

Conversations with Leading Women Coaches – Part One

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Introduction

According to data obtained from the Coaching Association of Canada, 19% of Canada's Olympic coaches and 31% of our Paralympic coaches at the Paris 2024 Games identify as women. Although these numbers are disappointingly low, the women coached with distinction, and the Journal proudly features eight of them in our next two issues.

In our January issue, we shine the spotlight on Olympic coaches Jocelyn Barrieau and Kim Gaucher and Paralympic coaches Carolyn Murray and Nicole Ban. Watch for the April issue for conversations with Paralympic coaches Carla Nicholls and Michele Sung and Olympic coaches Catharine Pendrel and Laura Brown. Their openness, wisdom, commitment to their athletes, and love for their sports offer essential lessons for all who are committed to growing the ranks of women coaches in Canada.

The International Olympic Committee on Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion reported the statistics for women coaches as 11% in Rio and 13% in both Tokyo and Paris. A hopeful note for women coaches is the significant improvement in women International Technical Officials from 18% in Rio to 32% in Tokyo and 37% in Paris. At the time of writing, statistics on 2024 women coaches are not yet available from the International Paralympic Committee. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor

The Conversations have been edited and condensed.

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.

Jocelyn Barrieau

Assistant Coach, Women's Rugby 7's, 2024 Olympic Games

When did you learn that you would be the assistant coach? I interviewed in March 2023 and started in June 2023.

How did you fit in? Slowly. I believe that when you show up in a new place, always act as a rookie. Watch, listen, learn, and only then do you act.

Describe the momentum going into the Olympic tournament. In pool play at the HSBC SVNS Series Grand Final in Madrid in May 2024, we beat New Zealand's Black Ferns for the first time in years. We had beaten everyone else at least once that year so knew we could play well.

For me, I worked very hard to be self-regulated and appreciate the moment. It was a whirlwind for sure, like Disneyland for adults. I had lived apart from my wife, Hughanna Gaw, for a year in a studio apartment near our training centre in Langford, B.C., and focused on my mental and physical wellbeing, my sleep, my relationship. I tried to peak at the same time as the players. Whatever I'm feeling, the players are feeling ten times more, so I tried to stay as steady as possible. I was super-positive and super happy for all their successes.

The silver medal? Afterwards we quickly got to a positive place. Reviewing the game, it was closer than we thought in the moment. The Black Ferns showed their world-class abilities; I respect that team so much; they get things done in the clutch; that's something we're working on, and we're getting there. Beating France in France in the quarterfinal was huge, and we were happy, calm, and composed.

Finishing second at the Olympics doesn't affect our World Series ranking. That's based on last year and we finished fourth in Madrid. We're in a really good place with great athletes who want to represent Canada and improve all the time. It helps that we were now decentralized, meaning the players choose their own home base and live their own lives when not playing.

Where did you grow up? I was born in New Brunswick and moved to Laval (Quebec) when I was four. I attended Dawson College and then McGill University to get my education degree. I taught French as a second language but never took a tenured job because I always coached and didn't want to feel weighed down by permanency.

As a kid I was loud, loved being around people, being on teams and travelling. I'm ultra-extroverted! My dad, Marcel, is Acadian and a harness trainer, and my mom, Susan, is English-speaking from St. John so I grew up with the duality of French and English.

My Grade Nine phys ed teacher was Sean McDonough, now the rugby coach at Royal Military College, and he started a rugby program at Laval Catholic High School. I played for three years, mostly scrum half, and then played club rugby. Wanting to get better, I went on to provincial rugby.

My coaching began when I was 18, giving back to my high school rugby program at Laval Catholic High School. I coached Concordia University's women's team for six years and Dawson College's women's team for four years. Then, after coaching the Quebec team at the 2022 Canada Games, I decided to make a life out of rugby full time.

I love to see people succeed, grow, do things they don't think possible. I love to watch people lead and I love to be a leader. I love the whole process, and that applies to everything I do.

Institutional barriers and facilitators? I'm fortunate to be in rugby in Canada and Quebec. I've had to make things work for myself, but the male technical leads have always given me opportunities, earned opportunities, and space to be myself as passionate and loud as that sometimes is. I don't think life is worth living if it's not lived passionately, proudly, and with love.

