



CHAPTER 5

Taking Charge of Your Own Media Relations

Personal Reflections on You, Equity and the Media

I have spent most of my life in sport. As an athlete competing in track and field, I made two Olympic teams and I was a bronze medallist in the 1500m at the 1978 Commonwealth Games.

by Penny Werthner

Now, as a sport psychologist, I work closely with many national team athletes. At Nagano in 1998, I was with the short track speed skating team and the women's hockey team, and at Atlanta I was with the canoe/kayak team. I am also deeply involved with CAAWS.

“I wish I had known how to take control of that interview.”

All athletes whose goal is excellence have worked long and hard to reach their goals. For some, your goal is to make an Olympic or Paralympic team. Others are determined to set a personal best. Still others intend to win a world championship medal. Whatever your goals, being on a national team tells the world just how much you have achieved and how hard you've worked. It singles you out and makes you a really important role model for all young Canadians, girls and boys.

It also brings you a lot of media attention.

Because you are an influential role model, it is important to take some time to plan what you want to say to the media when you are interviewed.

There are two factors for both female and male athletes to consider: first, how woman athletes have traditionally been portrayed by the media; second, how you can effectively reach the youngsters of Canada with a positive message about sport.

Let's first talk about how the media has tended to portray women athletes.

We know that women competing on national teams are no different from the men in the skill, dedication, courage and years of hard work they bring to their sport.

Media coverage should reflect these characteristics, but all too often it doesn't. Let me tell you a personal story.

Before the Montreal Games, a reporter asked me how someone *“so small, so petite, so delicate”* could be on an Olympic team. I'm not sure how I responded, except that I was wishy-washy. Later, I thought, *“He never asked me how fast I run; how good I am; how I got to be that good. Nothing, in fact, about my performance. It was all about my appearance.”*

I wish I had known how to take control of that interview. I would have talked about how hard I trained, my speed and power, the injuries I had overcome, the constant support of my parents, the miles I ran to get to the Olympics, the records I had set along the way and my great coach. It was a lost opportunity, on both sides.

And my story is anything but unique.



◀ **Short track speed skater
Nathalie Lambert**

Most athletes would prefer that the media forget about their appearance and concentrate on their skill, their strength and their accomplishments, and I think most readers, listeners and viewers would prefer that sort of information. It would certainly paint a more accurate picture of who and what Canada's athletes are, effectively and realistically.

Here's what athletes and their coaches can do.

Begin by being aware of the situation. Certainly, not all of the media portray athletes in an unseemly manner. In the last few years, many Canadian sports reporters and broadcasters have made serious and successful efforts to avoid writing or speaking in the manner I describe above. To help the process along, during interviews,

- ◆ *talk about yourself as an accomplished athlete*
- ◆ *talk about your training; mention specifics—the hours you spend in the gym, in the rink, on the hill*
- ◆ *talk about the complexities of modern training*
- ◆ *talk about the fun you have, the self-esteem sport develops, the challenges you meet, the thrill of victory and how sport makes you feel*
- ◆ *mention the number of years you have devoted to your sport, battling injuries and setbacks*
- ◆ *talk about how and why you got involved in sport and about your early years as an aspiring athlete*
- ◆ *talk about who inspired you: your mom, your dad, your sister or brother, a friend, a supportive coach*
- ◆ *talk about how important it is for girls to participate in sport*
- ◆ *tell a personal anecdote or two. I am reminded of the terrific track athlete who started out in swimming and wasn't very good, and the star gymnast who switched to diving. Kids love to hear these stories, and so do the journalists on the lookout for a different angle.*

These are all important and fascinating points to make with the media. Not only will there be better and more accurate reporting of you and your sport, but the public's perception of what you do will be based on fact, not fantasy.

Your message will reach the millions of Canadian youngsters—and their parents—who watch your competitions and cheer you on.

Penny Werthner is a practising sport psychologist working with athletes and coaches at all levels.



