

## **Stories We Need To hear: Three Canadian Women in Coaching**

**Online**

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They may not be household names, but the three women coaches who share their stories in this article embody the many compelling reasons why Canada's sport community must evolve into a more welcoming environment for this and the next generation of women who give so much of themselves to their athletes, to their sports, and to their communities.

From their earliest experiences as aspiring athletes to the excellent coaches they are today, Janet Goddard, Miranda Kamal, and Savanna Smith are disarmingly open about their life journeys and the challenges they faced and overcame. *Journal* readers will be able to relate to and learn from these three remarkable women, who truly reflect why women *can* and *should* coach. – Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor.

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

## **Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching**

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**by Cari Din**

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.

The Hannah Arendt quote above reminds me of what storytellers show us without mistaking what we hear as a singular story. For me, fitting every woman's experience into one narrative of how women experience coaching is unreasonable and reductionist; however, I know what a woman coach can do, and I know we need to read, reflect on, and find resistance in women's stories of coaching.

The purpose of bringing together three Canadian women's experiences of coaching is to give readers more than a decontextualized quote or social media post about their

coaching. I cannot tell Janet Goddard's, Savanna Smith's, nor Miranda Kamal's complete stories but hope you find resonance, reassurance, and resistance in these coaches' stories.

## **The coaches**

Janet Goddard has been coaching track and field at both the elementary and high school levels since 1996. She won a Key Contribution Award for her outstanding sport leadership in the Avon Maitland District School Board in southern Ontario. She has also been honoured as an Inspiring Woman for her role in mentoring and supporting women in the Huron Perth Area. Janet continues to race in cross-country running at the master's level and completed the Boston Marathon in 2022.

Miranda Kamal is a boxing coach who has earned her NCCP Advanced Coaching Diploma, International Boxing Certification (AIBA) two stars, and numerous coaching awards. She coached Team Canada at the 2022 AMBC (American Boxing Confederation) Men's and Women's Continental Championships as well as the 2022 Women's World Boxing Championships. She has helped thousands of athletes overcome challenges and excel in both sports and academics. Today, Miranda is building a competitive youth boys' boxing team, coaching recreational athletes, and training new coaches as an NCCP learning facilitator.

Savanna Smith early developed her passion for the Medicine Game (lacrosse) and began coaching it in her teens. Her coaching is rooted in culturally sensitive practices and a deep understanding of traditional wisdom. Savanna has empowered athletes to embrace their heritage and develop their skills. She is a Master Coach Developer for the Aboriginal Coaching Module and a learning facilitator for the Indigenous Long-term Participant Development, Active Communities module for lacrosse coaches. Savanna was named the NCCP National Indigenous Female Coach of the year in 2023. Today, she coaches at various levels, is aiding in developing sustainable programs in Indigenous communities, and continues to play lacrosse.

## **Love and Play in Sport**

Savanna, Miranda, and Janet's coaching stories began, to an extent, when they fell in love with their respective sports. "Lacrosse was my outlet, and I loved it," writes Savanna. This feeling weaves its way through her experiences as an athlete and coach.

Similarly, Miranda describes being involved in competitive sports since she could walk and the sport she first "fell in love" with was table tennis. Miranda's range of early experiences signal the joy we feel in sport that I believe great coaches nurture.

Janet was exposed to many sports as a child and at the age of ten “fell in love with cross-country running ... with the exhilaration of the starter gun going off and the racers sprinting from the start line, the thrill of the charge to the finish and the adrenaline that comes with giving it your all. I loved the comradery I had with my teammates. I loved the team element of cross-country, the scoring of all the runners and seeing if our team’s total was the lowest. It was really thrilling.”

Both Miranda and Janet remember physical education as their favourite class in primary school and Miranda describes her early sport experiences both in the gym and outside of school with her family as true play – joyful, immersive, and exciting. Janet remembers running in the woods as “magical,” and that she enjoyed getting covered in mud while pushing the limits of her body.

Savanna remembers playing lacrosse in her backyard with her siblings and “making up mini games for fun. Some days it was sticks and gloves; other days we would need our helmets or full pads because we would be going all out. We might have broken a window or two, but our parents still let us play and be kids.” These childhood memories depicting love and play in sport overlap with the next theme in all three coaches’ stories.

## **Family Support**

“My parents raised me to believe that I could achieve anything with hard work,” says Miranda while acknowledging that this belief did not pave a straight path to sport success and satisfaction; however, her statement helps us to imagine the deep and abiding support all three women received from their parents as athletes.

