



# Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online >>>>>

© 2009 Coaching Association of Canada, ISSN 1496-1539  
October 2009, Vol. 9, No. 4

## **Building an Effective Coach–Athlete Relationship: Perspectives from Great Female Coaches and Athletes**

Whenever an athlete wins an Olympic or world championship medal, people want to know the secret behind the success. Inevitably, the athlete, or occasionally the coach, is called upon to explain that secret, but rarely do the two believe the same thing about what brought about that unique moment. As a Canadian team consultant in sport psychology, Penny Werthner has been uniquely placed to observe coaches and athletes in action at sport's highest levels. She has used her knowledge and experience to elicit valuable information from three of the most successful female coach–female athlete relationships in Canadian sporting history and from a female coach, whose expertise has helped numerous athletes. The findings are remarkable for their simplicity, and they identify qualities that every coach would be advised to emulate—sound technical skills, a complete understanding of the athlete's needs developed through listening to her and sharing information (in other words, effective two-way communication), and, finally, patience, caring, honesty, and respect. World-class performances are never achieved overnight or in a vacuum. In a world that increasingly expects the quick fix, these coaches and athletes understand that there are no short cuts to successful performance. — Sheila Robertson

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### OCTOBER 2009 FEATURE

## **Building an Effective Coach–Athlete Relationship: Perspectives from Great Female Coaches and Athletes**

by Penny Werthner

Following the 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China, a study was undertaken to analyse the Canadian performances. The review process was initiated and funded by Own the Podium\*, and the primary objective was to identify, from both the athletes' and the coaches' perspectives, the key factors that contributed to a successful performance or, in some cases, an underperformance at the Games. In total, 27 Olympic and Paralympic athletes and 30 coaches were interviewed. From the analysis of the 27 athlete interviews, five key themes were developed: the development, over time, of a high degree of athlete self-awareness; the importance of a strong coach–athlete relationship; the creation of an optimal training environment; the creation of a strong support system, from both financial and human resource perspectives; and excellent management of the Olympic environment, primarily by the coach and athlete, often with help from the high performance director and others, such as consultants in sport psychology and exercise physiology.

\* Own the Podium 2010 is a national sport technical initiative designed to help Canada's winter athletes win the most medals at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games and to place in the top three nations (gold medal count) at the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games.

The second theme, the importance of a strong coach–athlete relationship, clearly emerged as a crucial factor in winning an Olympic medal or producing a personal best at the 2008 Olympic Games. Each of the 27 athletes spoke at length about her or his coach and how they worked together to create an environment that enabled them to succeed. The following quotations are a sample of how these athletes felt about their coaches.

- “We had the best coach, with a great deal of international experience. He was skilled technically, but he kept it simple.”
- “My coach is like a mentor to me. We have a good relationship, and are open to learning from each other.”
- “We have complete confidence in our coach.”
- “With my coach, we knew exactly what I needed, physically, technically, mentally—our motto was ‘Execute excellence.’”
- “I have a great coach.”
- “The key pieces of success were a very good coach and very good training as a result of good coaching and a good support team.”

Given the results of this review process, particularly with the Olympic athletes’ emphasis on the importance of a strong working relationship with their coaches, I thought it would be intriguing to look a little deeper at this relationship, at how an effective coach–athlete relationship is created and at how it is maintained. I could think of no better way to do this than to interview some of our best national women coaches along with one each of the wonderful women athletes they coach. The coaches and athletes who agreed to talk with me were Xiuli Wang, national long track speed skating coach, a former Olympic speed skater for China, and a two-time Olympic coach for Canada, and Clara Hughes, winner of two bronze medals at the 1996 Olympic Games, the 5000m bronze medal at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, and a gold medal in the 5000m and silver medal in Team Pursuit at the 2006 Olympic Winter Games; Melody Davidson, national women’s ice hockey coach, and Hayley Wickenheiser, a silver medallist at the 1998 Olympic Winter Games and gold medallist at the 2002 and 2006 Olympic Winter Games; and Yi Hua Li, national diving coach and former Olympic diver for China, and Émilie Heymans, the winner of silver and bronze medals in 10m synchro at the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games and the 10m silver medallist at the 2008 Olympic Games. Expanding the dialogue slightly, I also spoke with Elaine Dagg-Jackson, national women’s coach for the Canadian Curling Association and coach at the 2006 Olympic Winter Games, about how she created effective relationships with the 16 coaches and teams who are currently part of the national program.

