career. A defender, she played for the national youth program, the national U-15 team, the Lac Saint-Louis Lakers club team, and the McGill Martlets where she was a CIS All-Canadian coached by Valdes, who had become the soccer Martlets’ head coach in 2013.

After graduating from McGill with a psychology degree in 2014, Wilson, who is intrigued by the mental side of the game, started taking coaching courses. Encouraged by coaches who recognized her potential, she then committed to a coaching career.

In common with many aspiring coaches, Wilson held down several part-time, soccer-related jobs, including as coordinator of technical programs for the Fédération de soccer du Québec, as a coach with Québec REX (the Regional EXCEL Women’s program), two seasons as a (part-time) assistant coach with Valdes and the Martlets, and as head coach of the Longueuil Soccer Club. “I was doing three jobs and driving around all day to get coaching experience, but I never minded that, which confirmed I was doing it for the right reasons,” she says. “Anyone who is in the game full-time has lined up part-time gigs in many places to make up a full-time salary.”

Initially concerned that being a good player might not transfer into being a good coach, Wilson was mentored by Valdes and her colleagues at the REX program who pointed to her intelligence as a player, her leadership skills, and her ability to connect with her players. Consequently, she persevered, even though a full-time position in university sport seemed a pipe dream. She also enhanced her coaching credentials through Canada Soccer’s Licensing Stream and the Coaching Association of Canada’s (CAC) National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP).

As the successful applicant for the WiS position and elated by the “full-time, living salary” that comes with it, Wilson enjoys the fact that her responsibilities constantly evolve. She and Valdes plan the training sessions together, with her freely expressing her opinions, and share video analysis of opponents and individual players.

As the first point of contact for potential Martlets, Wilson handles emails and videos and travels to the West Coast in summer for recruiting; in-province recruiting is shared with Valdes. “Recruiting is a long process because we like to recruit two years in advance,” she explains. The Martlets have two seasons – the fall or competitive season when the goal is to reach the national championship, and the winter season when the focus is development. “Jose lets me take the lead and I and the other assistant coach, Patrick Viollat, handle session planning and delivery, with Jose chiming in as need be. He and I do a lot of session feedback,

discussing what went well, including methodology and pedagogy. And now that we film our sessions, we will be able to add film breakdown to the feedback.”

Looking ahead, Wilson plans to obtain her B National License, possibly work towards a UEFA license, and complete a master’s in sport psychology, which she considers an important coaching tool. In the meantime, she focuses on getting as much out of WiS as possible knowing that the point of the program, over the long-term, is to give the role to as many coaches as possible. “With Sylvie as a mentor who opens up opportunities, and Jose as my main mentor, I will be prepared to move onto the next step in my career, becoming a head coach, whatever the level. I have potential in all the levels of coaching; they all interest me and so I will keep the door open.”

Although Rikki Bowles knew she wanted to coach basketball while still in high school, she did not consider it a career, but something that would always be a part of her life. Like Wilson with Valdes, she has a lengthy record of achievement with head coach Ryan Thorne, as an athlete and later as a coach. A 5’3” guard, she played for both John Abbott College and then for five seasons at McGill where she earned a physical education degree in 2010. While working as a full-time physical education teacher, she was head coach at a private school in Montreal, then head coach at Collège Brébeuf and assistant coach with the provincial U-15 team in 2013-2014, an assistant coach at McGill from 2011 to 2017 under Thorne, and for the 2017-2018 season, part-time head coach at Collège Vanier. With the WiS endowment, she returned to McGill as Thorne’s full-time assistant.

“When the WiS opportunity came up, I was teaching full-time and coaching part-time at Vanier, practising four or five times a week and travelling weekends,” says Bowles, whose official title is Associate Coach. “I was passionate about coaching, but it didn’t allow me to pay the bills. So, to be able to coach full-time is amazing and I am happy with my decision to return to the Martlets. The biggest difference is the time I have to devote to McGill; it allows me to be fully committed and to do my absolute best. There are opportunities for professional development, there’s Sylvie, a great resource one office over, and I have a better life balance.”