Savanna describes her family as “passionate about the Medicine Game (lacrosse),” and wanting to follow in her siblings’ footsteps and play.” In her teens, she trained whenever possible, practicing skills alone at the local field, and remembers running at night “when it was getting dark my mom would be there in her car watching or following me. It was her way of supporting me during this time.” Savanna continued to feel family support early in her coaching career when she was working on getting girls out to try lacrosse at camps and clinics. At this time, Savanna’s mom “handled the politics” and organized support from more mothers in the community.

Janet’s parents exposed her and her sisters to many sports – from judo to soccer – when they were very young. They sought opportunities that were suited to her strengths and enrolled her in the local track and field club when she was ten. Her dad was a teacher and a coach leading gymnastics, basketball, soccer, and track teams. His dedication and the strong rapport he developed with his students “made teaching look fun and exciting,” to Janet. While she was in her dad’s Grade Eight class, Janet decided she would like to become a teacher and a coach, like her father.

Becoming a coach created the opportunity for Janet, and each of these women, to emulate the role models they were supported by in their families and beyond.

## **Support from Coaches and Teachers**

The role models who influenced and supported each of these coaches are not limited to family members. The first time Savanna played on a female lacrosse team she “had no idea how to navigate,” this new experience. She writes that her coach “created a space that allowed me to make friends and feel like I belonged.” Savanna also describes a dear friend, mentor, and manager who, “really emphasised to me the importance of having strong Indigenous women supporting the next generation of Indigenous girls; that it’s part of the culture and connects us all together.” The legacy of this mentor is embodied in Savanna’s award-winning coaching and sport leadership today.

Janet describes the impact of the coaches who provided support through training everyday with her cross-country running team. Janet says she always works to emulate these coaches who role modelled, in a concrete way, what they valued through embodying it. She is running (perhaps as you read this) with the athletes she is coaching today.

The primary school teacher who ignited Miranda’s love of sport is central in her stories of support. This Grade Five teacher and coach “was a mentor who believed in the power of sports to improve our lives. He never really focused on winning, even though that is what I was doing. He focused on the practice, the community, and personal development.” In high school, Miranda had a coach who recognized she needed support beyond sport and connected her to a health professional. Miranda describes this coach as someone she strives to be like and says her high school coach “cared about more than just peak performance; she tried to care about people. But I don’t think she was a softie. She was a competitor like no other. She understood the balance of pushing us and caring for us.” Looking back, Miranda feels fortunate to have learned from “great teachers and coaches who valued diversity, leadership, sports ethics, and, most importantly, friendships, family, and fun.” Notably, fun, family, and friendships weave their way through all three women’s stories of coaching and being coached.

## **Athletes First**

From a very young age, Janet, Savanna, and Miranda experienced extensive competitive success as athletes. Miranda was eleven years old at her first Canada Games appearance and won medals on the national stage every year she competed in table tennis. Savanna was fourteen years old when she played on Canada’s U19 national lacrosse team. Janet started winning provincial championships in 400 and

800 metre running events in the 11-12 age group. Janet and Savanna competed as student-athletes in the Canadian college and American NCAA Division One systems respectively. In her late twenties, Miranda became a boxer and has not looked back.

While their athletic careers are not the focus of their coaching narratives, they are in many ways the starting point of each woman's coaching practice. This is noteworthy and something for each of us to reflect on – how does athletic success influence our careers as sport coaches?

## **Becoming Coaches**

Savanna was not quite fourteen years old when two dads in her community asked if she would help coach their sons' U11 field lacrosse team. Savanna said yes. Like the two U11 dads in Savanna's community, Miranda's formative Grade Five coach-teacher also empowered her to begin coaching her peers once she understood the game, which was before she was twelve years old. After graduating from Teachers College, Janet was hired to teach physical education to primary students and quickly took over coaching track and field, which in her early years of coaching included learning to organize track meets!

## **Challenges and Ways Forward**

Being bullied at times both at school and lacrosse is something Savanna faced during her childhood and adolescence. She felt "different from other kids" and that she did not fit in. Because Savanna was the only female on many of her teams, she was forced to either change quickly and rush out the locker room or stay out of this team space completely. To Savanna, this "felt more like alienation rather than being respectful overall."

During school, Janet struggled academically so when her parents enrolled her in track and field, she writes that "this was a turning point as it opened my social world and boosted my confidence in my abilities. I took this confidence with me throughout my athletic career." In Grade Twelve, Janet sustained a major injury during a cross-country race, ending her chance of earning a scholarship to run and study at an American university, which had been within reach up until this injury.

Miranda reflects: "Listening to my inner voice and body have always been my biggest challenges ... looking back, I can say that my *can-do* attitude has caused me a lot of stress." Because boxing did not have an off-season and very few women were involved and available for fights, Miranda overtrained and incurred a career-ending spinal injury. After surgery, Miranda struggled with what was next and sees this moment as a turning point because an exceptional trainer and mentor helped her see that she

had “much to offer as a coach outside the ring. It took me a while to believe him,” but eventually she did.

