

Pursuing Motherhood and Medals

It's a topic where intransigence is the norm. Whether a woman is a high performance coach or an athlete, the prevailing attitude claims that she cannot possibly continue her pursuit of excellence when she becomes a mother. Of the growing numbers of girls and women engaged in high performance sport, inevitably some continue to compete well into their child-bearing years. While the numbers of women coaches at that level is much smaller (too small, we would claim), far too often they are forced to choose between profession and parenthood. Institutionally, there simply isn't the support that makes doing both possible and palatable.

Success stories are slowly emerging, creating role models and showing what can happen when the commitment is strong. However, if we accept that women coaches and athletes are essential to a strong, vibrant, and progressive sport system, it follows that policies and programs should harmonize their high aspirations with the desire to raise children. It behooves our institutions, notably Sport Canada and national sport organizations, to recognize women coaches and athletes as essential components of Canadian sport and to work to create a much more welcoming and supportive environment. If this happens, we will all be the richer.

"Pursuing Motherhood and Medals" tells how one athlete and one coach, both at the highest levels of sport, manage their dual roles, largely through their own initiative. The article spells out the challenges and cites examples, notably in the corporate world, where growing numbers of employers are taking important steps to accommodate women who choose to combine working with motherhood. Corporations are moving in this direction because they are recognizing the value women bring to their marketplace. It is a sad fact that our sport world lags far behind. The [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) urges Canada's sport leaders to take the necessary steps to address this issue—and to do so quickly. All it takes is the will. — Sheila Robertson

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Pursuing Motherhood and Medals

by Claire Carver-Dias

Women coaches considering parenthood may balk at the thought of 2:00 a.m. feedings coupled with 5:00 a.m. wake-up calls to head to the pool, rink, or gymnasium. But their hesitation goes beyond the dread of sleep deprivation. Although many of these women have the ability and desire to attain the top coaching positions in their sport, they often forfeit their coaching dreams to pursue family life—not because they don't think both can be managed, but because they know that the necessary financial, emotional, and physical supports remain inadequate.

Likewise, most women athletes considering parenthood while still in training find themselves staring down a path rarely taken. At the highest levels in Canadian sport, few sports allow the flexibility and support an athlete-mother might require, and few women athletes are willing to risk losing their position on a team, miss crucial events or training, or manage the physical changes of pregnancy.

In this article, I explore some of the challenges that women in high performance sport face, share the stories and opinions of some who have made it work, identify some of the reasons for their success, and

take a look at what some corporations have done to make pursuing parenthood and career success more manageable.

The Challenges

It is undeniable that in most high performance sports, managing a young family and coaching or competing at the national team level are generally seen as incongruent. Some of the challenges faced by the coach-mother also apply to the athlete-mother.

Timing clash

Women coaches who aim to reach the highest levels in their sport careers often find a definite clash between a typical career path and the child-bearing years. Coaches who begin their careers in their 20s take, on average, 10 years to acquire the necessary experience and skills to coach at the national or Olympic levels. This timeframe coincides with the optimal time for beginning a family. Taking time off work or requesting job flexibility at that point may be unrealistic, and render breaking back into the top levels of coaching difficult. Further, women who choose to leave coaching with the intention of eventually returning may find that updating skills and certification is expensive and time-consuming—a potential deterrent to re-entering the competitive coaching field.

Limited positions, lots of competition

Often, multiple individuals vie for those two or three top spots in a given sport, so choosing to take time off at this crucial point could result in another individual being selected for that coveted position. Most national sport organizations (NSOs) would choose to name to a top coaching role a person who does not require additional support or career flexibility, rather than wait, spend limited funding, or make special concessions for a woman coach who is simultaneously balancing motherhood.

The same challenge exists for athlete-mothers. In most cases, several athletes battle it out for only a few coveted spots on a team.

The demands on coaches

Parenting and coaching both require consistency, time, and boundless energy. Attempts to balance family life, coaching, low salaries, and travel demands can be difficult and stressful. Many coaching roles require weekend and evening work and extensive travel, which necessitate extraordinary child-care planning, adding an additional layer of stress on the coach and her family.

