

Kathy Shields

A Profile

BY SHEILA ROBERTSON

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Cet article brosse le portrait de la vie et de la carrière de l'entraîneure au ballon-panier, Kathy Shields..

An astute observer of sport in Canada, Kathy Shields, for 23 years the head coach of the Victoria Vikes, the University of Victoria's women's basketball team, retains her enthusiasm and optimism in the face of significant change.

She has compiled one of the most enviable coaching records in Canadian sport. Yet coaching was the last thing on the mind of Kathy Shields the player. Consumed with the sport from the minute she picked up a basketball as a Grade 9 student in West Vancouver, she matured into one of the finest players in the country, starring at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ont., during the 1970s when Norm Vickery was building a formidable women's program. Landing a starting spot on Canada's national team meant trips to the Pan American Games and the

world championships, heady stuff for a player who "loved to play, loved the game, breathed the game, lived for the game."

In mid-career, disaster struck in the form of a back injury that slammed the door on her playing days. Recuperating from spinal fusion surgery in Victoria, where her husband, Ken Shields, had accepted a position in 1976 as coach and athletic coordinator at the University of Victoria, Shields was in no man's land, uncertain of her future as she struggled to cope with "that horrible time in many athletes' lives when you cannot play anymore. I did not have it in mind to coach, not at all," she says. "I had in mind basketball. I went through phys ed and sport admin because they would keep me in my sport. I hadn't thought through what I was going to do with my education. My goals were very short term and totally around playing and competing, not unusual for a dedicated athlete. I was 23 years old and basketball was such a passion."

As Shields was pondering her future, she learned of an opening for a position as a part-time coach of UVic's junior varsity basketball team. At a stage in her recovery where she felt she could handle a couple of hours of work each day and attracted by the opportunity to coach a young team, she accepted. "It was being in the right place at the right time and under the right circumstances," says Shields, adding that at that time, a career as a woman basketball coach at a Canadian university was unheard of. "I thought I was going to be a phys ed teacher and that would help me to stay in basketball."

Shields squelches the suggestion

that some might have considered nepotism a factor in her appointment. "While people today might say I got the job because of Ken, back then it wasn't an issue because there simply was no else available who had the time and the background. Certainly I knew I had the credentials and lots to offer because of my playing background. However, while he didn't give me the job, Ken certainly helped tremendously, as he has throughout my career."

As the winner of eight CIAU (Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Association) championships, amassing a record of 320 wins against a mere 50 losses, and with 19 appearances in the national championship tournament, a master coach with the National Coaching Institute-B.C. since 1986, and the head coach of the national women's team in the mid '90s, Shields has more than proven her worth.

Success came swiftly. After a year as the junior varsity coach, she became an assistant coach to Mike Gallo, who was coaching the women's team. She had discovered that coaching was very much to her liking and she knew she was ready to "begin stoking my way up." In 1978, when Gallo retired, the head coach job was hers.

"Being an assistant coach was a really neat training situation, a mentorship, a training without pressure, and I think that's so important before you become a head coach," she says. "It's a step that's missing in team sports in Canada. You see it in the States where it is almost unheard of for somebody to go directly into a head coaching position without having spent time as an assistant coach.



Kathy Shields and members of her team relish victory. Photo credit: University of Victoria

I was ready when I took over.”

One of the drawing cards for Shields is the satisfaction derived from working with the student athlete who, in contrast to the totally focused national team player, has to handle a multitude of factors at play in her life. “It’s tremendous to try to bring out the best in them when they have so many things going on in their lives,” she says. “Besides their coach, you tend to become a counsellor, a mom, a doctor, playing so many roles in their lives. At times, that can make it extremely draining, but also extremely satisfying when you know you’ve made a difference. I find there’s a lot more to coaching at this level than with the national team and it’s because of the complexity of their lives as student-athletes.”

The degree of commitment is another difference. While university athletes do bring a strong commitment to the team, it varies from player to player, in contrast to a national team, which is generally made up of 12 extremely dedicated athletes. These are mature athletes who know where they’re going and what they want. With the university team typically composed of freshmen through to seniors, commitment must be taught and instilled by the coach. “Oftentimes the first-year player doesn’t understand commitment. Eventually they grasp it, or not, depending on the individual, so it’s something you’re working at with different degrees, different levels of intensity, different levels of commitment,” says Shields. “With the stu-

dent-athlete, commitment usually grows with maturity and experience.”

She says that because of the current calibre of university players, plenty of skill and technical teaching is required of the coach, more so now than in the past as Canada loses more and more top players to the United States. Because they tend not to be players who can earn a scholarship to a Division 1 American school, they need to be taught much more of the fundamentals of the game, and the skills they do have must be refined. What this means, says Shields, is that the technical competence of the university coach must be solid.

In contrast, technical teaching is not much of a factor with a national team because the players spend so little time together as a unit. “As a

national team coach, my focus was on team play and getting prepared to compete," says Shields. "The ideal would have been to have a lot of time to refine their skills and work on new skills and things we thought were missing, but without centralization, we just didn't have the time."

