



CHAPTER 2

**The Steps To
Successful
Media Relations**

Media Relations: A Two-Way Street

by Sheila Robertson

Despite the phenomenal growth of women's sport, coverage in newspapers and on radio and television remains largely devoted to men's sports. And when women athletes are the subject of reports and commentary, they are sometimes referred to in words that treat them differently from men, often in ways that downplay or trivialize their achievements.

A favourite example: *"She is a comely nubile with hazel eyes, a glowing complexion and a decidedly feminine grace. There's no hint of testosterone in her nature."* That's goaltender Manon Rheaume as described by *THE TORONTO STAR*.

Admittedly, that quote dates from 1994, but Rheaume constantly attracted commentary on her looks.

Most members of the media agree that sports commentary and reporting, like the use of the English language in general, should reflect the fundamental equality of women and men, both on and off the field. Athletes, coaches and the media share the responsibility for ensuring that this equality of reporting happens.

"Their sporting achievements give them a potent platform."

A few years ago, CAAWS offered the media a few suggestions, which have since gained widespread acceptance. It's good advice for athletes and coaches, too:

- ◆ *Just as male athletes are generally referred to as "men" or "young men", refer to female athletes as "women" or "young women" and not as "girls", unless they are under 12 years of age. In our opinion, athletes should not be referred to as "ladies". However, if the sport is known as Ladies' Golf, for example, it is of course appropriate to use that term.*
- ◆ *Avoid descriptions that place too much emphasis on physical appearances or skills not related to athletic performance.*
- ◆ *Avoid the use of inappropriate nouns, adjectives and adverbs when describing athletes. Inappropriate words include "moody", "shapely", "curvaceous", "well-built", "cute", "pixie", "bouncy", "coquette" and "jockette". Also to be avoided are words that suggest weakness, such as "indecisive", "out of control", "shaky" and "panicked".*

Sometimes, women athletes use less-than-flattering terms to describe themselves to the media. Some seem uncomfortable using powerful descriptors that adequately reflect their athletic attributes—words such as *"dynamic", "powerful", "agile", "gutsy", "leader", "aggressive"* and *"swift"*. They forget that their sporting achievements give them a potent platform—for discussing the drive and determination with which they pursue their sporting dreams, for turning more and more girls on to sport and for challenging the attitude that women can't go the distance.

◀ **An informal media moment for former alpine ski star Ken Read**



Gymnastics coach Alex Bard encourages a young athlete.

As important role models for young Canadians, your impact is profound. You reach thousands of youngsters, and their parents, too.

Your message can be something as simple as, *“Being involved in sport is important for both girls and boys”*, or you can follow the example of some top athletes who used their media platform at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games to reach out to girls and women.

During a post-game interview, basketball player Lisa Leslie, 1996 Olympic gold medallist, looked straight into the

camera and said, *“I want to say something to the young girls who are watching—you can dream your dreams, and you can do everything I have done.”*

1996 Olympic swimmer Amy Van Dyken challenged the notion that it is not feminine to be muscular: *“Nowadays it’s cool to be able to bench press your husband.”*

Male athletes can also use their media platform to encourage girls and women to take up sport. Cycling silver medallist Brian Walton spoke effectively of the impact a woman athlete had on his life: *“Back in ’76, I was just a young kid in Halifax and I lived on the same street as [swimmer] Nancy Garapick. She won two bronze medals, and I got to see them. I’ve always dreamed of winning an Olympic medal, and now my dream has come true.”*

Softball standout and Olympic gold medallist Dot Richardson made the point when she said, *“One of my greatest joys is knowing that my five nieces have an exciting future. I want them to have the same opportunities as my five nephews. I’ll do anything I can to make that happen.”*

No one expresses the value of girls and women in sport better than Canada’s great rower Silken Laumann, who said, *“One of the most valuable things that sport can do for us as women is to give us the confidence to discover our dreams for ourselves and then develop the confidence to explore those dreams.”*

Women athletes are no different from their male colleagues in the skill, dedication and courage they bring to their sports. The challenge is to tell your stories as effectively as possible and to do your part in portraying your own achievements accurately.



Mastering Media Coverage

There is a widespread belief that Canadian athletes who are not hockey players or race car drivers receive media coverage only once every four years, and even then only if theirs is an Olympic sport.

Although this is the truth for most sports, it doesn't have to be. As you read your favourite daily newspaper, you may notice that some Canadian athletes and their sports receive steady yet unspectacular coverage.

Are the media playing favourites? Is it just plain luck? Hardly.

The coverage has likely been generated by none other than the sport's national federation. Often, the federation has hired professionals—either a full-time employee or a company like Canadian Sport News (CSN)—to publicize its sport and its athletes.

In the main, however, sport federations remain inexcusably in the dark about the importance of media relations. Meanwhile, the handful that have media savvy reap the benefits. Public exposure of their sports soars and sponsorship dollars are garnered.

“Sports federations remain inexcusably in the dark about the importance of media relations.”

THE PUBLICITY GAME

by Louis Daignault



Like every sport, the publicity game is played by strict rules. Those rules are set by the media.

Rule number one is to provide the media with what they want. Guess what? Are you sitting down? The media want stories about Canadian athletes. That's the absolute truth, and CSN has thousands of non-Olympic Games clippings to prove it.

Perhaps the toughest task is to deliver the information to the media properly so that it will get into the newspaper or mentioned on the television or radio sportscast. That's why the sports in the news have hired experts such as CSN, which has spent years developing specialized media lists and gaining professional credibility.

