



Catherine Priestner Allinger — A Woman of Firsts



VANOC executive vice president Cathy Priestner Allinger addresses the Women in Coaching Luncheon and Plenary at 2008 Petro-Canada Sport Leadership sportif.
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Ever since she burst into national prominence in 1976 as the first Canadian woman to win an Olympic speed skating medal, Cathy Priestner Allinger has captured the attention of women in sport. Not only was her athletic achievement remarkable, she has gone on to carve out a stellar career that has propelled her higher than any other female senior sport executive outside the ranks of the International Olympic Committee.

Priestner Allinger's story is fascinating, not least for the frankness with which she speaks, but also for her ability to take strong stands, to believe in herself, to trust her abilities and her judgment, to realistically assess her strengths and weaknesses, to surround herself with the strongest people she can find, to demand as much of herself as she does of others.

Priestner Allinger is the consummate role model for all Canadian women in sport, at all levels. Not only is she the epitome of success, she has managed her career without sacrificing what she calls her most important roles — as a wife and the mother of three children. The [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) is proud to bring her success story to our readers. — Sheila Robertson

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Catherine Priestner Allinger — A Woman of Firsts

by Sheila Robertson

Sport has been such a dominant part of your life. Where did it all begin?

It began when my family moved from Hamilton, Ont., to Winnipeg. The family living in the house behind us had two daughters. They were the same age as me and my sister, and we became really good friends. Both those girls were involved in the River Heights Speed Skating Club and suggested that I try skating. I did and ended up winning nationals for my age class that first year. It was 1968, and I was 11 years old. I had never really skated before; it just came easily to me. I was a natural for the sport and was also generally athletic and very involved in school sports. Obviously, that helped.

I was 13 when I made our national team and competed in the world sprint championships in Milwaukee, 14 when I won a gold and a silver medal at the Canada Games, and 15 when I made my first Olympic team (in 1972). My path was really quick and on a fast track, but I didn't make it because I was good; it was because Canada wasn't very strong at all in the sport at that time. We just didn't have the depth, but I was skating fairly well relative to other Canadians.

What personal characteristics contributed to your athletic success?



Cathy in action.

Physically, I was a natural athlete and probably had the right body type for the sport. Early on, I decided that I wanted to skate long track and met **Ron Marchuck**, an awesome coach. We connected and I stuck with him. He was fantastic; he seemed to know what I needed and gave me huge emotional support. He was a teacher and a huge mentor. I am sure he is the reason I did as well as I did. Unfortunately, he was killed in a car accident when I was 16, so he wasn't around when I won the 500m silver medal at the 1976 Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck, Austria. My win was the first official medal by a Canadian woman in the sport, and Ron was absolutely huge in getting me to that point.

His death was devastating. I was heartbroken and really never had another coach that I worked with on a continuous basis after he died. Part of that was the national team coaching system itself. Canada frequently changed its national team coaches. I was on the national team, but didn't have a dedicated coach. We went to Europe every year to train, so we were quite independent. We also didn't have a lot of funding.

After the 1972 Games in Sapporo, I went to Norway with three other athletes to train with a coach, **Finn Halvorsen**, who, interestingly, is now Canada's long track program director.

So you didn't have the support that is taken for granted nowadays.

That's right. But I got help from a lot of different people. If I was training somewhere, I would tap into what was available. I worked with Soviet athletes and other coaches. I looked for expertise in different areas.

As a teenager, it can't have been easy to figure out the right people to go to.

I've always been independent. Part of it is the family I grew up with, but I was in Europe on my own when I was 15. I was with a team, but not a very structured one, so I had to grow up in order to survive. One of the things I learned from sport is that coaches are huge and so is the support around you, but you have to deliver on your own. I learned that early on.

Were you always driven to excel?

I definitely have the drive to be the best I can be at whatever I do and I think I had that from a young age. I wouldn't say that I set my sights on the Olympic Games or on winning a medal after winning my first race, but I realized that I was getting good results very quickly, and that was enjoyable. Progressing from provincial to national to international competition depends on the results you get, and I happened to have very positive results very early.

Was it difficult for your family to let a teenaged girl head off on her own?

I don't think it was easy, but I'm not sure they really understood what I was doing. My parents hadn't travelled a lot, but we were a very sport-minded family. Doing well in sport was natural; my two brothers also did sport at a fairly high level. But I'm not sure my family understood what was involved in getting on a plane and flying to Amsterdam, switching planes to go to Munich, and taking a train to Inzell alone for the first time. Fortunately, I was competent enough to be able to do it, although it did have its scary moments.

