Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching

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Coaching Association of Canada
Association canadienne des entraîneurs

# Coaching Mothers in Canadian Sport: Cultural Realities and Paths Forward

January 2026, Vol. 26, No. 1
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Online


## Introduction

Olympian, academic, and author Jill Moffatt notes that over many years much has been written about the challenges facing women who aspire to pursue a career as a coach. Reviewing 25 years of insightful, provocative, and timely *Journal* articles, I am struck by how often we chronicled such women, including in my own early articles: *In Their Own Voices: Women Coaches Raising a Family*; *Tales of Transition: From Star Athlete to Career Coach*; and *Staying The Course: Candid Observations of Women Coaches On The Trials And Tribulations Of Their Profession*.

In *Why Female Athletes Decide to Become Coaches — or Not*, Dr. Guylaine Demers called for "specific, practical measures. And one year later, Dr. Penny Werthner's investigation reinforced why women should and must be at the forefront of high-performance coaching: *Making the Case Coaching as a Viable Career Path for Women*.

As recently as the October 2025 issue of the *Journal*, Séverine Tamborero wrote a compelling article entitled *Assessing the Current State of Women Coaches in High-Performance Sport*. Her conclusion: "… we must continue to challenge sport's leadership culture, generate more and better positions for women coaches at the high-performance level, and overall create a healthy environment for women to succeed."

And so the struggle continues. Adding an important new dimension to the discussion, Jill examines the particular situation of coaching mothers. Building on the *Journal's* body of literature, she paints a disturbing picture of coaching mothers continuing to be constrained by "powerful assumptions" about 'good motherhood.' Her solution: … "small, actionable steps that can move culture forward without waiting for budgets, policies, or systems to be rebuilt."

Canadian sport leaders: take heed! It is long past time to stop wasting this valuable resource. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor.

# Coaching Mothers in Canadian Sport: Cultural Realities and Paths Forward

As a two-time Olympic rower, I spent years in environments where women coaches were uncommon and coaches who were mothers were rare. Only after retiring following the Paris 2024 Olympic Games did I fully recognize how deeply gendered high-performance sport remains. Long, inflexible hours, extensive travel, and expectations of total availability have been documented for decades as barriers for women coaches, and that endurance is precisely the problem.

This article builds on that documentation by focusing specifically on coaching mothers, whose experiences expose how familiar structural barriers intersect with powerful assumptions about "good motherhood" and what high-performance coaching is supposed to look like. While these norms affect all caregivers, they continue to constrain coaching mothers most acutely, whose commitment is routinely judged through gendered expectations of care and availability.

Drawing on interviews with former and current national team athletes who transitioned into coaching, Paige Crozon OLY and Lindsay Jennerich OLY, from basketball and rowing respectively, alongside insight from scholar-coach Dr. Alix Krahn, I explore what it means to build a coaching career as a woman while raising children. Their experiences help explain why progress has stalled and what must change for coaching to become a viable and sustainable pathway for parents in Canadian sport.

By integrating these lived experiences with emerging Canadian research, I argue that supporting coaching mothers requires more than new programs or isolated policy changes. It calls for a cultural shift within sport, one that reimagines commitment and values care, and positions parenthood as a normal part of the coaching landscape. Such change is essential not only for women, but for anyone who hopes to build a sustainable coaching career alongside family life.

## Motherhood and Coaching: Cultural Expectations

Motherhood carries powerful expectations in society. Feminist scholars have long shown how mothers are evaluated through ideals of "good motherhood", which emphasize constant availability, emotional presence, and prioritizing children above all else. Fathers' commitments to paid work, by contrast, are normalized rather than questioned.

High-performance sport brings its own expectations. In my experience, coaches were often seen as people who were available around the clock, willing to travel for long stretches, and able to put the needs of the Olympic or Paralympic dream ahead of everything else. Scholars have described this as a 'performance narrative,' where success requires singular focus, total dedication, and an uninterrupted commitment to performance. While dominant in elite sport, this narrative sidelines those seeking balance and is linked to burnout, harmful practices, and abuse.

Coaching mothers must navigate these two powerful expectations at the same time: the deeply embedded belief that mothers should sacrifice everything for their children, and the expectation that coaches should sacrifice everything for sport. Canadian research illustrates the effects:

mothers describe juggling childcare during training seasons, navigating guilt around travel, and feeling pressure to continually 'prove' their commitment in ways peers without children do not. Many work within organizations that lack flexible scheduling, childcare support, or family-inclusive policies. While all parents navigate care, mothers face the added burden of being judged against ideals of "good motherhood."

It is also important to recognize that motherhood intersects with many identities. Single mothers, mothers with a disability, queer families, and parents affected by geographic, financial, or cultural barriers - all experience additional pressures. Access to childcare, financial stability, community networks, and employer flexibility shape who can coach and who is excluded. An intersectional approach helps us understand that motherhood in coaching is not one universal experience.