Media Relations as Practised by a Coach

An interview with Al Morrow, national coach of Canada's women's rowing team



Al Morrow

For some strange reason, I started reading newspapers when I was about seven. I come from a musical and political family—my mother was a voice teacher and my brother's the mayor of Hamilton, Ontario—so I didn't have a background, environmentally or genetically, in sport. We got *THE GLOBE AND MAIL* every morning and *THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR* at night, and I can remember scanning the sports pages and being able to

which came in polyyard. The point is that I always had an idea.

My first Olympic exposure was in 1964 when I was 14. I vividly remember listening to coverage of the Tokyo Olympics on CBC Radio. Roger Jackson and George Hungerford won gold in pairs rowing, and that was probably the first time I heard of the sport. It was the time of Doug Rogers, who won a silver medal in judo, and our great runners, Bill Crothers and Bruce Kidd. Something about their exploits attracted me.

So my early exposure to the media was reading, listening to and eventually watching sports, and this experience was really enjoyable.

The next thing that shaped my opinions of the media happened when the 1976 Olympic rowing team—I was spare on the men's eight—was training on Burnaby Lake. We planned a major interview opportunity with many team members present and invited the Vancouver media. No one showed up. That's when I realized that media relations are not that easy.

When I started coaching, I remembered that incident when I first approached the media. I made my first cardinal rule: *"Communicate 100 per cent to the media. It is my responsibility; not theirs."*

When I joined the University of Victoria's rowing program as a coach in the late 1970s, I analysed the situation and realized I wanted to make rowing a household word. To do that, I had to make information available to the media so that they would understand it on their terms.

For even the smallest regattas, I hand-delivered news releases to Victoria's five media outlets. I always drew attention to any stars who were entered and gave a contact name and number. When journalists showed up, I made sure they were met, preferably by me, so that they would get good and accurate information. After the regatta, I would go to my office, type all the results and deliver them to the outlets. I got into a lot of Monday morning papers, not an easy thing to do.

The point is that I worked on it. Anytime I thought something was unique or newsworthy, whether human interest or hard results, I sent out a release. The system got so good that before long, the Victoria media were phoning me for results.

"No one showed up. That's when I realized that media relations are not that easy."

A lot of people in sport only want media coverage when they win. Another rule I've always followed: *"Don't just report the good stuff."*

I learned a lot over the years and was able to establish really good rapport. The media learned to trust me, which leads me to another major rule: *"Create a bond of credibility by providing good and relevant information."*

One of my pet peeves is when coaches make up their minds that the media are putting pressure on them. How many times do you hear, *"We felt great pressure from the media,"* or *"The media misquoted me."* Those sorts of statements reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship.

During the 1997 world championships, at a meeting of the women's team, I said, *"Tomorrow some of you will be interviewed by the media. It is your choice how you project yourself. If you come third and you're really disappointed, and you stand on the podium slumped over, hands in pockets, looking dejected, keep in mind that CBC Television is picking up the feed to show next week. Ask yourself now what you want tomorrow's image to be, because you will live with that image of a momentary emotional reaction forever. You are free to act any way you want. Just ponder how that will be."*

I think many coaches are reluctant to give such advice, first, because they don't know how to and second, because it seems like the coach is telling the athlete what kind of person to be. Also, coaches are technical by nature and don't want to bother athletes with the after-race business. I think my job as a coach is to help them be better people, and that goes way beyond the race to how they conduct themselves in the other parts of their lives.

I treat interviews as though we are two people sitting in the kitchen, having a friendly conversation, and I suggest that my athletes do the same. It is also wise to remember who is listening to you. Technical detail loses the audience; you need to talk in general terms that people will understand.

I have heard so many athletes (and coaches, too) give bad interviews, say really dumb things, use terrible body language, and I believe it's my job as a coach to prepare people for everything they may encounter, including the media, who often ask difficult questions.

