

Meet Marion Lay, Sport Leader Extraordinaire



Marion in action

Marion Lay is the president of the 2010 LegaciesNow Society, founded to build support for Vancouver's bid for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games and Paralympic Winter Games and to ensure a strong and lasting sport system for British Columbia. An innovative thinker since her early years as a competitive swimmer, Marion is Canada's leading advocate for women in sport and physical activity. She also has a strong international reputation that led to her being awarded the 2001 International Olympic Committee's Women and Sport Trophy for the Americas in recognition of "outstanding achievements and landmarks made to develop, encourage, and strengthen the participation of women and girls at all levels of the sporting world."

In our recent conversation, Marion talked with characteristic frankness about her lifelong commitment to the betterment of sport. — Sheila Robertson

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By Sheila Robertson

Let's talk about what brought you into sport in the first place.

My brother, **Michael**, was an excellent swimmer as a youngster and made the swim team at a local pool in Covina, California, where we were living. Even then I was competitive and wanted to do what my brother was doing, so that's how I got into swimming. He was the better swimmer, but when he was 10 and I was eight, we were in Vancouver visiting our grandparents and he fell down Capilano Canyon and suffered 32 breaks. He was in rehabilitation for years and was never able to regain his form. My father died when I was 11, and the swim club became my family. I was a welfare child, and my club helped me to swim and to raise money so I could go to competitions.



Marion on the blocks at her local swim club.

How soon did you become interested in competing seriously?

Not right away, although I always wanted to go after my personal best. I was quite an awkward swimmer, with a high right arm and a very flat left arm, sort of a lunge swimmer, but I've always been a very strong upper-body person, and that's why I was such a good sprinter. Although I knew there was an Olympics, I had no idea that people like me, poor kids, could ever go there. Also, sport wasn't part of my family culture. My mother was a concert pianist and she had a withered leg so she knew nothing about sport. And for a young girl at that time, competing seriously was not much of an option.

Why were you living in California?

Because of my father's business. He immigrated to Saskatchewan from Germany to work as a farm labourer just before the Second World War. He then went into the hotel business and was part of the Hotel Vancouver's management team. He and a group of partners bought a motel in California, but he wasn't there long enough to make a profit or to build much of a pension. When he died, all we had was that pension and welfare.

Tell me what happened when you first wanted to swim for Canada.

There was quite a controversy when I came to the Olympic Trials in 1964. I had the potential to make either the American or the Canadian team, but Canada said no because I was not a resident

Canadian. It was their rule that you had to be a resident to be on the team. (My mother would never have stood for me taking out American citizenship — she was so proud to be Canadian.)



Marion had to win in and out of the pool before being named to her first Olympic team.

My coach, **Vince Van Detta**, decided I should go to both nationals anyway, first the Canadian and then the American, just to see how I did. I made the Canadian team, but **Howard Firby**, the team coach, refused to coach me until it was official. **Ken Murray**, from the Canadian Olympic Association, said I should have the right to represent Canada. He said this was an internal ruling that had never been challenged, but that as far as the International Olympic Committee [IOC] was concerned, I met the standards and, as a Canadian citizen, had the right to go to Tokyo. It was he who got the ruling changed.

All my life I've tried to belong to Canada, and I think I overcompensated from that moment on to show that I was of value. Even though everyone was so kind, I always felt like an outsider. It was a really interesting situation, and I was only 14 years old.

Would you call this your first battle in sport?

Yes, and I won it because somebody looked at the rules on my behalf and my coach supported me.

Did you ever train in Canada?

I always swam out of the States. My mom couldn't return to Canada until there was an old age pension for her, and that was in my last year of high school. I didn't return because at university I got preferential status for work studies because of my low income and my swimming abilities. Work studies means getting jobs in the school. I cleaned the gym and washrooms. That's when I started to realize I had leadership skills, because I got the men and women on the various teams to clean with me two days a week so I could get the job done in 20 minutes. I usually had a team of eight or nine of us cleaning, and that was a lot more fun.

