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***Exploring the Learning Environment of Women Coaches***

As authors Bettina Callary and Penny Werthner note, much has been written, certainly in the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*, about the barriers women face in developing and maintaining successful careers in coaching. What is far less explored is how the woman coach copes with, learns from, and adapts her various and unique life experiences in order to become a successful coach. If we accept that career success in coaching means working in a personally positive, creative environment while producing athletes who excel to the best of their ability, whatever the level, and who enjoy their athletic experience, then it becomes critical to understand *all* the factors that come into play to create this happy combination. Surely essential for inclusion are life experiences, a factor that is generally overlooked or dismissed when discussing coaching success.

While one coach's life experiences, as presented in this article, may not be typical of all women coaches, sufficient evidence emerges to recommend, as the authors do, strategies that can be readily applied across the spectrum of sport in Canada and in tandem with the excellent foundation laid by the National Coaching Certification Program. In fact, taken together, life experiences, informal learning, *and* formal coach education are imperative to producing the successful coach as this article readily reveals.—**Sheila Robertson**

*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.*

**JULY 2011 FEATURE**

***Exploring the Learning Environment of Women Coaches***

By Bettina Callary and Penny Werthner

There has been a great deal of research describing the barriers that women coaches face in entering and staying in the coaching profession, but very little that has looked at how women coaches have managed to successfully navigate the sporting environment to create a career in coaching. Furthermore, research on coaches' development has not been specific to women coaches.

Why is it important to explore how women coaches learn and develop their careers? We would suggest that understanding how women coaches have learned throughout their experiences in life and how this translates into their coaching could help us to implement relevant strategies that would help many more women succeed as coaches.

This article looks specifically at one coach's meaningful life experiences in learning to coach, and from those findings, suggests a number of strategies that could help other women coaches succeed in a coaching career. It is based on PhD research into the learning processes of five women who have successfully created careers in coaching.

Peter Jarvis is a British theorist who has looked at human learning for over 30 years. He discusses human learning as occurring in many situations throughout life, from childhood through adulthood. He argues that our perception

of each experience determines how we learn and who we are at any point in time. Our perception of a situation is based on what we have previously learned. When we look at learning as occurring in a series of social situations, we can determine how this woman coach learned, changed, and developed her career based on her experiences throughout life.

### **The Coach**

Sarah is a 51-year-old figure skating coach with 33 years of coaching experience. Until two years ago, she was coaching high performance competitive athletes, and every year she went to the national championships with at least one athlete. She is the director and a coach of CanSkate, the entry-level program at her club, and is a resource coach for the competitive athletes. She has almost completed all the tasks for Level 4 of the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) and has a high school diploma. She is married and has two daughters, aged 18 and 21.

Four interviews were conducted with Sarah over the course of three months. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that asked about her life experiences and how she learned in different situations. Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed. From the transcriptions, questions were developed that delved deeper into how she learned from the various situations throughout her life and the data organized into a chronological biography based on her learning experiences. In the fourth interview, the story was discussed with Sarah to ensure that it was an accurate reflection of her lifelong learning and experiences.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results were displayed as a story of Sarah's lifelong learning and experiences. In this article, we demonstrate how lifelong learning occurred in various situations throughout her life. We hope, first, that program directors and sport policy makers can gain knowledge from her experiences. Second, we anticipate other women coaches being able to relate to some of these experiences, which will lead to reflection on situations within their environment that may help to keep women involved in coaching. A discussion ensues regarding strategies to help women coaches continue to develop their coaching careers.

### ***Childhood and Adolescence***

As a child, Sarah's parents encouraged and supported her sport participation. They promoted independence and self-confidence by allowing her time for active play outside the family home by herself. In this way, she learned to love physical activity and to be intrinsically motivated to be physically active. She started figure skating at age 11. After watching Sarah at the rink, her father asked if she would like to join the competitive stream.