Janet looks back and says today that the break from running her injury forced upon her created time to focus on academics, “and, for really the first time, excelling at school. I had a very wise teacher who told me that she believed I was very smart and that I had been coping with an undiagnosed learning disability.” Gaining confidence in her academic abilities, after college Janet earned a degree in Sociology while running on the varsity team at university. After achieving excellence in both school and running, she applied to Teachers College and when she “received that acceptance letter, it was one of the happiest moments of my life.”

Pursuing a Bachelor of Science and playing lacrosse at an American NCAA Division One university removed Savanna from her community. When she returned after four years, she realized things in lacrosse had changed. More specifically she noticed, “the focus wasn't so much on the love of the game and what was best for the girls anymore,” and that despite more associations and age groups for girls, there were also more barriers to playing for them. Savanna began dismantling these barriers and amplifying opportunities for girls and women in lacrosse with the support of mentors in her community and taking Indigenous multi-sport courses with the Aboriginal Sport Circle.

## **Trauma**

A central aspect of Miranda's life experiences was being assaulted when she was sixteen. She writes that this assault left her doubting her abilities in all areas of her life, including sports. She did not receive support after the assault because up until she began boxing in her late twenties, she did not tell anyone it had happened. Miranda writes: “Boxing and learning to defend myself healed me ... The process of competing in boxing allowed me to feel strong again. It allowed me to share what had happened to me, and then I began to use my story to help others.”

Savanna coached British Columbia's U19 Indigenous female box lacrosse team at the 2017 North American Indigenous Games, her first time coaching an all-Indigenous team. She reflects that after going away to university she had been “disconnected from that part of myself, and through the Indigenous Sport, Physical Activity, and Recreation Council (ISPARC) I had a life-changing experience. I didn't realize what was missing in my life until then, and the work I needed to do to heal from all of my own traumas. This experience coaching this remarkable group of young, proud Indigenous girls saved me.”

## **Coaching Impacts and Successes**

Coaching is often measured by athlete outcomes alone. We know the score, the time, the result, and the winners, seconds after the competition ends. When I asked these three coaches about their successes, they shared stories of positive impact as much as performance outcome, revealing the importance of coaching people rather than a sport.

Janet describes coaching as something that grew naturally from her love of running and knowledge of drills, games, and aspects of track and field that she was enthusiastic about sharing with her students and athletes. She was raised by her father, who was also her coaching and teaching role model, and this contributed to her coaching success from the beginning. She says her “biggest learning curve came from organising track meets. There was a lot for me to learn about the scheduling and all the fine details that come along with a track and field meet.” To date, Janet has convened over 30 cross-country meets and more than 50 track and field meets.

One specific example of Janet’s impact is found in the community-based competition called the Maitland Trail Cross-country Race. This is a free event that provides local public school athletes (Grades 3 to 8) the opportunity to race and compete. Janet designed this event, which began twenty-five years ago, to rely on sponsorships from local businesses making it free to all the runners. The combination of Janet’s vision, development, organizing, and leading has created hundreds of opportunities for athletes to compete, which did not exist before she became a coach. We can lose sight of the community-building and organizing leadership Janet describes and embodies, as well as the deep impact it makes. While Janet did not state how many athletes she has coached to podiums, her teaching, coaching, and mentoring has supported and strengthened thousands of athletes.

Savanna has coached both male and female lacrosse athletes from preschoolers to adults. She describes her most recent successes and impacts as promoting change and being a voice for not only female lacrosse but also advocating for the lowering of barriers for Indigenous athletes in adaptive sports. She feels the greatest gift she has received from athletes has been seeing them develop as individuals, becoming coaches, and giving back to the game. Today, when Savanna coaches with female players she has coached as young women she sees “it all goes full circle,” and calls this a true privilege and “the best gift they didn’t even know they gave me.”

Becoming an AIBA certified coach alongside a cohort of international peers is a memorable coaching success for Miranda. Coaching at international competitions, where multiple athletes earned numerous medals, is part of Miranda’s concrete coaching impact; however, she describes being most proud of seeing her athletes succeed beyond the boundaries of sport. Athletes earning four-year university scholarships, 4.0 grade point averages in university, beginning medical school, and

becoming the first in their family to graduate are a few examples of Miranda's coaching successes.

As the writer weaving together these three women's personal descriptions of success and impact, I am imagining the expansive ripple effect they have each made within and well beyond the sport communities they create, lead, and coach in.