I began each interview by asking the women to tell me about their coach–athlete relationship and how it had become strong and productive. The coaches all spoke about their technical skills, not surprisingly, because sport is all about technique, tactics, and training. They also spoke at length about the importance of communication and trust. The three athletes each spoke of the open-mindedness of their coaches and their willingness to listen to what they each needed and thought. They pointed out that their coaches were also open-minded in the sense of being willing to bring other experts into the team, and that they cared for them not just as athletes but as individuals.

### **Xiuli Wang and Clara Hughes**

Xiuli: “At the time of meeting Clara, I was still just an Olympic Oval coach, and she came to me asking for technical help. We worked well together really quickly. She was very fit and she had lots of sport experience and, of course, success with medals in Olympic cycling, but now she was changing sports. She needed help with skating technically well. She was asking lots of technical questions, but they were the right questions.” Xiuli was honest with Clara about the technical



Long track speed skating coach Xiuli Wang and multiple Olympic medallist Clara Hughes epitomize the coach-athlete relationship.  
Credit: Mike Ridewood

changes that needed to be worked on. "I was straight with her. I told her the truth, and I got on the ice with her to show her how to skate well." Xiuli felt that they worked very hard but she also thought that the difficulties were eased because Clara was already an accomplished athlete; she knew how to work hard and she was more than willing to do so. "So many Canadian athletes need to be told six things that they are doing right before you can tell them what they need to work on, and with Clara I didn't need to do that—she was ready to work."

Clara told me that when she made her decision to try to make the national speed skating team, she was placed at first with the national team, but she felt that she was not getting the technical help she needed. "I knew what it took to be successful. I demand a lot from myself and of other people, and what Xiuli said made sense to me—she had the ability to **teach** me the technique—and that is what I needed. She was so calm, and so patient with me—she pushed me too, but she had the patience to teach me. She would say, 'This is going to take time; let's see what we can do.' After seven weeks of training, I made the national team, and after 16 months I had an Olympic bronze medal. I wanted to keep Xiuli as my coach, and I had to fight for that. Xiuli and I have done this together. She is such a great competitor, so motivated herself, so hungry, it makes me look at myself. Her ability to articulate technique is incredible, and she has a big heart. I never feel alone. I share my successes with her."

What is most profound about this coach-athlete relationship is the caring, the honesty, and the respect for each other. The coach had the skills to teach this athlete the speed skating technique that was the critical foundation for her competitive success in a new sport, she was clear in her communication about what was necessary, and she was patient. She had the ability to know when to push and when to be gentle, and as a result she built a trust that, in turn, built a strong relationship and great success on the ice.

### Melody Davidson and Hayley Wickenheiser



Motivation matters to Coach Davidson.  
Credit: Jeff Vinnick [hockeycanada.ca](http://hockeycanada.ca).

Mel coaches a team sport, and this has an impact on how she builds her individual relationships with players. "In a team sport, it is always a work in progress, and the challenge is that each athlete needs something different. My personal challenge, as a coach, is that I am internally motivated, and that can lead to frustration for me, especially when an athlete does not appear motivated or is not working hard. Perhaps that is why Hayley and I work so well together; I have known her since she was 12, and we are very similar. It's 'Let's get the job done.' We are comfortable with each other; she can come to me with suggestions. We talk about the game." According to Mel, communication is key, but, she said, "It is hard for me. I know myself well and I am not a big people person, but I work on it each day. I set up meetings with each athlete, I allow them to speak first, I make

sure I am around, available, I try to pay attention to body language, and I make sure I say

something to each player on the ice. I can be blunt, honest, but I really do care. I want each player to get better. I tell them, 'Make our selection decisions very difficult.'"

Hayley said that her relationship with Mel "is all about mutual respect. I admire her passion and dedication to the game. She knows the game; she loves the game; she is giving it everything she has—you respect that. And she values my opinion. I have been in the program for 16 years, I am mature, and I can get her attention. We have the same goal. When I bring issues to the table, she is not hard-headed. She doesn't have much ego. She listens, she says she will look at it, or she gives me her reasons for not changing something. We are both good at letting it go; sometimes we simply agree to disagree. But she is always open and receptive, if you show you are accountable and professional. And she is very organized." Interestingly, Hayley felt that Mel was good at communicating. "She is good at communicating the 'why'. Women want to know why, or they tend to jump to conclusions, and Mel is good at answering that. But coaches have a tough job; we, as athletes, want to know that the coach has control. It's a fine line."

