

### Reflections of a Winning Coach: Behind the Scenes with Melody Davidson

Too often in Canadian sport, coaches, especially head coaches, work in isolation. The nature of the current system is such that there is little opportunity (except for those able to attend the Coaching Association of Canada's annual conference, Petro-Canada Sport Leadership sportif) to share experiences, exchange information, discuss lessons learned, and establish networks. The [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) aims to address this deficiency by providing a forum for our leading women coaches to write about their Olympic experiences. The hope is that our readers will not only benefit from the shared knowledge, but will also gain valuable insight into the all-encompassing commitment that goes into the making of champions.

In February 2006, our hockey-loving nation was enthralled by the amazing displays of play-making and teamwork that culminated in the gold medal for our Olympic women's ice hockey team. We watched with respect as, throughout the tournament, head coach **Melody Davidson** handled controversy with dignity, never failing to maintain a calm and pleasant demeanour. We saw how the team stuck to its game plan, undeterred by criticism from many quarters. And now, thanks to Melody's candour, we learn about all the planning, hard work, trials and tribulations that combined to make the team such an effective unit. It is a story about preparation, teamwork, sharing, professionalism, and tough decisions. Above all, it is a story about caring, because Melody and her staff believed from the beginning that Olympic victory would depend upon building a team that cared about and for each other — not an easy task with players ranging in age from 19 to 40.



The 2006 Olympic Champions  
Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

The [Journal](#) thanks Melody for her insightful reflections and for the vital lessons they offer to every woman coach, regardless of her level. — Sheila Robertson

## JULY 2006 FEATURE

### Reflections of a Winning Coach: Behind the Scenes with Melody Davidson

It is incredible to believe that a year has passed since the Olympic women's ice hockey team's time on Prince Edward Island (PEI), a time that all involved reflect on with memories of pain and smiles. Our journey to 2006 Olympic gold had many steps, but none were more influential than the three weeks we spent at Shaw's Hotel and the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI).

Why PEI? The choice to take our group there fell into place for several reasons:

- **Mike Kelly**, the head coach of the UPEI men's team at the time, had approached Hockey Canada about hosting high performance activities at the UPEI facility.
- We needed a facility that housed an arena, outdoor fields, and a weight room and that provided access to a swimming pool and gymnasiums, preferably all in one place. UPEI had all this and more.
- Mike and his community embraced us and made everything happen, so it was an easy choice.

The idea of bringing our centralized athletes together for a month originated in 2002 when Salt Lake Olympic head coach **Danièle Sauvageau** gathered all of us together at Valcartier, Que., for what later was called "Boot Camp" or, as some players joked, "Fat Camp" because it was designed to get them in shape by losing weight and building muscle. This time together was important, because it started everyone on the same training path, set a level of expectation, and allowed players to get to know the centralized group.

There was no question that as part of our preparation for Torino we would do something similar; the trick was to create a setting that mirrored Valcartier but, at the same time, was different. The rationale for coming together was driven by the physiologists, who wanted to ensure that we laid our training base and expectations for all involved in the centralization.

What we got was far more and, in hindsight, laid the base for our entire team in almost every area.

So many team things happened in our time together that it is difficult to know where to start. Taking Coach Sauvageau's lead, we needed easy access to training facilities. Also, based on training needs, the days were to be high in volume but low to medium in intensity. With feedback from the players and staff, we added variety, challenges, a purpose to our on-ice sessions, and some day-to-day living adversities.

Staff and players alike moved into Shaw's Hotel, which consists of cabins housing three people. Some had three rooms, but the majority had two rooms, with one being a double. The coaches — **Tim** [Bothwell], **Margot** [Page], and I — also lived together, with our male staff of athletic therapists, media attaché, and strength and conditioning coaches in the "boy cabin". A third cabin housed our equipment manager, administrative assistant, director of female hockey, and video coordinator, both male and female. We were a short jog from the ocean and about 20 minutes from Charlottetown and UPEI, but we were, in a sense, isolated from the outside

world. None of us had friends or family within an easy commute — relying on each other was a necessity.