A strength of the Martlet basketball program is its collaborative work environment, bolstered by long-term relationships between the coaches. Bowles has been with Ryan for over eight years, assistant coaches Helen Magdalinos for 17 years, Bayonne Taty for five seasons, and Françoise Charest, who played for five years and is now coaching. “We each have our roles and responsibilities, but we are a team working together; we have lively discussions that add to the program, and once a decision is made, we are all onboard,” says Bowles who, like Kelsey Wilson, handles recruiting. The bulk of that work occurs over the summer. It is a time, she says, to examine the program, assess the team’s needs for the upcoming season, and above all, make sure that recruits are academically strong as well as athletically skilled.

Having held head and assistant coach positions, Bowles understands the demands of both. Although she would not turn down a head coaching position if the right one came along, she would first consider how well it fits into her lifestyle. Pointing out that holding NCCP Competition-Development and Canada Basketball’s Train to Compete is essential to becoming a university head coach, Bowles is in the midst of completing Competition-Introduction Learn to Train and Train to Train with Comp-Dev top of her professional development list for 2021.

Wilson and Bowles appreciate their offices being in proximity, which allows them to talk about how their seasons are unfolding and share experiences, opinions, and challenges. Both have lived the same lifestyle as the student-athletes they coach and consider themselves as role models and mentors. “We both hope that young women student-athletes across the country look at us and see coaching as a viable career, and one they can pursue,” says Bowles. “I love basketball and my job, and I think it’s great for young women to see that I’ve made coaching

work, have pursued something I am passionate about, and that brings me great joy. I've found a place in the world where I am happy and fulfilled."

A Head Coach's Endorsement

The beneficiary of the initial Kerr endowment, Peter Smith has coached women's hockey at one level or another for 27 years and calls its progress "phenomenal" in terms of the quality of the game and the skills of the players. He was head coach of Team Canada when it won the silver medal at the 2008 world championship and was an assistant coach at numerous international tournaments, including the 2010 Olympic Games when Team Canada captured the gold medal. Smith became head coach of the hockey Martlets in 1999.

Assistant coach Alyssa Cecere, whose employment is funded by the Kerr hockey endowment, played for Smith as a left winger during her five years at McGill studying physical education, and won three CIS championships and a Clarkson Cup national title with the Montreal Stars. She was an assistant coach at Dawson College for three years and has spent seven years as an instructor at the Martlet Hockey School.

Pointing out that the learning curve to becoming a full-time coach is steep, Smith says that Cecere put in the time and then some. He cites their five-year player-coach relationship, her activity in the alumni post-graduation, her CEGEP coaching experience, excellent organizational skills, her knowledge of the culture of the team and of McGill, and says those factors, and her teaching background and a thirst for knowledge, made for a smooth transition into the full-time assistant coach role. "What she lacked was experience, and we have worked hard to close that gap," he says. "The skills she had and the experience she's gained being a full-time coach has made a big difference in terms of her progress, and that will be further enhanced by WiS' professional development components."

Smith, who is a NCCP Level 4 certified coach and has a master's degree in sport psychology, is as positive about the endowment as he is about Cecere. "WiS is an unbelievable initiative for our other Level 1 sports**. It's incredibly worthwhile; having full-time assistant coaches has made all our programs better. I can't say enough in terms of the potential impact over time."

He chuckles when asked to explain his involvement in women's hockey. "I've been a hockey guy my whole life and was a skills coach and ran camps. My two daughters went from figure skating to ringette and then asked to attend my camps. Wanting to play came next, but there wasn't a program for them so when a parent asked me to coach his daughter, I agreed and did that for five years, which was formative in my development as a coach." Later, Smith was teaching at McGill when its varsity sport program was being restructured and the director of athletics, who saw the potential of women's hockey, asked him to coach the Martlets. "I have never seen women's hockey as a stepping-stone to coaching guys," he says. "I just enjoy it."

