

Introduction

For Canadians, the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games reflected the growing presence of women as outstanding athletes and as medal-producing coaches. For the women coaches, the numbers were small – 22 out of a total of 131 coaches at the Olympics and 10 out of 43 at the Paralympics were women – but their impact was powerful, not only in terms of medals but as exemplars for girls and women who aspire to join the profession. To honour and to celebrate, the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* proudly profiles five of these women throughout Women's History Month in March 2022 - inspirational, accomplished, and wonderful role models for the next generation.

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

Part Two: Lisa Thomaidis Closes a Chapter

By Sheila Robertson

Over the course of her eight-year journey as head coach of Canada's national women's basketball team, Lisa Thomaidis, ChPC, compiled an enviable record of firsts: bringing the team to a ranking of fourth in the world; winning two AmeriCup championships and two AmeriCup silver medals: recording a fifth-place finish at the 2014 World Cup, the highest placing in 30 years; winning Canada's first ever Pan American Games basketball gold medal and achieving that milestone before a home crowd in Toronto in 2015; and winning the FIBA Women's Olympic Qualifying Tournament in February 2020. It all pointed to success on the world's biggest stage, the 2020 Olympic Games.



The announcement on March 24th, 2020, by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) of a one-year delay because of the COVID-19 pandemic, upended the team's Olympic journey.

Three months of down time followed and Thomaidis returned to her hometown of Dundas, Ont., to live with her brother Christopher and nieces Emily and Allie. It was a chance to deal with the recent loss of her parents. Christos died on October 10th, 2019, shortly after the team won the FIBA AmeriCup, and Sandra on February 16th, 2020. She had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer two months before Thomaidis was named head coach and "beat all the odds" by living until a week after the team earned its Olympic berth. "It was an eight-year battle that

she managed with positivity and grace,” said Thomaidis. “... I always thought that after 2020 I’d be able to spend more time with her ... so that created guilt. She was the most supportive, encouraging, and positive human being and my most influential role model.”

As the Olympic tournament opened 16 months after the IOC announcement, a place in the medal round remained a realistic goal. The team’s ninth-place finish left Thomaidis “heartbroken ... Had we been able to compete in 2020 when we were healthy and playing our best, the outcome would have been different,” she said. “I wish we could have shown Canada and the world how good we truly were at that time.”

Role models paved her way

Thomaidis grew up surrounded by influential role models within her family, including her mother Sandra, grandmother Elsie, and aunt Jane, whom she describes as “strong, independent, caring women I looked up to.” At Highland Secondary School, she learned about leadership from committed women coaches and physical education teachers, in particular Brenda Nelson and Beverly Smith.

Also formative during her high school years were her close group of female friends. “Experiencing success by working hard with friends who were athletic, dedicated, and competitive encouraged many of us to pursue sport beyond high school,” she said. “Without that peer group, I’m not sure I would have believed in myself enough to compete in varsity basketball at McMaster University.” Smith and Nelson, noting her potential, also encouraged her to pursue varsity sport. “They invested and believed in me; I can’t thank them enough,” she said. “It truly changed my life.”

Shy, lacking confidence, and initially overwhelmed by McMaster’s highly competitive environment, Thomaidis developed into a leader of the cohesive, tightknit, and successful Marauders and played for five seasons. Her height - she is 6’2” – was an asset as was the coaching of Theresa Burns. Thomaidis was a three-time Ontario University Athletics (OUA) all-star and a OUA Coaches Award of Excellence recipient.

Briefly an assistant coach to Burns upon graduation, Thomaidis spent two life-changing years in Greece, the homeland of her father, drawn by the desire to compete at a higher level and to experience living abroad. After a career-ending knee injury in 1998, she returned home to ponder her future.

Mentors, including Burns and McMaster athletic director Therese Quigley, told her that the University of Saskatchewan desperately needed someone to coach their under-performing women’s basketball team and insisted she would be perfect for the position. Inexperienced and uncertain, Thomaidis balked at the suggestion, certain she wouldn’t be considered. Waiting until the last moment to apply, she was shocked when offered a three-year contract. “I had no idea what I didn’t know; all I knew was that we were going to work very hard because we weren’t very good,” she admits. “That hard work and a commitment to excellence is the foundation of our Huskies identity, hasn’t changed, and is reflected in our team motto – ‘Entitled to Nothing. Grateful for Everything’”.

In the subsequent 21 years, Thomaidis has accumulated statistics and credentials that cement her reputation as one of the best coaches ever in Canadian basketball. Led by her, the Huskies won national championships in 2016 and 2020, seven Canada West titles, and advanced 13 times to the USports Final 8. She holds the record for regular season wins (281), Canada West playoff wins (49) and national championship wins (19). She is a two-time USports Coach of the Year, five-time Canada West Coach of the Year, and was named the 2015 Coach of the Year by the Coaching Association of Canada.

A challenging but workable balancing act

Thomaidis' tenure with the national team began in 2000 as an assistant coach, first with Bev Smith and then with Allison McNeill. From hovering near mid-point in FIBA World Rankings, (which usually lists over 100 countries) by 2012 the team had climbed to 11th and made it to the quarterfinals of the London Olympics. In 2013, Thomaidis succeeded McNeill and brought the team to fourth in the world by 2020. "I am not sure any other team has improved at that rate," she said. "It's a reflection of the body of work on the part of the athletes, the Integrated Support Team (IST), and the coaching staff, and their commitment and dedication to improving our team ... [our ranking] is a huge source of pride ... a massive accomplishment that should be celebrated."



