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Coaching and Motherhood: Staying in the Profession

That the coaching profession is demanding is a hard fact of life. The strains and stresses are well documented – odd hours, working weekends, frequent travel, lengthy away-from-home training camps, parental interference, under-funded programs, demanding boards. The list goes on. Balancing these demands are the rewards – guiding athletes to develop physical and social skills, building their self-esteem and positive self-images, enabling them to achieve and even exceed their potential, making a positive difference in their lives.

When asked what drives them, most coaches cite passion for their profession as a powerful motivator. It's an emotion that can conflict, often irreconcilably, with the equally passion-inspiring state of motherhood. This conflict drives many women coaches from the profession, some forever and others for extended periods.

Does it need to be so black and white? No. Committed coaches are finding ways to combine career and motherhood without stepping away from coaching for prolonged periods. It isn't easy, but it is becoming more doable. The times, as Dylan says, are a-changin', and none too soon. – Sheila Robertson

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APRIL 2007 FEATURE

Coaching and Motherhood: Staying in the Profession

[by Sheila Robertson](#)

In a matter-of-fact tone, **Sheilagh Croxon** talks about her decision of five years ago to not renew her contract as head coach of Canada's synchronized swimming team. Fresh from coaching her athletes to the team bronze medal at the 2000 Olympic Games and two world championship medals in 2001, she asked Synchro Canada for a seven-month maternity leave when she became pregnant with her third child.

The organization agreed, but when Croxon requested some compensation, she was turned down flat. After a period of reflection, she decided to move in new directions. "I felt I had no choice. My position was based on a yearly contract and provided no benefits. Nor was I eligible for unemployment insurance. **Marley** was born on February 6, 2002, one week after I stepped off the pool deck. I would have preferred to have stopped coaching earlier, but I wasn't going to get paid."



Sheilagh Croxon and her family

Croxon, whose other children are 12-year-old **Nicolas** and nine-year-old **Natalie**, had stated her case in writing to the Synchro Canada board. She felt herself to be in a strong position. The Olympic medal (one of Canada's 14 won at the Sydney Games) and the world championship medals indicated a national team on the upswing after several down years. Implicit in her argument was her belief that refusing her leave with compensation would send a negative message to the organization's coaches, all of whom were women. "I wasn't looking for anything huge, just some sign of good faith, something to show that they valued me, that they understood, but they said no." No reason was given other than that the board would stick to her contract as written. End of discussion.

Although Croxon fulfilled the balance of her contract after taking the seven months off without pay, her decision to move on was firm. "I would have stayed had the environment been more supportive. Since it wasn't, I realized I had to look out for myself and get into a better working arrangement, one that allowed some family consideration. It was painful, a real slap in the face, almost humiliating. I thought they would understand, and when they didn't, I took it as a sign that it was time to move on."

Croxon had fared better with her first two pregnancies, both of which occurred when she was a club consultant, even though she only took eight weeks off with each child. "I made the case for some support, and my club board paid someone else to coach for me and paid my salary as well. It may have been because a board of parents knows you better than a national board does. Maybe my personal interaction with that board made my situation more human for them."

Croxon also has a supportive husband, **Jean Constantin**, who took paternity leave for each child. When Nicolas was born, Constantin took a leave-of-absence so that the family could relocate to Edmonton for nine months when the team was centralized there before the 1996 Olympic Games. "The move was possible because Jean said he would come, and that shows what an open-minded man he is," says Croxon. "Some people are not that supportive, because it goes against the norm."

Once her decision was made, Croxon put her disappointment behind her and moved on to work that not only is good for her but is improving conditions for other women coaches. She is the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC)'s consultant responsible for its Women in Coaching Program, a national campaign to increase the number of coaching opportunities for women at all levels of sport. In demand as an international consultant, Croxon has worked with Olympic and national teams from around the world. Within Canada, she is a regular presenter of clinics, camps, and consultations and is a mentor to several National Coaching Certification Program Level 4 candidates. In 2005, she established the Toronto-based International Centre of Excellence, where athletes and coaches flock to work with her. She served on the executive of the Canadian Professional Coaches Association (now Coaches of Canada) and, these days, is the chair of the Coaches Association of Ontario.

She is heartened by the fact that **Biz Price**, her immediate successor, was made a Synchro Canada employee, and although Price's was also a one-year contract, she got benefits equivalent to those of the national office staff. Better still, incumbent **Isabelle Taillon**'s contract is long term. Says Croxon, "I felt that by leaving, I could do some good for the coaches who followed. My decision woke up a few people and made a difference, because now the coaches have acceptable working conditions. I've always been a groundbreaker. I've had to fight for everything in my coaching career, but there is some satisfaction in knowing that you have made a difference for those who follow."

These days, one-year coaching contracts are generally frowned upon because they do not build stability or show long-term vision. Nor do they acknowledge that, in sport, it takes more than one year to produce success. “It is people like me, people who come up short, who spark change for the next generation. That’s often the way it is,” says Croxon.

Croxon is committed to encouraging sport organizations to understand the importance of creating conditions that work for the woman coach. “They need to realize that good people are everything, and that intellectual capital is not easily replaced. Key to that is identifying champions for women within Canada’s sport system – men and women who really understand what being a mother is all about and what the demands are on the coach.”

