

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 One: Michelle Darvill, 2021 Coach of the Year

By Sheila Robertson

Michelle Darvill's soft-spoken demeanor belies her steely spine, resolute commitment to excellence, and uncanny ability to instill athletes with the confidence to exceed their limits.

Her skills came to a dramatic climax on July 30, 2021, at the Sea Forest Waterway in Tokyo Bay. Overcoming blistering heat and humidity and undaunted by thunderclouds from Tropical Storm Nepartak, Canada's women's eight powered from start of finish to win the Olympic gold medal.



The journey to that magical moment can be traced back to 1976 when 11-year-old Darvill began competitive swimming in her hometown of Mississauga, Ont. Turning to rowing as a social activity while an undergraduate at the University of Toronto Mississauga in 1985, by 1993 she was world champion in lightweight single skills representing Canada. Competing as a dual citizen of Germany, she added gold medals in lightweight double sculls in 1997 and in lightweight quadruple sculls in 2000, after which she retired.

Darvill's transition into coaching began at the high school and master's levels and by 2003 she was head coach of the London Rowing Club. Her affiliation with Rowing Canada Aviron's (RCA) national training centre in London began in 2004 as an assistant coach and continued, with various iterations, until the Tokyo Games ended. Along the way she enjoyed considerable

coaching success, including gold medal performances from women's crews at three U-23 world championships.

Two years out from Tokyo 2020, Darvill stepped away from the RCA, unwilling to accept its decision to shift the training centre to Victoria. She believed the move would be too disruptive for her teenaged daughters, Denise and Nikola, and opted to join a rowing consultancy with former national coach Al Morrow and Peter Cookson, a former RCA high performance director.

By September 2019, several of Darvill's former athletes were urging her to reconsider, citing the challenges of working with two male coaches and missing her empathetic approach. Eventually convinced she could help and supported by her daughters and husband, Bernd, Darvill applied to be one of three assistant coaches to head coach Dave Thompson. "High performance can be tough, stressful, and tense, but the rowers sincerely wanted me to return and so I signed on for a term running from October 2019 to July 2020, with occasional flights home," she said.

Thompson's departure on March 2, 2020, led to a reshuffle and Darvill, hoping to coach the eight in Tokyo, requested responsibility for a large training group of 17 rowers who could form the eight and four. There would be four crew coaches and no head coach.

Then, COVID-19 changed everything



On March 16th, 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced the suspension of non-essential travel outside of Canada and a 14-day isolation period for Canadians returning from abroad. While justifiable, these actions would have a severe impact on Canada's athletes and their preparation for the Tokyo Games, scheduled for July 24th to August 9th.

On March 24th, the International Olympic Committee postponed the Games for one year. RCA shut down the training centre indefinitely, the rowers dispersed, and Darvill spent the next two-and-a-half months back home in London. She used the delay to bolster the rowing culture and create an environment to increase the athletes' chance of success. "I knew how important it was that they had structure and a purpose, believed the Olympics were going to happen, and would be better prepared mentally and physically than ever before," she said.

Darvill, a Chartered Professional Coach (ChPC), needed every tool she could muster. COVID was an unprecedented disruption, but she also had to cope with staffing and program changes, inclement weather, forest fires, and serious injuries (*see link below*). "We pressed the reset button, re-engaged the athletes, and rebuilt the program," she said. "Every athlete put her life on hold and committed to the extra year as did I with the support of my family. All I wished for was that the women execute the race of their lives, with no what-ifs." Achieving that goal depended upon creating a values-based culture, incorporating expert help, and creating an athlete-empowering environment; that is exactly what Darvill set about doing.

Elements of her plan to engage the athletes and build to a peak performance included cross-training, working out on rowing machines, communicating through WhatsApp, and meeting regularly on Zoom with each other and with the IST (Integrated Support Team) consisting of physiologists, a strength and conditioning coach, nutritionists, a physiotherapist, and a mental performance consultant. “The crew was made up of very diverse personalities so many discussions focused on how to work together and still appreciate differences and utilize these as strengths,” said Darvill. “There was a real openness and willingness to embrace learning how to communicate, build trust, and work together better.”

Personal Improvement

Darvill’s ability to create a winning environment was enhanced by her involvement in Own the Podium’s Coaching Enhancement Program (CEP), “a ground-breaking initiative built and delivered by its high performance partners in a long-term commitment to develop national team coaches with Olympic and Paralympic potential working with world-class experts” (*see link below*). CEP challenges coaches to find creative solutions and build self-awareness by sharing experiences working together on projects.

Keen to learn from coaches of other sports, Darvill relished the many opportunities for interaction CEP offers. She had noticed, for example, that the world record 5,000m time of speed skater Ted-Jan Bloeman was similar to times being posted by her rowers. Both are power endurance sports, deal with six minutes of race effort, and require hours of aerobic training. How, she wondered, was Bloeman prepared mentally, physically, and strategically? Reaching out to his coaches – Bart Shouten, Todd McClements, and Scott Maw – she found answers that would give her crew an edge come competition day. “CEP opened my eyes to how seeking expert coaches creates a really productive environment,” she said.

