

Introduction

For Canadians, the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games reflected the growing presence of women as outstanding athletes and as medal-producing coaches. For the women coaches, the numbers were small – 22 out of a total of 131 coaches at the Olympics and 10 out of 43 at the Paralympics were women – but their impact was powerful, not only in terms of medals but as exemplars for girls and women who aspire to join the profession. To honour and to celebrate, the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* proudly profiles five of these women throughout Women's History Month in March 2022 - inspirational, accomplished, and wonderful role models for the next generation.

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A Tribute to Women's Coaching Leadership at the Tokyo Games

Part Three: Heather Hennigar Champions an Integrated Support System

By Sheila Robertson

As the athletics segment of the Tokyo Paralympic Games got underway on August 24th, 2021, Canada's medal expectations were high, and rightly so. On August 31st, Zachary Gingras ran the race of his life to capture the bronze medal in T38 400m. Four days later, Nathan (Nate) Riech dominated the T38 1500mm event to win the gold medal in record-breaking time (see link below).

Watching with pride was Heather Hennigar, the lead coach of Athletics Canada's West Hub in Victoria, the training ground of Riech, Gingras, and Thomas Normandeau, a T47 400m athlete who finished sixth in his race. The performances were an exhilarating experience for her and crowned years of commitment to becoming an exemplary coach.



Even making the team had been difficult. "The criteria were tight and there were few allocation slots, so it kept us challenged all year, it kept us pulling out all the stops and having to do everything right," said Hennigar. "The athletes had to produce significant personal bests to make the team and once they did, I was confident they would do well given the way they were progressing in training and managing themselves mentally and emotionally."

A traumatic brain injury after being struck on the head by a golf ball at the age of 10 affected the left side of Reich's body. "A natural athlete, he had to learn how to speak and walk again; he was relentless in bringing himself back," said Hennigar, an endurance and altitude training specialist. Her move to incorporate Para coaching into her skill set began in 2018 after she and Reich connected at a training camp in Chula Vista, Cal., and Reich decided to make the Hub a

key component of his support system. Before long, he was a world record holder in 800m and 1500m and became 1500m world champion in 2019.

“Rallying a team around Nate was interesting because he is a lone wolf and doesn’t necessarily trust easily,” said Hennigar. “He is headstrong in a way that translates to independence, drive, and mental toughness, and so it takes time to form a working alliance.” Before long coach and athlete had developed a strong bond that eventually extended to include Normandeu and Gingras.

Hennigar does not differentiate between Olympic and Para athletes. “I coach athletes; my group is integrated, and I believe strongly in that model.”

The Joy of Running

Raised on 44 acres in South Maitland, N.S., Hennigar ran everywhere, including the mile to the corner store. Her parents Ann and Tim, brothers Dan and Toby, grandfather Bill Hennigar, and grandmother Pauline Hunter were all involved in track. In 1986, at the age of 12, she made the first of five appearances for Nova Scotia at the Legion Nationals, the annual youth track and field championships organized by the Royal Canadian Legion. The activity she loved gave her rewarding experiences, lifelong friendships, and travel around the world. “I still associate running with a sense of joy and freedom,” she said.

Over the years, running remained a mainstay of Hennigar’s life. While studying psychology at Acadia University, she was its Female Athlete of the Year in 2000 and 2001 and won the U Sport 600m title in 2001. She then moved to Victoria to train with middle distance coach Wynn Gmitroski and his elite group of runners and made the world indoor championship team in 2004. Sidelined by a stress fracture in 2008, she transitioned into coaching by accepting dual positions: at Dalhousie University as cross-country and track and field coach and with the Canadian Sport Centre Atlantic (CSCA) coaching a high-performance development group. “I got the job when their first choice declined the position, and that started my coaching career; over time I developed a human-centred approach [to coaching]; the ability to facilitate an athlete’s journey is interesting and addictive,” she said, explaining that she bases her coaching philosophy on wanting her athletes to enjoy the rewards of pursuing excellence. “I don’t care about a shiny medal, but about what it represents.”

It was an exhilarating, exhausting time. Hennigar was coaching, recruiting, taking athletes to European competitions, to Florida for warm weather camps, to Arizona for altitude training, and building the CSCA program.

In 2014, Hennigar relocated to Victoria to establish an Athletics Canada (AC) High Performance Hub. Now fully operational, the hub offers a daily training environment and provides resources for every athlete within its system. As well as being the endurance coach, Hennigar serves as a staff coach or personal coach at major international competitions. Reporting to AC head coach Glenroy Gilbert, she runs “a completely integrated training group which is a win/win for both the Olympic and Para athletes in the opportunities it provides to learn from each other.”

Developing Personal Supports

In October 2017 Hennigar joined six of Canada's top coaches from various sports in Own the Podium's first Coaching Enhancement Program (see link below). The coaches formed tight bonds that persist in what she calls "a web of support ... having colleagues across the country, from diverse backgrounds and environments ... and with a wide range of experiences and knowledge to draw upon can only strengthen our current reality as coaches in our own challenging and complex environments." The program boosted her confidence in many areas, from implementing effective strategies to resolving conflict, effectively managing her time and energy, improving her communication skills, and understanding her strengths and weaknesses.