What is intriguing about this coach-athlete relationship is the importance, still, of the individual, even within a team sport. Mel and Hayley have formed a strong working relationship because, in part, they are very similar—passionate about the game of hockey and sharing the goal of winning an Olympic gold medal. But that similarity also had the potential to cause problems. As Hayley said, "We don't always see eye to eye." And yet knowing each other for many years—Hayley the talented athlete, and Mel the assistant coach and then the head coach of the national team—and having a mutual respect and love for the game have helped them grow together. It took that fine balancing act by the coach of listening well and then leading, either by changing, for example, the power play, or by explaining why it would stay the same. It is equally important to note that Mel acknowledged that she had to work at communicating. She knew it was a critical component for the team's success, and so she "worked hard at it, every day."

### Yi Hua Li and Émilie Heymans



Émilie Heymans says that Yi Hua Li's ability to listen to her was an important factor to her silver medal performance at the 2008 Olympic Games. "You lose, I lose; we work as a team."

Yi Hua came to Canada in 1999 after a successful career as an Olympic diver in China, and she said that she had to work hard as an athlete. "That has helped me as a coach. What works with my athletes is an individualized approach." About working with Émilie, she said, "It took about a year to create our relationship. Each day I was trying to understand her better. I am very honest with her—I don't lie—but sometimes we would disagree, so I would say, 'Try to think about my idea,' and I would give her a few days to think about it. But I was always talking with her about what was possible: 'We want to beat the Chinese, and we need to do everything possible; we don't want any regrets.' I would often say, 'I think ... what do you think?' But every day we would work, and every day we built up her skills. We trust each other, and we always tell the truth. And I always say, 'When

Émilie, after two Olympic medals in synchronized diving, came to work with Yi Hua in 2005. "I needed a good coach, and she had worked with other athletes. But what was important for me was that she listened to me. She is really human. If I thought something was the right thing, she let me do it, and this really allowed me to learn so much about myself. Often she was right, but she gave me time. She really listened, tried to understand what I was feeling, what I needed. I would do my own plan for a competition, and then we would discuss it, and this really helped my confidence.

And technically ... for me on 10m, I needed to have the best technique because it is so hard to do those dives, and sometimes when she gave me too much feedback, I said that it was too much for me, and she listened and changed. And her bringing Alain [Delorme, strength coach] and Penny [Werthner, sport psychology consultant] into our team—that is hard for a coach, and she did it. She was open to it; she was not threatened by it. She gives me 100 per cent.”

In this relationship, Yi Hua and Émilie began working together after Émilie had experienced Olympic success but not on the 10m board—an individual medal had still eluded her. Yi Hua brought her technical knowledge to the relationship, but was willing to listen to what Émilie needed in terms of training volume, feedback, rest, and outside help. And again, so significantly, she cared about Émilie both as a person and as a diver. Alain Delorme spoke eloquently of Yi Hua’s skills when he said, “I believe she has great communication skills, taking the needed time to listen to and understand Émilie, to reflect and recommend solutions from her perspective, and finally to move forward with a consensus. This strategy was, from my point of view, the foundation of Émilie’s success.”

### Elaine Dagg-Jackson



National curling coach Elaine Dagg-Jackson, seen here with her daughter, Steph Jackson, brings years of experience to the position.  
Credit: Elaine Dagg-Jackson

Being a national coach in a sport such as curling is always a delicate balance for a coach. In most cases, the coaches do not work directly with the athletes, and yet they oversee many coaches and many teams. In Elaine’s case, it is 16 national-level teams and coaches, all vying for the one spot representing Canada at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. Certainly Elaine has a huge amount of coaching experience. She has been involved in curling both in Canada and internationally for many years. She has been the national coach for both Korea and Japan, and she is currently British Columbia’s provincial development coach as well as the national women’s program coach.