Whenever I do an interview with a reporter I don't know, I ask what kind of questions they're going to ask, and if I'm not comfortable with some of them, I say so and offer suggestions. Nevertheless, you do get asked questions that are awkward or irrelevant, so the secret is to be alert. It's all right to say, *"I'm not quite sure how to answer that, but my opinion in general on that topic is ..."*

Although I no longer handle media relations directly (because Rowing Canada now has a media relations officer), I continue to believe in its importance. It is quite simple: The media can be a great ally, free promoters of our sport, if I do a good job. It doesn't cost me anything more than time.

Why A Media Interview Request Protocol: Swimming Head Coach Dave Johnson Explains — A conversation with Sheila Robertson



WHY DID SWIMMING CANADA DEVELOP A MEDIA PROTOCOL?



Dave Johnson

Invariably, in any major games setting, there's such a cross-section of abilities on the part of the athletes and coaches and an equal cross-section of abilities on the part of the media that if we don't work within a framework, the media are confused about who is the best person to answer a specific question.

Often in the past questions would be put to people who thought they were informed. Their answer would turn out to be off base. But, with no malice intended on anyone's part, their information ended up appearing as the position of the Canadian team. To avoid that confusion and to try to provide a protective umbrella over the team that allows coaches to coach and swimmers to compete, we've uncluttered the process. At Swimming Canada, the lead spokespeople are our chief executive officer and our president; if the topic is the national team program, it's me; when we're talking about athletes and how they felt they performed, the answers are provided by the respective swimmer-coach tandem.

In situations where we cross the line about such topics as drugs in sport, the athletes do need to be informed, because they are our front-line representatives. If they are uninformed, then we are not doing a really good job of promoting our sport in a positive fashion. That's why we covered every parameter when we set up the media protocol. We also understand that the media need their stories, and if you want coverage and exposure, you had better be prepared to play on a professional level.

WAS THERE ANYTHING SPECIFIC THAT SPARKED THE DECISION TO HAVE A MEDIA PROTOCOL?

In their efforts to scoop each other, we used to find various media in the locker rooms talking to the swimmers. The swimmers had no space where they could find privacy.

We also had situations where the team spokespeople might be coaches, who often framed their remarks based on how their own athletes performed. Consequently, it was a bit of a biased position. It is important that people who speak on behalf of the national team are seeing the bigger picture. That's what we've tried to anticipate with this strategy.

HOW HAVE THE MEDIA RESPONDED? DO THEY EVER SUGGEST THAT YOU'RE BEING CONTROLLING?

We don't restrict access, not at all. We work as cooperatively as we can with the media, and a large part of this is because of our media relations expert, Penny Joyce. She has an excellent working relationship with the media and they know that if they need something, they can get it. If they can't get the story, they are told immediately; we don't wait until it is time for them to file. Common courtesy and respect are the operating axioms.

YOU ALSO PROVIDE MEDIA TRAINING TO YOUR NATIONAL TEAM, DON'T YOU?

Yes, and you'll remember that we started back to 1976 when we did mock interviews with you as team information officer and sport psychologist Brent Rushall. That was when we really became aware of the need, and we were pretty good with it into the '70s, but slackened in the early '80s. Since the late '80s, we've been building on our efforts.

We are a high-profile sport, and it is important that when our athletes go into the public forum they are able to present themselves professionally. If they can come across as being very confident and capable, it reflects very positively on the sport and has an impact on the support and sponsorship side of our endeavours.



**Swimming
Team Media
Interview
Request
Protocol**

1. The media request is directed to the team media attaché.
2. The request is communicated to the team leader or head coach.
3. The team leader or head coach receives approval for the interview from the swimmer's staff coach.
4. The time and place for the interview are established so that everything is as convenient as possible for the swimmer.
5. The team leader or head coach responds to the media attaché.
6. The media attaché responds to the reporter and sets up the interview.

TEAM SPOKESPERSONS

On team's overall performance:
head coach

On swimmer's performances:
swimmer's staff coach or, if not available, head coach

*On behalf of Swimming
Canada Natation:*
**chief executive office
or president**

On controversial issues:
**head coach or chief
executive officer**

Sport–Media Relationships: Basic Rights and Responsibilities of Athletes and Coaches

Athletes, coaches and media personnel are in the same business: producing sport. However, the needs and desires of athletes and coaches as **newsmakers** can be vastly different from the needs and desires of the **newsgatherers** and entertainment media.

by Margaret MacNeill



It is important to practise media skills and to acquire a basic understanding of the sport–media relationship before arriving at major events. Just as time and concerted effort is spent to train the body for high performance, so too should the athlete and coach hone interview and public relations skills.