So now you're probably asking yourself, if the media is so interested, why don't they cover Canadian athletes themselves? Answer: In a capitalist society such as Canada, newspapers and radio and television stations are no different from any other business. The objective is to make as much money as possible.

What sells newspapers to sports fans in Canada—when there are no Olympics—is professional sport, specifically the National Hockey League, major league baseball and professional football. Secondary sports such as curling, tennis, golf, auto racing and basketball also have important pockets of followers, which can affect advertising, sales and viewership.

**Sport physiotherapist
Carrie Smith and
sports personality
Don Cherry**



Canadian Olympic Association

Louis Daignault is editor of *Canadian Sport News*, a publicity service specializing in amateur sports. In 1997 he was named among the 25 most influential people in Canadian sport by *The Globe and Mail*.

Over one million Canadians tune in to *HOCKEY NIGHT IN CANADA* every Saturday night, and three times that watch important play-off games. The annual Grey Cup football game is the most-watched Canadian television show, with over 3.5 million viewers. The Labatt Brier curling final draws a television audience of one million.

In other words, live television sports strongly influence what's in the newspaper the next day.

Unfortunately, most amateur sports don't benefit from live broadcasts of their championship competitions. In fact, most events attract just a handful of spectators, generally family and friends of the competitors.

But that doesn't mean that the media and public are not interested. Each medium is committed to being an integral part of its community, and sport is a key indicator in the quality of that commitment. Which brings us to rule two in the publicity game: Athletes and coaches should be aware of their local media and develop a working relationship with them.

One way to establish a relationship is to get in touch with local media regularly. Provide schedules; call the media before your team departs for a competition; let them know the who, what, where, why and how of the competition. The results should be sent to the media as soon as possible after the competition—preferably the same day—whether those results are good, bad or indifferent.

Rule three is for the coach to be part of the publicity team. Although the media are usually more interested in stories on athletes, the coach is in many instances the most important source of information. A coach can provide an insider's view of an athlete—personality, strengths, weaknesses and characteristics—and of the sport—rule changes, statistical information, news and views. Often a reporter will work the story around the information provided without quoting or even crediting the coach—making the reporter sound like the expert.

There will be times when your media efforts may seem fruitless, but if you are persistent and consistent, then you can expect to get a fair share of media coverage. And most journalists are interested when Canadians make an impact on the international scene, whether it's in archery or sailing ... or even hockey.

What appears to be a complex game is really quite simple. The winners are the athletes and coaches who are willing to master the who, what, where, why and how in the distribution and quality of information.



Getting It Done the Freestyle Way

When I was asked to contribute to this guide, I went directly to the source of our media success—Grant McDiarmid. As marketing manager for Owens Corning, he decided to sponsor the Canadian National Freestyle Ski Team; he ended up building a partnership that has far exceeded the usual duration of a corporate sport sponsorship.

by Mary Fraser



“The key to a successful media relations program is to do all the things that we ended up doing,” says McDiarmid.

So what did Owens Corning do to establish a media program that has been touted as amateur sport’s best? Perhaps the first thing to recognize is that Freestyle’s media relations began as a sponsor-driven program. Owens Corning considered media relations to be 75 per cent of their entire sponsorship package. Their number-one priority was to have their name and logo in the print media and on television, providing a platform for advertising and promotions that would in turn create an abundance of hosting opportunities.

“The athletes have a tremendous understanding of how important media are to them, both personally and professionally.”

In other words, the objective was corporate brand recognition. The vehicle was Freestyle.

Having chosen their sport, Owens Corning found they had to educate their athletes. Media training became an integral part of Freestyle’s public relations program. Working with public relations firms and with former athletes now in sport broadcasting, our athletes are taught how to prepare for interviews, how to deal with difficult questions and how to develop corporate messages, sport messages and personal messages. In the past few years, media training has been conducted during the off-season, usually during a summer training camp. Our objective is to work with the athletes in an environment where they are relaxed and rested and where they feel comfortable asking questions. There’s a refresher course before the first World Cup of the season.

Now that we’ve been with Owens Corning for more than a decade, our younger athletes have the luxury of watching and learning from the seasoned veterans. They are exposed to media and hosting events year-round, giving them a level of comfort during the competitive season.

Perhaps the biggest misconception about my job is the idea that, because I do media relations for a winter sport on a World Cup tour, I work only in the winter. Not so. Most of Freestyle’s media program is implemented during the summer and fall.

In summer, we do media training, bring headshots up to date and develop new story lines for the coming season. Our ideas focus on specific questions:

Alpine skier Cary Mullen reacts for the Japanese media



Canadian Olympic Association

- ◆ *What's at stake for our team this season?*
- ◆ *What personal challenges do individual athletes face?*
- ◆ *What are the events to watch?*

This information is accumulated and summarized in an annual media guide that is distributed in the fall to all Canadian sports media. We include broadcast television footage (B-roll) of our higher-profile athletes to provide all local and national television stations with the option of showing our sport on their news broadcasts throughout the winter. In a perfect world, we'd have satellite broadcasting at all World Cup events; failing perfection, B-roll provides television stations with some footage and opens the door for a telephone call after a World Cup win when we're far from home.

The off-season also provides opportunities to promote our athletes when they are not under the pressure of competition. News conferences and media tours have been a major part of our media relations program and have proven successful at launching the competitive season every fall.

Anyone who has ever worked in media relations knows the fear of planning a news conference without knowing if anyone will show up. Freestyle has effectively dealt with this issue by incorporating performances into our news conferences. Admittedly, our sport lends itself to that type of activity: It's easy to dazzle when you have elite athletes performing double twisting double back flips on a trampoline. Over the years, locations have varied from school gymnasiums to company plants to shopping malls in downtown Toronto. We put on a show, draw a crowd and invite the media.