Cabins were established with three ranges of age or experience in each one: a player in her 30s plus a player in her 20s plus a third player young either in experience with the national team or in age. The cabins had all the appliances needed to prepare meals, and the team compiled a general list of day-to-day items they felt they would need. Then the staff went on a shopping spree to help outfit everyone with items we always take for granted such as Tupperware containers, tinfoil, plastic wrap, and ketchup.

As far as the actual food went, each cabin was given a *per diem* based on the three players. It was the players' job to prepare their menu and do the shopping. Before leaving for PEI, we were in Calgary for a week and had the chance to meet with our team nutritionist, **Kelly-Anne Carter Erdman**. She led sessions that gave the roommates the opportunity to discuss food likes and dislikes and attempt to prepare their shopping lists for PEI. I believe this was when they began to think that living in cabins close to the ocean with teammates might not be as easy as it sounds.

While in Calgary we had conducted all our fitness testing, and once in PEI we spent time reviewing and educating players and staff about why the tests were done, how the results potentially related to hockey performance, and what would be done in the upcoming training sessions. Testing is always a stressful time and in many minds is considered unimportant. For example, how does riding a bike to exhaustion transfer to hockey performance? By our taking the time to explain the tests and how they related to on-ice performance, our players better understood the rationale behind the testing. It did not change their dislike for testing, but it did answer many questions and help put testing into perspective.

A typical day consisted of a 7:00 a.m. beach run, followed by a return to the cabin for breakfast. Players were then required to be at UPEI and on the ice for 10:00 a.m. On-ice sessions were two-hour blocks, and although how we used the time varied, our individual focus was on skill development and hockey-related on-ice conditioning, and our team focus was 4-on-4 play, situational hockey that usually happens in penalty situations when both teams are down a player. The coaching staff agreed that 4-on-4 play is not always worked on and that this training would be the perfect way to lay our base for breakout, defensive zone coverage, transition, and offensive team play.



The players take a break from the 7:00 a.m. run along the beach.  
Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

Following the on-ice sessions, there was a break during which the players were expected to cool down, eat, replenish fluids, and get ready for the afternoon sessions. Afternoon sessions consisted of weight room workouts, bike workouts, and skill development. We had access to a second rink without ice where we worked on puck skills through ball handling and small-space ball hockey games. We also had access to a shooting gallery where players were scheduled four at a time to work on their shooting. The downside of this gallery was that it did not have real ice, so we

were not able to work with the goaltenders as we had anticipated. Adjustments were made and notes taken stating that, in future, we had to continue to communicate with the goaltenders and goaltender coaches about their specific needs.

Afternoons ended in the 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. range and, for the most part, everyone returned to Shaw's for dinner. But the day was not over. Except for Wednesdays and Fridays, we would return to Charlottetown for an evening activity such as water aerobics or pilates.

One important aspect of all of our training and day-to-day living was that no one was excused. We always worked to find solutions. For example, if someone could not run, she rode a bike. This approach had already been introduced in our time together in 2004/05, but having the group full time, we were able to reinforce and help everyone understand how it would work. The idea of finding solutions did not happen just in our physical



A game of ball hockey is part of the off-ice training regimen.  
Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

training; if you had a problem you were expected to discuss it and come up with solutions, and not just complain! The discussion was to happen with whoever could help you out, whether coaches, therapists, teammates, or roommates. If you could not present your own realistic solutions, then you had to live with what was decided.

We had a plan for staff and players to get together one night a week for a barbecue. However, the players came to the staff with an alternative that evolved into one of the best things we did. Their plan was to pair player cabins up, and each Wednesday, players from one cabin would go to the other for a meal. Everyone enjoyed these evenings, and in the end they became highly competitive, as each cabin attempted to outcook the others. Meals moved from simple macaroni and cheese to cedar-plank-baked salmon, from a one-course meal to several courses. It was also a time when they got to know each other even better. For a coach, this camaraderie was invaluable; we could not have planned another event that they would get as much out of. The staff used the time to entertain key people in Charlottetown, from lifeguards to managers to the people who cut the grass, all of whom were going above and beyond their duty to assist us.