Coaching is my calling; this game just keeps giving back to me. Living apart from Hughanna for a year; I call things like that "choices". We've been married for six years and she's incredibly supportive, and now we're expecting our first baby. To give my best to the team, I couldn't do that from Montreal. I've had to really think about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it.

I predict that a year from now, 50 per cent of World Series coaches will be women, going from two to six out of twelve. Women are being given space by those in positions of power and men who are allies, but it's been earned! When I first coached at Concordia, the RSEQ (Quebec Student Sports Network) coaches were 50-50, and now it is all men, so take nothing for granted.

Women need to say "yes" and believe they can be head coaches. I encourage young women to do two things: start investing in tax-free saving accounts and get coaching certifications. Change starts with provincial sport associations. With the Canada Games a fixture of the sport calendar and having 7's a participating sport, it's a great opportunity to experience what is essentially a mini-Olympic Games event.

My path involved taking the opportunity to lead at the Canada Games and then move to the national level. If someone had suggested that I interview for the head coach job without having been an assistant coach, I don't know if I would have done it. And if I hadn't been invited to come on a few tours as a guest coach, I might not have been confident enough to apply to be assistant coach.

What is World Rugby doing right? A lot. They have Women in Coaching specialized streams and funding opportunities for women to accompany teams.

I got support from everywhere to live this dream. Concordia agreeing I could miss games to have an overseas experience. Hughanna supporting me. Rugby Canada supporting me as a developing coach. Being involved in the Next Gen program, Rugby Québec, my school ... so much support.

And now you're the head coach. Yes, and I never saw it coming. The assistant coach job was created leading up to Paris to give the team more support. After, I was planning to move back to Montreal, start a family, and I didn't think the head job would be open much less that I would get it. And now here we are!

I am following a house-building blueprint for the next four years. Year One is getting our foundations right, on and off the field, making sure we're solid and supporting each other. Year Two is about framing as we start to focus on fine-tuning and making sure we are world leaders and innovators. Year Three is finishing, and Year Four is making our house a home, ensuring that athletes want to be involved as we perform leading up to and in L.A.

Thanks for telling our stories. If they don't get told, potential coaches don't think they can have this life.

Carolyn Murray

Head Coach, Para Triathlon, 2024 Paralympic Games

Tell me about Paris. Our planning started two years out and included competing at the test event in 2023, which ensured that we understood the course, racing on cobblestones, handling the water current, becoming familiar with the environment, and being prepared for the challenges around water quality, schedule changes, and transport.

For staging, we needed an accessible location not too far from Paris with roads that were nearby, safe to ride, and not hilly – because the Paris course wasn't hilly – hard-packed trails, an open water lake for swimming, a pool and a gym, and an elevator for the wheelchair athletes.

Stefan Daniel, standing classification (PTS5), who was born with club hands, was completely prepared physically and mentally. He was leading going into the last lap of the bike segment when he decided to pass a tandem but didn't have space to make the turn and crashed into a barricade. He got up and finished 10th (in a field of ten). There's a lot to learn from an athlete who gets up after a crash and finishes.

In her first Paralympic Games, Leanne Taylor, PTWC (wheelchair user), was fourth when the athlete in front of her crashed and she absolutely made the most of her opportunity to win the bronze medal.

Our third athlete, Kamyille Frenette, who finished fourth in PTS5, put so much time and energy into preparing. It didn't come together as she had hoped, but she has lots to be proud of.

How did you handle the stress? As a coach you're investing your energy, time, thought processes, and you want the best for your athletes. What helped me stay calm and composed was debriefing with Olympic coach Marc-Antoine Christin, understanding his challenges and how he managed them. I de-stressed by running and taking time for myself each day. Getting enough sleep, eating well helped me to deliver when I needed to.

Our season ended in October at the World Triathlon Para Championships. Stefan won his sixth world title, a nice way to close the season after his challenges in Paris. Leanne was fourth, a good result given the long season and limited time to be fully prepared.

Describe your personal journey. I was nine or ten when I started running and my Olympic dream began. I was a quiet, shy kid and running was where I could express myself. While at Simon Fraser University (SFU), where I earned a kinesiology degree, I realized that my Olympic dream through running wasn't in the cards. Being introduced to triathlon rekindled that dream. I competed at the 2008 Olympic Games, finishing 29th as the top Canadian. I'll treasure that forever.

