

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 Four: Yihua Li brings absolute passion to her coaching

By Diane Culver and Iman Hassan

Yihua Li’s lengthy career as a successful diving coach speaks for itself. She has coached multiple Olympic and world championship medallists, including Anne Montminy, a double medallist at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, and Émilie Heymans, who won two silver and two bronze medals over four consecutive Olympic Games. At Rio 2016, Yihua contributed to Meaghan Benfeito’s 10-metre bronze medal and the 10-metre synchro medal won by Benfeito and Roseline Fillion. And she was on the deck in Tokyo, bringing her values and relentless commitment to excellence to the benefit of Canada’s best divers. As the buildup begins for Paris 2024, Yihua is now working with some of the top hopefuls for those Games.



Yihua’s pathway began in her native China when, in 1977, a diving coach approached the 14-year-old and her successful career as an athlete was launched. Yihua won gold on the 3-metre springboard at the 1981 Universiade and silver at the 1986 world championships, which earned her recognition by *Swimming World Magazine* as the best springboard diver of 1983.

In 1991, Yihua came to Canada to coach, wishing to share her passion for diving through helping others. She initially considered coaching to be a “temporary” job, not envisioning it would extend into a such a successful and enduring career. Since 1999, she has been the head coach of the Pointe Claire Dive Club and has been a constant presence on various national teams. Over the years, she has accumulated numerous honours: she is a seven-time winner of the Petro-Canada Coaching Excellence Award, has been Diving Canada’s Coach of the Year several times, and was Aquatics Canada Coach of the Year in 2008.

Yihua, a Level 4 National Coaching Certification Program coach, is known as a person who does not like to talk about herself. But in discussing her strategies in the lead-up to the Tokyo Games, through all the restrictions and unknowns brought about by COVID-19, her commitment to communication with her athletes is clearly one of her guiding principles. “Well, you know, on certain days we couldn’t be in person, so we did Zoom training to make sure collectively the athletes were connected. And sometimes just calling them, Facetiming to make sure they were following the coaches’ direction and guidance. And I tried to make sure to teach my athletes that sometimes things happen, and all you can do is to do the best for yourself.”

Empathy and guidance were also evident in her approach to coaching through the pandemic as she tried to keep negativity from overwhelming her athletes. “I know it was a difficult time, but you cannot be negative; we have to see things in a positive way. We can’t always be pumped up, but as long as you’re always *with* your athletes, you can listen to them when they say: ‘You know, I don’t feel like training’. You have to have some sympathy and understanding because what the athlete goes through, as a coach you go through the same thing. As a coach, you have to be stronger for the athlete; you have to find a way to make sure you understand them with sympathy and help them move onto the next steps.”



When questioned about her connection with her athletes, Yihua revealed an underlying commitment to honesty, which she believes is ethically responsible given the dangers involved in the sport. She does, after all, handle most of the 10-metre divers on the national team. “I connect with my athletes because I’m - sorry for my language - but I don’t bullshit. I mean, I am really honest with them ... Honesty can sometimes be harsh, but in the long-term, it’s the best approach ... they know every time I tell them something, I’m sincere; they do believe me.”

Trust is an essential element of Yihua’s connection to her athletes particularly as she helps them deal with fear. “Some people have more guts. Other people, you really need to talk with them; that is why trust is important. They have to trust that what you’re saying they can do with their body. So that’s mostly mental, not only technical.”

Yihua’s compassion and commitment to honesty are among her coaching strengths and emulate the values she holds in life: relationship building, empathy, honesty, and hard work. In particular, her philosophy of honesty has paid off when it comes to coaching the 10-metre divers.

“In the beginning, I coached 10-metres and 3-metres, but then my responsibility slowly shifted to only the 10-metres. I don’t know what makes me successful with the 10-metres. I think just being around the Chinese national [diving] team for many years, they are very technical, and my relationships are very good with my athletes ... When they have a problem, they talk to me. Because if they want an honest, truthful answer, they know they will get that from talking to me! I think it’s easy for me to communicate with the women, and the boys and men too. I just

have my own way; I cannot describe it. I just prioritize connecting with people. I am an easy-going person, but at the same time, I'm pretty tough."

When asked about the Tokyo events and how her divers fared, she first praised the Japanese people and how well they managed the Games during COVID-19. About her role she was clear: "I am always prepared for the worst-case scenarios ... whatever happens, I can handle it, knowing it's not going to be easy." She also praised her athletes, noting that one managed a fourth-place finish despite having suffered an injury. "For an injured single diver to do that? I could not be prouder."