Sarah started skating competitively at age 13, which is late compared to other figure skaters. Furthermore, her first coach did not properly teach her the basics of skating, so she did not have a strong foundation on which to grow. However, she expected a lot from herself and set her mind to achieving success. From her athletic experiences, she learned much that played a part in her passion for the sport and later in her coaching repertoire. Indeed, while still an athlete, her coach asked if she would like to help the younger athletes, perhaps because the coach could see that Sarah would make a good coach due to her independent, organized, and confident nature. From these early experiences, Sarah knew she wanted to become a coach.

### ***Coaching Experiences***

Sarah started coaching competitive athletes full-time after she completed high school. To make ends meet, she coached at three different clubs, seven days per week. Slowly, as she gained students, she was able to settle at one club. Since she had virtually no previous coaching experiences, she borrowed from her athletic experiences. She taught her athletes a strong foundation before moving onto harder skills because she realized that because her coach had not done this with her, she had suffered as a result. However, this idea to coach athletes in the basics of skating was not only learned through her athletic experiences, it was also quickly confirmed by her coaching

experiences, especially as she worked alongside her first coach mentor. She says: “Bill was very generous in sharing with me how he taught and included me in his coaching; I listened to him while he was coaching and sometimes I taught his kids ... We would quite often go out to lunch and he would share his experiences as a coach. It was a very natural experience with Bill. It just fit ... I think the reason he was a really good coach was because he focused on the basics of skating. Everything was a building block ... I was really influenced by his approach to coaching.”

Bill was an experienced coach and his coaching approach fit with Sarah’s attitude. She learned a great deal from him as she was beginning to coach. However, after five years, Bill left the club for personal reasons and at first she found herself having a hard time coaching without his support. However, when Patrick was hired as program director, she also learned from him. He was very different than Sarah, and this was reflected as her learning evolved. “Patrick and I didn’t always see eye-to-eye ... I learned a lot from him, but it was a totally different side of coaching. It was more how you manage an athlete than how you teach an athlete. I learned based on watching him. At the time, I didn’t appreciate it. It was so different from with Bill that I didn’t always agree with what he was doing. When I look back on it now, I understand it.”

Only in hindsight could Sarah appreciate Patrick’s teachings. At the time, she found his approach rough and detached. However, she also noted that it was important to know how to properly manage high performance athletes to ensure that performance peaked at the proper time. She realized that this was not her strong suit and therefore recognized the value of Patrick’s approach. Both Bill and Patrick helped Sarah shape her style and knowledge of coaching in the early years of her career.

Over time, Sarah completed her NCCP Levels 1, 2, and 3 and continued to take seminars and tasks to help her learn about changes and developments in skating. “I took coaching certification courses for interest’s sake, in order to be a better coach. I do think they provide a lot of information to coaches.”

With the help of her two mentors, Sarah was able to apply the information she learned in her coaching certification courses to her coaching. She learned to plan athletes’ training and to modify the training plans according to each athlete’s needs.

Sarah may not have been the most talented athlete, but she had always worked hard to keep up to other skaters. Therefore, as a young coach, she was tough on her athletes. She remembered one athlete who was quite talented but lacked initiative. This was a new experience for her and she did not, in her earlier years, necessarily cope well with dealing with these types of athletes. “Kristin had talent, but didn’t necessarily have the drive. I wanted her to do what I was asking of her all the time, and she didn’t always do that ... I was tough on her because I saw all this talent and ability in her.”

From her own drive to make skating a central part of her life, Sarah did not, at that point in time, understand when athletes did not feel the same way.

### ***How Sarah’s own family influenced her coaching***

Slowly, Sarah changed her coaching approach. She explains: “When my first daughter was born, my life just changed. Within the first year of her life, I lost my father. So these two monumental things happened within the course of one year. I do think that, in some ways, that was the beginning of my change in coaching. It was sort of a reality check ... My second daughter came along three years later, and it was the same feelings all over again. At that point, I had not changed so much because I was still really into the competitive side of skating; I still really wanted my athletes to succeed in competitions. When my daughters started to skate, I think that’s when I started changing a lot. I’m a parent and all I want for my kids is the best. I want them to make errors and learn from them. I don’t want to protect them so much, but I want them to be happy. And skating is a happy thing for them. I think that that’s when I started looking at some of the other parents and thinking, “My god, why are you treating your child that way? It’s just skating.” *It’s just skating.* All of a sudden, skating started to not be ‘the be all and end all’ to this life.”

