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Stories matter. And in telling Rachèle Béliveau's story, Diane Culver has provided women coaches everywhere with an inspirational role model, with important teachings, with motivation, with possibilities, with perspectives. Rachèle's choices are not for everyone, but thanks to her candour, women who aspire to a coaching career may be encouraged to develop their own strategies for success. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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Rachèle Béliveau: A life of passion in sport coaching

By Diane M. Culver

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This fall, for the 31st year, McGill University's women's volleyball team will be coached by Rachèle Béliveau, one of Canada's most successful coaches. This article describes her career, how it began, how she navigated balancing her desire to have a family and to coach. To understand Rachèle's story, I asked her to write her 'autobiography'. That is, I asked to think of her life in sport as a book and to divide it into chapters that marked her pathway. The autobiography was to consist of suitable chapter headings that matched her memory of that period. The chapters were the scaffold upon which I built the interview questions. We met in late spring 2021 and nearly 10,000 words later, I had a fascinating view into her life: her early learnings as an athlete, the circumstances that led to her coaching career, the people and structures that opened doors for her, and her approach to struggles and successes.

Before Coaching

Rachèle's 'book' has 11 chapters, beginning in childhood and ending in retirement – yet to come. Since the focus is on her coaching career, scant words will be spent recounting her childhood. Suffice it to say that from ages two to 12 (chapter 1), Rachèle, along with her sister, Sylvie Béliveau, one of Canada's most important women in sport, and their two brothers, Alain and René, played all sorts of creative games alongside their father, Bertrand, developing many sport skills. Rachèle recounted being frustrated that her brothers began playing organized sport at the age of five while she and Sylvie had to

content themselves with attending games with their parents to support the boys. There were no teams for girls to play organized sport (chapter 2).

“I was the oldest and I had to wait much longer to be able to play in organized sport, because there just wasn’t anything available for women ... my brothers were playing hockey, and I was sitting in the arena and watching ... and I was like, ‘Why can’t I do that as well?’” Rachèle was frustrated, but she said it “developed something in us that when we started playing, we couldn’t stop ... Whereas my brothers stopped sports way earlier than my sister and me ... in the end, we made our lives in sport, and they did something else.” It started as “a desire in the beginning and became a passion.”

Not until Grade 7 (chapter 3) could Rachèle participate in organized sport and then she played every sport possible. “I stepped up no matter what sport ... I loved to play,” she said. She was awarded the MVP for all sports in her first year in high school.

It was in high school (chapter 4) that Rachèle had her first qualified coach. She chose volleyball because at the higher levels of competition, volleyball was the best organized (chapter 5). Rachèle’s determination at this young age is noteworthy: Despite her short stature, she recognized that volleyball offered her the most developmental opportunities. Eventually she made the provincial and Canada Games teams (chapter 6) and finally the National Team (Olympics 1984, world championships 1981 and 1986, and FISU 1985 [International University Sports Federation] (chapter 7).

Those who study coach development have long recognized that most coaches begin to learn about coaching as an athlete. And so it was for Rachèle. She was determined to make the national team. “... they would tell me I was too small, but somehow I kept pushing ... I was skilled, but not tall, so I had to compensate by having a perfect game ... And I had a position, setter on the court, similar to a quarterback in football. You run the game, you run the plays ... I became very tactical about the game.”

This last statement is important, especially looking forward to Rachèle’s coaching career.

“... we talk about physical skills, but I think being able to understand the game is a skill we underestimate, the tactical part, the analysis. It was one of my strengths to be able, as I played, to analyze the game and make decisions, hopefully good decisions.” Asked what drove her to study the tactical side of the game, Rachèle reflected: “I would watch games as much as I could ... I watched a lot of other sports. Sometimes you don’t realize it, but when you see another sport, it can help you within your own sport.” She also noted that coaching at the time was not like today. “We would never have a meeting with coaches; we learned through the practices and what they asked us to do.”

In chapter 8, Rachèle made the decision to make her life in sport. Not wanting to be a teacher, she took a master’s degree focusing on science, physical education teaching and coaching. She remembers being told that she would not get a coaching job.

“And, if I had listened to everybody, I would have chosen another field, but I kind of didn’t listen. At the same time, I said: ‘I’m going to prepare as best as I can’... as I was doing my degree, I was playing a lot ... on the national team ... I also took some coaching levels in preparation and completed Level 3 NCCP.”

A Coaching Career Begins

Rachèle transitioned from athlete to coach in September 1988 (Chapter 9), coaching her volleyball club in Sherbrooke, Que. Success came quickly with the club lacing second at provincials and fifth at nationals in year one, and winning both championships in year two. Her chapter heading was: “Respect my personality and do not imitate winning coaches (old pattern)”.