Creating a Learning Environment

While the primary thrust of WiS is full-time positions for female assistant coaches and a transition path for female student-athletes, Béliveau is committed to providing opportunities for the head coaches. Consequently, to continue their own development and to ensure their expertise is not lost upon retirement, Smith and Rachèle Béliveau each receive professional development support while exploring potential transition with Dr. Pierre Trudel of the University of Ottawa, an expert Personal Learning Coach* for high performance coaches. For Thorne and Valdes, along with other McGill coaches, Béliveau arranged their participation in CAC's NCCP Mentoring Workshop*, which took place in December 2018.

For the female assistant coaches, Béliveau has created a Community of Practice (CoP*), which typically brings together people who "share a common concern ... or an interest in a topic ...". Through the McGill CoP, Wilson, Bowles, and Cecere are each creating a Personal Development Plan (PDP), which Béliveau describes as a "life forecast, an exploration of what the future could

look like. The PDP supports their learning and identifies tools they require to succeed in coaching and in life.”

Another initiative, dubbed Pipeline by Béliveau, focuses on community outreach and the sport of soccer. “It is a pilot immersion program to find out who the local female coaches are and to create a network,” she explains. “We brought seven of them to McGill from the greater Montreal community. They watched a practice with Coach Valdes providing explanations of his decisions followed by a post-practice question period and debriefing; the same process was followed for a game. Coach Valdes also held a video session to demonstrate how he chooses clips, cuts, and presents them.”

A LinkedIn page for the student-athletes and female assistant coaches is intended to help them build a professional profile, learn networking and career planning, and link with the business community.

“WiS is focused on developing female leaders in and beyond sport and doing so in a supportive and positive environment,” says Béliveau, who recommends “Where Will You Find Your Next Leader?”* as a valuable resource in exploring how sport advances women at every level. “We want female student-athletes to leave WiS with a better sense of confidence than when they arrived and to be well-equipped to become successful in their respective passions. We want to provide female assistant coaches with competitive salaries, complete with benefits and access to development opportunities. In short, they are employees who are well equipped to move on as they wish, whether as head coach of a university women’s team, a provincial or national program, or even head coach of a men’s team. The experience and opportunity given at McGill will be instrumental in solidifying their knowledge and experience.”

Note: McGill was the recipient of a Coaching Association of Canada University Female Mentorship Program matching grant for 2018-19 and 2019-20.

About the author

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor and an author for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*; the author of *Shattered Hopes: Canada’s Boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games*; the editor and an author for *Taking the Lead: Strategies and Solutions from Female Coaches*; a contributing author to *Playing It Forward: 50 Years of Women and Sport in Canada* and *Women in Sports Coaching* (Routledge 2016), and the founding editor and lead writer of *Champion* magazine and of *Coaches Report* magazine. The Sheila Robertson Award, presented annually by the Coaching Association of Canada, recognizes a national sport or multi-sport organization that demonstrates a consistent approach in valuing the recognizing the role of the coach internationally and to the media and the public.

***Links to WiS Supports**

“Team Behind the Team”: (http://www.synchro.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Transformational_Coaching_Workshop_2017.pdf)

CoP: For details see Nurturing Social Learning Spaces to Enhance Women in Sport Leadership Programs: (<https://coach.ca/canadian-journal-women-coaching>).

CAC’s Mentoring Workshop: (<https://coach.ca/nccp-mentorship>)

Personal Learning Coach:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337511999_A_Personal_Learning_Coach_for_High-Performance_Coaches

Where Will You Find Your Next Leader?:

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/54466788/where-will-you-find-your-next-leader>

McGill's Sport Structure

Level 1 Varsity Teams

Basketball (M)
Basketball (W)
Football (M)
Hockey (M)
Hockey (W)
Soccer (M)
Soccer (W)
Swimming (M/W)
Volleyball (W)

Level 2 Varsity Teams

Alpine Ski (M/W)
Badminton (M/W)
Baseball (M)
Field Hockey (W)
Golf (M/W)
Lacrosse (M)
Rowing (M/W)
Rugby (M)
Rugby (W)
Synchronized Swimming (W)
Track & Field (M/W)
X-Country (M/W)