From her own children, Sarah realized that skating was a tool for learning important skills in life that would help her own children and other skaters succeed in whatever endeavours they chose to pursue. Slowly, she began to reassess her strict and driven approach and her philosophy about why she was coaching. Two years ago, she stopped working as the main coach for competitive athletes. "In some ways, it's surprising, because I had been the main coach of competitive skaters for so long, that I'm fine with leaving it, but I am. Because I'm doing the part of coaching I like best – the day-to-day working with the kids. I think it goes right back to the part of Bill I liked the most; I think that's who I am, a person who likes to work with the kids. I care about them more than I manage them."

This change was better aligned with her coaching style and philosophy as it shifted from wanting her athletes to win to wanting them to love the sport and learn about themselves by participating in skating. "When I'm on the ice, I'm not just teaching them how to skate, I'm helping them grow as a person ... I'm teaching them things they can bring to their lives when they grow up and get jobs and have families ... I try to think about what they're going to be like when they move on from skating ... I'm looking at it as helping them as much as I possibly can so that they're going to be a better person from being involved in sport."

Athletes do not automatically learn life skills and values from engaging in sport. Coaches must intentionally teach these life skills through demonstration, modelling, and practice. Sarah does so.

### ***A Unique Club System***

Sarah is part of a tight-knit group of coaches at her skating club in quite a unique environment. After her two mentors left the club, she was able to continue to learn throughout her coaching career from the other coaches in the club, many of whom had worked together for 20 years, and all of whom are women. She explains: "I think the fact that we're able to work so well as a group empowers each of us individually. It makes you feel more confident, it makes you feel you're on the right path ... Because to be successful, there has to be a common cause, and for us, our common cause is that we want our skaters to be the best they possibly can be, so we push each other in a positive way."

Each coach at the club does not work alone with their competitive skaters. There is a main coach, a resource coach, a choreographer, and a fitness coach, all of whom work together to help each athlete succeed. For this reason, the coaches have created a form of what is called in the learning literature a 'community of practice' where they have a mutual engagement in helping the athletes succeed, a joint enterprise in coaching at the club, and a shared repertoire of skating skills and drills to help them all communicate clearly (Culver & Trudel, 2008).

Communities of practice are rarely formed spontaneously in coaching, but when they do, they have the ability to help coaches learn tremendous amounts from one another and be supported in their learning. The coaches at this club learned to work with one another because that was how they had been coached as athletes at the club and this naturally evolved when they started coaching. In order to continue developing this network within the coaching staff, each full-time coach, even if they work predominantly with competitive athletes, also works with the CanSkate program to help mentor the younger, part-time coaches and to positively enable all the coaches. In working together, they also develop a trusting relationship. As Sarah noted: "We work so well together, and the parents know they can trust anyone on staff. I think confidence is so much a part of being a coach. We are willing to learn and make changes, which comes from having confidence."

From mentoring young coaches who have been part of the program as athletes, the coaches are able to shape new coaches and continue to learn from one another in doing so.

In our final interview, Sarah said that through our discussions, she realized she had learned, not only in her formal and non-formal coaching education courses, but also in informal learning situations throughout her life and could better recognize the interconnections between the experiences in her life and how she had learned from various situations to become the coach that she is today. "Talking about when I skated, my relationship with my father, my sisters, my kids, my husband, coaching, it just sort of made me realize that it's all me. All these things that are

really separate, they all make up my life. But, instead of thinking “this is my life at the rink, this is my life at home”, I’ve realized that all these parts are integrated. It’s a pretty good life. I’m a happy person with the life I’ve chosen and the life I have. You’ve helped me reflect on that, and that’s been really nice.”

Indeed, Sarah’s story demonstrates the interconnections of various life experiences that influence a coach’s biography and play a large part in lifelong learning.