## Coaching Mothers in Practice: What Their Experiences Tell Us

The experiences of Paige Crozon OLY and Lindsay Jennerich OLY illustrate the everyday realities coaching mothers face within high-performance sport. While their sports, contexts, and career paths differ, their stories converge on a central truth: coaching structures and cultures in high-performance sport were not built with mothers in mind. Their experiences also show where support can emerge, and what it looks like when leaders create environments that make coaching possible rather than impossible.

Paige Crozon OLY, who competed for Canada in 3x3 basketball at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, began coaching shortly after the birth of her daughter, Poppy, in 2018. At the time, returning to play or coach after having a child was rare in basketball. This contrasted sharply with sports such as hockey, where motherhood has been normalized for decades. When Paige explored continuing her professional playing career overseas, several clubs told her that signing a mother was "not possible" or "too administratively difficult," even though her male counterparts routinely relocated abroad with their families.

"I was furious," she said. "I watched all my male counterparts take their entire families over to their teams. But I heard from at least three clubs that it wasn't possible with a child." These experiences highlighted gender discrimination embedded in hiring and selection practices.

Paige's early steps into coaching revealed similar barriers. While completing the Coaching Association of Canada's (CAC) NCCP certification and Train to Compete coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic, Paige found the coaching pathway to be dominated by men. Despite her international playing background, she was repeatedly told she needed "more coaching experience" before she could be considered for a university role. She also pointed to geographic inequities: coaches in Ontario or British Columbia often benefit from proximity to national centres and decision makers. "There is not a clear process," she said. "Sometimes it just feels like people hire within the group they already know."

Despite these challenges, Paige's story shows how individual leadership can make coaching feasible, even in systems not designed for mothers. At the University of Lethbridge, head coach Dave Waknuk valued her playing background, welcomed the perspective she brought as a high-performance athlete, and encouraged Poppy's presence in the gym. "Poppy would lighten the

mood," Paige recalled. "It totally changed the energy. It provided perspective of the bigger picture." Athletes embraced Poppy at practices, and the environment became one where motherhood was not seen as unprofessional but as part of the coaching culture.

However, these supports depended entirely on individual goodwill. There were no childcare resources, limited travel support, and no institutional policies allowing children in training environments. During the pandemic, when daycares were closed, a colleague told her that bringing her child to practice looked "unprofessional." Paige described this as a reflection of cultural expectations placed on mothers in coaching.

A moment of mentorship was transformative for Paige. A mentor in the Living Skies Indigenous Basketball League (which Paige founded) told her: "In Indigenous culture, having a child is not a weakness. It is a strength. Please stop apologizing for being a mom." For Paige, this reframing positioned motherhood as an asset rather than a liability and changed how she viewed her place in coaching.

Lindsay Jennerich OLY, a 2016 Olympic silver medallist in rowing, also found herself navigating the realities of coaching through the lens of parenting. Her experience differed from Paige's because she coached after retiring from elite sport. At her alma mater, the University of Victoria, she was strongly supported. "I was more or less headhunted," she said. She had mentorship, a transition plan, and institutional trust.

Even with these advantages, Lindsay ultimately stepped away from coaching because rowing's demands were incompatible with the life she wanted for herself and her children. "Rowing scheduling is not family-friendly," she said. "You are coordinating childcare at 5:00 a.m. It just does not happen." She also highlighted the environmental realities of rowing. Bringing a toddler to a dark, cold, early-morning session could feel unsafe for some parents. She contrasted this with sports that operate in indoor environments, where parents can safely bring children to the venue. These examples show that sport-specificity matters when discussing childcare and sporting environments.

Lindsay also spoke candidly about how sport culture shapes what athletes expect from coaches. Earlier in her career as an athlete, she worked with a coach who brought her infant to training camps and even to an international competition. At the time, Lindsay admits she perceived it as unprofessional. "I was judging it," she said. "I was fixated on the fact that she was not all in on me." Years later, as a mother, she sees it differently. "Looking back now, I think she did an incredible job. It shows you how insidious the expectations are. We logically know it should be different, but we still feel rooted in old ideas of what coaches are supposed to be." This shift reveals how cultural norms quietly police mothers out of coaching roles.

As Lindsay considered coaching more seriously, she felt she could not meet the expectations she once placed on her own coaches. "I did not feel like I could be as all in as I expected my coaches to be. It made me feel like a hypocrite." Combined with frequent travel and strict scheduling, she realized coaching "did not fit the lifestyle I wanted" and would not be viable unless the system changed. Even with strong mentorship, deeply rooted norms around availability, intensity, and singular devotion made coaching untenable.

Together, Paige and Lindsay's experiences show a clear pattern. The structural barriers are significant: inflexible scheduling, lack of childcare, travel demands, and policies that bar children from training environments. The cultural expectations are equally influential. Coaches, particularly mothers, are judged against masculine norms of professionalism that rely on uninterrupted availability and total immersion. The supports that make coaching possible, such as inclusive leaders, mentors who reframe motherhood as a strength, or athletes who welcome a child in the gym, often depend on individuals instead of system-level commitments.