While you were competing, did you give any thought to what you wanted to do with your life after sport? I am sure you didn't visualize being where you are today.

Not a lot. When I won my medal at Innsbruck — I was only 19 — I was still improving, and every time I got on the ice I got another good result. But I made the call not to continue for a number of reasons, including the financial burden on my family and the lack of encouragement from my sport organization and my parents to carry on. Apparently I had done what I was supposed to do, so it was, OK, move on. It was odd.

I decided to go to Mount Royal College in Calgary, and I remember standing in the hall among thousands of students and wondering, "What's next? I'm 19 and I've been very successful in my sport. How do I top it?"

That forced me to think a lot about the future. I decided I wanted to lead a normal life. Throughout my teens, for six months of the year, I was in Europe on my own, and when I was home I was in summer school — it was two completely separate lives. Anyway, I decided to be normal, so I got married at the age of 21 and eventually we moved to Champaign, Ill., and this is where I started to shape my present career.

I found a speed skating club in town and I volunteered to coach. The head coach pointed out a 14-year-old girl who, he said, was planning to quit. I noticed that she looked pretty darned good. I could see a natural flow to the way she skated. I joined her on the ice and we hit it off right away. That was the beginning of three years of coaching her.

Several years later, I moved to London, Ont., and was working at a golf and tennis club. In 1985, I connected with **Roger Jackson**, the former director of Sport Canada, who was then dean of physical education at the University of Calgary. I had been out of the country for seven years and so found out what was happening in sport when we met for lunch in Toronto.

He invited me to Calgary to see what was happening. Preparations for the 1988 Olympic Winter Games were in full swing. Shortly after my visit, I got a call offering me the position of general manager of the Calgary Olympic Oval. I had studied sport management at Montana State University and facility management at the University of Pittsburgh, so it was a good fit. The federal government representative on the organizing committee, the late **Jerry Berger**, found the funding for the position.

Family is very important to me. As much as I wanted to accept the offer, I wasn't prepared to uproot my two daughters, **Leah** and **Ali**, halfway through the school year. I was a single parent and I wanted the transition to be as seamless as possible for the girls. Anyway, we managed to find a way to work it out, and that position was a huge milestone in my career.

Back to the young speed skater I had worked with in Champaign: I met up with her again in Calgary when she competed at the 1988 Olympic Winter Games. Her name? **Bonnie Blair!**

She competed at four Olympics and won five golds and a bronze. It was an awesome moment when she won her first gold medal in Calgary. I have a plaque on my office wall that says, "Thanks for getting me started and making my dreams possible."

When I talk to sport leaders and teachers, I tell them never to underestimate the influence they have on another individual, especially a young person. The head coach throws in the towel on Bonnie, I come along, we hit it off, and she becomes one of the most successful U.S. Olympians ever. It's amazing the influence you can have.

Given that you weren't very experienced, what was it like to take on the responsibility for the Oval while it was still under construction?

It was a bit scary, for sure, but I have realized that I **can** go into new situations — and this has been my path — and do a lot with them. In fact, I thrive on change; it's part of what keeps me going. I certainly like a challenge. I've always been really strong when it comes to putting a good team together. In my last three jobs, I've had dynamite teams. I tend to put together a team that really balances me. I have people who strengthen my shortcomings. My judgment of people has worked well for me.

When I got to the Oval, we put together a dynamite team and sat down to decide what we wanted the venue to become and created our vision and mission. We said we wanted to be the number 1 speed skating facility in the world and we wanted Canada to become a leading speed skating nation — remember that at the time Canada's programs had no depth. Of course, the facility had to be economically viable so we had to create all the programs, but the number 1 thing was to do something for speed skating.

I hired **Jack Walters**, at the time the best coach in the world. We also came to the conclusion that we had to have partnerships, so we partnered with a number of provinces to fund their skaters to train at the Oval and with Speed Skating Canada to deliver their sprint program. The result is what you see today, with Canada as the world's number 1 speed skating nation.

How did you combine your personal and professional lives?

My family is my number one priority and they always have been. I believe a woman can have a very healthy home life and be very successful in a career. Early on, I committed to my kids that they would always be number 1, but I knew I wanted a career. I didn't have family around to support me, but when I moved to Calgary, a neighbour took care of the girls and she was awesome.