Satellite footage is available at both World Cups held in Canada, and a Canadian Press (CP) accredited photographer is booked for the first month of the winter tour, when the team is in Europe. We also hire a CP writer, who files after every competition throughout the season. Newswire photos have proven to be an essential and successful element of our media relations program and tend to increase the number of stories that get picked up in Canada throughout the winter.

While on tour, I provide each World Cup press centre with Canadian team information. I'm on the hill with the athletes in the finish area to ensure that interviews are conducted in the proper order of priority. After competitions, I take the athletes to the press centre, where I provide colour commentary to CP, arrange telephone interviews for athletes with the Canadian media and ensure athlete accessibility to the television networks covering the event. Results are

Mary Fraser
is media
relations
officer with
the Canadian
Freestyle Ski
Association.

distributed to the media, and I follow up at the end of each World Cup competition in preparation for the following week.

In spring, it's time to reconnect with all the media we contacted during the World Cup season. Our annual media audit is a great help in determining our strengths and weaknesses. One reporter told me he was prepared to give us a first-class rating solely because he had never before received a call from a sports organization asking what could be improved.

The only way to know if the media are getting what they want and need is to ask them. I've been told that the success of our program lies in our willingness to go to the media and do our very best to get them what they want and need.

Our goal has been to develop relationships with media and maintain them through consistency. One reporter wrote, *"I wish other sports put in even half the time that you guys do to keep us informed and get the athletes in touch with us."* The media have come to expect things from us, and it's a standard that we strive to maintain.

But the greatest strength of our program has yet to be mentioned. ...

I have yet to meet an athlete who hasn't given 100 per cent to her or his sport and sponsors. The partnerships that exist are solid and respectful. The athletes have a tremendous understanding of how important the media are to them, both personally and professionally. They are willing to do whatever I ask of them, and in return, I do my best to keep my demands within reason, respecting their moods and schedules. Our program could not succeed without their cooperation.

I remember being up one night with Jean-Luc Brassard. We were in Japan and he had just won the world championship. The win was followed by drug testing, news conferences and autograph signings. By 10 o'clock that evening, Jean-Luc had not managed even to change his clothes, much less have a shower. Every other athlete had long since gone to bed. But time zones have no respect for a weary athlete, and we knew we still had a long night ahead of us. We spent the next four hours on the phone, making sure no one was missed. In between dialling, I apologized for how long everything was taking. Jean-Luc held up his hand and said, *"Hey, it's just part of it. Now, who do we talk to next?"* ❖

A Media Opinion of the Freestyle Approach

I have no criticism, only compliments. The program is outstanding, efficient, co-operative and helpful. As a result, the television program, the athletes, the sponsors and the sport all benefit. ... Freestyle should be used as a model for many of the amateur sports media programs. The sport excels in dissemination of information and athlete access. It is very media friendly and extremely well organized. The athletes are articulate and approachable. They seem to feel that the media are friends, and not enemies to be avoided. They are well-schooled in how to do interviews and very good ambassadors for their sport.

MIKE BRANNAGAN,
producer, CBC Sports

Achieving Media Visibility

How does a Canadian athlete carve a profile with the media, at home and abroad? Given the sea of information available to the media, the name of the game is proactive promotion.

by Lorraine Lafrenière and Sheila Robertson

Coaches, too, can benefit from developing a media profile. For the many who tend to shy away from the spotlight, the suggestions in this chapter should at least be considered. For the coach who wants to develop a proactive and effective style, the steps outlined for athletes adapt easily.

“With visibility comes responsibility.”

Begin by visualizing what kind of prominence you want to achieve, and then focus on the steps to get there. Don't just think about it—write down your goal and then write down each step you must take to achieve it. Be realistic. Tailor your goals to your sport career. Are you a provincial-level athlete? Focus on your province's media. Are you a high-performance athlete on the lookout for sponsorships? Focus on national dailies, television and radio. Whatever your level, never forget your hometown outlets.

Just as you assess your athletic progress on a regular basis, assess and re-assess your media relationships. Success will not come overnight, and you will not be successful at each attempt. Sound familiar? Using the same perseverance and energy you apply daily in your sport can help you achieve your media goals.

Understand, though, that with visibility comes responsibility. Once you establish a promotional program, be prepared to maintain it, in good times and bad. Nothing throws a bigger monkey wrench into media relations than ignoring the media when things don't go as you planned. In fact, that is the exact time to follow up on all of your commitments. By doing so, you achieve a distinctive, professional relationship with the media.

PREPARING YOUR OWN MEDIA KIT

One of the most important tools for the media-wise athlete is a personalized media kit. Hometown media outlets, which usually take a keen interest in local athletes, are likely to put well-prepared and interesting material to good use. Larger outlets keep good material on file, particularly if the biography offers tidbits designed to whet a reporter's interest.

Update all the contents of your kit at the beginning of each season, and keep your results and personal data current throughout the year. As you build a profile in the media, you can adapt the contents to contact potential sponsors.

A successful media kit does not have to be expensive or slick. What counts is the material inside. As much as possible, use a fact-sheet style, with the material for each topic presented neatly on a single page: It's easier for you to prepare



and for someone else to read. If you will be handing them out in person, insert the material in a simple folder with large interior pockets on either side (you can buy them at your local stationery store). Put background material on the left side and your competitive history on the right. You can also provide this material to be downloaded from your website, or burn it to CD/DVD for distribution.