The type of customized child care required often carries a price tag beyond the coach's paycheque, and beyond the patience and endurance of her spouse or partner. Many NSOs do not have formal maternity leave policies, and coaches often work on contract, leaving them ineligible for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits and maternity leave. The result can be significant income loss for a family if the choice is time away from work.

There is also the considerable physical strain of coaching, which must be considered when it comes to women coaches who are expectant mothers. Many tasks require the coach to stand, bend, walk, climb, lift, spot, and demonstrate physical skills that are not always safe or comfortable for pregnant women, and there is often no other coach available to ease the physical stress of such activities.

Few part-time or flexible coaching positions

Another challenge is the dearth of part-time high performance coaching positions. Although some sports have embraced a team approach to coaching, it is still an uncommon phenomenon. In many sports, where

funding for multiple coaches is scarce and the tradition of the lone coach at the helm remains prevalent, a coach is either there full-time or not there at all. For women coaches, it's too often all or nothing.

Perceptions

Women coaches balancing families and careers are sometimes seen as not committed or as divided in their focus. Many claim that because they are managing both responsibilities at once, their coaching career is deemed a hobby rather than a professional career.

The demands on athletes

To take steps toward addressing the financial strain of athlete-mothers managing child care while competing at a national team level, Sport Canada's Athlete Assistance Program (AAP) has included child-care costs on the list of special needs recognized as deserving of its support. Consideration to granting child-care assistance is given only when an athlete must obtain the services of a babysitter to attend approved training or competitions and when the NSO certifies that the athlete must be absent from home to attend approved training or competition and no family member or ongoing day-care service (including nannies) is available to provide the service. So ongoing child care, such as day care or preschool programs, is not eligible for funding, even if these have been enlisted to enable the athlete to attend training and competition. Neither is a nanny or a family member providing child care. Also, while some special needs are funded up to \$5000 annually, the maximum child-care assistance is \$1000 annually. (For further information on assistance available for childcare expenses for athlete-mothers, refer to Section 8.4 – Special-Needs Assistance, of the Athlete's Assistance Program: <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/sc/pol/athl/109-eng.cfm - a4>.)

Lack of precedence

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing coach-mothers is the relative few who have trod the path before them. There are often no formal policies in place to deal with parental leave because there has never been a demand for them. There is also an absence of mentors or advisors who can guide women coaches through this important change in their careers.

Women who have done it



Becky Kellar
Photo courtesy of
Hockey Canada

Many women in high performance sport have felt forced to make the tough choice between pursuing their career and parenthood. A few brave women have weighed the challenges and then chosen to defy convention and face the uphill battle of attempting both at the same time.

Ice hockey player **Becky Kellar**, three-time Olympian and two-time Olympic gold medallist, is one of them. Kellar is the proud mother of two sons and, at time of writing, was in intense training for her fourth Olympic appearance. Here's her story in her own words.

Timing it right

"If I had been asked a few years before I had my son **Owen** whether I would retire before having kids, I would have said "yes". But when the time came that my husband, **Nolan Duke**, and I were ready to have kids, I wasn't ready to stop playing hockey. Together we made the decision that we would try to do both at the same time.

"We tried to plan the timing of my pregnancy so I wouldn't miss a complete hockey season. I played the world championships in the spring of 2004 and had just become pregnant. Owen was born in October 2004, and I returned for the remainder of that season and managed to make it to the national team training camp in January 2005. One reason I was so aggressive with the timing of my return was because I knew that if I

was going to make the 2005 world championships, I had to be back on the ice and attend one of the camps that same season. My only choice was the January camp.”

Finding the right child care and support

“Whether the baby joined me would be decided camp-by-camp, and for that first camp, we decided it was best that he stay home. Fortunately, my mother-in-law, my mother and my dad were committed babysitters while Nolan was at work. They’re all extremely supportive.

“In many ways, not much changed for me after Owen was born. Motherhood seemed to involve a disciplined lifestyle that I was used to, and pretty much everything we planned in terms of returning to hockey and moving to Calgary for the Olympic preparation period (beginning in August 2005) worked as expected.

“We had planned to hire a nanny to come to Calgary with me to look after Owen when I was training, practising or playing. We met with a nanny placement agency months before he was born to make sure we could find a nanny who was prepared to move out West for seven months. The nanny worked for us before I left for Calgary so we could get adjusted to each other. She ended up being very accommodating and flexible, which helped immensely.