As for herself and handling the stress of the Games, Yihua talked about sleep, breathing, and preparation. "No matter what, especially when I go on the pool deck, I don't show my problems because these athletes are looking at you and you're encouraging them to sleep well, wake up, and be prepared. I have to make sure that I am at 100% once I get on the pool deck. Because the morning of [the competition], if I am looking and feeling 100%, then I can give my athletes 100% and that will help them."

During the year, Yihua's preparation [for each week of coaching] is intense and an important stress reliever for her. "On my weekends, unless there is a competition, I generally get up when my mind is fresh, and I can plan out the whole week for each athlete ... get the training picture in my head. Then during the week, it is a lot less stressful." It is a different situation at a major event such as the Olympic Games. There, except for small tweaks, all the preparation has been completed, allowing her to be fully focussed on supporting her athletes.

Digging deeper into Yihua's coaching philosophy, it became evident that some of her experiences growing up as a diver in China have had an important effect on her since she did not always feel morally supported. "I remember, I went there [national training centre]; I didn't want to stay there. I wanted to go back to my province. I remember being there for two months, and every coach would pass me by and only coach me a little bit ... eventually I went to international competitions, but it wasn't good enough for the coaches. Either I was too light or too fat. Some people give you experiences, some people give you lessons, you just keep moving forward ... I'm not complaining, I'm just giving you the story. I am thankful for everything everybody gave me."

Clearly, Yihua's commitment is to be the best coach possible - certainly to give her athletes much more than she received as an athlete - and to always support them emotionally, technically, physically, and psychologically.

Yihua's passion and drive to keep learning is clear. "I love coaching; that helps a lot. Because if you like it properly, you can try to make sure you are doing the right things when a talented athlete is in your hands. Sometimes I can be scared because I don't want to screw up; I want to make sure the athlete can put the best of their talent on display. And I want to make sure that I don't jeopardize their career. So, I am always a little afraid to make a mistake ... I have friends coaching international diving teams and I always ask them questions, like 'Hey, I have an athlete, they have a technical problem. Can you help me by watching them dive and tell me

what you see?’ So on top of coaching, I spend a lot of time learning from other coaches. That’s another thing that keeps me on top of my coaching ... I want to be able to unconditionally help other people, and not just be selfish.” Yihua’s drive for excellence and knowledge-seeking is typical of highly successful coaches who are not afraid to ask for advice through their coaching network.

Important people Yihua’s network includes Diving Canada’s Nancy Brawley, Director, National Officials Program, and Mitch Geller, Chief Technical Officer, both of whom inspire her to always do better. For example, at the start of the Rio Olympics, Yihua remembered Geller saying at a coaches’ meeting: “Hey, why not you? Why does the medal have to belong to someone else? Why not you?” “So, I was like ‘Yes! Why not you? I used those words from him. I copied his words when the kids started competition and I felt like it was the perfect time to share that message ... I told them: ‘Don’t forget! Why not you on the podium? Why can’t it be you?’ When I shared this, I could see my athletes’ eyes pop and of course, we got a medal.”

Yihua’s support has come not only through her network but also from Mike Morris, her husband of nearly 20 years. “My husband is such a nice guy; he always makes sure that whatever I want to do, he 100% supports me. That makes a huge difference.” Asked about having children, she said “It’s a pretty stressful life. It was never really meant to be. I always have very talented kids in my hands. It’s never really about me; everything is about them. Anyhow, we tried, but we don’t have kids ... I have no regrets ... it’s really difficult for a woman. You either have kids first, and then later on when the kids grow up you can do it ... You know, I don’t have kids so maybe that is what’s keeping me going for so many years.”

Asked about women who coach diving, Yihua acknowledges some increase in the numbers. “Before, I’d say, it was only me with a bunch of guys for many years. But now we have more women involved ... [although] we need more women coaches at higher levels.”

Yihua’s passion to help others and her life-long learner’s approach have driven her to excel. She enjoys stepping outside of her comfort zone, connecting, and learning from her coaching networks, both nationally and internationally. She remains open to being guided and inspired by her colleagues. Like so many other successful coaches, Yihua stressed the joy she feels when her athletes improve and her gratitude for being able to do what she loves. She is absolutely passionate about her job and desires to coach as long as she provides value to her sport and her athletes. “I want to continue to coach until I feel like I am not able to give anymore, and then I’ll have to talk to myself in recognizing that I may not be good for the athletes anymore and I’ll have to step back. Otherwise, I really enjoy the coaching. Not only by watching athletes get medals, but just being able to see them improving every day, that itself just gives me goosebumps, you know? I just really love it!”

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