You got your master's degree in the sociology of sport from California State University at Hayward. What came next?

I went to teach at the University of Western Ontario [UWO]. I met a woman who said something I took to heart. I was asking her how to teach because I was terrified. She said that the best teachers are those who have had life experiences that they can bring into the classroom, and that made so much sense to me. So in 1971, when **Roger Jackson** [1964 Olympic gold medallist in pair oars] asked if I would be willing to join him and four or five other athletes to work at Sport Canada — **Lou Lefaive** was director then — off I went, fully intending to return to UWO in a couple of years.

When did you start coaching?

During my last year in California. I also coached at UWO and joined the Kingfish Swim Club as soon as I got to Ottawa.

Why did you choose sport for your life's work? In my opinion, you could have excelled in many different areas.

When I made the Olympic team in 1964, I told Howard that if he let me swim, he would never regret it, and I would give 100 per cent in everything, and I did that. I made the commitment that I would come back to Canada and try to give back to sport. I always thought I would be a physical education teacher, because I didn't realize you could have a career in sport.

Two other things influenced my choice. When I was getting my master's degree, I met a woman shotputter who was one of the first to speak out about discrimination facing women in sport. And one of my teachers, Dr. **Marie Hart**, wrote the first major article about discrimination and women in sport — it was published in **Psychology Today** — and I chose women in sport as a statistical analysis project for her. These were defining moments and marked my start in women in sport. Later, when I talked to Lou about working at Sport Canada, I mentioned that women in sport was one of my areas of interest, and in case he hadn't noticed, there was a problem. Just like that, he said, "Let's fix it. Get out there and talk about it."

I was absolutely naïve and thought that after a couple of presentations, things would change — that it was only because people hadn't noticed. I was so shocked at the reaction I stirred up. There was a huge backlash, from women as well as men, to which Lou said, "This probably means you are right, but now we have to do it differently." He suggested a national conference, and in 1974, **Abby Hoffman, Penny Werthner, Petra Burka**, and I organized Canada's first women and sport conference.

What were the key learnings of that conference?

The validation that the problem was not just an oversight, that women *were* second-class citizens in sport, and being in a position of power and status in effecting change is important.

Although they weren't in positions of power, women were competing in quite large numbers.

They were competing, but they were young, and when they got to a certain age, it was understood that they would then start to do appropriate "girl" things — that it was time to stop this childhood, tomboy behaviour. We competed as an extension of the male and never as a dimension of the female. For years, psychological tests defined sport as a male characteristic and nursing as a female characteristic — in other words, defining just by your sex what you were supposed to like or dislike. There was a lot more tradition to hold us into roles, and when you have tradition, roles and rules are very important.

You are a creative, tenacious, hard-working visionary, not to mention being able to see how to do something and then getting it done. Can you explain this?

My strength is having a vision and making it come to life. If you give me a couple of words like "LegaciesNow", I can create a new entity. "Women in sport" was the same, although I had a lot more trouble with that one and had to do a lot more work on my personal journey. I am also blessed with the ability to sell a dream. Some call my gift being a dream weaver, others a team builder; the result is the same — being able to translate dreams into reality. When people ask for help, I can usually set them on a course. I believe that asking for help is the greatest compliment you can pay another person.

I'm trying to be a good day-to-day manager; it's not my strongest skill, but I am good at creating something and empowering others to take over because I don't need ownership. I helped to create CAAWS [Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity], but I was never the administrator. I came in two or three times as chair to help move it through transitional times, but I've always had the ability to let go of transitional power. I was part of the creation of the Canadian Sport Centre Vancouver, was very hands-on as the chair for the first year or so, and then let it go. It was the same with proMOTION plus. A lot of people think you need positional power to get things done; I think personal power is as important. I have allowed myself the freedom to not get involved in hierarchies, so I can position myself wherever I want.



Celebrating the opening of Pacific Sport Canadian Sport Centre Vancouver in 1998 are (L to R): Kathleen Heddle, Wendy Pattenden, Marion, and Greg Edgelow.