Olympic Year – At Last

Once Darvill and her rowers knew that the Olympic regatta would finally take place, her planning accelerated. Two colleagues were integral to the process. Terry Paul, coxswain for the 1992 Olympic champions and a veteran coach responsible for the men’s four, proved to be an inspirational sounding board and a valuable resource for coxswain Kristen Kit. “A big part of creating a healthy competitive environment was working with the men’s four,” said Darvill.

When RCA suggested a male coach as her assistant, Darvill insisted upon Carol Love, citing her experience as a coach and her importance as a female role model for the rowers and as a mentor for herself. Love, who stroked the eight at the 1976 Olympic Games (the first-time women rowers were allowed to compete), is widely respected for her knowledge and toughness. Kit remembers her saying: “You know, we were doing these times in 1976. You can’t do this anymore. You are better athletes; you have stronger equipment and training than we did. You have to find it within yourselves to be better than this.”

When Love’s contract ended in June, Paul took over the women’s four, allowing Darvill to focus on the eight. The shared sessions continued. “It’s a great situation when different boats can work together and push off each other,” she said.

Developing a winning culture included connecting her rowers with alumni and the larger rowing community.

“The women grew the team around them and built an army of support that shared the victory,” said Darvill, who cites 1991 world champion Jennifer Walinga, Brenda Taylor and Kirsten Barnes from the 1992 Olympic champion eight, 1992 bronze medallist Silken Laumann, 2008 Olympic eight champion Kevin Light, 2012 Olympic silver medallist Darcy Marquardt, and three-time world champion Colleen Miller as among the team’s inspirational supporters. Providing perspective and an experienced lens were Morrow and Cookson. Evening Zoom sessions featured rowing luminaries such as Tokyo Chef de Mission Marnie McBean. The two-time double gold medallist reflected on her learnings from her partnership with the late Kathleen Heddle. “It was important to me that the women understand the power of Kathleen’s kindness and quiet strength that lifted others,” said Darvill, who wanted them to have strong female role models and to understand that, while they were responsible for carving their own way, they were also building on a legacy.

A month before departing for the pre-Olympic training camp in Sagami-hara, Darvill made a final adjustment to her program, enlisting the support of armed forces veteran and mental toughness expert Sean Bacon. “He directed the women’s focus towards committing to each other and the process,” explains Darvill. “He was instrumental in assisting them to understand the fierceness each had within, which would drive them to success. They stepped on the plane on July 1st as warriors.”

Let the Regatta Begin

Heat #1 pitted Canada against the world champions from New Zealand, whose training had been less disrupted by COVID. Darvill was satisfied when they finished a mere 0.32 seconds behind the Kiwis, believing that being so close built confidence and excitement to race even better in the repechage. In the last metres of the repechage, Romania edged past the Canadians and broke the world record. It was another satisfactory outing. Gearing up for the final, the Canadians were determined to lead from start to finish. The race would be the ultimate test of trust in themselves and in the leadership of coxswain Kit who later said: “Winning wasn’t our goal. Our goal was to go beyond that and have the absolute best race we, or anyone else, had ever had.”

As the sun set the night before the final, Darvill, McBean, and the rowers gathered around the Olympic Memory Tree to honour Kathleen Heddle, to share a tribute, shed tears, and observe a moment of silence. It was, said Darvill, the final process of connecting the past and forging a way forward.

Darvill recalled the final: “Executing the strategy to lead throughout, the women rowed a gutsy and determined race to win ahead of New Zealand and China. They overcame so much beyond COVID, so it was incredible! The moment they crossed the finish line I felt elated for them. It was also bittersweet. Why? Because it signified what a great culture can produce, but it was also the end of an amazing journey. Creating something so spectacular with a group of

women I cared about is the most rewarding part of this story. All I wished for was that the women have a positive journey and execute the race of their lives, with no what-ifs.” (see [link below to relive the race](#))

The Future?

No longer under contract with RCA, Darvill enjoys being at home and doing contract projects with Morrow and Cookson. She will explore potential coaching positions, so long as the fit is right. “The past two years were an adventure, an incredible journey. Building a cohesive team that aspires to greatness together is the most fulfilling accomplishment and one of which I am very proud.”

Postscript

Darvill has been named the Coaching Association of Canada’s 2021 Coach of the Year, an award given in recognition of a coach’s outstanding achievements leading successful sport performances and exhibiting excellence in sport values. She has also accepted a contract with the Royal Dutch Rowing Federation as a coach of its women’s team, a position that will extend until Paris 2024.

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

[Own The Podium - Canada Coach](#)

[Olympic champion rower Kasia Gruchalla-Wesierski shows off gold in Canmore - OkotoksToday.ca](#)

<https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/summer/rowing/canada-womens-eight-win-gold-medal-tokyo-olympics-1.6123139#:~:text=Canada%27s%20women%27s%20eight%20crew%20captured%20gold%20on%20the,claimed%20silver%2C%20finishing%20ahead%20of%20bronze%20winners%20China.>