Friday afternoons we had competitive games — water polo, flag football, and softball — with the teams divided differently each time. Our players are not just hockey players; they are accomplished athletes in many disciplines. By playing a variety of sports, we attempted to cover their interests and provide competitive opportunities in activities we knew they enjoyed. To avoid complacency and ensure communication, we changed our group dynamics as much as possible. Friday afternoons were a great time to do this, as each time, new people brought skill and leadership to the activity. I would like to say that we knew who would bring what, but other than knowing who played various sports regularly, we were never quite sure what the outcome would be. Staff were active as officials and fans. If needed to even teams out, they participated, but for the most part we wanted it to be only players competing. Friday evenings were free, and Saturday mornings saw us on ice with a 4-on-4 scrimmage complete with fans in the stands. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were free, and then we started again on Monday morning. How players

used their free time varied. Some did laundry and rested, while others toured the island, went lobster fishing, or enjoyed lobster suppers.

Just as everyone was getting into a solid routine the next test arrived — a four-day bike and camping trip around the island. Trying to plan such a trip was as close to a logistical nightmare as you can imagine, but our staff was relentless, and despite their threats to do me in for wanting this trip, we pulled it off with remarkable ease. The army came through for us with tents and sleeping bikes. A local bike shop provided bikes and a bike technician, who met us at our scheduled stops and at the end of each day to do repairs or replace bikes. The staff organized themselves to drive the vans that carried luggage, tents, and sleeping bags. The vans were also designated to be at checkpoints with fluids, snacks, and lunches.



Pictured outside their tent, and still smiling, are (L to R): Sami Jo Small, Caroline Ouellette, and Colleen Sostorics. Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

As with everything we did, the staff took on any role asked, and many rode some if not all of the trip.

Distances on days one, three, and four were in the 70- to 80-kilometre range, with day two being the biggest challenge at approximately 125 kilometres. Each day, the players were given different challenges. Day one they were in groups according to their fitness level, and their challenge was to complete the ride as a group — start and finish. For day two the challenge was to finish the distance riding with a buddy; there could be no loners. Day three was a cabin challenge — all three roommates were to ride together, and their time would be recorded with prizes awarded at the end of the day. Day four was also a cabin challenge, but it was each individual's time that was recorded, and they did not have to ride together.

We saw and experienced so much in those four days, from the pouring rain of the first night of camping and second morning of riding to the excitement when they were surprised with hotel rooms on the second night to the various fitness levels of each cabin and how they brought each other through tough moments. No one can plan what you gain from these experiences and what emotions and characteristics emerge in the variety of moments that occur.



Cheryl Pounder and Hayley Wickenheiser catch their breath during the bike camping trip. Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

As the players rode into Charlottetown to finish the trip, a local sports store presented T-shirts for all of them that read "MADE IN PEI". In the end, we certainly were!

By this time the players thought that we staff must be done terrorizing them, but we were not quite done. Hotel rooms awaited us along with a lobster supper home-cooked by Hockey PEI, which was much appreciated. A coaching clinic was being conducted in Charlottetown with **Scotty Bowman** as keynote speaker, and after everything they had been through, you would think the players would just want to relax, but no, they asked if they could go to hear Coach Bowman speak.

Our final day of training in PEI was a triathlon — yes, a triathlon! We were back to the cabin teams, and each player had to swim 60 lengths, bike 25 kilometres, and run 10 kilometres. Up to this point, despite the mental and physical anguish encountered, the training camp had been a relatively uneventful time with few logistical problems that we could not handle and no injuries. The swim went fine considering that only two or three of the players were actually swimmers. Talk about mental challenges! We adapted for the final three teams so that the competition would stay close. As a coach, I could do little more than smile when the three swimmers tagged their cyclists and then jumped back into the water to complete the remainder of their 60 doing breaststroke and some type of backstroke — even though their cyclists had been allowed to take off before the swimmers finished their lengths, they were not going to cut any corners. We had come a long way as a group in our short time together!

The bike segment was another matter. By the end, we had two players at the hospital and another who looked like she should have gone with them. In the first crash, one player hit the pavement at an intersection, an experience that evolved into an ambulance trip, with two other players abandoning their bikes to accompany her. The second crash did not stop the player from continuing, but when she finished, we realized that her brakes had been stuck since the crash and she had ridden 15+ kilometres with her front brakes on. In the final crash, as a cyclist crossed the finish line to tag her teammate for the run, she did not realize how fast she was going; she hit the brakes while going too fast, which resulted in a skid and wipeout across the UPEI parking lot. Another indication of our competitiveness as a group: as this was all randomly happening, no one ever suggested that we stop the race! As runners finished the final portion of the triathlon, cyclists would go back out on the trail and draft for the runners. Sometimes it was a roommate; other times it was someone who had finished and just wanted to help the runners however she could.