I asked her how she went about effectively building relationships with each of those teams and their coaches. She said, “It is all about credibility and relationship building. I believe I have credibility because I have coached championship teams, I have coached national teams, and I understand what it takes. And the athletes know me. In the sport of curling, athletes and coaches have often been involved for a long time. For example, as national junior coach from 1993 to 1995, I worked with Kelly Scott and Jennifer Jones, and now, 15 years later, they are at the top of the national level, so we have a remarkable history together.” In terms of building relationships with other teams and coaches, Elaine emphasized that “it takes time to build each relationship.” Her current job as national coach is about getting to know each of the teams and their coaches and working with them to determine what they might need in addition to what they are already doing. “I go to bonspiels around the country, and I spend a lot of time observing and studying the athletes. I have discussions with each of the coaches, and with all that information, I am anticipating what might help for the world championship or the Olympics.” She said that she works mostly through the coaches of each team, always exploring what they might want or need in order to perform better. “Certainly for those teams that are off to the world championship or the Olympic Games, they have already done lots right. My job, at that point, is to make some suggestions, depending on my observations. This is what I call the ‘art of coaching’, because it’s about a few small things that might help, and I have to anticipate what those might be.”

A second part of Elaine's job as national coach is leading a team of coaches who serve the national program, and matching those coaches, where possible, with a team as a consultant. "Our program is so much deeper now, with 16 teams active in the national program. It is exciting to lead this group of coaches throughout the year."

## Conclusion

So what do we see here in terms of how effective coach-athlete relationships at the high performance level are created and nurtured, whether as a personal coach or as a team or national-level coach? Each of these coaches has excellent technical knowledge of her sport. This should not be overlooked, because it is the cornerstone in competitive sport; athletes cannot hope to succeed without continually working on the technical and physical sides of their sport. But is it enough? I would strongly argue that it is not. Competitive sport, particularly at the world and Olympic levels, is so emotional and competitive that athletes also need a coach to support them and care about them, both as athletes and as individuals. And that is what these coaches do. They care about the athletes they coach. As Émilie said of Yi Hua, "She gives me 100 per cent." Each of these coaches has built trust with her athletes and the coaches they work with. They built that trust with patience, recognizing that it takes time, and with skilful communication.

Skilful communication means, first, listening to the athletes and to the assistant coaches or other coaches, to clearly understand what is needed in any particular situation. These coaches ask a question and then they listen for an answer—a feeling, an opinion, a concern. Certainly, the three athletes interviewed for this article have many years of experience competing, which means that they also have knowledge and expertise. When this is the case, it is a wise coach who, at this level of sport, listens to her athletes.

Second, it is about being open-minded—to listen, to change, sometimes to explain why a change will not take place, and to be willing to seek help from other experts if it will help the athlete's performance. As Émilie said of Yi Hua, "She was not threatened by it [the strength coach]."

Third, the coaches were clear in their communication back to their athletes. As Xiuli said, "I was straight with Clara. I told her the truth." And then she helped Clara make the technical changes by getting on the ice and showing her correct technique. Being able to clearly and concisely communicate what technical changes are necessary in a sport is a crucial skill in coaching. Being able to demonstrate the changes is an additional skill. These coaches are skilled in being honest and caring at the same time. As Melody said, "I want them each to succeed."

The effective coach-athlete relationship is about a team approach, and that means listening and talking, ongoing dialogue, figuring out together what it will take to win at the world level. The coaches understand that it may take time, so there is both hard pushing and great patience.

Finally, it is an individualized approach. What Hayley Wickenheiser needs to play well and succeed is different from what Émilie Heymans needs or what Clara Hughes needs or what any one of the 16 curling teams working toward being the Olympic team needs. Each of these four coaches understand this, which is why they are great examples of how to build an effective coach-athlete relationship.

## About the Author



Penny Werthner, PhD, is a professor in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa, conducting research in the areas of the learning processes of coaches and athletes, issues facing female coaches, psychological preparation for coaches and athletes (particularly within the world championship and Olympic environment), coach stress and burnout, values and ethics in sport, and the use of bioneurofeedback for enhancing the performance of coaches and athletes. She is also a consultant in sport psychology who works with many national team athletes and coaches, and she has been part of seven winter and summer Canadian Olympic teams from 1988 to 2010. At the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games, Werthner was the Canadian team consultant in sport psychology. A leader and innovator in international sport and in women and

sport issues, Penny is a National Coaching Certification Program Level 4/5 presenter for Tasks #7, #8, and #17. A former Olympic track and field athlete, she represented Canada internationally from 1970 to 1981.