The next generation is already breaking into the upper levels of coaching. Four of the brightest lights are also young mothers, and their stories illustrate the complexities and challenges of combining coaching and motherhood to the detriment of neither.

Stand your ground



Natascha Wesch and her daughter Machaela at the age of nine months.

Natascha Wesch is an upwardly mobile rugby coach. She has coached Rugby Canada’s U-19 women’s team and the Ontario U-17, U-19, and U-23 teams, and she is the head coach of the women’s varsity team at the University of Western Ontario, where she is working on a doctorate in sport psychology. She spent five years as the Ontario Rugby Union’s director of women’s rugby. In December 2006, she became head coach of the National Women’s Sevens Team. And oh, yes, on December 5, 2005, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter named **Machaela**.

Wesch greeted the news of her pregnancy with delight and, like so many first-time mothers, assumed that her life wouldn’t change. “To be honest, and I think it’s the same for everybody, I had no idea what to expect and I

didn’t believe it when people told me I was crazy to expect to carry on as usual.”

Throughout the pregnancy, she coached non-stop, even flying with the university team to the national championship in her eighth month. And she informed Rugby Canada that she would coach after the birth and spelled out how she intended it to happen.

Wesch was frank about her needs. “I told them that it was my personal choice to nurse my daughter for one year, meaning three training camps were involved. I said that if you want me to coach this team, she is coming with me, and I need somebody to take care of her, and I expect the costs of a flight and a room for a babysitter to be incorporated into the budget. When it was suggested that I bottle-feed her and leave her at home with her dad, I said, ‘Then I’m going to tell you that you’ve just lost your head coach!’ It was black and white. As long as I wasn’t paid a salary but was coaching as a volunteer, this was how it was going to be.”

The wrinkle, says **Eva Havaris**, who as manager of rugby development was responsible for Wesch’s budget, was that Rugby Canada lacked policies to cover Wesch’s situation. Havaris contacted several organizations, including CAC and the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, looking for a policy that would protect the interests of both parties. “Of course there weren’t any, and there should be if we want more women involved in sport without creating barriers for them. A maternity leave policy is a matter of a best practice. I would like Rugby Canada to take a stand, be the first sport organization to do it, and be seen as a supporter of women coaches.”



In the end, Rugby Canada agreed to factor Wesch's expenses into the budget. Ultimately, the decision was Havaris's. "I really believe in what she does. She bends over backwards, and everybody in the coaching community in Canada knows that and her accomplishments. This is someone who is going to continue to contribute. It's not as though she has hit the pinnacle of her career. In some ways, at the national level, she's just starting."

The lesson, says Wesch, is to know what you want and to stand your ground, which admittedly is not always easy. "I know my value. I am the only highly certified female rugby coach, and they want to keep people like me involved, so I knew I had leverage."

At the university, Wesch's situation was different. Coaching the varsity team is part of her workload, and the season, which runs from the end of August to mid-November, was over by the time Machaela was born. When the 2006 season rolled around Machaela was nine months old and ready for afternoon day care. Wesch is with her until 11 a.m., and Wesch's husband, **Chad Dawson**, whose work permits a flexibility that other spouses might not have, picks Machaela up at 4:30 p.m., leaving Wesch free to coach until 6 p.m. "We made the decision that I wasn't going to turn into a little housewife and he the breadwinner. It was going to be equal. We had 50/50 input into making her, so we were going to be 50/50 in caring for her. It's all about flexibility and having a spouse who is extremely supportive."

Wesch stresses the importance of establishing priorities. "Is it having your child with you? Is it being a mom? Is it being a mom and a coach? Whatever it is, stick to your guns and know what you want. Know clearly ahead of time what you want to accomplish and how you want to involve your child. I knew I wanted time to be my own person and have my individual life back, so to speak, but I also wanted to raise my daughter and not have her in day care all day long."

Despite having a clear picture of how she would do her mothering, Wesch found it wasn't cut and dried. Unable to "carry on as usual", she faced some hard choices. "For the first three months I tried, unsuccessfully, to keep doing what I was doing before, and I was just getting frustrated. I went through a very difficult time with postpartum depression. It hit me like a rock and flattened me for seven months.

"What hit me the most was my inability to get things done. My PhD was on hold. My coaching career, which absolutely matters to me, was on hold. I was questioning everything, which is totally unlike me. I couldn't get out of the house and I couldn't exercise. Although I love my daughter, it was like I had a ball and chain attached to me, limiting where I could go, and when it was really bad, I wanted to quit everything."

Realizing that something had to give, Wesch made some decisions. She didn't run again as an Ontario Rugby director and she stopped coaching the Ontario and national U-19 teams to focus on the university team and the women's sevens. She resumed her exercise routine and put Machaela in part-time day care. "Although I felt really guilty, things started to feel so much better because I was able to be me for half a day."

Wesch supported Havaris contacting Croxon to ask if Wesch was asking too much and what they were allowed to do. "Sheilagh told them that if they wanted to keep me, then they should accommodate me as much as possible. They could have said, 'Too bad, we're finding someone else,' but they knew the value I bring to the sport and the association and said, 'OK, that's the way it is.' Keep in mind, though, that I wasn't asking for a lot."