Whether coaching her university

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team or the national team, Shields says her main strength is her ability to relate well to people, her powers of perception, and her communication skills. "Because of those strengths, I generally have a pretty good relationship with my athletes," she says. "I try to get them motivated through their own desire to become the best they can. I try to get my athletes to buy into what we want to accomplish as a team and then it is up to me to show them what that will take."

Shields says that her coaching style has changed over the years, due in part to the widening age difference between her and her players, and differences in the players themselves.

"I am authoritarian about the way things have to be done on the floor, but I am not a screamer or a negative person," she says. "I still coach in a demanding way, but not an intrusive way. My approach today is more along the lines of, 'We're all in this together. This has to be done. Here's how to do it. Now do it.'"

Shields says her outstanding win/loss record isn't a distraction because her team changes from year to year, making it impossible to try to repeat, even if she wanted to. At the beginning of each season, she holds discussions with the team to try to set goals that are realistic for the current crop of players. "Usually it's that we want to be the best we can, and let's not think about the actual end result and possible wins. Let's just talk about performance," she says.

With the drain of top players to the United States, Shields is also working with athletes who tend to be on the small side, and that calls for a different style of play.

"The difference in height between now and the '80s is amazing and has called for changes in our approach, in how we play the game," says Shields, who, not particularly tall at 5'10", built a reputation as a good shooter and scorer and an aggressive competitor who also loved to practise. "We don't rely on our post play as much, for example, and we transition more than we used to. Last year our tallest starter was only 5'11", but we had very good shooting in every position, including our post players. They could go outside and shoot the ball, and we ran well and defended all over the court. It was so much fun to coach them, but I must add that in our game being big does help. We might struggle if we came up against a team with bigger players who were equally talented."

Height is not the only difference Shields notes. Although varying from university to university, working conditions for CIAU coaches have improved, although situations remain less than ideal. Shields, for example, was paid \$5,000 a year for the first five years she coached at UVic, progressing to \$15,000 by the mid '80s. Today she brings home a salary that is "reasonable," but will never make her rich.

"In Canada, if you want to become a coach, don't do it for financial reasons," she says. "You have to go into coaching because of your

love and passion for your sport. Unfortunately, we take advantage of our coaches because we have all these passionate individuals who will do anything for no money. Sport is full of them. We volunteer for everything; we put on clinics and camps for very little compensation. It's because sport is part of the educational system, which doesn't support sport very well. We coaches shoot ourselves in the foot because we coach for the love of the game."

Being a member of a physical education faculty can be a positive situation, but it might also entail fulfilling responsibilities outside of the coaching role. In Shields' case, her role is strictly that of a coach, but it is three-quarter time—up from half time not so long ago—or as she says, full-time work for three-quarters pay. That would perhaps be sufficient for a coach who is single, but certainly not for a person who is the main breadwinner in a family. Until recently, UVic coaches had no pension and only year-to-year contracts. The situation improved around seven years ago, but only after a protracted battle with the university over reclassification.

Shields chuckles when asked to compare her head coach position to a similar situation in the United States.

"I just finished reading a book called *Raising the Roof*, by Pat Summit who coaches basketball at the University of Tennessee. It covers the year they won the NCAA Division 1 championships. Comparing my life to hers, it's two different worlds. The coaching is the same—relationships with players, trying to get the best out of them, trying to coach them to the fullest—but the lifestyle is certainly different. They travel in a chartered jet, Summit has a nanny who travels with her, and they live in a hotel suite. Because there is more money, everything is bigger and brighter."

According to Shields, in Canada coaching is a great life, but it's a tough life, especially if the coach has



Kathy Shields derives satisfaction from working with university athletes, who have many factors at play in their lives in contrast to the totally focused national team player.

a family. She attributes her own longevity to two factors: love of the game and childlessness.

"I admire so much women coaches who have been able to balance coaching and children," she says. "In Canada, to be able to stay in coaching with a family, to me those women are the real heroes in this country."

Shields presses the point by describing a typical day.

"For the first two months of the season, we're on the track at 7 a.m. I'm then in the office most of the day and at 3 o'clock we start the coaches meeting and players drop by to talk. We practise from 4:30 to 6:30 or 7:00, and I arrive home at 7:30. In the season, from the end of October on, we don't have the early morning track session so I arrive around 9:30; the rest is the same. We have games every weekend or are on the road, leaving on a Thursday night and getting home on Sunday afternoon. If you have children, you can't do

that very easily. It is circumstance that has allowed me to stay in coaching and be successful."

Expanding on the topic of changes since she first started out, Shields mentions more good athletes and coaches, which she attributes to the growth of basketball. The result is a much more competitive and professional environment with opportunities to play in spring and summer, a proliferation of touring teams to enhance playing opportunities, and provincial teams at every age level, all of which have been tremendous for development.

