

# “Not just ‘Little Ladies’ in Hockey Gear”

## Hockey Experiences in a Small Town

BY BONNIE SLADE

*Les souvenirs de l'auteure quand elle était adolescente et jouait au hockey dans une petite ville d'Ontario, face à l'équipe canadienne des joueuses de hockey qui ont gagné l'or aux Jeux de Salt Lake City. Elle a jugé que les joueuses et leur entraîneure ont été victimes d'homophobie et de sexisme. .*

As I watched the 2002 Olympic gold medal women's hockey in a crowded bar of cheering, hopeful fans of both genders, I felt a certain amount of disbelief about the experience. It is hard to believe how much the profile of women's hockey has changed in 19 years.

I played hockey from 1979 to 1983 in a county league in Ontario. Initially, my experience on the ice fell into the more traditional outlet of figure skating. My dad often reminds me of my unsuitability for this sport, “You sure weren't Barbara Ann Scott”. It wasn't until I was 12 years old, when we moved from Scarborough to a small, almost exclusively white, town in Ontario that my interest in hockey began. Two of my new friends were on a girls' hockey team. It took me two years of advocacy work to get my mother to agree to let me play on the team. She was worried about the roughness of the game and the potential for injury, especially since I was barely over five feet tall and the other girls were much bigger.

I remember how excited I was when we went to buy my equipment. How I loved my second-hand pair of SuperTacks. The focus of my first season was relearning how to skate and learning how to stay on my feet dressed in the hockey gear. My survival strategy was to pass off the puck as quickly as I could to one of the more experienced players, usually those who had played on a boys team when they were younger because there were no teams for young girls. They had an intense drive to play hockey as well as parents who supported their unconventional dreams. I played right wing (the only time in my life that I have identified by this term) and didn't provide much in the way of offense until my second season. There was something particularly rewarding about the game of hockey. The short intense shifts on the ice provided opportunities each game to try and improve my skill and confidence.

Our coach for the first two years was the father of the goalie. Later, two women took over the coaching role. As I look back, it is evident that they were lovers. It is difficult for me now, as an out lesbian who enjoys the freedom of a progressive urban centre, to comprehend what it must have been like for them to live, closeted, in a small town.

They lived in the same house, coached the hockey team together and played on the same baseball team. In the late 1970s / early 1980s it was not safe for a lesbian couple to be out in a small town. I doubt that it is safe now. I look back with great sadness at the stories one of the women used to tell about her “boy-friend in Toronto”. We all believed her and used to tease her about her visits to see him. The homophobia was so pervasive that it was completely invisible; it never occurred to anyone that they were a couple. As coaches of a girls hockey team, they would have encountered terrible repercussions from the community if the truth were known. For the players too, heterosexism was a strong force. However powerful we were on the ice, we were expected to wear dresses and look like young ladies at the annual banquet.

Did we have a feminist consciousness about playing a non-traditional sport? Did we recognize the discrimination we faced? I would argue that the discrimination against women was as pervasive, and therefore as “normal” as the homophobia that kept our coaches silent. Uniting together as a team to defeat our rival, another girls team from a neighbouring small town, was something that gave us a great deal of purpose and satisfaction. But identifying the real barriers was something we never did. We didn't question the fact that we had the worst ice time for practices and games or that we had to drive up to 75 kilometres to play against another team. Nor did we question the lack of infrastructure that could have provided a place for young girls to develop their skills and a future for talented players.

Were we “little ladies” dressed up in big hockey equipment? How did donning the gear affect our gender identities and how did our behaviour on the ice challenge stereotypical notions of femininity? In my opinion, our games were as competitive and aggressive as boys games; fighting and penalties for roughing were frequent occurrences. In spite of the fact that we played in a “non-body contact league,” body checking was an unspoken part of every game. While playing the game, we were also break-

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ing out of our restrictive gender roles. I was acutely aware of this; I felt powerful and strong on the ice, a feeling that was rare for a young woman in a patriarchal world. This experience was to be fleeting but intense and satisfying.

The Canadian women's hockey team has been recognized as the best in the world. They have captured the nation's attention and pride. The opportunities that exist today for girls and young women interested in hockey have changed considerably since 1983. How great that a girl can dream of playing in the Women's National Hockey League or on Team Canada at the next Olympic games. Women's hockey has a future that is more than fleeting. It is my hope that for the next generation of female hockey players, barriers such as sexism, homophobia and racism will be named and addressed, making it possible for a more diverse group of women to participate.

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## DEBRA SHEPHERD

### Curly Headed Lamb

My daughter Mary gave him to me,  
my companion  
when I broke my knee cap.  
He fits in the crook  
of my arm.  
He has become the family bean bag.  
To punish me,  
they throw him around.  
To tease me,  
they withhold him.  
I would never sleep  
If he were lost forever.  
My eyes would become dry deserts.  
My eyelids would curl up.  
I would walk in a dreamland  
of sleeplessness.  
When he is with me  
So is my daughter.

*Debra Shepherd is a college student studying English and Theatre. She is married and has three growing into teenager children.*



*Photo: Marlene Hielema*

Je me rappelle encore d'une qualification de soccer en Novembre, il y a quelques années. Nous étions une trentaine de filles et jouions à l'extérieur devant des entraîneurs, des sélectionneurs, etc. Il y avait de la neige et de la glace à certains endroits et, bien que chaudement habillées, nous nous épuisions dans le froid. Je me souviens de m'être dit: "Il faut être fou pour être ici," et c'est ce que l'on est: des folles... du soccer. Cela fait bientôt neuf ans que je joue avidement au soccer et, que ce soit dans des camps d'entraînement intenses avec l'Équipe du Québec ou tout simplement sur la plage, mon plaisir de jouer demeure le même. Le soccer pour moi c'est non seulement le conditionnement physique, la technique, la stratégie... mais c'est aussi l'équipe. Ce cercle de joueuses et d'entraîneurs qui se déplacent ensemble et qui, match après match, se rapprochent, s'aidant mutuellement. Présentement le soccer est une partie importante de ma vie. Je ne sais pas où cela va me mener, ni quel niveau j'espère atteindre... Je sais tout simplement que je continuerai, durant toute ma vie, à participer à ce sport incroyable et que, particulièrement en tant que femme, j'en serai fière.

—Perri Ravon, 15 ans et demi

En voyant pour la première fois des gens jouer au soccer, je me suis dit qu'ils avaient l'air de s'amuser énormément et j'ai voulu apprendre aussi et m'amuser comme eux. Alors je m'y suis mise, et maintenant quand moi je joue au foot, c'est comme si rien d'autre n'existait, comme si jouer était la seule chose importante au monde. Garçons et filles devraient être traités de la même façon, comme les égaux que nous sommes. Probablement que certains garçons croient à tort qu'ils jouent mieux que nous autres filles mais pour la plupart d'entre eux, garçons ou filles c'est la même chose lorsque nous jouons au foot. L'essentiel, c'est d'y prendre plaisir.

—Kayla McKenzie, 10 ans