As the first chair of the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation, you played a key leadership role. What was it like to be replaced midpoint in the process?

The same thing happened with **Rick Hansen's** Man in Motion World Tour, which I was in charge of organizing. It went through a transformation and, as in so many big projects, because of the power dynamics, often the team that starts a project doesn't have the opportunity to see it through to the finish. Once the Tour hit Newfoundland, the Who's Who in Canada brought him home. At the time, the change was devastating to me; I have now learned not to take it personally. There are different values in not-for-profits compared to the business world, and it's not that one is right or wrong, but there is often a dynamic tension between the two.

In the bid, the stress was around how to create an Olympic/Paralympic bid — "the big circus" — that would stimulate the economy, have sustainability, and be socially responsible. Games have struggled with these issues for years. Usually the people who chair these big events are well connected — the elite — and often are not sport people. I'm not rich, I don't pretty up real well, I'm not great at formal dinners, and there's a lot of protocol in big events. Vancouver was obviously successful in this regard. These days, bids and Games are huge projects, and you need to be able to deal with prime ministers, premiers, presidents, and princes. You need to be able to walk into boardrooms, and I am just not that person. **Jack Poole**, who came in as chair and CEO, is. I chose to use the strength I have to create something for sport, and that was the 2010 LegaciesNow Society.

Your vision of the Games was something different, wasn't it?

Yes, it was — it was all about leadership. I see leadership as being when someone with passion and vision sees an opportunity and acts. LegaciesNow came about because we said, and we believed it passionately, that our bid could not win in Canada unless we were also developing sport and doing something that touches kids around the province. Sport development and the bid absolutely had to go together.

I was part of the teams that did the yes/no debates around the province and, depending on the crowd, my strategy from time to time was to tell them that I was on the “no” side. People would just stare at me. I said, “I am against the Games as defined by the media as a huge circus that takes and takes and leaves nothing. Let me tell you about the Games I want. I want a Games that provides opportunities and services for athletes and coaches now, and I helped to create LegaciesNow to do that. I’m using the Games for the sport agenda that coaches and athletes, a constituency that should be important to the Games, have asked for. If you’re going to support these Games, you need to figure what it is you need them to do. Showcase Vancouver to the world? Help with some infrastructure development? Get more money for community coaches or cultural programs?”



Marion and her bronze medal, won at the 1968 Olympic Games in the 4x100m freestyle relay

We created community committees to listen to the people and maximize the legacy of the Games in the heartland of the province. These can be power skating clinics for their kids, outdoor recreation experiences, an opportunity to go to a B.C. Games or a Western Canada Games, or bringing in a good coach. They don't necessarily want big things, but they want things that make a difference in their lives and the lives of their children.

I suggest that LegaciesNow is the most innovative program ever in Canadian sport. How did it evolve from “a commitment by the province and the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation to enhance sport development in British Columbia into a far-reaching initiative that touches British Columbians of every generation in all communities”?

It is all about learning from past experience. The financial commitment of \$5 million [see “What is LegaciesNow?”] was integral to marketing Vancouver’s candidacy within Canada and in swinging the Canadian Olympic Association to choose Vancouver over bids from Quebec City and Calgary.

In 1998, when the choice was made, everyone was talking about the Calgary legacy* and its amazing impact on sport development, but athletes were asking for legacies to help them get ready to compete in 2010, not to kick in years after the Games, as happened in Calgary — and we listened. The \$5 million made it possible to start building LegaciesNow.

Right after we won the right to bid, I was in Lausanne receiving the International Olympic Committee's Women and Sport Trophy for the Americas, and people kept asking me why Canada was so strong on the social responsibility agenda and so weak in competition. My analysis mentioned all the funding cuts, the impact of the **Ben Johnson** doping scandal, plus a number of other things that all happened around the same time and decimated our infrastructure. With this bid, we knew we had to be advocates for sport, it had to be more than just the Games, and that's why LegaciesNow emerged.