Here are the things that should be in your media kit:

- ◆ **A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE** (see the samples in the Appendices) in two formats—a summary and an in-depth biography. Essential information includes your full name (and pronunciation for the electronic media), address and phone number, age, height, birthplace, hometown, coach and competitive highlights (which must always include best results, education, awards, special interests, community activities, work experience, hobbies, famous relatives, and so on).

A coach should also list successful and developing athletes, with a few words on the competitive history of each.

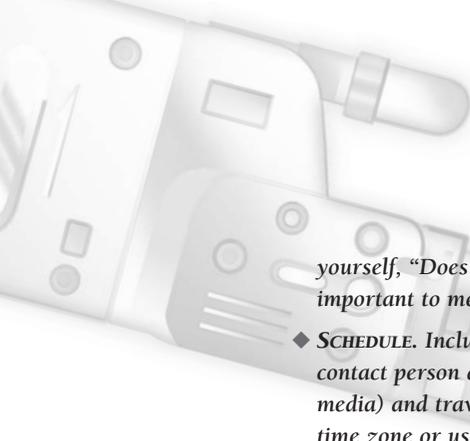
If you don't wish to publicize your own telephone number, arrange for someone else, such as your coach or your sport's media relations expert, to be your media contact. Working out a system that ensures that reporters get the service they require can make the difference between a good story appearing in the next edition of the paper, or no story appearing anywhere. Tell your contact what the reporters require and what deadlines they are facing. Ensure that your contact has a back-up person.

- ◆ **A BACKGROUNDER OF YOUR SPORT.** The best stories about you will be prepared by reporters who have a working knowledge of your sport. Foreign reporters often specialize in one sport, but their Canadian counterparts tend to be generalists—in other words, their editors expect them to cover a great many sports, and they often lack the time to learn the ins and outs of yours.

Include a paragraph on the history of your sport, a description of how it's played, who the top athletes are, where it's played, the best countries and major competitions. If your sport federation has a brochure, ask for a supply.

Provide contact numbers for both your provincial association and the national federation. The more information you provide, the better, so try to include contact names and numbers for your forthcoming competitions in Canada and abroad.

- ◆ **PHOTOS.** Invest in a good-quality head-and-shoulders shot for the print media and a colour slide for television. Make sure your name, the sport and the date of the photo are on the back. If possible, include a recent action shot as well.
- ◆ **NEWS CLIPPINGS.** Including clippings in your media kit should be done for only two reasons—you're an athlete or coach who has received local or provincial exposure and you're trying to promote yourself at the national level, or the material adds another dimension to your biography. Ask



yourself, “Does this clipping enhance my bio, or not? Is the information important to me and my career?”

- ◆ **SCHEDULE.** Include a competition schedule that lists locations, dates, a contact person and telephone number, training times (that are open to the media) and travel dates. Be sure to translate the schedule into your local time zone or use eastern standard time. Whichever you choose, be consistent. If your sport has a media relations employee, coordinate your activities with that person and make sure that he or she has your media kit on hand and is aware of your promotional activities. Media people do not appreciate being contacted twice about the same person and event. If you’re competing abroad or at a major provincial or national competition in the near future, let the media know how to reach you personally for comment; e-mail, for example, can be an effective and inexpensive tool. Arrange with local media to be available to take or make a telephone call at specified times after each game or race. Above all, always fulfil any commitments you make to the media. If the unexpected comes up, make alternative arrangements.
- ◆ **SPONSORSHIPS.** Include a list of your corporate sponsors and contact names and numbers, if applicable. Send a copy of your media kit to your sponsors along with a note telling them who has received it. If you are just starting the search for corporate sponsors, your media kit doubles as an excellent mail-out introduction to the corporations you wish to attract.
- ◆ **A GOOD “CAAWS”.** The media will be interested in knowing if you support gender equity in sport, take a strong interest in fair play or oppose the use of performance-enhancing substances by athletes. Contact the relevant organization and ask for a promotional brochure to include in your media kit.

Review your media kit carefully. Ask for your coach’s opinion of the contents. You may also want a friend or teammate to offer comments. This material creates an impression of you: Make certain it is accurate.

DISTRIBUTION

Distribution of either your hard or electronic copy, is as important as the information you’ve put together. In other words, take the time to thoroughly research who needs to get your kit. All your hard work will be for nothing if the material doesn’t get into the right hands. Tailor distribution to your sport’s season, but make sure it is in the hands of the media several weeks before competition begins. If sent too early, it will be put aside and probably lost. If sent too late, other athletes or sports may have taken the spotlight.

As when preparing the contents of your media kit, make sure the distribution also matches your level of competition. In other words, if you compete at the local level, focus on local media; if you are on the national team and compete abroad, focus on national and international media. Never, we repeat, forget your hometown and provincial media outlets.

DEADLINES

Timing is everything! It certainly is one of the keys to getting along with the media.

Deadlines are important to understand because the level of urgency felt by the reporter often shapes the interview.

Different media have different types of deadlines:

◆ *Magazine interviews require lots of time and are generally conducted in a relaxed and laid-back manner. These interviews are in-depth and time-consuming.*

◆ *Daily newspaper reporters work to a daily deadline, which means they don't have much time. Interviews are usually only a few minutes long; sometimes all the reporter needs is a quick quote. It's not hard to feel the pressure these reporters work under.*

◆ *Today's newspaper deadlines often include a short story filed immediately for the website, so responding to a print reporter in a timely manner is critical to ensuring a story appears.*

◆ *Weekly newspapers also have a deadline, but it is neither as urgent as the daily's nor as relaxed as the magazine's.*

◆ *For radio interviews, the story is usually being told the same day, or the day after at the latest. Usually the reporter just wants a few strong sentences.*

The reporters show up at the competition, get what they want and then they're gone.

