

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.

A Special Issue of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching

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

Part Five: Bev Priestman on delivering gold

By Sheila Robertson

Post-Gold Medal Awards

- Canadian Press Team of the Year
- PostMedia Team of the Year
- Doris Anderson Award (*see link below*)
- Christine Sinclair: The Best FIFA Special Award for Women’s Football (*see link below*)

When Bev Priestman was named head coach of Canada’s women’s national soccer team on October 28, 2020, her public profile was relatively low even though she had handled Canada Soccer’s development programs from 2013 to 2018. Ten months later, with the team’s stunning success at the Tokyo Games, anonymity was gone forever (*see link below*).



Those months had been a roller-coaster for Priestman. Public interest in the team was high leading to the Olympic tournament, scheduled to open on July 21, 2021. Led by its storied captain, Christine Sinclair, Canada had, after all, won the bronze medal at the 2012 and 2016 Games. Now, as the 34-year-old Priestman assumed her first head coaching position, was it realistic to expect another medal? The young coach provided an unequivocal and tantalizing answer at her first media conference on February 18, 2021, calling for a change to the colour of the medal: “We have to aim higher than that.” Clearly, she meant gold.

The comment was part of Priestman's deliberate plan to motivate the players through "a big, bold vision even though some people thought I was crazy with only five months to go, but I sensed that the team was too comfortable, even a little flat, living off bronze medals."

Priestman had to overcome two immediate challenges. One was her limited contact with the players as COVID-19 forced the team's practices and games into a year-long dormancy that produced a slightly demotivated mindset. She also had to merge the dissimilar systems and tactics the players experienced under the various coaches for whom they played professionally. Her method was to simplify operations and develop behaviours and a values-driven culture that would cement the team's identity as strong-willed and totally connected. "I want anyone watching our team to say, 'That's who Canada is.'"

Priestman's personal values – bravery, passion, humility, people (over process), and respect – mirror her vision. When players and staff ranked bravery as their lowest value, she interpreted that to mean playing it safe. Such an attitude, she believed, would deny them the gold medal. "Bravery became the underpinning part of changing the colour of the medal; we went after bravery in everything we did," she said. Also essential was developing a strategy for winning that all-important fifth game. Failure to do so in 2012 and 2016 put Canada into the bronze medal game, and that she was determined to avoid in 2021.

Priestman believes the COVID restrictions played to her ability to adapt. "Adaptability is my strength; but many of the staff struggled because they were used to a process-driven way of doing things." To help achieve the necessary change, she invited Neil Dewsnip, technical director of Plymouth Argyle Football Club, to share her Tokyo journey as advisor/mentor.

Dewsnip's advice was pointed: "Bev," he said, "ignore the circus; focus on picking the right team and making the right subs. If you get that right, you'll win the gold medal. Well, that's what I did. I have really bought into the need for a mentor as someone who can take a helicopter view and remove all the noise and clutter. Mentors are massive."

Becoming the coach who would deliver gold was a long, hard process. "This year I was the best I've been," she said. "The Bev five years ago was the complete opposite. I was doing everything; it's how I had always been, getting down in the trenches." A critical turning point was her move to England in 2018 to work with Phil Neville, head coach of the Lionesses and a former Manchester United stalwart. Her two years with him were a valuable training ground for future leadership.

Tracing an Improbable Journey

While discussing the Olympic preparation and tournament is relevant to understanding Priestman the coach, her pathway warrants close examination as it reveals the love of boldness that goes back to her childhood in Consett, County Durham, England. As she speaks, a vivid image emerges of the soccer-obsessed youngster spending hours alone outside the family home entirely focused on kicking the ball, driven by her determination to be the best at everything she does. It's a tenacity she learned from her hard-working parents, Helen and Colin.

At Castleside Primary School, Priestman was the only girl on the soccer team. Around the age of 14, she encountered John Herdman, then running the local soccer school and now head coach of Canada's men's team. She opted to play on the boys' futsal team, which Herdman operated throughout the week, instead of the girls, who met once weekly. "I put cones down and I played; I channeled everything into soccer," she said. While later inspired by Herdman to coach, she was also drawn to teaching thanks to an "unbelievable first experience" with Mrs. Jacques, her primary school teacher who was "nurturing and saw something in me, and so I was passionate about teaching. Put soccer and teaching together and hence coaching."



Priestman, who admits to being a bright but average student, attended a secondary school that was "very rough, very tough, very poor." The first in her family to pursue higher education, she went to college for a two-year, pre-university bridging program that granted a coaching diploma. She accepted that the move meant leaving Consett, likely forever, as she "opened up to a whole new world" in boldly pursuing her passion for soccer and coaching. "I went from Bev the average student to winning Student of the Year awards; I absolutely aced my course and got my first coaching job at a local sports centre."

Next came an honours science and football degree from Liverpool John Moores University (2004-2007) and another transformative encounter, this time with Maureen (Mo) Marley, a former soccer legend for England then coaching Everton Ladies Football Team. Marley, who was Priestman's first encounter with a woman coach, agreed to her request to attend a training session. That first session led to another and, after observing Marley every night for six weeks, Priestman was invited to lead a warm-up. A coaching career, her lifelong dream, was becoming feasible.

In the meantime, Herdman had moved to New Zealand in 2003 to become that country's Coach Education Manager and later Director of Football Development. Appointed head coach of the women's national team in 2005, he offered Priestman a full-time coaching position, which the 21-year-old boldly accepted. She spent the next five years leading coaching and women's development. While there, she met her wife, Emma Humphries, who had previously played for the Ferns.