I ran the 800-metres and 1500-metres and looked up to my SFU coach, Brit Townsend, who competed at the 1984 Olympics. I blame her for making it look easy to have kids and coach at the same time! I'm equally passionate about both; it's not easy, but it's possible. I stopped racing because I had enough of everything revolving around me, and I wanted to have a family. My daughter Cadence was born in 2011 and my son Roland in 2013. I brought my daughter into my coaching environment every day. My husband, Dean, and my mom, Laurie, were so supportive, including making it possible for me to travel.

In 2008, I joined Triathlon Canada as a development coach in Victoria. In 2012, I was named head coach of the National Performance Centre Victoria and, two years later became head Para coach. Coaching allows me to share my passion for sport. I love being part of someone's journey as they try to achieve the highest level they can.

Were you supported? Sometimes I had administrative support and sometimes not, which was challenging. I had to figure out how to advocate for myself, ask questions, and not make any assumptions. Not everyone sees children and high performance as a fit, which is unfortunate because the result is women coaches walking away.

I need a team around me that I can trust, the personal team at home and the professional team I work with; you can't do this alone. I need the administration to provide enough autonomy that I can use my experience and instincts to lead the environment and not be micromanaged. There needs to be open discussions about the role so that it's a partnership and everyone is clear about the expectations and priorities.

Advice for aspiring young women coaches? Please come; we need you! Coaching can be such a rewarding career, but I won't sugarcoat the challenges, particularly if you want to have a family and be a high performance coach. Advocate for yourself. State your needs. Ask for help. Say "yes" to opportunities because the more you do, the more you are in the mix. We don't have enough supports to fully support our coaches and that's because we're not asking for what we need.

How can an NSO increase the number of women coaches? Ask questions. Ask what the barriers are. One of the biggest is managing travel, especially when children are young. One time I assumed it was okay to bring mine to a space when it wasn't. I hadn't asked for help, and no one asked me what I needed. Don't shy away from that conversation. Otherwise, you won't feel welcome; I experienced that early on. I had moments of wondering if it was worth it but decided to advocate for myself. Despite challenges related to gender, I am not a victim. I focus on all the opportunities I've had access to, such as mentorship programs and Own the Podium's Pursuit program, and that outweighs the challenges.

Your future? Every day is different as I learn and grow. It's being a leader who makes my children proud. I'm competitive and I love to win and so being in high performance is where I see myself. As I said earlier, when opportunities come, I will say "yes".

Author's Note: Carolyn joined Own the Podium as summer sport high performance advisor on January 6th, 2025.

Nicole Ban

Head Coach, Canada's Women's Sitting Volleyball Team, 2024 Paralympic Games

Your team came to Paris with an impressive record. Yes, but our beginnings were humble; we barely had enough athletes for a program. I became assistant coach in 2014 and head coach in 2015. Our first world ranking was 16th in 2018. We built our staff by involving people I had experience with and trusted, and our team started to flourish.

Our bronze medal at the 2015 Parapan American Games qualified us for the 2016 Rio Paralympics, we placed fourth in Tokyo 2020, and were silver medallists at both the 2022 world championships and the 2023 World Cup. We started planning for Paris almost immediately after we lost the bronze medal game in Tokyo. We were devastated to lose; we let the pressure get the best of us.

We took time off, reflected, and then got right back to it. We planned our calendar to compete at the top events against the top teams. We stayed focused on our game plan, ensuring that the metrics we needed to meet and our vision were clear to each athlete. Event by event we evaluated and then returned to training camps to work on the gaps.

Because of COVID-19, some top teams, including China, skipped events in the lead-up to Paris, whereas we competed at everything, so we ended up having the world number one ranking. Our pool was Slovenia, Rwanda, and Brazil. In the round robin, we beat Slovenia, lost to Brazil, and beat Rwanda. We played China in the semi-final and lost.

The US beat China for the gold medal, and we faced Brazil for bronze. Based on excellent information from our lead statistician Lionel Bonnaure and performance analyst Jason Haldane, we provided our team with a detailed game plan. We have two of the best setters in the world, Jennifer Oakes and Sarah Melenka, and star server Heidi Peters, who served eight aces in the first set! In defeating Brazil, all the stars aligned. We put everything together to perform to the best of our ability, getting into a state where nothing could stop us. It was the best match I've ever coached.

You sound excitable. Oh, you should see me. I like to say I am passionate, involved, but I've learned to prioritize my health in order to manage emotions. In Paris, I had never been so calm. I was sleeping six to eight hours every night and worked out every day with our staff. I had a single room, which is key for a head coach's health, and needs to be prioritized.