◆ *Television also works to a daily deadline. Again, they're looking for a few good quotes from several people along with footage of an athlete in action, talking to the coach or warming up.*

PENNY JOYCE,
Swimming Canada Natation

Ask your sports federation will provide you with a list of media outlets or help you to find them. You can also reference the internet listing for the media outlet to get contact information. There are also services available that list all print outlets and radio and television stations in Canada. Your federation may subscribe to them, or copies may be available at local libraries. Note the medium's name and address and the sports editor's name, phone, fax and e-mail addresses. The lists are published quarterly; bring your contact list up to date appropriately. Include weekly as well as daily newspapers and radio and television stations that cover local sports.

BUSINESS CARDS. While not a necessity, business cards are a good investment. They slip easily into a reporter's file and are quickly accessible. Carry the cards with you and hand one out to all the reporters you meet, telling them that you are always available if they have a question about you or your sport. Ask for their business cards and keep them on file so that they will be included when you distribute your material.

FOLLOW-UP. Include a cover note with each media kit and let the recipient know that you will be in touch. When you do call, ask if the reporter needs any additional information or has any questions.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Keep your list of e-mail addresses current. Communicating with the media by email is both a timely and inexpensive way to provide biographical updates, competition results and training and competition schedules.

Monitor your own press coverage on the internet. Keep track of what gets printed after your competitions. Monitor the various sport sections so that you are up-to-date on news in your sport as well as in the rest of the sport world. As your public profile grows, you will be asked a wider variety of questions and will be expected to have opinions.

Having your own website allows you to communicate directly with both media and fans who follow your sport. It can be time consuming to maintain, but it allows you to post photos and comments as soon as possible following a

competition, or keep people informed of your training progress. Just remember that media may follow and incorporate your comments into profiles, so don't post anything on your blog, website or social sites such as Facebook, that you would not want repeated in a media story.

STAYING IN TOUCH

To be truly successful at developing visibility, it is important to stay in touch with the media even when the peak competition season is past.

Establish relationships with the media who cover your sport regularly. Ask how they prefer to be contacted (by phone, fax or e-mail). Find out what interests them. Don't wait for them to call you if you have a news item you think is important. Media always appreciate hearing from you, even if they are unable to print your information or results. Don't be offended if they don't have the time to discuss your results—most must meet difficult deadlines using limited resources. Don't make the mistake of calling for a chat. Your relationship with the media should always be on a business footing.

If you decide to stay in touch with the media, remember that this commitment must be maintained not only during your best performances, but also at times when things did not go as you planned. Timely reporting of your results and issues is what makes the difference when developing and maintaining your relationship with the media.



Interview Tips

Dealing with the media is not an addition to your sport career; it is an essential part of it. That is why interviews should be welcomed as opportunities to discuss your career and your sport.

PREPARE AND PRACTISE

by Sheila Robertson and Lorraine Lafrenière

First, give some thought to the kinds of questions you might be asked. You could even ask the reporter beforehand. If rehearsing your answers makes you feel more comfortable, do so; in any case, have a general idea of how you want to respond to avoid sounding stilted and uneasy. Coming up with responses should not be difficult, as your sport is something you know very well.

“You are always on record.”

If you're an athlete, consider developing four or five key points of things that are important to you and your sport—the role of women in sport, or the financial strains of being a high performance athlete, or the intensity of your training. If you're a coach, you might want to elaborate on the special demands of the profession. Embellish your responses with facts about these topics and find creative ways of introducing them into the conversation.

Before beginning your interview, find out as much as you can about the reporter—the agency, the agency's and reporter's reputations and the reporter's knowledge of sport (yours in particular). If the reporter is new to your sport, keep it in mind when answering questions. Terms that are second nature to you may be foreign to the reporter and the target audience. Develop alternatives to sport-specific words and acronyms. For example, instead of saying, “CWSA” (Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association), say, “our national wheelchair sports federation”.

Next, give some thought to the information you're prepared to share and tailor your answers to accommodate the knowledge of the reporter. Take the time to explain your sport's intricacies. As speed skaters prepared for the 1998 Olympic Winter Games, for example, the media were fascinated by the new clap skate. Plenty of coverage of the sport was generated by that topic.

If you have a sponsor, wear their logo or find a way to work them into the conversation. For radio or print media, practise delivering a sentence or two, no more, that mentions the sponsor in a casual and comfortable way. If government funding has helped you to stay in your sport, mention it.

The more you get used to being interviewed, the easier it becomes and the more you will sound like you. Use the sample questions at the end of this article to practise with a friend or teammate. If you have access to a video camera, play-back can be invaluable because it allows you to assess your performance. The key to success is to remember to be yourself.

THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ *Arrive on time. Keep all of your commitments and always let the reporter know if you are unable to keep an appointment.*
- ◆ *During the interview, take your time. Don't feel pressured into answering a question immediately.*
- ◆ *When you've given your answer, stop talking and wait for the next question.*
- ◆ *No matter what a reporter is looking for, you can help the reporter and yourself by giving a "golden quote"—a keeper, a great line, a great story. A good quote can make a story; a great quote goes even further—and think what it does for you! Compelling personal stories increase your profile and those of your team and your sport.*
- ◆ *Remember that you may be sitting with just one person—the reporter—but you are actually speaking to many people. Never underestimate the impact a reporter can have. Ensure that everything you say is accurate. Discuss only those issues that you know well. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so in a straightforward manner. Offer to put the reporter in touch with someone who can help.*
- ◆ *We can't say it enough: There is no such thing as "off the record". You are **always** on record. Never say anything you are not willing to see in print or hear on the sports news.*
- ◆ *Keep your cool. Some reporters deliberately frame questions in emotional tones. Don't let it work.*
- ◆ *Be energetic in your answers. An enthusiastic response shows that you enjoy your sport and feel confident. Long pauses or a flat monotone may suggest a lack of interest, indecision and insecurity. Give something of yourself in your answers. What you do is interesting: Try to make it interesting to the reporter and it will come across to the audience.*
- ◆ *Don't hesitate to mention something you think will add to the reporter's knowledge of you and your sport.*
- ◆ *Think fast; talk slowly. This tip is especially important for television and radio interviews. If you talk too quickly, your point may be lost or misunderstood.*
- ◆ *Because time is limited and you don't have the luxury of explaining terms, avoid technical jargon, including acronyms.*
- ◆ *Use simplicity. Short, to-the-point answers are better than answers that are lengthy and complicated. But don't hesitate to provide additional information if you think it might increase the reporter's knowledge of you and your sport.*
- ◆ *Don't get side-tracked by a reporter's agenda. She or he may have an opinion about your results, your coaching or how the team should have done. It's up to you to deal with the media in a positive way. Avoid arguing; concentrate on being positive. State your point of view and stick with it.*

- ◆ *Be yourself. If you're a funny person, be funny. If you're quiet, answer the reporter quietly. If you try to become a different person during an interview, you'll become nervous and tense. Be confident.*
- ◆ *Be conscious of what you are saying. Listen carefully to the questions that are being asked. Try to avoid controversy or any comment that may be misconstrued. If you are going to make a controversial statement, be sure you can back it up during and after the interview.*
- ◆ *If the reporter tries to get you to say things you don't want to say, bridge back to your main message by using such phrases as*
"That's not the real issue; the real issue is ..."
"There's an equally important concern, and that is ..."
"There's another issue to consider ..."
- ◆ *Remember that interviews are a great opportunity for you to promote yourself and to thank your sponsors, family, friends and coach.*
- ◆ *Thank the reporter for the interest in you and your sport. You are newsworthy—otherwise, the media wouldn't be interested in you—but politeness goes a long way in developing your reputation as a "good interview".*

SPECIAL TIPS FOR THE BROADCAST MEDIA

It's no secret that the broadcast media play a very large role in influencing how the public interprets, or misinterprets, the information being presented. That's why it's important for athletes and their coaches to consistently project a positive image.

With this in mind, any exposure gained through the broadcast media, whether live or taped, should be approached thoughtfully and tactfully.

For a television interview, dress appropriately and always look at the reporter. Ignore the cameraperson; it's that person's job to find the best angle, and it's yours to supply the best answer. Once you've developed confidence, you will automatically glance at the (fixed) camera, and therefore at your audience, in a natural manner. If you are doing a *"double-ender"*, that is, speaking directly to a camera and hearing questions through an earpiece, focus on one spot on the camera throughout the interview. Try to maintain eye contact with the camera. You will come across in a much more confident and professional manner.

Ask if the interview will be live or taped.

Strive to sound calm and confident. Rapid speech is a sign of anxiety; if an audience detects nervousness in your voice, they are bound to be distracted and uncomfortable. If an interviewer purposely tries to throw you off balance, make every effort not to sound intimidated or annoyed. The audience will respect you and your comments even more if you maintain your composure. Try to avoid slang and such verbal hiccups such as "yah", "eh" and "um".

The media suggest that you treat every mike as live. During a televised competition, broadcasters often place live microphones in the venue to pick up the “sporting sounds” of the event. These include crowd sounds, coach’s comments from the bench and bickering from the penalty box. As a result, it is possible for athletes’ comments and vocal sounds to be broadcast (and later reported by the print media).

Sample interview questions

The media is a competitive business. Local newspapers are rivals every bit as much as the big-city dailies. And they are all in competition with the local radio and television stations. Each outlet wants to be first with the story.

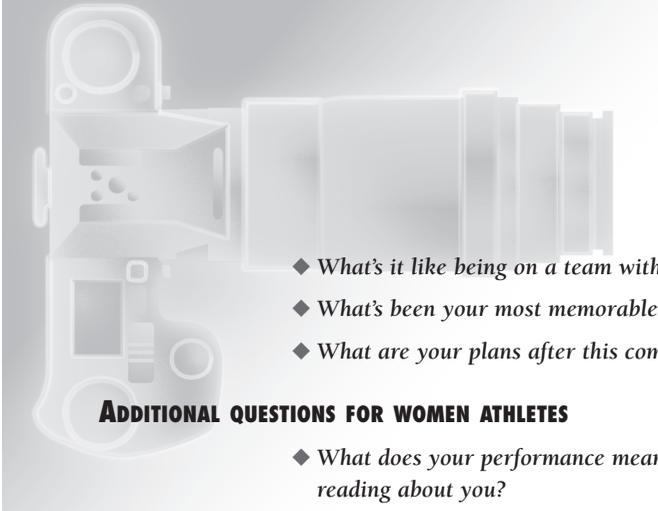
If you are involved in an important story, almost certainly you will have to deal with the ripple effect. Once an item hits the papers, everyone will want to be in on the story, and each journalist will want to outdo the other in telling it. In other words, expect lots of calls and lots of questions.