These issues also affect fathers. As Lindsay noted, "Men have children, too. This harms them as well." When fathers feel unable to adjust schedules or bring their children to practice, inequity is reproduced for everyone. A coaching system that supports mothers is one that supports all caregivers.

## Current Strategies and Why They Are Not Enough

These individual accounts reflect what Canadian research documents more broadly. A recent study of coaching mothers attending the Canada Summer Games described the women-in-coaching policies as well-intentioned but insufficient. While mentorship and development programs were valued, they did not change the culture that mothers had to navigate in their daily coaching work. One theme captured this tension starkly, with development programs described as "band-aids for a shitty culture" where initiatives did little to address organization attitudes toward parents.

Dr. Alix Krahn, a postdoctoral researcher at York University and varsity volleyball coach at the University of Toronto, emphasized a similar concern. Despite the number of women-in-coaching initiatives across Canada, participation rates remain low as programs focus on individual development while leaving the structure of coaching work unchanged. Her research shows that coaches in university and high-performance sport face long, inflexible, and often unpredictable hours. These roles blur boundaries between work and personal life, creating what she describes as "boundaryless work." This includes not only running practices and travelling but also administration, recruitment, community engagement, athlete support, and ongoing availability outside traditional working hours.

This workload makes coaching precarious and extremely difficult to combine with caregiving. Dr. Krahn's research suggests that unless sport organizations address these structural realities (for example, workload, scheduling, staffing, and expectations of constant availability), participation by coaching mothers will continue to stagnate, and many will leave the profession altogether. This highlights a central point: policy additions and mentorship programs alone cannot solve a structural and cultural problem. Sustained change requires rethinking how coaching work is organized, valued, and supported across the Canadian sport system.

There is also an unavoidable financial reality that shapes what is possible for coaching mothers in Canada. National Sport Organizations (NSOs) have not received an increase to core federal funding since 2005, despite major expansions in responsibilities, inflation, and standards of performance. While the CAC recommends childcare services, travel support, and family

accommodations, most NSOs lack the resources to implement them. Even when evidence-based solutions exist, the financial landscape prevents action.

## Recommendations

Decades of research have already mapped the solutions to this national sporting issue, making it difficult to propose anything genuinely new. Family-friendly policies such as childcare at multiday tournaments, co-coaching models, and structures that support work-family balance are well established, yet remain out of reach for most NSOs. While initiatives like the Future of Sport in Canada Commission may enable this structural change over time, the more immediate question is what cultural shifts can begin now. Drawing on my own experience, I focus on small, actionable steps that can move culture forward without waiting for budgets, policies, or systems to be rebuilt.

After the 2021 Olympic Games, as our national rowing team confronted the aftermath of a toxic environment and a system ill-equipped to address abuse, we underwent extensive Safe Sport training. These in-person workshops, held both collectively and separately for staff and athletes, focused on challenging normalized behaviours and building healthier environments. Though uncomfortable, they demonstrated that intentional cultural education can shift entrenched norms.

A similar approach is needed to unsettle long-standing assumptions about coaching, high-performance sport, and parenting, as supporting coaches who are parents requires education, unlearning, and a willingness to dismantle what has long been treated as “normal.”

1. **Train leaders and coaches to support parents.**

Supporting coaching parents challenges the long-standing expectation of boundaryless coaching. Leaders need training that explicitly addresses caregiving, scheduling flexibility, human-first approaches, and family-inclusive environments.

2. **Engage athletes in cultural shifts.**

As Lindsay noted, athletes absorb the same ‘performance narrative’ and culture that shapes coaches. If athletes expect their coaches to be endlessly available, that expectation disproportionately harms parents, particularly mothers. As athletes advocate for a human-first approach to sport, this must extend to coaches and staff as well.

**3. Evaluate organizational environments with parents in mind.**

In many cases, those who need support are the ones most burdened with advocating for it. Staff and leaders across a NSO can help ease this load by actively assessing whether current practices unintentionally exclude parents and caregivers.

A useful starting point is for staff at all levels to ask:

- Do our training schedules, meeting times, and travel expectations make coaching possible for parents?
- Are we reinforcing norms that push caregivers out, even unintentionally?
- Is the presence of children, flexible scheduling, or childcare support viewed as professionalism or as a liability?

These questions help shift responsibility away from individuals and toward the organization, where meaningful and sustainable change must occur.

## Conclusion

Supporting coaching mothers requires systemic investment and structural reform. But cultural change, grounded in education, shared responsibility, and a reimagining of care, can begin now. Until funding structures evolve, these cultural shifts are essential for ensuring that the next generation of coaches can pursue meaningful careers without having to choose between family life and high-performance sport.

## About the Author

**Jill Moffatt OLY**

Jill Moffatt OLY is a two-time Olympic rower, PhD student at Laurentian University, and freelance journalist. Her doctoral research examines feminist sport media and elite athlete motherhood, with a focus on how stories about women in sport both reflect and shape broader socio-cultural norms. She is also a co-founder of MOMentum, a non-profit led by Canadian Olympians and Paralympians that supports athlete motherhood and reproductive agency in high performance sport.