“We had originally planned that Nolan would visit regularly, but, instead, every time the team travelled, I chose to fly Owen and the nanny home. Nolan wound up coming to Calgary once, and I brought Owen home five times. In terms of the expense of the flying, I was able to fly the nanny quite a lot on the Aeroplan miles I had been collecting since 1998. I coordinated my travel such that, if the team was flying to Europe, I could often route my flight through Toronto. Owen was under two at the time so he sat on my lap. All in all, it wasn’t too bad. I paid for a few extra flights, but for the most part, the plan worked out.”

Training camp planning

“My second son, **Zach**, was born in January 2007.

“For the current pre-Olympic period, we aren’t quite as fortunate in terms of the training camps. Both boys are over two years old, which means we have to arrange for a lot of flights.

“The first challenge was the training camp in May 2009. I went by myself to Calgary for a week to do fitness testing and house hunting, and then my mom flew the boys out and we all flew together to Dawson Creek in northern British Columbia. They were with me for two weeks, and then my mom flew back to Ontario and I did the last week without them because the team goes on a biking and hiking training excursion.

“In Dawson Creek, we stayed in houses that local people vacated for us. As a result, my mom, the boys, two other players, and I were in one house. From that point on, what we did during each day was scheduled and planned.

“A typical day really depends on the training camp. In Prince Edward Island, before the 2006 Games (<http://www.coach.ca/WOMEN/e/journal/july2006/index.htm>), we ran on the beach every morning at 7:30 for 45 minutes, and then we had breakfast, headed into town and skated for one to two hours. Then we did off-ice stick-handling and shooting, followed by time on the bikes or lifting weights. We went back to the cottages for dinner and then had an evening fitness class. A big part of it is skill development on the ice. It was similar in Dawson Creek.

“These spring camps tend to be the most demanding in our training schedule. Normally at a training camp we’re on the ice a couple of times a day, but these are more like boot camps. They’re unique and challenging. It’s one of those things, where once you’ve gotten through it, you look back on it with pride. We did the same thing at Canadian Forces Base Valcartier before the 2002 Olympics, and it was very difficult there, as well. Because we were on a very large military base, we had to ride our bikes everywhere to get

around. I remember at one point thinking, other than the work being a little harder, I felt like I was at summer camp for adults.”

Doing what I love for as long as I can



Veteran Becky Kellar plays defence for Canada's national women's hockey team. Photo courtesy of Hockey Canada

“I’ve been on the national team since 1998, and my life has changed quite a bit since then. I still love to play hockey and I know that once I retire from competing at this level, it’s gone forever. A while ago, my brother said, “You realize that most people live to be about 85. You’ve got 50 years or so left of not playing competitive hockey!” I plan on riding it out for as long as I can. My boys are getting to the point now that they are going to start doing their own activities so, if I make the team, 2010 is the last Olympic Games for me.”

Giving back

“One of my sources of income is running hockey schools. My former teammate **Cheryl Pounder** and I coach at our own hockey school in Mississauga and Burlington. We do it partly because we’ve worked at hockey schools for years and both of us had the same idea that if we ran our own school we would do some things differently. We talked about it for a couple of years, and finally, with the help of Cheryl’s dad and a friend of his, we put it together. We’ve been running it since 2002. Here’s some information on the school:

- Strictly Hockey is an all-girls hockey school open to future hockey stars aged six and up.
- We offer a fun environment where players learn new skills from Olympic gold medallists.
- For more information, visit, <http://www.strictlyhockey.ca/Site/Welcome.html>.”

The future

“I am still thinking about what I will do after 2010. When I did my undergrad at Brown University, I got my teaching certificate, and I’ve never used it because I’ve been busy playing hockey. I also obtained an MBA from Wilfrid Laurier University, and I haven’t yet had the opportunity to use it either. When I chose to pursue the MBA, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, but I felt that an MBA could present some opportunities. The tuition was one of the things Sport Canada could financially support, which was a huge help. It was a major time commitment, but I thought that if I could do it without incurring a large expense, then I should at least try.

“After I retire from competitive hockey, I’d love to find something I can do that works with having a family with two active sons. I’ll see what opportunities present themselves after the 2010 Games.”