A pit stop is a welcome respite from the gruelling bike trip that took four days and covered more than 400 kilometres of Prince Edward Island.

Photo Credit : Hockey Canada

Some road burns and missing teeth later, we had completed the triathlon and were having our celebration dinner in a local pub. Celebration dinners were introduced at the 2005 worlds. The purpose was for the players to share any personal celebration with the group. The only stipulation was that you had to speak to the group clearly and with eye contact, and it had to be about something that was important to you, something *you* were celebrating.

The celebration dinner following our time in PEI was unbelievable. We had arrived at Shaw's Hotel and UPEI as individuals with wavering respect for each other, and we

were leaving as a unit who respected differences and understood the challenges each other faced plus the strengths each brought to our unit. I include the staff in this. Margot, Tim, and I lived together, and we learned as much about each other as the players did about their teammates; it was the same for all our staff. For almost three weeks, there was no escaping each other. Through that closeness, we came to unconditional support between staff and players in good and bad times.

There is so much more to tell. This seems like just a snapshot. In the end, we got to know each other as people, we became accountable to each other, and hard work became a part of our team personality, with team encompassing players and staff. The character, quality, and professionalism of the team you witnessed in Torino was present in all individuals. What we learned in PEI transferred it to a team identity.

## About the author



Melody Davidson  
Photo Credit : Hockey  
Canada

On May 16, 2006, Hockey Canada announced that Melody Davidson had agreed to a new four-year contract with Canada's Women's High Performance Program as full-time general manager and head coach.

Melody will manage the day-to-day operations of the program, including the National Under-22 and Under-18 women's teams for the next four seasons (2006–2010) and will be responsible for leading Canada's women's hockey player personnel and coach development.

She will be head coach for some of the national women's team's international events leading up to the start of the 2009 season, including the 2007 IIHF World Women's Championship. A final decision on whether Melody will return to her full-time duties as head coach at the 2010 Olympics will be made prior to the start of the 2009 season.

Melody, an NCCP Level 4 coach, has been head coach for 2005/06, 2004/05, and 1999/2000. Her head coach résumé includes Olympic gold in 2006, a silver medal at the 2005 world championship, and a gold medal at the 2000 world championship. As an assistant coach, she was a member of Canada's Olympic championship team.

A 1986 graduate of the University of Alberta, she has a bachelor's degree in physical education. She also holds several coaching certificates and received a National Coaching Institute diploma from the University of Calgary in 1996.



## **CANADA'S 2006 OLYMPIC CHAMPIONS**

Charline Labonté, goaltender  
Kim St-Pierre, goaltender  
Sami Jo Small, goaltender  
Gillian Ferrari, defence  
Becky Kellar, defence  
Carla MacLeod, defence  
Caroline Ouellette, defence  
Cheryl Pounder, defence  
Colleen Sostorics, defence  
Delaney Collins, defence  
Meghan Agosta, forward  
Gillians Apps, forward  
Jennifer Botterill, forward  
Cassie Campbell, forward  
Danielle Goyette, forward  
Jayna Hefford, forward  
Gina Kingsbury, forward  
Cherie Piper, forward  
Vicky Sunohara, forward  
Sarah Vaillancourt, forward  
Katie Weatherston, forward  
Hayley Wickenheiser, forward

## **STAFF AND THEIR POSITIONS**

Melody Davidson, head coach  
Tim Bothwell, assistant coach  
Margot Page, assistant coach  
Peter Smith, assistant coach  
Dave Jamieson, goaltender coach  
Denis Sproxton, goaltender coach  
Wally Kozak, head scout  
Robin McDonald, equipment manager  
Dr. Marni Wesner, team physician  
Dr. Peter Jensen, team psychologist  
Doug Stacey, therapist  
Jason Poole, strength and conditioning coach  
Mavis Wahl, massage therapist  
Jennifer Spencer, video technician