Two years later, Rachèle was asked to be an assistant coach on the provincial team. Then, in 1991 (chapter 10), a combination of circumstances led to her being solicited by McGill University, which was starting a uSport women’s volleyball program and wanted a woman as a full-time head coach. Feeling that McGill was not strong in volleyball, and reluctant to move from her home in Sherbrooke, she did not apply even though both Volleyball Québec and Volleyball Canada had suggested her.

“Then I received a phone call from the athletic director (AD) Robert Dubeau who asked why I didn’t apply.” She thought: “Maybe I should apply ... he was trying to convince me it was going to be a good job ... He said: ‘If you apply, you can go also on a woman’s leadership program, where if we hire a woman, there would be financial support.” She applied, was accepted for the leadership program offered by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (now Canadian Women and Sport) and, with trepidation, moved with her husband to Montréal to begin her career at McGill. “I had never been to the campus, I was coming from a program where we were winning a lot ... and I came to coach a program that we started at Day 0.”

Full-Time Coaching and Family

Despite concerns about her new position, Rachèle and her husband Alain also wanted a family. She was 30 years old; it was time. “We had a big decision: Do we go for a baby now or not? I just got hired. We thought, let’s try it. And if it works... I’m going to deliver in the offseason, and then I’ll be able to start next season. And it worked! I had been hired for two months, and I went to my boss announcing I was pregnant. You should have seen his face! So, I said: ‘I’m going to deliver in the offseason, and I’ll be able to start next season, so just give me my summer to recover ... And three years later, we had the second one ... in the offseason. So I didn’t stop everything except for the summer, and we had the family in this way as well as doing something new, in a new place, in a new city.’”

Being a hard worker and organized were factors in Rachèle’s ability to get the job done. But her motivation and passion for the work is also evident. “I felt like I was fortunate to have a job in coaching. And I was going to get organized around that! ... I was not afraid of being a mother and giving my best at the same time and sometimes the kids, Alexandre and Isabelle, followed in the gym. And this is something I’m really proud of: their capacity to adapt to situations, because they could sleep in the corner of the gym with the balls and the whistle of the ref ... So yeah, we made it through.”

‘We’ here is important. The adage ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ seems apt. Rachèle made it work by working hard, being organized, and doing a good job. Notwithstanding, she herself used the word ‘we’ when talking about making it work. She and her husband organized their work schedules as best they could around childcare, trying to have at least one of them at home as much as possible. Rachèle would usually work from noon until about 8 pm and her husband a normal working day. This left the children only four or five hours in childcare. But as Rachèle stated (and many families will relate to this): “It

was quite easy from the age of zero to five ... It got tougher when the eldest started school ... and I tried to adjust my time to his time. It was the toughest time when they were in elementary school."

Once her children reached high school, Rachèle decided she would be home before they went to bed. She told her athletes that as soon as practice ended, she was going home. Moreover, she asked the AD for the earliest practice time: "To consistently practice in the 4 to 7 pm slot time, and not 6 to 8 pm or 8 to 10 pm really helped." She said the AD understood. "And I didn't complain; I did my job like I had to do." Pre-season tournaments and camps were the most difficult for leaving the children but travelling to games was usually at most an overnight trip and her children adapted.

An important, deliberate decision Rachèle made was to remove herself from the summer programs such as the FISU Games and the National B team program. She did this to have balance. "You're not going to have a balance with the family on a weekly basis ... but it worked on a yearly basis. As they were getting older, they knew that October, November, January, February, March were very busy months. September, December, April would be okay months, and the summer months would be easy. And I would always be with them."

Rachèle's children are now coaching, and this is satisfying, "At some point I felt ... guilty. But kids can adapt. And now I don't feel as much guilt because they are doing what I'm doing so, it probably wasn't that bad!"

Asked if she had any role models such as women coaches raising a family, Rachèle said: "No. I was the only one. I saw some other women coaches, but they didn't have a family; most were single ... I think I was, in my sport ... the first one coaching full-time with a family."

Being true to herself

Another of Rachèle's chapter titles was transitioning from being a female athlete always coached by men (chapter 10). Thirty years later, this remains nearly always true "anyway in Quebec. The other provinces might have been coached by a woman before, but I would say the majority, from what I know ... not. In Quebec, it's 100% men for sure, because they're all coming from CEGEP, division one; it's all men coaches."

What did this mean for Rachèle? Some of her athletes were used to being yelled at. "And then they're coming here and, 'No, no, what's the problem?' You find a solution. I'm going to help you ... And, 'Oh, you're not going to yell at me?' 'Maybe yes, maybe one time, not all the time'". Even now some athletes are destabilized by her approach, but by the end of the first year most are comfortable.