If the story has a negative spin, be prepared to give your side, but very carefully. Be particularly careful if you are asked to clear the air and make sure you tell the same story, truthfully, to each reporter. Consistency is important.

QUESTIONS FOR ATHLETES

The following are examples of questions the media may ask you in an in-depth interview. They may seem simple and straightforward, but if you offer thoughtful and interesting answers, a small sidebar might become a lead story. Thinking about the answers before an interview will help you feel comfortable and well prepared:

- ◆ *What attracted you to your sport?*
- ◆ *What do you get out of competing at this level?*
- ◆ *What are your other interests?*
- ◆ *What do you think you would be doing now if you weren’t competing?*
- ◆ *What are your goals in school/work/sport?*
- ◆ *How do you feel about going to the Olympics/Paralympics/Canada Games/worlds/nationals?*
- ◆ *What are your chances of winning a medal? Who’s your competition?*
- ◆ *Who’s helped you along the way? Family, friends, a mentor?*
- ◆ *Who’s your coach? What’s he/she like?*
- ◆ *Who supports you?*
- ◆ *Do you have a sponsor? How do you get by financially?*
- ◆ *Describe your training regimen. How much do you train?*

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- ◆ *What's it like being on a team with (name of high-profile athlete)?*
 - ◆ *What's been your most memorable race/game/event?*
 - ◆ *What are your plans after this competition?*

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN ATHLETES

- ◆ *What does your performance mean to girls who are watching, listening to or reading about you?*
- ◆ *Do you believe that girls and women who are interested in sport have enough role models?*
- ◆ *Do you think that women athletes enjoy the same opportunities as male athletes?*
- ◆ *Does the media cover women's sports fairly?*

QUESTIONS FOR COACHES

Experienced coaches suggest that the media are most interested in a coach after a major race when the day's performance comes under intense scrutiny. At such times, the atmosphere is usually emotional, often tense and occasionally elated. Here are some examples of what to expect:

- ◆ *Give us a rundown of how you expect the team to do.*
- ◆ *What are the strengths/weaknesses of the team?*
- ◆ *How tough is the competition? And how well prepared is your team?*
- ◆ *Was there any special preparation for the tournament? Please give us the details.*
- ◆ *Considering the results today, how well do you think the athletes were prepared for competition?*
- ◆ *What went wrong today, coach, and how are you going to fix it?*
- ◆ *The Swiss did extremely well; what are they doing better than we are?*
- ◆ *Enough excuses. How are we going to get back on top?*

THE SCRUM

From time to time, often immediately following your competition, you may find yourself involved in a scrum—surrounded by a question-calling cluster of reporters, with mikes and tape recorders thrust toward your face. The questions in a scrum call for short, to-the-point responses.

To do well in a scrum, athletes should be aware of their stats (their best and worst performances), who the top competitors in their sport are at the national and international levels, who the world champions and world record holders are and any other pertinent information about their event.

Athletes should also be aware of past stories written about them. If there has been a doping infraction, trouble with a coach or some other incident with a

negative side, you should expect questions about it.

Don't use reporters' names during a scrum; if you do, no one else in the electronic media will be able to use your answer.

Here are the types of questions that you may be asked in a scrum:

- ◆ *Was your performance up to expectations?*
- ◆ *What was the key to your success tonight?*
- ◆ *You appeared to flounder at the half-way mark. What went wrong?*
- ◆ *How important is this result for you leading up to the Canada Games?*
- ◆ *Were you nervous? And how did you deal with it?*
- ◆ *How did you prepare?*
- ◆ *What was going through your mind during a key moment in the competition?*
- ◆ *What did the coach tell you just before you got on the blocks?*
- ◆ *What was her message in the dressing room?*
- ◆

***Coach
Les Gramantik
with
decathlete
Richard
Hesketh
and pole
vaulter
Mike Steen***



Mike Redwood for Coaches Report

Dealing with Difficult Issues

Because they are the eyes and ears of their audience, reporters have a responsibility to report issues as well as results. You may not agree with what they have decided to investigate or how they go about it, but that is not your concern. You are being interviewed because you have agreed to provide honest, well-thought-out answers to the questions.

"No COMMENT"

by Lorraine Lafranière

The golden rule of never saying *"no comment"* does not mean that you have to provide an answer to every question thrown your way. When you believe it is inappropriate to answer a question, then say so, but provide an explanation as well. The key is to set clear boundaries for your opinions and areas of responsibility. For example, if you are asked a question about rumours that your coach is about to be fired and you don't wish to comment, then say so: *"My job is to focus on my athletic career and performance. If you are interested in discussing Coach Smith's career, you can speak with our national federation."*

Don't respond to a question by repeating it in the negative. Reporters are skilled at zeroing in on the best quote or sound bite. For example, if you are asked, *"Have you ever been sexually harassed by Coach Smith?"*, do not say, *"No, I was not harassed by Coach Smith."*

Rather, use positive language: *"My athletic career with Coach Smith has been a positive experience. He has provided me with the expertise and guidance I needed to develop to this level."*

Speak only for yourself. Speak on behalf of your teammates only if the question deals with something that you have discussed together and agreed on an answer to.

"Speak only for yourself."



WHEN TO TALK OPENLY

The media can provide excellent vehicles for influencing change. If you are asked to comment on an issue that you believe needs to be aired, weigh your comments carefully. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ *What are my motivations for discussing this issue?*
- ◆ *Are my comments based on fact or rumour?*
- ◆ *Who will I affect by discussing this issue?*
- ◆ *How does discussing this issue affect my future?*

If any of your answers are negative or fuzzy, think again before talking about the issue to a reporter. If you believe that speaking out is the best avenue for constructive change, if you have exhausted all other avenues, if your sport will benefit, and if your motivations are for the betterment of sport and for all the individuals involved, then proceed, but proceed with caution.