Why it worked for Kellar

It would be easy to consider Becky Kellar as the classic overachiever, but that is too simplistic a take on her accomplishments. Kellar has been able to face all of the challenges of being an athlete-mother because she is able to source the type of flexible support she needed to make it work. Her children are often cared for by trustworthy and dependable family members, an economical and flexible solution to child care needs and one that allows her to enjoy peace of mind about the quality of child care so she can focus on her training. Her husband’s financial support plays a crucial role in allowing her to pursue her athletic career.

A second and equally important factor in her success has been the openness of her NSO, Hockey Canada, her coach **Mel Davidson**, and her team, in helping make it work for her. Kellar has been able to bring her sons on bus trips and flights and to training camps. **Julie Healy**, Hockey Canada’s Director of Women’s Hockey, says that the team enjoys having the kids join them on trips. She says that the NSO does what it can to support the athletes with children. “It’s important to us that we put the best possible athletes on the

ice and the best possible coaches behind the bench,” says Healy. “We try our best to make it easier for them when we can. We wish we could do even more.”

Head coach Mel Davidson coached Canada’s women’s hockey team to gold at both the 2006 Olympics and the 2007 world championships. She claims that since team members **Hayley Wickenheiser** and Kellar have involved their children in their athletic lives since before 2006, having athlete-moms on the team has not changed the team: “It has been a part of us for so long, there is no impact,” says Davidson. “It is just a part of us.”

Perhaps what worked best for Kellar was her own openness. She regularly communicated her needs, asked for assistance, requested special considerations, and consistently came to the table with workable solutions. Davidson sees this as critical: “One of the things I do to support athlete-moms is let them know to let me know how we can help. Solid lines of communication are so important.”

Kellar investigated all possible funding avenues, even communicating with Sport Canada to look into obtaining special assistance for her child care and relocation costs. While she obtained some help with relocation fees, she still relies heavily on her husband and family to make things work for her and her boys. Davidson feels that more could be done: “My personal opinion is that a solid child-care support financial system needs to be put in place—one that athletes who are parents can apply to and access. It should assist in covering a minimum of 75 per cent and close to 100 per cent of their costs, and it should have some flexibility so that the money could be applied to travel, accommodation costs, et cetera.”

Kellar hopes that her experience will open up the way and be an inspiration to other female athletes who think that having a baby must coincide with the end of their days of performing at an elite level, or for any women in general who give up the activities they love after having children.

Clearly, Kellar has made it work, but more can be done, including greater financial support through the AAP and less rigid qualifications for child-care funding.

Coach-mother



Rowing coach Laryssa Biesenthal, here with first-born daughter Avery Biesenthal Brambell, combines coaching and motherhood with equal success. Photo courtesy of Carla Saris

Another example is rowing coach **Laryssa Biesenthal**, a mother of two daughters who has figured out how to make motherhood and her coaching career work together. A two-time Olympic bronze medallist and six-time world champion, Biesenthal coached for Canada and is now working as the senior women’s coach at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra, Australia.

Biesenthal and her husband, **Iain Brambell**, also a former Olympic rower and 2008 bronze medallist, welcomed **Avery** in December 2006. Biesenthal was back on the water six weeks later. **Ryley** was born in November 2008. Determined to get back to coaching, Biesenthal agreed to be interviewed by Rowing Australia two weeks after giving birth. Three weeks later, she was on a plane bound for Australia for an in-person interview, and in February 2009, Biesenthal and Brambell and their daughters moved from their B.C. home to a new residence down under.

Having a supportive spouse plays a crucial role in making coaching and motherhood work. “Our whole family made the move right away,” says Biesenthal. “To make it work, Iain and I made the decision that he would be a stay-at-home dad until the girls and I got settled in, and he would then begin work. Iain is great.”

Biesenthal feels that balancing the roles of coach and mother becomes substantially more manageable if employers are open to providing extra support to help the coach deal with some of the logistical challenges related to having

young children and working, such as managing breastfeeding: “The biggest challenge I faced was trying to coach and nurse the baby, especially when the girls were eating every three hours. This became further complicated with trips away from Canberra and going overseas. It is made so much easier for moms if their employers are open to having a helper-nanny or the father travel with them.”