Hennigar also draws strength from a unique WhatsApp group of top North American female middle-distance coaches who "share everything." Noting that sport trails other sectors when it comes to women's roles, she says that supporting each other becomes essential to surviving and thriving. "Because we lag, we have unique challenges in sport, and we need to rely on each other. I don't think there's any other way. I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if I didn't have that support."

Pandemic the Ultimate Challenge

With the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics until July 23rd, 2021, Hennigar faced unprecedented challenges, including managing a barrage of information while unable to coach in person from March to May. "It was a massive challenge to stay connected and help to prevent athletes from feeling isolated; I was working on so many fronts, including managing mental health concerns," she said. An asset was collaborating with Gareth Sandford, a researcher and physiologist with AC and an expert on racing strategy. To keep the athletes interested and engaged, the two created an online "Racing Tactics" interactive series. Hennigar and Geoff Harris, another Hub coach, also created an online education model with a calendar that recorded recovery sessions, mental performance, and nutrition.

One of their dilemmas was 'duty of care' versus helping athletes to achieve their goals and cope with the nerve-wracking situation when they had to travel to earn qualification points. Adding to the frustration was the federal regulation enforcing a two-week quarantine period after travel outside Canada, which forced many athletes to forgo racing opportunities. AC eventually approved accessing training camps and races from a training base in Chula Vista, Cal., for 30 Canadian athletes, including Hennigar's Para athletes. This facilitated competition in the United States and eased worry about cross-border isolation rules. AC also relaxed its requirement that medal hopefuls compete at the national championships and Olympic Trials meaning that sprint star Andre De Grasse and others could prepare uninterrupted in their US-based training environments.

Hennigar credits AC high performance director Simon Nathan for the information, logistical, and financial support provided to athletes throughout the qualification process. "Compared to many other nations, our athletes were well prepared when they arrived at the Games, and this was evidenced in the strong performances," she said, reminding readers of Canada's two gold,

one silver, and three bronze medals won by Olympians and the two gold, three silver, and two bronze Para medals.

On Being a Woman Coach



Overcoming systemic barriers and challenges are, in Hennigar’s experience, part of being a woman coach. At the start of her career, she wasn’t interested in ‘women in coaching initiatives’, believing the playing field was even for anyone who worked hard and was skilled, a view she now calls “naïve”. She has encountered difficult colleagues and been stymied by male-dominated workplaces and networks which tend to “hire, reward, and trust systems and behaviours that look and sound like you do; in other words, predominantly male. Our sport culture rewards an instrumental approach to success, sometimes at all costs. I believe one can be both high performance oriented and a caring, compassionate person.”

Hennigar’s experiences cover one extreme to another: from strong, positive support to paternalism, contradictory feedback, and professional and ethical violations aimed at undermining and discrediting her. She acknowledged that speaking of such experiences can increase her vulnerability; however, she stressed the importance of speaking honestly despite the potential negative impact. “The only way to really understand the barriers is to listen to women’s experiences.”

Undeterred by the obstacles she has faced, Hennigar insists that coaching brings “numerous and immeasurable” rewards. “I can’t think of a time when I stepped on a track to coach and didn’t light up and feel alive and like the luckiest person on the planet, even on the hard days. I work with some incredible people who are pursuing a rare form of excellence ... each part of every day isn’t perfect, but the overall journey is the adventure of a lifetime.”

She counsels young women who are considering a coaching career to be “your genuine self and let your own strengths shine through. Nothing is more important than having a positive impact on another human being. It is not necessary to be authoritative, transactional, and focused on results at all costs.”

The Future?

As Hennigar reflected on her recent past, she admitted that it was tough to manage the unique demands imposed by COVID-19 even though she usually enjoys novel situations, challenges, and problem-solving. “I realized I’m a bit like a shark, always moving through the water to get oxygenated, and suddenly the world stopped; no travel, competing, no moving at all ... all the unknowns ... and the constant threat of COVID-19 ... I am still recuperating from the long, slow burn of it ... and I am reassessing where I am professionally. Anytime you finish a year, or a quadrennial, it’s okay to take some time and assess where you are.”

In talking to colleagues after the Games, Hennigar noted high fatigue levels which she attributes to having to be constantly available to athletes who had little experience in managing a situation as complex and unsettling as the pandemic. “Some found it extremely hard; their world was turned upside down. I don’t know any coach who wouldn’t identify mental health issues amongst athletes as one of the more significant challenges.”

Hennigar has recognized the perils of sacrificing everything to coach and is determined to make her own life more sustainable. “In 2021 I coached at both the Olympics and Paralympics and lived out of a suitcase for three months, which isn’t uncommon but was particularly hard last year.” She did have a holiday after Tokyo, but with Paris 2024 on the horizon, is again “full steam” into planning and applying lessons learned. Simplifying and distilling what is important and essential. How “good” people, no matter their role on the team, are essential when the going gets tough. Being nimble and adaptable. And being thankful that humans will always “find a way and show up when it counts.”

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. Visit her website at [A Piece of Canadian Sport History](#).

Links

<https://www.cbc.ca/sports/paralympics/paralympic-wake-up-call-tokyo-september-4-1.6164989>

[Own The Podium - Canada Coach](#)

Cohort 1:

Patrick Côté, Wheelchair Rugby

Heather Hennigar, Athletics

John Herdman, Soccer

Trennon Paynter, Halfpipe

Mark Smith, Women’s Softball

Mike Thompson, Para Swimming

Chris Witwicki, Snowboard Slopestyle

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