Things just fell into place for me. Two years later, I married **Todd Allinger**, and we have a son, **Cole**, who is now 19. Todd did his PhD in mechanical engineering at the University of Calgary and works as a biomechanist on the science side of sport. When I was in Salt Lake, he worked with the Orthopedic Specialty Hospital there and now he heads up the Top Secret program [an innovative research and development program to give Canadian athletes “the edge” in equipment, technology, information, and training] for Own the Podium.

I also believe that having flexibility is important. The kids are all into sports, but I can count on one hand how many games of theirs I’ve missed in 29 years. I’ve had really good, flexible working environments.

Doesn’t that also show an ability to prioritize?

Yes, but I’ve also had the luxury of being in leadership roles, so I can be a role model. A guy who works for me recently said, “It’s because of you that I saw my daughter’s soccer game yesterday. Before working here, I wouldn’t have thought I could or should do that.” My approach to leadership is that I expect everyone to have the same flexibility I have. I want them to take advantage of it and have a balanced life. If they do, they perform better.

You are arguably the most successful woman in Canadian sport. To what do you attribute your success?



Cathy at the height of her speed skating career.

There are women who behave differently than they might really want to. I live in a world of men. The career path I’ve chosen is completely dominated by men. I decided very early on that I was going to be myself. I didn’t want to feel that I had to be tougher than I am. I felt that I didn’t **have** to compete because I’m a woman, or do things differently, and I made a commitment to myself not to.

I believe that doing that has added so much to my being successful. People know when I’m talking to them that what I’m saying is me, that I’m not trying to be one of the guys. I’ve been very true to balance in my life. It’s been extremely important to me to have life outside of work and that has also enabled me to be successful.

I mentor quite a few young women and I tell them that they don’t need to be so tough, that they don’t have to work 15 hours a day. Plan well and be true to who you are and get yourself into roles that work for you. I think that people who know me well would say that my number 1 success factor is my balance between my work life and my home life.

You made headlines when you joined the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the Olympic Winter Games of 2002 and became the first woman to run the sport function at an Olympic Games, winter or summer. You went on to a similar position with the Torino 2006 Organizing Committee of the XX Olympic Winter Games. How did these leadership positions prepare you for your current work with the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC)?

I was recruited to be the director of ice sports in Salt Lake, but when I got there, I was asked to oversee all sport on an interim basis. They did a worldwide search for a director of sport and I didn’t apply for the job. I believed that they knew my work and so could have approached me. The title for most of the senior leadership positions in the organization was “managing director”, and I told them that I would be selling myself and the function short if I agreed to become director. Sport, I said, needs to be at the same level as transportation. They offered me the job of managing director, and I accepted. I would have sold the organization short if that position had stayed at the director level.

An interesting point: Before offering me the job, they polled every International Federation (IF) because they thought that a woman couldn’t cut it in the job — initially they had written me off because I’m female — but the IFs were all fine with it. Being Canadian helped me in the States; the environment is different, but similar.

Italy was another story. I was also recruited to go there and was given the title of managing director, the highest after the chief operating officer, and I had more areas of responsibility there than in Salt Lake. The environment was much tougher, primarily because of the business culture, not because of gender. When I realized it wasn’t the best environment for me, I made the decision to leave. From my own style and who I am, I don’t stay in a place that doesn’t fit.

I hadn't gone to Italy immediately after the Salt Lake Games. I had the job of chief executive officer of the Utah Athletic Foundation [the caretaker of the legacy facilities from the Games]. I thought it was going to be the perfect job. We loved where we lived in Park City, and I have a strong interest in legacies so it seemed like a really good fit. I had said very strongly that I had no interest in going to Torino, but the chief operating officer of the Torino Organizing Committee called repeatedly and made a fantastic offer. We decided as a family that this was a unique opportunity for all of us. I have no regrets.

So then you went into the automobile dealership business?

I hadn't decided what I would do after leaving Torino. My father, brothers, and sister are all in the car business. While I was still in Italy, my brother, Pat, called and mentioned that a good-sized dealership was available in Edmonton. Imagine his surprise when I said I'd try the business. At the time, I was working on the VANOC bid as a consultant, but I didn't bank on a job offer if they won the Games.