She believes that if the sport world wishes to retain female athletes, they are going to have to realize that women are different. “If women want to have children and work, or nurse their babies for a year, there is going to have to be support for the mother. Or if she wants to take time off, NSOs should feel compelled to maintain a job for her when she returns.”

In Biesenthal’s opinion, there is an enormous upside to an employer supporting a woman coach as she deals with the demands of the early days of motherhood. The coach, she says, returns to the field of play stronger than ever.

“Being a mom has helped me to be a more compassionate coach. I see the athletes now through a mom’s eyes, and I really try to communicate with the athletes as best I can—an open and honest approach is the best. The other thing being a mom has helped with is that I now have more balance and I’m grounded. To love my coaching and love my girls has enabled me to have the best of both worlds.”

What sport can learn from corporate Canada

Only a handful of women at the top levels of sport have chosen and been able to manage competing or coaching simultaneously with parenthood, for reasons listed earlier.

On the other hand, corporate Canada has seen a sharp growth in the number of working women with children and an increase in the number of women vying for and attaining executive roles. It has also seen a rise in part-time positions, even at the executive level. Statistics show that over 70% of people in part-time roles are women (Statistics Canada, 2007). In 2006, 73% of all women with children less than age 16 living at home were part of the employed workforce, up from 39% in 1976 (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89f0133x/89f0133x2006000-eng.htm>). I talked to **Wendi Campbell**, a chartered accountant and former HR executive with KPMG Canada, and now an executive coach, to find out her take on this trend.

Campbell has noticed the increase in professional women who have chosen to continue working after entering parenthood. The challenges they face are the same as those of women coaches, but increasingly the network of support behind them is improving. Policies around parental leave are commonplace, and EI benefits are helpful.

“Women who have careers and young children face the challenge of handling home and work responsibilities at the same time,” says Campbell. “Those who are able to manage best are those who have successful networks of support both at work and at home.”

The network Campbell is referring to is one that is created by employee and employer in partnership: “Policies are important, but I’ve always thought that the most successful arrangements are when the employee and employer are both flexible and willing to give and take. It has to be a two-way street, with both parties at the table, communicating, making sure that it works well.”

With advances in technology, it is easier for employees to entertain a flexible schedule or part-time work. Campbell claims that this has helped women to balance alternative work arrangements and motherhood, while it has also created some added stress at home in that the employees can become reachable at all times. Nevertheless, Campbell has noted an increase in appetite for part-time executives, at least in the professional services industry. In particular, KPMG, where Campbell has spent most of her career, has made efforts to recognize the talent that women who are mothers can bring to the table and have welcomed flexible and reduced schedules. Participation in these types of flex programs has grown year by year, and Campbell has observed that the success of these programs has been proven over time.

“If anything, employees who are balancing parenthood and work tend to be very well rounded,” says Campbell. “They are able to prioritize, and sometimes their product can be even more focused and more balanced.”

Conclusion

It seems that corporate Canada has begun to make steps toward establishing an environment that recognizes a valued segment of the workforce—women. At the same time, the sport world struggles to make it work for women, even those with lofty goals and the skills to back up the goals. A few coach-mothers and athlete-mothers have succeeded (but not necessarily with ease), while others have been pushed aside or have chosen to step down because the challenges seemed insurmountable.

The onus is on Canadian sport to make the shift from maintaining the status quo to becoming a leader in facilitating the work of athletes and coaches who are mothers. Sport Canada and the NSOs need to provide better child-care support and policy conditions to protect and promote their most valuable assets, our country’s top women athletes and coaches. The cost of initiating these measures may seem great, but a much greater cost is the constant loss of these talented women from our sport system.

About the Author



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Claire Carver-Dias is a communications consultant with Clearday Communications and an executive coach with Impact Consulting. She specializes in assessments and team effectiveness coaching, using her experiences as an Olympian and business owner to help corporate groups achieve their business goals. She had a 15-year high performance sport career that earned her an Olympic bronze medal, two Commonwealth Games gold medals, two Pan American Games gold medals, and over 30 international medals. Claire recently completed her term as president of AthletesCAN and has served on the board of directors for the Coaching Association of Canada, the Canada Games Council Sport Committee, and the Commonwealth Games Canada Bid Committee. A published writer, she holds a BA with distinction from the University of Toronto and an MA in English from McGill University. She is currently working on her PhD in English.