The concept has worked well. We've definitely shown this government and the Bid Corporation that we can help communities maximize their potential off the Games. We are a model for how people would like to move forward.

And move forward you certainly have.

Yes, in mid-February the government announced an investment of over \$30 million in one-time, exceptional funding to support initiatives to bring out the best in sport, music, arts, culture, literacy, and volunteerism. As a result, LegaciesNow will be given the funding and human resources to assume the leadership role in British Columbia's sport development and recreation programs. The expanded program will do with culture what it has already done with athletes and sport organizations: incorporate them into the buildup to the 2010 Games. I want to do exactly what we did with LegaciesNow, which was to work with existing sport organizations to create new and innovative programs. In addition to sport organizations, now we will work with schools, the Olympic Secretariat, Olympic organizers, and all levels of government to bring out the best in our athletes. We will now be able to leverage new contributions for sport and fitness from other levels of government and the private sector.

Where do your ideas come from?

I get ideas from books that talk about how to create your own realities by authors like **David Suzuki**. I listen to great speakers. I also believe in synchronicity. For example, if I see a person in a wheelchair, I might say it's time to increase the attention we pay to Paralympic sports. People may find that strange, but that's how I work. I also learn by talking about ideas. I put ideas out and I like to get reaction. I enjoy the debate. I learn a lot from colleagues and friends who dream about how to make a different world. A small group of people really can make change; all you have to do is inspire them to get together to do it.

In building my teams, if I hear something good about someone, I check it out. I try to find solutions to criticism about why we can't move forward because, that way, real changes can happen. I try to park issues that are going to hurt us and find areas where we can build consensus. To me, the strategy is always the struggle to move forward. There is no right or wrong; rather, you need a network of people who support you, including some who are critics. Otherwise, you don't know when there is going to be a backlash or when you are going too hard or too fast for people.

***Editor's note:** The federal government's direct financial commitment to the 1988 Games was close to \$225 million, which covered all government services, all capital construction costs, and two endowments of \$30 million each, one to the Calgary Olympic Development Association to run the Olympic Oval and one for Canada Olympic Park.

You are known for bringing the right people together to get things done.

I agree that is one of my skills. For example, when I set up my group to develop what grew into LegaciesNow, I brought together colleagues who help me dream, and that group became a planning and delivery component of LegaciesNow. Currently, it is the closest thing that British Columbia has to a collective voice for sport. I said we needed a name that would discourage people from joining because I wanted to choose my team. If a group is called "Excellence" or "Best Ever", everyone wants to be at the table, but who would want to join something called "System Integration"? Not very many, so we chose that name.

I'm not a complicated, academic-type thinker, but I can move agendas and I can recognize opportunities. For example, when the current provincial government was elected, I looked at their strategic plan to figure out how we in sport could help them to reach their goals through sport and deliver some of their messages. I have done most of my work with governments, and very little with the business world because I feel that government is committed to the social responsibility and health agendas.



Marion is an enthusiastic snowboarder and downhill skier.

Part of leadership is making tough decisions. Does that come naturally to you?

It doesn't. I prefer the carrot to the stick. With CAAWS, I always said, "Let's do the least amount of harm." I have the ethic of caring. I am into change through transition, not sweeping change. Chaos can bring about positive change, but it is very hard on people.

At Sport Leadership 2003, you spoke passionately about the importance of coaching and said that it would be a focus of LegaciesNow. Is anything happening to improve the lot of coaches, or is it too early?

We need to ensure that what athletes need to perform is available in the team around them. Right now, athletes have to buy what they need, and they are paying high market rates for the services because the system isn't there. The sustainability part of the system is through coaching, because athletes come and go.

We need larger amounts of system money to employ coaches and establish endowments. We need to approach government job creation agencies and human resource development programs. We have NCCP Level 4 coaches who can't get jobs, so we need to put together a group whose focus is getting jobs for coaches as a legacy of the Games. That way, we could actually start to create a different system. There will always be political will and public sympathy for athletes, which makes it easier to raise funds on their behalf; that's not the case with coaches, who are

seen as having cushy jobs travelling around the world. We need to speak out for coaches far more than has been done, because getting money for coaches is tough.