Let's talk about your pathway. My father, Ted, from St. John's, Newfoundland, and my mother, Patricia, from Vancouver, worked in the oil industry so I grew up in Fort McMurray, Alberta. My brother, Christopher, is two years younger and, watching his hockey games, I wanted to play, too, and started when I was around eleven. Growing up in the north, we were always together outside playing every sport you can imagine.

I was always very competitive; I'm a perfectionist, very critical of myself. I found volleyball in Grade Nine and was goofy-footed, but I loved it. I never thought of coaching as a career because I didn't have a role model.

I played at MacEwan College (now MacEwan University) for two years and then at Brandon University for three years and in Norway for a year. Because of a torn ACL, I became an assistant coach at MacEwan, but it wasn't challenging enough so in 2015 I decided to get my Master of Coaching degree at the University of Alberta. I loved working with Laurie Eisler, head coach of Pandas Volleyball at the time. I learned that it's okay to be strong, passionate, opinionated.

How do you manage the challenges of coaching? It's about finding a work/life balance for Nicole the human who needs to work out, sleep, take breaks and vacations, and Nicole the coach, who needs to present the best version of herself for the athletes to succeed. High performance coaches face constant burnout, teetering on the edge, and so I'm trying to find balance as we enter the quad for L.A.

I'm not trying to be the best woman coach in the world; I want to be the best coach period. I want to show everybody that no matter what, I can do my job despite the barriers I face as a woman coach.

There's stigma around women in leadership positions, barriers to break through. It's very difficult if you want to have a family because you're constantly on the road. But once you get there, the advantages you bring include planning and multitasking abilities, relatability, and, if you're coaching women, shared lived experience. At matches, officials assume that a male support staffer is the coach – all the time! To address that, my approach is to be very direct, which shows my athletes that they, too, can stick up for themselves. We as staff empower our athletes to be leaders in their own lives, to have a voice and advocate for themselves and for Paralympic sport, every day, all the time.

How do you and your athletes stay connected? Starting in January, we will see each other monthly. We have a buddy system and between each training camp, they check in with each other and group chat on WhatsApp. Throughout the summer months, we spend tons of time together and do a daily gratitude circle, sharing what we're grateful for. I'm a relationship-based coach so it's creating one-on-one relationships that build connections.

The Future? The plan is to hire an assistant coach for me to mentor through this quad. As a strong, passionate coach, I want to be a mentor for young coaches. I planned to leave after Paris, but now it could be after L.A. I've worked with coaches who stayed too long, and I never want to be that person. I love sitting volleyball and Para sports, but at this point, I plan to move on as head coach. Given my passion for travel, I would like to move outside Canada, but not far from the coaching realm.

Kimberley Gaucher

Head Coach, 3x3 Basketball, 2024 Olympic Games

What was your pathway to becoming head coach? Being in the right place at the right time!

The 3x3 program was started in 2019 by Katherine Plouffe, Michelle Plouffe, and Paige Crozon with the goal of qualifying for the Olympics. Despite being self-funded, they quickly became one of the best teams in the world. When Canada Basketball got involved, the four got Own the Podium funding and decided to use it for a coach. They wanted one who supported what they were doing. I did, and so I was hired. After I retired from playing in 2022, I took time to reflect on my future and, during COVID-19, completed NCCP Train to Compete, and this opportunity was the perfect way to see if coaching was what I wanted. I absolutely loved it!

Describe your strategy for Paris. An essential aspect of being a coach is building trust with your athletes and so building super-strong relationships was my priority.

My strategy focused on helping the players on the court. Because a 3x3 coach can't be involved during play – it's like tennis – it's the prep work, the practices, the feedback, video, demonstrating, pre- and post-game discussions.

Did the Olympic tournament disappoint? You expect that everything is going to go perfectly but things happen. First, Michelle, the world number one player, tore her ACL at the final event of 2023, and then Kacie Bosch, who joined the team in 2021, got hurt. We had planned to spend January, February, March, and April playing international friendlies leading to the Olympic qualifier. Instead, it shifted to me working with Paige and Kacie individually.

Talking about the tournament is tough because we believe we should have won a medal. Heading into the tournament, it was, what colour are we going to have around our necks? But in 3x3's, anything can happen. We shot uncharacteristically poorly and didn't adjust to officiating nuances. We lost in the semis to Germany by one on a last-second shot!