GENDER ISSUES

For female athletes, gender issues may come up repeatedly. If you are competing in what has long been considered a male sport, you may be asked if it is an appropriate activity for girls and women. Your answer could be: *“Girls and women should have the right to participate in every sport, including those in which women have not traditionally participated, such as football, wrestling, rugby and our national sport, ice hockey.”*

But why bother, the reporter might ask. Why is it important for girls to play sports? Here are some possible answers:

“Girls and women who play sports have more self-esteem, more positive body images and less depression and are more likely to graduate from high school. Their marks are better and they have less risk of breast cancer and osteoporosis.”

“Sport is where boys have traditionally learned about teamwork, goal-setting and the pursuit of excellence in performance. These are critical skills when it comes to success in the workplace, which is important for both men and women.”

Questions about sexual orientation are frequently asked of coaches as well as athletes, and much more often of females than of males. Your answer could be, *“A person’s sexual orientation is a private matter that has nothing to do with participation in sport. It is inappropriate to judge an athlete, or her or his athletic performance, based on sexual orientation.”* *

OTHER COMMON ISSUES

The following scenarios are presented as examples of difficult issues that could come up in an athlete’s career. Instead of providing stock answers, we offer questions that we hope will help you to clarify your thoughts. Think about how these circumstances would affect you and your teammates. Think about how you would answer questions about these issues and who your answers could affect. How you react and what you say in the tough times will stay with you throughout your career.

Your team is losing consistently and there are rumours that your coach will be fired. Is this issue outside your focus as an athlete, one of many distractions that does not directly involve you? Does answering the question force you into an area that does not concern you? Is it appropriate for you to comment?

The top medal prospect quits, and the media are suggesting that this undermines the confidence of the remaining athletes on the team. Does the decision of one athlete affect the others and how they will train and perform?

* Adapted from “A SPORT LEADER MEDIA HELPER”, published by the Women’s Sport Foundation

The star player overreacts during a crucial game and throws a tantrum. The coach then loses her temper and behaves aggressively towards an official. Is it right for you to publicly judge a teammate's or coach's actions? Is the goal of sport to strive for excellence, understanding that mistakes may be made along the way?

Rumours of sexual abuse in your sport are about to make the headlines. Two athletes accuse their coach of sustained abuse and press charges. Do you have personal experience or knowledge of the situation? If you do, what are your motivations for discussing the situation publicly if due process is under way? What is the best course of action to benefit the people involved?

A teammate is under investigation for taking performance-enhancing drugs. What are the protocols set up by your sport and the investigating body for confidentiality? Is this situation outside your area of focus? How does your discussing the issue affect the case and the future of the athlete in question?

A player collapses and dies. His parents accuse sport officials of negligence. Understanding the pain of loss is part of sport; judging how bereft parents react to loss is not. Whether or not negligence is part of the issue, is it not up to the sport federation to follow due process? If you have some information that may assist the investigation, where is it best directed to ensure that all the facts are reviewed and a responsible decision made?

A team member is charged with a felony. Do you see yourself as a role model for children and youth? Do you have strong opinions about such actions? What message do you want to deliver about your beliefs? Has the accused been treated fairly? Is this behaviour typical of the accused? Do you know all the facts?

A popular player is cut from the team. To create a successful team, athletes, coaches and administrators all have roles to play. What is your role?

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I SAID ..."

From time to time, an article will appear that you believe is misleading, erroneous or unfair. In assessing how to react, begin by asking yourself why you are unhappy:

1. *Does the article have factual errors?*
2. *Does the article include an opinion I disagree with?*
3. *Does the article contain a slanderous statement?*
4. *Am I quoted inaccurately?*

- 1** A factual error is the easiest issue to deal with. First, check that you provided the correct information. Then make a friendly phone call to the reporter, mention that an error has been made and ask for the opportunity to state the facts.
- 2** If the issue is an opinion you disagree with, there may be little you can do, particularly if you have been talking to a columnist. It is a columnist's job to state opinions, and you won't always agree with what is written.
- 3** A slanderous comment is an extreme situation and rarely occurs in sport. It may be difficult for you to assess the situation objectively. Before doing anything, discuss the comment frankly with someone you trust. If you believe the comment is a serious infringement of your rights, contact a lawyer and discuss next steps. Do not call the reporter yourself.
- 4** Inaccurate quotes happen often. With most reporters use a tape recorder; many others do not. In any case, a tape recorder is no guarantee of accuracy.

If you are misquoted, and the quote is controversial, you can take two steps. First, discuss with the reporter what, in your opinion, went wrong. Second, if a retraction is not printed and other reporters are calling you about the issue, work with your sport association to prepare a news release that states the facts.

Whatever the issue, ensure that everyone connected to you, especially your coach (or athletes), sport association and sponsors, are aware of the real story. Don't assume that people will know that you "couldn't have said such a thing". In the case of sponsors, write a factual, non-confrontational letter that spells out your concerns. Include a copy of the offending article and make sure a copy goes to the reporter involved.

COMPLAINTS

Every medium has a mechanism for hearing complaints that you, as a member of the public, may have about its organization or its journalists. A telephone call to the newspaper or the radio or television station in question will provide you with information about the complaints process. For print media, your complaint usually goes through a provincial press council; for electronic media, through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC).



***Distance swimmer
Corinne Liedtke***

Canadian Sport Images