Let's say we have \$100 million profit at the end of the Games, which is what Salt Lake City had. If we had \$5 million annually for coaches, what a difference that would make. If all the constituents — Aboriginal Peoples, municipalities, the Canadian Olympic Committee, the Canadian Paralympic Committee, the provinces and territories, and the federal government — kept the \$100 million intact (because that creates bigger investment returns), could we not get matching funds from provincial and federal human resource agencies? Then we would be at the table with matching funds. It may not happen, but why not talk about the legacy and sustainability of sport through coaching?



Marion makes her point!

Coaching is something we really need to focus on, and if, with partners and through LegaciesNow, I can get people doing that, it will be great. Once we get some money into the system, we can start to work.

Lessons for Women in Coaching

- Never be afraid to take risks.
- Dare to be a trendsetter.
- Challenge the status quo.
- Speak up about issues and advocate for your beliefs.
- Capitalize on your strengths *and* the strengths of others.
- Don't take transition personally.
- Draw strength from your passion for coaching.
- Understand positional power and use it to your advantage.
- Use your personal power — nobody can take that away from you.

How did you feel when you heard Vancouver announced as the winning city?

In my head, I was willing IOC president **Jacques Rogge** to say "Vancouver", and when he did, it was an unbelievable power surge, almost like being in a vacuum of numbness. Some people cried at the moment; I and several others cried nonstop for several hours. It was like a release. There was exhaustion as well as elation. You could have wrung me out. When I heard the announcement, I could not believe it, and then everything released. It was almost like a shock and not something I have ever experienced before.

Marion's Athletic Accomplishments

- 100m freestyle swimming champion, 1964–1968
- Fifth, 100m freestyle, 1964 Olympic Games
- Gold medallist, 100m freestyle, 1966 Commonwealth Games
- World record, 110yd freestyle (short course), 1967
- Bronze medallist, 4 x 100m freestyle relay and fourth, 100m freestyle, 1968 Olympic Games

Marion's Professional Accomplishments

- President, 2010 LegaciesNow Society
- Past chair of the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation
- City of Vancouver representative on the board of directors of the Vancouver 2010 Organizing Committee
- Member of the executive committee of the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC)
- Founder and past chair of the board of directors of the PacificSport Canadian Sport Centre Vancouver
- Past co-chair of the British Columbia Games Society
- A founding member and past chair of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS)
- A founding member of pro*MOTION* plus, British Columbia's organization for girls and women in sport
- Founding member of WomenSport International
- Head of operations, Rick Hansen's Man in Motion World Tour, 1985
- CBC colour commentator for swimming events, 1968–1973
- President of Think Sport Ltd., a Vancouver-based sport management and consulting firm specializing in event management, program planning, evaluation, and gender equity education

Marion's Awards

- 2002 COC and CAAWS Carol Anne Letheren International Sport Leadership Award
- 2001 Leadership in Sports Award – Canadian Sport Awards
- 2001 International Olympic Committee's Women and Sport Trophy for the Americas
- 1998 Bobbie Steen Award of Excellence for Leadership in the Sport Community
- 1996 Canadian Citizenship Award
- 1995 Bryce Taylor Memorial Award for Outstanding Contribution to Canadian Sport – Canadian Sport Awards
- 1994 CAAWS Herstorical Award
- 1991 YWCA Women of Distinction Award for Recreation and Sport

What is LegaciesNow?*

The legacy program of Vancouver's bid to host the 2010 Olympic Winter Games — the 2010 LegaciesNow Society — was developed as a key component of the bid and the means to an enhanced, province-wide sport system as well as to having a positive impact on the national sport system.

Introduced in 1998 by the provincial government as a province-wide sport development program in partnership with the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation and backed by a \$5 million commitment, half from the province and half from corporate fund-raising, LegaciesNow focuses on youth, winter and summer sports, events, and communities through targeted programming.