Stress? Absolutely I was stressed, more so at the qualifiers because only eight teams go to the Olympics. As a player, I loved the feeling of butterflies and stress, which dissipates when you're on the court and running and playing; as a coach, you don't have any outlet. You just sit there and watch!

Looking ahead is cool because 3x3 has absolutely exploded and it's so great for kids. The 10-minute games are consumer-friendly, and because there's no coaching during a game, kids have to figure out what's going on, solve problems, and communicate. What my players wanted was to grow the game in Canada and so many people loved it, which means that 3x3 is here to stay. We're going for four medals in Los Angeles 2028!

Playing at the Tokyo Games with your daughter, Sophie, and your husband, Ben, present, made headlines around the world.¹ I was passionate about breastfeeding her and playing, and the way the story took off was insanely overwhelming. Now I'm part of MOMentum, a new initiative dedicated to supporting high performance women athletes with their family planning needs. Backed by the OLY Canada Legacy Grant, we offered eight \$1,000 grants for Paris Olympians and Paralympians and hope to grow it.

Any barriers as a coach? Opportunity is the biggest barrier. You can coach for free, but you can't make a living without doing other things on the side; that's what I'm struggling with the most.

I hope that the WNBA coming to Toronto in 2026 will help women's basketball, but one team is not enough. I spent the last seven years of my playing career in France, and I mentored, moulded, and shaped so many young French players, and that's what female Canadian athletes don't have.

Describe your personal journey. I was born in 1984 in Surrey, B.C., and grew up in Mission, B.C. I began playing with the senior women's national team in 2001 and competed at the Olympic Games in London, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo, where I was team captain. I played my college basketball at the University of Utah and was the first woman to have my jersey retired.

¹ [*Gaucher: Daughter Sophie has 'most amazing group of powerful aunts' | CBC Sports](#)

I graduated in 2006 with a Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in communications. I was a first-round selection in the 2006 WNBA Draft, going to the Sacramento Monarchs as the 13th pick. I played three seasons and became the first Canadian to appear in a WNBA Finals. I played professionally in Belgium, Spain, Hungary, and France.

As for mentors, I was very lucky to be coached by Allison McNeill at the 2012 Olympic Games, and Lisa Thomaidis at Tokyo. I've reached out to them and they are very supportive of my coaching journey.

How can Canada Basketball increase the number of women coaches? So many former teammates gave a lot to the program, learned so much, played overseas forever, came back, and what are their opportunities? Well, you can volunteer! Players don't see pathways for coaching here; none of my teammates who are coaching are here. They're in Europe, the US ... I suggest bringing more national team athletes on staff, but funding is a problem in terms of paying people to coach. It boils down to there not being a lot of places to coach in Canada. What jobs there are, are highly coveted.

What's working internationally? France has the EuroLeague, second and third division professional leagues, and youth academies so there's many avenues to coach, unlike in Canada.

How do you manage family life and coaching? Without Ben, it's impossible. Coaching requires an incredible amount of travel, and I don't want to miss out on Sophie's growing up, but Ben said we'd figure it out. He's also a basketball coach, an American, and while waiting for his Canadian papers, he could help me. The Paris Games provided a nursery and Pampers jumped on as a sponsor and young kids were coming in and out of the nursery all day long. It was so easy to set up, and so long overdue.

The future: Absolutely coaching is a passion. I feel I have a lot to give back. I've been exposed to so many different coaches from all over the world and some were outstanding. For those who weren't, I learned what not to do! So -I'm open to opportunities.

Conclusion

In each interview, strikingly similar advice emerged that, if implemented, could lead to healthy, productive, and rewarding environments and situations for Canada's women coaches:

- Accept and learn from every opportunity. "The more you do, the more you are in the mix."
- Develop self-confidence and strong, trusting interpersonal relationships professionally and personally
- Encourage relevant NSOs to provide support through policies, practices, and actions that address systemic barriers.

- Advocate for yourself. State your needs. Ask for help.
- Strive for a work/life balance.
- Advocate for opportunities, such as leagues, for women athletes which will, in turn lead to more coaching opportunities.

About the Author

Sheila Robertson

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor of and a contributing author to The Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching. Her most recent book is *Stories of Resilience and Courage: Women Coaches Form a Global Community*.