Unfortunately, because the media often ignore national teams outside major event periods, athletes and coaches may arrive unprepared to deal with media pressures and may harbour misconceptions about the role of the media. The Athletes' Rights and Media Relationships Project that I conducted in 1994, for

example, found that most national athletes believe that the media should be cheerleaders and that they should equally cover the full range of sporting events. Members of the media responded to this finding by reminding athletes and coaches that media primarily cater to their editors, producers and audiences.

Still, the media are invaluable for telling your story, promoting your sport, and investigating pressing issues of the day. It is important, therefore, that you understand your rights when dealing with the media and are sensitive to the responsibilities of being a public figure on the national or world stage.

“Open discussion with the media is always your right; open discussion with your team is your duty.”

BASIC RIGHTS OF ATHLETES AND COACHES

In Canada, all people have the fundamental human right to freedom of expression.

However, it is unlawful in Canada to promote hatred against a group of people, to unfairly harm someone's good reputation or to dishonestly spread malicious gossip. You have the right to protect yourself against libellous words and depictions of your image displayed in public locations (which includes media coverage).

Canadian laws and charters may not protect you while competing in other nations or protect you from inappropriate media coverage outside of Canada.

Be mindful of your contractual obligations:

- ◆ *Have you signed away your full freedom of expression?*
- ◆ *Are you expected to refrain from making public criticisms of your team?*
- ◆ *Do media first have to contact your media attaché, press chief, team leader, agent or coach before interviewing you?*
- ◆ *Do you have the right to contact the media without first clearing the request with your sport's officials?*

Carefully study your contracts before signing them. Be aware of your obligations regarding contact with the media, clauses permitting your image to be used in future promotions and limits on individual expression, body language and fashion. Ask a lawyer to double-check that team contracts, sponsorship agreements and employee contracts do not conflict.

Contact your team's media attaché or press chief to learn about the specific media protocol for your team, your temporary living quarters and competition venues. Request insights about the treatment you can expect from media from different countries and about where the media will be located at your venue. Ask for interview tips to enhance your media savvy.

Talk openly with your team members and officials about hot issues that the media might be interested in. Clarify who should deal with certain topics if you do not want to. In the Athletes' Rights project, it was revealed that 25 per cent of athletes regularly withheld information during media interviews because they feared punishment from their coaches or sport federations, yet these athletes were not actually sure if officials were worried about information or opinions becoming public. Honest discussion with the media is always your right; open discussion with your team is your duty.

BASIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF ATHLETES AND COACHES

Know your rights and obligations as a team member or official under contract and as a national figure in the public's eye.

Express yourself honestly. Just as you expect your good reputation to be upheld in media coverage, you are responsible for all comments you utter in public or to the media. Both you and the media outlet that publishes a libellous comment can be held accountable.

Be aware of your physical safety around the media.

- ◆ *If media equipment or personnel are dangerously situated in your competition venue or training spaces, the coach should contact venue personnel or sporting officials.*
- ◆ *Watch your step around cables, cameras and cranes in media work areas.*
- ◆ *Be careful of the "push, shove and shout" that may occur in media scrums after high-profile events (or because of fans or paparazzi in public areas). Get advice from team leaders when considering strategies for your media game plan. Request extra security escorts if you need a greater degree of separation from the media and spectators.*
- ◆ *You are not obliged to reveal personal information such as your home phone number to the media. Control your privacy for reasons of safety and to prevent harassment.*

TREAT THE MEDIA KINDLY—THEY ARE HUMANS, TOO! Although you may feel the pressure of competition, the media have their own headaches to deal with at major sporting events, including tight deadlines, security checks, technological breakdowns, transportation problems and access to venues and people. ❖

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