Shortly after I returned to Canada, I got a call from the late **Mark Lowry**, who was the Canadian Olympic Committee's executive director of sport. He asked me to put on paper how I would go about determining whether Canada could win in 2010. Then the winter sports asked me to do a review and analysis of their sports to determine if winning was possible and what had to be changed to do so. I pulled together a very small, eclectic group to do the work, and the result, published in 2004, was "[Own the Podium — 2010: Recommendations of the Independent Task Force for Winter National Sport Organizations and Funding Partners](#)". By then, Vancouver had the Games, and eventually I was asked to take a senior position, which I accepted. I kept my stake in the dealership and found someone to manage it, and off we went to Vancouver.

Are there lessons to be learned from the Beijing Games that should shape or fine-tune Canada's preparation for 2010?

There are some key things we want to ensure are in place. We've been saying these things for a long time, and Beijing reinforced our thinking. We need to be an organization that can push its decision making as far down as possible, to empower people at all levels of the organization, so that we can respond to issues and unknowns. We need a lot of people able to make decisions without having to bring every issue to a high level in order to get decisions or resolution. We really have to be nimble and capable of change.

Also, at the last few Games, we've seen empty accredited seats and this, for us, is unacceptable. We have a strategy around making sure all of our seats are full all the time. That's a very high priority.

Another priority is the experience that spectators have at the venues. We want the venues to rock, and we want the spectators to walk away feeling that they've had the experience of a lifetime.

Beijing had the spectacular venues, and for us, the field of play has to be flawless, as do the Villages, the athletes' homes away from home. We want to make sure we have done everything we can so that the athletes have the very best experiences of their lives. This means that nothing is getting in the way of their performances.

What advice would you give to women aspiring to senior leadership in Canadian sport?

If you believe that your skill set and your experience are compatible with the position, then trust yourself. You really have to believe in yourself and your gut. One of my positive attributes is knowing that my gut is usually right; I've learned to trust that. Be yourself — I see too many women trying to fit in. Many women would argue with me on this one, but I don't believe you have to change to fit in. You're there because you have value and you bring something unique to the team.

Can you look beyond your current role to what the future might hold?

I've always, always left options open. Maybe I'm going to retire, or volunteer; that's something I have sacrificed because of the balance I wanted with my family. I'm a builder, and if something needs changing, that's definitely one of my strengths. If I want to stay in sport, there aren't very many options.

I want to see how I feel after the Games. After that, I will make some decisions. But right now, I don't know.

Cathy Priestner Allinger's Career Path — From Athlete to Coach to Senior Olympic Leader

- 1970 to 1976:** Member of Canada's long track speed skating team; winner of nine world championship medals and six national titles
- 1972 and 1976:** Olympian
- 1976:** Silver medallist, 500m, Olympic Winter Games
- 1981 to 1997:** Coach of speed skating, hockey, ringette, basketball, and softball
- 1986 to 1997:** General manager, Calgary Olympic Oval
- 1990 to 1998:** International television broadcast analyst for CBC and CTV
- 1994 to 1997:** Associate athletics director, University of Calgary
- 1997 to 2002:** Managing director of Sport and Medical and Doping, Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games
- 2001 to 2003:** Consultant, Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation
- 2002:** Chief executive officer, Utah Athletic Foundation
- 2002 to 2003:** Managing director of Games Operations, Torino Organizing Committee for the 2006 Olympic Winter Games
- 2003 to 2004:** President and general manager, Capital Dodge, Edmonton
- 2004 to —:** Executive vice president, Sport and Games Operations, Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games

Awards and Honours

- 1975, 1976** Booster Club Female Athlete of the Year
- 1976** Governor General's Award of Excellence
- 1976** Inducted into Alberta Hall of Fame
- 1988** Carried the Olympic Flame (with alpine skier Ken Read) into the stadium for the opening ceremony of the 1988 Olympic Winter Games
- 1994** Inducted into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame
- 2002** Recipient of the Olympic Order

About the Author



Sheila Robertson
Photo Credit: George Bayne

Sheila Robertson has worked as an editor and writer with Canada's sport community for over 30 years. The founding editor of *Champion* magazine, she was also the founding editor of *Coaches Report* magazine and its lead writer from 1993 to 2005. She is the editor of and a writer for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* and *Making the Most of Your Opportunities: A Media Guide for Athletes and Their Coaches*. In 1995, she was the recipient of the Canadian Sport Award for communications. In 2005, Coaches of Canada established the Sheila Robertson Award to recognize a national sport organization that demonstrates a consistent approach in valuing and recognizing the role of the coach internally and to the media and the public. She is currently working on a book about Canada's boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games.