LegaciesNow intends to increase the number of British Columbians on Olympic and Paralympic teams by providing programs and services to high performance athletes, to develop provincial and community outreach, to build capacity and sustainability, to create positive awareness about the Olympic movement, and to build support for the Vancouver 2010 bid.

Already in place are a number of programs designed to achieve those goals:

A generic, long-term athlete development model is available to all athletes in the province. Additional funding is going to develop sport-specific models in basketball, curling, field hockey, figure skating, freestyle skiing, and snowboarding. All the winter sports will have an opportunity to create long-term athlete development models.

Tourism British Columbia's WorldHost program assists those interested in bidding for international sport events, conferences, and congresses, recognizing the value in raising the profile of the province and its people on the world stage. Success stories include the 2001 World Figure Skating Championships in Vancouver and the 2002 World Cup for the Disabled in Kimberley. In all, over 30 international competitions and conferences have been supported.

The TELUS Whistler Sport Centre is Canada's latest winter training centre for Nordic, alpine, and sliding sports. Launched in 2001, the centre assisted training groups from figure skating, freestyle skiing, snowboarding, and curling. **Bob Kusch**, chair of the centre, says, "The centre would not have been created at this time had it not been for LegaciesNow. Its funding has been fundamental in permitting the development of the centre, in providing support for our quality athletes, and in beginning a development program for lower participation winter sports."

The PacificSport Canadian Sport Centre Vancouver has enhanced its services to 57 winter sport athletes and 10 coaches in freestyle skiing, snowboarding, figure skating, and curling; to 445 gold and silver athletes and 41 coaches; and to 397 bronze athletes in 25 sports. LegaciesNow funding has enabled PacificSport to expand athlete services beyond its partner sports to reach the greater sport system. All provincial sport organizations now access PacificSport programs.

Through Sport BC, the Kidsport Funds is a partner in the national charity that brings sport and needy kids together.

SportTek is a technological resource that provides coaches with an opportunity to access the Sport Information Resource Centre either at no charge or at a reduced rate.

TeamWork is a partnership program with SportMedBC that brings together science and medical experts with PacificSport head coaches and training groups.

In the works is another ambitious program targeting children's obesity, tentatively named SportFit. "The obesity problem is widespread, and we felt we just had to do something in the elementary schools to motivate kids, to reach them before they drop out of physical activity and sport," says Marion. "The intent is to link kids into our club programs and into after-school programs. We want to get a lot of kids more active and also interested in the BC Games and Canada Games."

Action Schools! BC is a physical activity program tailored to elementary school and promoting and evaluating healthy hearts, healthy bones, healthy self-images, and healthy schools. Action Schools! wants to become integrated into elementary school and is supported through community partnerships.

The BC Youth Olympic Leadership Academy provides leadership skills training focused on the values of the Olympic movement.

The BC Facility Access Review is examining sport facilities throughout the province. Its initial report outlined current needs and plans of the 23 PacificSport sports including access and development recommendations. Next will come a broader review of winter sport facilities to provide the basis for future facility development.

For coaches, LegaciesNow supports a menu of services delivered through the PacificSport centres, including salary support in partnership with national, provincial, and local sport organizations; information on educational scholarships and bursaries; and delivery of the National Coaching Institute program and NCCP Level 4/5 program.

By establishing LegaciesNow early in the bid process, huge, positive changes are being made to British Columbia's sport structure.

**As of February 2004*

About the Author



Sheila Robertson

Sheila Robertson has worked as an editor and writer with Canada's sport community for over 27 years. Since 1993 she has been the editor and lead writer of Coaches Report, Canada's only source of national news for coaches. She is also the editor and a writer of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching. She was the editor and a writer of Making the Most of Your Opportunities: A Media Guide for Athletes and Their Coaches. In 1995, she was the recipient of the Frank Ratcliffe Memorial Award for communications, presented annually at the Canadian Sport Awards. Coaches Report was a finalist for the award in 2001.