### **Strategies for Women Coaches**

It is critical to study women coaches’ development to gather empirical data on which to base changes in their conditions, opportunities, or policies, and to give program directors, policy makers, and other women coaches an understanding of potential learning opportunities.

From her story, we see how, over 33 years, Sarah changed her own personal approach to coaching based on how she learned from her various life experiences. Initially, and for many years, her focus as a coach was on helping athletes compete at various levels from novice to international. Then, at one point, apparently initiated by the births of her own children, as well as many learning experiences, she began to shift to wanting to focus her coaching on a much less competitive level, helping athletes improve and also enjoy the sport.

Critical reflection can help coaches develop their own informed approach. Reflective learning requires that coaches take responsibility for their learning and that is not always easy to do. However, when individuals are helped to reflect, they are more capable of deeper learning (Moon, 2004). Indeed, because of our discussions, Sarah became aware of changes over her lifetime, of key learning situations, and of people who helped shape her coaching approach.

Therefore, strategies that can help women coaches develop their coaching by way of understanding their learning can include:

- Leadership courses that explore personal coaching styles and philosophies implemented at all levels of coaching certification courses. If coaches are given the opportunity to work with their athletes while reflecting on their approaches, this can also help them to understand their philosophies in relation to their experiences.
- Purposeful reflective conversations such as peer interviewing and debriefing about coaches’ experiences and personal lives.
- Policies on completing end-of-season progress reports and performance reviews to help coaches think about their seasons and plan for upcoming seasons, thus helping them reflect on and learn from previous experiences.

In Sarah’s story, we note that when a developed social network exists, women coaches can enable each other through positive and critical feedback, celebration of accomplishments, respectful treatment, successful conflict resolution ideas and skills, and mutually beneficial relationships (Mercier & Marshall, 2010). Sarah was fortunate to build such a network within her club, but this may not occur naturally for other women coaches. Therefore, our research supports other authors’ suggestions, which include:

- Linking women coaches with other mentor coaches or providing women-only coaching conferences to help them learn that they are not alone and to gain access to a network of women coaches (Kilty, 2006).
- Attending and presenting at conferences for both men and women that relate to women’s issues in sport policy so that women coaches can advocate for themselves and listen to others (Mercier & Marshall, 2010).

From this story, we also learn the importance of a woman’s informal learning through her family life. Sarah discovered from her children that she can have an impact on athletes beyond the skating rink; she realized that this was ultimately what she wanted. From previous research published in the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* and in the book, *Taking the Lead, Strategies and Solutions from Female Coaches*, we know that coaching

is time-consuming and that coaches have a hard time balancing family life with their coaching career (Demers, 2004; Robertson, 2010). Indeed, other women coaches have also changed their coaching careers after having children (Robertson, 2010). Again, our research supports other authors' suggestions: Sarah and other coaches are capable of making changes to their career while remaining as full-time coaches when sport organizations

- accommodate full-time positions at different levels or provide financial support and job security, such as through maternity leave, so that coaches know they will still have a job if they have a baby (Robertson, 2010).
- build flexibility into coaching positions, such as work sharing, thus creating ways for women coaches to opt back into coaching careers after a break, and retaining experienced, educated coaches.
- create salaried coaching positions to pay coaches well, but also hold them accountable by providing effective performance reviews.

Perhaps a key point in Sarah's story is the need to explore learning from a lifelong perspective. Previous experiences had a profound influence on the way that she perceived situations and on her learning. In a lifelong learning approach, coaches are responsible for shaping their own development in which coaching education programs are only one of many ways they learn to coach. Taking a lifelong learning approach becomes less about forcing educational 'opportunities' on coaches that may not be easily and readily inserted into women coaches' busy schedules, and more about adopting a feminist perspective whereby they become aware of the different ways they learn and take responsibility for that learning (Jarvis, 2006). Women coaches do develop confidence when they know they have skills, knowledge, and approaches that have been built throughout their life experiences and understand that their approach will likely change as they continue to develop as coaches. Perhaps this understanding will take the pressure off women coaches and allow them to take time to reflect on and discover what they need to learn to further grow as coaches.

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