In 2011, Herdman became head coach of Canada's national women's team and invited Priestman to lead the Women's Excel Director U-14 to U20 program (see link below) and serve as his assistant. Five years later, she made another bold move. After her years with Herdman, it was time to explore other coaching methodologies if she were to accelerate her career path. Her choice, to return to England to assist Neville, was productive as she contributed to several significant results, including the team's victory at the 2019 SheBelieves Cup and finishing

fourth at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup. Shortly afterwards, Priestman became coach of England's U-18 side.

Priestman calls Neville "the icing on the cake" and the complete opposite to Herdman, whom she describes as "a workhorse with a great brain. John's my foundation; I spent nine years learning from him and then the Phil experience was fantastic for me. It was about people, about balance, about stepping back and letting others lead. If I hadn't experienced Phil, I wouldn't have done what I did with Canada. Diversity in your mentors, to see different ways of coaching, is critical."

In July 2020, Kenneth Heiner-Møller, Herdman's successor as Canada's head coach, resigned to rejoin the Danish Football Association as head of coach education. Priestman seized the opportunity to apply for the position, knowing she was ready to lead a national team.

On Parenthood

Priestman and Humphries are the parents of Jack, who was born in 2018, nine weeks before their move to England. Asked how she manages that role, Priestman said: "I don't!"

Humphries also keeps a hectic schedule as the Vancouver Whitecaps director of women's football development and head coach of the national U-17 team. Before settling in Vancouver in 2020, the couple managed relocations that took them from New Zealand to Canada, Canada to England, and back to Canada. Perhaps the toughest move was to England, with Humphries adapting to motherhood while Priestman was "living her dreams", which included 52 days away to prepare for the 2019 World Cup. The move back to Canada was equally challenging with Priestman settling into her head coach job amid a pandemic, Humphries and Jack enduring a two-week quarantine in a New Zealand hotel in order to visit relatives, the family reuniting after eight weeks apart, only to have Priestman immersing herself in Olympic preparation and then the Games themselves.

Frequently Priestman is the solo parent as Humphries' coaching job also entails travelling so it is, as she says, difficult. "... we just survive. I wish I could say we have it mastered; we don't, but I have a better perspective on life because of being a parent ... in the past it was all high performance. Now I am a better boss because I have staff who have kids and I am very big with, 'take time with the family' because I have an appreciation of its importance."

The Olympic Final and Beyond

Priestman's day began with a request from Neil Dewsnip to forego her traditional game day nap to meet with him. She reluctantly agreed. Telling her to sit down, he ran videos from people who were meaningful to her – Phil Neville, Gareth Southgate, the England men's manager, and goalkeeper specialist Mark Mason. "He had gone out of this way to get the videos ... I bawled my eyes out. I'm going to the final and these people are proud of me. I was overwhelmed."

That final will forever be remembered as one of the most memorable, stress-inducing moments in Canada's sport history. When it was over, Canadians rejoiced.

Before that, however, Team Canada had to handle the quarter-final against Brazil, a stressful, must-win game if the colour of the medal were to change. “Once we won, I knew we would go all the way, would beat the U.S. I can’t tell you why; I just knew.”

Much of the post-game analysis of the final focused on Priestman’s substitutions. In early 2020, FIFA announced that a maximum of five substitutes per team, per game would be allowed, up from the traditional three. The change was made during the coronavirus shutdown “to protect players from potential injuries when play resumed.” Priestman told her technical staff that she wanted Canada to make the maximum use of the rule, an approach not all accepted. She explained to them: “COVID has affected players’ fitness, so I want this to be my X-Factor, I want to make the subs, I want to be bold, I want to be front-footed (proactive). And that’s exactly what I was in the final.” After a sluggish first half that had Sweden up 1-0, Canada needed momentum and Priestman made the first of four critical substitutions. At the 67th minute, Jessie Fleming scored the equalizer. Extra time was scoreless and so it was down to tension-filled penalty kicks that ended when first-time Olympian Julia Grosso scored the historical winner. The moment was sweet for Priestman who coached both Fleming and Grosso as U-17 players.

Priestman attributes the team’s success to “the right mix of young and old players, all united in their passion to reach the next level and inspire a new generation of players.”

Next stop on her journey is the World Cup scheduled for July and August 2023 in Australia and New Zealand. “This team has been brilliant at the Olympics, but failed comparatively at World Cups, having been eliminated early in the knockout stages.” Canada Soccer’s comprehensive analysis of past performances suggests that 2023 will be a very different World Cup for the Olympic champions.

Asked what she will challenge the players to achieve in 2023, Priestman explained: “Winners of the World Cup get a star on their shirts so it might be around the star. I’m thinking about it!”

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.chatelaine.com/living/2021-doris-anderson-awards/#gallery/doris-anderson-awards/slide-1>

[Christine Sinclair honoured by FIFA for goal-scoring record \(msn.com\)](#)

[Women's Excel Program - Canada Soccer](#)

[Canada wins Olympic gold in women's soccer - Bing video](#)

Canada in Tokyo

Round 1: Canada 1, Japan 1

Round 2: Canada 2, Chile 1

Round 3: Canada 1, Great Britain 1

Quarter-final: Canada 1, Brazil 0

Semi-final: Canada 1, USA 0

Final: Canada 2, Sweden 1

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