For eight years, Thomaidis managed what were essentially two full-time coaching positions; the national team season ran from May through August and the Huskies season covered late September through March, giving her a month or so to catch her breath. Then, in 2019, FIBA introduced competitions in November and February, forcing her into lengthy periods away from the Huskies and the challenge of juggling two teams simultaneously.

"Working 14-15-hour days, constantly watching games on the computer, talking to other coaches, communicating with my coaching staffs, interacting with 35 athletes (from both teams), managing the growth in IST support from five personnel to 13, all while trying to improve yourself as a coach, you never turn off," she said. As the national team climbed the world rankings, Own the Podium (OTP) sport science and funding support grew exponentially. "OTP was phenomenal, but it added more layers of leadership and responsibilities to the head coach position," she said.

Along with an accommodating and understanding U of S leadership, Thomaidis was fortunate to have the support of Ron and Jane Graham, whose contributions to the Huskies program included construction of the Ron and Jane Graham Basketball Facility and funding for a full-time assistant coach position, "a game-changer for me and our program. It enabled us to bring in some amazing people and to mentor women coaches such as Claire Meadows, who assumed a lot of responsibility when I was away with the national team and is now the head coach at Queen's University." (See [link below](#)).

Thomaidis relished the challenge of coaching both teams and wasn't prepared to give up either. "The thrill of coaching at the pinnacle of our sport, nationally and internationally, was so rewarding," she said. So long as the seasons were complementary, the dual arrangement worked well. With the FIBA changes, however, expectations and demands grew to such an extent that the situation became unsustainable. "I knew it was coming to an end because it was way too much for one person to manage," she said.

Upended by COVID-19

In March 2020, the Huskies won the national championship, matching the national team's success at the Olympic Qualifying Tournament a month earlier. Everything was unfolding according to plan until the Tokyo Games postponement threw the national team into turmoil.

Carefully laid strategies were disrupted; travel was halted, forcing players to train independently; key players were injured; veteran Kim Gaucher was waging a public battle to have her infant daughter and husband with her in Tokyo (see link below); and the playing field was anything but even with most of their Olympic opponents able to continue to train and play in their professional leagues.

"We were dealing with one thing after the next on the road to Tokyo ... and being in a more restrictive situation than our competitors was tough to swallow," said Thomaidis. Finally, looser protocols in the United States enabled the team to hold a training camp in May at the Raptor's practice facility in Florida. Strict isolation mandates confined them to hotel rooms and the gym, ate up days of precious training time, strained the players' mental health and resilience, and created a tense undercurrent. "Our bubble was super tight; it was hard, and asked a lot of our players, but once we adjusted to the situation, they displayed such resilience and commitment to our mission."

What hadn't changed was the team's goal of a podium finish and their belief, instilled by Thomaidis, that it remained achievable. "People say I am calm and cool, and that is my demeanor. I am analytical, I provide facts, and figure things out from a technical standpoint," said Thomaidis, a pragmatist whose introverted and quiet personality is key to her leadership style. "You have to be the optimist; you have to believe and instill confidence."

To expand her passion for learning and personal growth, Thomaidis had connected with offensive expert Chris Finch. She watched Raptors' games so she and Finch, then a Raptors assistant coach and now head coach of the Minnesota Timberwolves, could discuss technical and tactical components and game analysis. "That connection (and television) probably saved me during COVID and being able to watch NBA games and our players playing professionally in Europe," she said. Another lifesaver was her involvement in OTP's Coach Enhancement Program. "Amazing, incredible ... an enlightening and growth opportunity ... you are in such a vacuum as a national team coach and rarely get to spend time with coaches from different sports. You can learn so much from each other." (See *link below*).

Canada's Olympic tournament and its aftermath

The Olympic tournament scores are well documented. A 72-68 loss to Serbia in the opener. A 74-53 victory over South Korea then a 76-66 loss to Spain. To deny Canada a place in the quarter-final, Australia had to defeat Puerto Rico by at least 24 points; the Opals 96-69 victory ended Canada's Olympic dream.

"Absolutely we were disappointed. A year-and-a-half prior, when we were playing our best ever, when we were healthy, when we could be together and train, expectations were high," said Thomaidis "In the time between qualifying and competing, so many things were beyond our control. I am mostly disappointed that our team was unable to show what we could do when at our best. We were on the path to making history, but it was not our time."

When people ask what comes next, Thomaidis, who stepped down as national coach at the end of September, laughingly reminds them that she has a full-time job with the Huskies. She anticipates spending more time with family and friends, golfing, travelling, giving back to the Saskatoon community, and being active with her black lab, Ruby. One certainty: the "unbelievable journey" that turned her into a world-class coach continues. She is, she says, "very much at peace with everything. I put absolutely everything I had into the national team program; I loved every minute."

About the author

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor and an author for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*; the author of *Shattered Hopes: Canada's Boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games*; the editor and an author for *Taking the Lead: Strategies and Solutions from Female Coaches*; a contributing author to *Playing It Forward: 50 Years of Women and Sport in Canada* and *Women in Sports Coaching* (Routledge 2016), and the founding editor and lead writer of *Champion* magazine and of *Coaches Report* magazine. Visit her website at [A Piece of Canadian Sport History](#).

Links

<https://www.moosejawtoday.com/local-news/former-moose-jaw-couple-donates-59m-to-support-u-of-s-programs-4344845>

<https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/canadian-basketball-player-may-be-forced-to-choose-between-infant-daughter-olympics/ar-AAALoSp8>

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