## **Coaching Purpose**

From the beginning of her career as a teacher and coach, Janet says she felt like she found her calling and was getting paid to do what she loved. She reflects that she often asks herself "while out in the rain at 6:00 am checking course conditions, why I do what I do. The answer is always the same: There is nothing better than seeing a kid come across the finish line, smiling from ear to ear because they gave the race their all."

At this point in her life, Miranda is using her education and her story of healing to raise awareness of the importance of "speaking out against maltreatment, even in the face of potential backlash or consequences. I am determined to use my voice and my story to help others." Miranda is coaching athletes to competition success and creating a safe and inclusive community in sport.

Savanna says, "Coaching fills my cup in ways I cannot fully put words too, to see a player at any age try something new and it just clicks for them. Or the excitement in their eyes when that new trick works and the sheer joy on their faces ... coaching is my way of being the person I needed when I was younger for someone today."

All three coaches describe their purpose using different words to state the same central aim: Giving back to their community and supporting people in the sports they developed in as athletes. Janet describes this in saying, "I have always felt it was important to give back to the sport that had served me so well over the years."

The author of the well-known quote, "Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life," is contested, but it strikes me as fitting to connect with in the context of this article. The great coaches I swam for embodied this maxim and they are the women you see glimpses of in me when I am at my best as a leader. Janet, Miranda, and Savanna's ways of describing their purpose reminds me to check in on what my job is mindfully, and a bit more often than I do, to assess the extent to which I am standing in joy when I do it. How often are you reflecting on this question?

## **The Coaches We Continue Becoming**



Dr. Herminia Ibarra studies identity and asks us to stop searching for our one true (and static) self and to instead focus our attention on the many possible selves we want to test and learn more about. We are always becoming ourselves. As philosophical as that sounds, this statement grounds us in lifelong learning and developing, which we know the most effective coaches do.

I asked Janet, Miranda, and Savanna what the future holds for them and if they have any advice for women coaching today. It will not surprise any reader at this point in the article to hear the wisdom and inspiration each woman shared.

Janet writes: “I will always coach in some capacity, even when I retire from teaching. Running is a lifelong sport, and as an athlete I continue to make new goals for myself like running the Boston Marathon for the first time in 2022 and competing in the Masters 5k Canadian Championship ... I have always done my best thinking on the run, and I use running to help balance my mental and physical health. I am constantly reading the newest research on nutrition, rest, and recovery. I want to be current in my practice to pass along the best possible information to my athletes.” In offering advice to women in coaching, Janet says: “Women need to support other women and help them climb the ladder. I nominate women for awards and am always supporting them in achieving their goals. I mentor other women in coaching both formally and informally. I want the women around me to be successful and to be the best coaches they can be.” Janet reminds us to lift other women whenever we can and as we rise.

Like Janet, Miranda describes herself as “an athlete for life.” In reflecting on creating a sports-based charity that has helped over 15,000 athletes and building a relationship with her local police station, Miranda writes: “I don't need an external organization to validate my worth ... it comes from inside. It is honed each time I take a course, help an athlete, or share my experience. My light is meant to shine.” When I asked Miranda what her advice to women in coaching today might be, she invites women to stay true to themselves and not let politics “distract you from your passion. Keep learning and advocating for your athletes, no matter the outcome.” Her advocacy and commitment to continuous learning overlaps with Janet’s reflections and comments. Miranda finishes her advice in reminding women in coaching to make self-acceptance and self-care priorities and that, “your dedication and commitment will inspire your athletes to greatness.” This final comment connects with Savanna’s perspective.

Savanna’s advice to women in coaching connects us to purpose, mentoring, being real, and coaching legacy. Savanna writes: “The next generation is looking up to us, and one of the best gifts we can give them is our time and knowledge. Coaching isn't about us as the coach, but about those under our care who we coach, who we mentor ... It is important that young girls see you during the good and hard times,

see your guidance and resilience.” This shows the young female athletes you are coaching that they can coach and be resilient, too. Savanna finishes by reminding women coaching today, “to remember you are never alone on good or bad days. You walk with your ancestors beside you, guiding you and they are the whisper in your ear when you need it the most.”

I am grateful to the women who answered my questions thoughtfully, with generosity, and offered glimpses of who they are when they coach through their stories. Stories help us feel seen, get us reflecting, and stretch our perspectives – in both delightful and difficult ways. In this article, Savanna, Janet, and Miranda have done all three for me and I imagine have left all of us remembering why we need more women in coaching.

## **About the Author**

Cari Din loves hearing and telling stories. She thinks we need them to make sense of, personalize, and learn pretty much anything. Cari coached in her home sport of artistic swimming for many years and is still in awe of what a great coach can do. A former Olympian and silver medallist at the 1996 Olympic Games, she teaches sport coaching and leadership at the University of Calgary today.