The growth in opportunities to play is another plus, particularly the arrival two seasons ago of the WNBA and the exposure the league offers the women's game, not to mention the opportunity for players to make a good living. "In a lot of ways I think it is easier for players nowadays because there is no longer a stigma attached to being a woman basket-

ball player and training full time," says Shields.

Times have also changed for women coaches. Shields remembers going to basketball clinics in the 1970s and 1980s and finding herself the only woman in a roomful of 400 men, being singled out by the speaker, usually a male Division 1 coach, and being made to feel totally uncomfortable. "I won't repeat all of the language, but they'd say things like, 'Unbelievable, a woman!' Now half the coaches at the clinics are women and their presence is accepted, not least because having them there is a money-maker. Once I was committed to a coaching career, my husband insisted I go to these clinics because they were great learning opportunities, but I would never have gone without his support. He has been huge in my coaching career, certainly my most important mentor and I owe so much of my coaching background to him. He is the type of

individual who, if there is any way he can be a little better at what he does, is going to find out how to do it and get it done. If it's a book to be read or a clinic to go to, he's going to do it. I like to think that along the way I developed my own work ethic and learned on my own in various areas, but he always encouraged me to get better."

Instead of being unheard of as was the case when Shields started her career, women coaches are now an accepted part of the sport of basketball. In her CIAU conference (Canada West), all the basketball coaches are women and next door in the Great Plains conference, all but one are women. Despite the competitive nature of their profession, the Canada West coaches enjoy great camaraderie, speaking on the telephone regularly and comparing notes after the weekend's games. "Ever since I was a young coach, I really admired the men coaches for being competitive during the games and friends afterwards," she says. "I always found that was something we as women struggled with a lot, so I tried to welcome new coaches and behave professionally. This is a game and, sure, we're coaching as hard as possible, but we can still be friends and share ideas and information, and we've managed to do that in our conference."

Just recently, more change occurred with the CIAU decision, after years of agonizing, to permit athletic scholarships up to the full value of tuition (but not exceeding \$3,000). Shields expresses delight with this "tremendous first step forward" even as she acknowledges the problem of where the money is going to come from. As for potential abuse of the new system that worries many Canadian institutions, she points to top academic and athletic schools like Stanford and Duke that have never had a problem in this area. "It comes down to ethics and to hiring ethical people," she says, adding that it's been her experience that abuses only occur when winning assumes overriding importance.

The decision means an acceptance of the philosophy of supporting Canadian athletes as athletes and rewarding them for their accomplishments. In Shields' opinion, the message is unmistakable. "It means Canada is finally willing to say we believe in athletics and we believe in sport, rather than apologizing for it all the time. Up to now, the approach has been very iffy and apologetic. At the same time, people constantly compare our kids, our programs, our teams to what is going on in the United States.

"People ask why we can't be as good as them, why can't I offer the

same program as Tennessee? Well, for starters I don't have four full-time assistant coaches, only a part-time assistant who is paid a small honorarium," says Shields. "We struggle with our team sports at the national level because we export our athletes, either to the States or overseas. We don't have the role models at home and they are not accessible to the national team program."

As consumed as Shields is by her passion for coaching basketball, she does make time for moments of relaxation. Reading and walking along the shore near her oceanfront home are among her pleasures as is watching sports on television and taking in plenty of sporting events. Because of her back problem, she is unable to golf with her husband; instead, she goes along "riding a mean cart." Above all, there is Koach, the Shields' female Airedale, so named "to educate the masses."

"People always say, 'Koach? But it's female.' A male coach did that not long ago and I almost took his head off!" she says with a laugh that doesn't quite hide her true reaction to the remark.

After leaving the national scene in 1995, Shields made an important decision to create more balance in her life. It's a decision she has stuck to by putting an end to 14 years of spending her summers coaching for the national team program, a mentally draining combination given her university workload.

These days Shields spends the summer months regenerating, recharging, and having fun. A wise decision, and undoubtedly a major factor in her continuing success at her chosen profession.

Sheila Robertson, of Robertson Communications, has worked with Canada's sport community for over 27 years. Since 1994 she has been the editor and lead writer of Coaches Report, Canada's only source of national news for coaches. She is also the editor and a writer of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching.

Quick Facts about Kathy Shields

- Member of national team, 1970 to 1974
- Athlete of the Year, Laurentian University, 1972, 1973
- Women's assistant varsity coach, University of Victoria, 1977
- Women's varsity coach, UVic, 1978 to present
- Junior national coach, 1983
- Assistant coach, Olympic Games, 1984
- Master Coach, NCI-BC, 1986 to present
- Coach, national junior basketball team, 1986
- Assistant coach, national senior basketball team, 1989-1992
- 3M Coaching Canada Award, 1992
- Head Coach, national basketball team, 1993 to 1995
- CIAU Women's Basketball Coach of the Year, 1979-1980, 1991-1992
- 3M Coach of the Year/CWUAA, 1997-1998, 1999-2000
- 3M NCCP Level 4