Maintaining her coaching approach was essential for Rachèle. "Because my voice is not loud, often when I'm going to talk, they have to come closer to hear, which is not bad ... that wasn't my coaching style, and this is something I wanted to respect." She would tell her athletes: "I have the knowledge, the technical, the tactical; I can make you a really great player. And I will be able to adapt to you. Most of the time, I will adapt more to the athletes than the athletes will adapt to me. But I'm not going to change my personality. No way ... I could change something about which I'm not happy, which I need to improve. What I'm saying is that I want to be me, and I want to be comfortable in what I'm doing. I don't want to be anybody else!" This hard line about remaining authentic to

who she is has almost certainly carried Rachèle through the decades. She also said that if it [her approach] was not working, she might have changed, but “in the end, we were improving, we were performing; the people loved it. They were coming back. So why should I try to change something if it's the way that it's working best for me?”

Rachèle does not believe she has faced many really difficult challenges. She feels being adaptable has helped. Recruiting athletes was a worry for a while. With a family, she could not recruit like other coaches who were, “at every gym, every tournament, every weekend.” Rachèle wanted to be able to see her children play sports, meaning she had to be smart and selective in her recruiting process. At first, she focused only on CEGEP players and then only on those who were likely to want to be in Montréal. She now has other people doing some recruiting for her. “But you have to choose ... The balance. Do you go all in to recruit the best and to win two nationals and lose your family?”

Reflecting, Rachèle said: “I think we've had good success with our program. We're not the best team but we are certainly a very competitive team. The athletes enjoy the experience with us. They graduate, and most of the time, they come back, and they appreciate [their experience] ... for the majority, it's their last experience playing high-level volleyball.” A few players made the national team, and one went to the Olympics in beach volleyball. For Rachèle, the overall athlete experience and respecting their lives as students is essential. As she noted, most McGill students go into business, science, or other careers beyond sport.

Women in Coaching – Progress?

Asked about progress in terms of the number of women coaches, Rachèle said: “I think, overall, it's better today, if I look across Canada. When I started, we were less than five. When I had kids, I was the only woman coach with a family. It took at least 10 years to have another in volleyball ...”

Retention, however, is an issue: “Retention of women coaches is not as easy. Yes, we have some and they're going to be there maybe five years, six years, and then move on ... I can name you three women in Canada who have been there for over 25 years. One has a family, and the other one does not, but we're still there”. Asked about her potential successor, Rachèle cannot suggest a woman who would be willing and ready to take her position.

Retirement – Still to Come

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, Rachèle thought 30 years might be a good stopping point. But now she says “it might take 31 years to do 30 seasons”. She has not made a decision about her retirement, but it won't be in 2021, “I think next year I should be back if we have a season. Because I wouldn't want to finish my career with COVID”.

However, she is preparing slowly. “I have not set a time; and even my athletes know it because they ask: ‘If I come to McGill, how many years will you coach me? One? Zero?’ “I used to say: Two, three years. Now I'm saying, if I still have the passion, and you are still committed to the program, and you work ... it will be fun for me. If my team becomes a nightmare to coach. I'm gone. I have done enough; and somehow they know that. The last two years were super nice [laughing]. But there's no date.... It's really hard for me to say this is it. At the same time, I know it's going to come, one day, but ...”

For the final question, I asked Rachèle to pick three words that helped her to be the successful coach she is. Her response: “Passion. Perseverance. Respect ... I think ... that probably would come out if you asked someone who I am ...”

When I remarked that she had not really talked about perseverance, she replied: “Ahh, perseverance as an athlete, perseverance in sport, like being a woman. And ... resilience, a lot! I'm the one who will ... accept that I must cross that threshold and that's not going to be easy. You know, it's part of my personality. Even going through the pandemic; some may panic, some may say, okay, this is what I can do right now. How can I make the best of it? And I will adjust and try to make the best of the situation. And it's probably the way I've been working all these years.”

Reflecting upon Rachèle's self-description of passion, perseverance, and respect, certain other factors round out her story. Remaining authentic to her coaching style is an important message to women coaches who may feel pressured to coach like many of their male counterparts. In her personal life, her family's commitment to sport, the opportunities to play multiple sports in high school, and a partner who willingly shared child-raising duties all contributed to her having a coaching career. Equally significant are the structural factors that supported her: the AD who encouraged her to apply for the position and being willing to modify her practice schedule so she might have evenings with her school-aged kids, and an organization that financially supported McGill to hire a woman coach. More women could thrive in coaching careers if administrators regularly facilitated support for childcare, flexible practice schedules for coaches with families, and maternity leave / job sharing to accommodate pregnancies.

About the Author

Dr. Diane M Culver is an Associate Professor in the School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa. Her research interests include coach development and women in sport leadership. She is the research lead for disability sport with the E-Alliance research hub for gender+ equity in sport. In her teaching, research, and consulting, she is particularly interested in social learning theory and building social learning capability in sport. Diane is also an Alpine ski coach who has worked with all levels of skiers from youth to Olympic levels in Canada and New Zealand. She now coaches masters skiers and mentors youth skiers.