

How Doors are Being Opened Across Canada for Women Who Coach Biathlon

Jacqueline Akerman didn't plan to become a coach. In fact, she nearly walked away from sport altogether. After years of competing in biathlon and distance running, she was ready to move on. But one conversation changed everything.

"I told my coach, Paul Dorotich, that I was done," she recalls. "I said I'd maybe go back to running or become a teacher. And he just looked at me and said, 'No, you're coaching biathlon.' I thought, 'No way, I've only just started in this sport. I don't know enough to coach.'"

But Paul saw something in her. A week later, he returned with a job offer. He had gone to the provincial board and created an assistant coaching position just for her. "It wasn't a big role, just a small honorarium," Jacqueline says, "but it was huge. He believed in me. He made space for me."

That moment launched a career that's now spanned over thirty years. Jacqueline has coached across multiple disciplines, mentored athletes, and coached Canadian teams at events such as the Canada Games, World Junior Championships, IBU World Cup, and Youth Olympic Games.

Thirty years ago, women in coaching, especially in biathlon, were something of an anomaly. But thanks to initiatives like Biathlon Canada's Women in Coaching Development Grant funded by the Government of Canada's funding for Gender Equity, Diversity Inclusion initiatives, more and more women are pursuing coaching in both biathlon and cross-country skiing.

Jacqueline remembers walking into her first World Cup coaching box in 2004 and realizing she was the only woman there. "Heads were turning. People were doing double takes. I thought, 'Why are they looking at me?' And then I realized... I was the only woman."

Still, she wasn't entirely alone. "There were a few women coaches I noticed early on, Gail Niinimaa and Robyn Williams. I looked up to them. They understood coaching as a woman and were generous with their advice. They helped by example and shared their challenges, which were greater than mine, I think. That encouraged me to stay the course."

The grant gave her confidence, tools, and credibility. "Could I have done it without the grant? Maybe. But having it made me feel like someone believed in me. That made me work even harder."

Last year, seven coaches who identify as women had the opportunity to apply for funding through Biathlon Canada's Women in Coaching Development Grant. What made this grant unique was its flexibility. Rather than prescribing how the funds should be used, Biathlon Canada invited each coach to define their own development path.

“We uniquely asked the applicants what they wanted to use the grant for, it wasn’t prescribed by us,” said Biathlon Canada CEO Kerry Dankers. “That way, they could explore or grow in the areas they felt were the best for them.”

Jacqueline Ackerman used her grant to deepen her technical expertise in rifle maintenance and ski grinding. Other recipients focused on advancing their expertise through Advanced Coaching Diploma’s and certificates, another trained in lactate sampling, and one developed skills to better support Para biathlon athletes.

For Allie Dickson, the grant opened the door to sport nutrition education. “I consistently hear from coaches at training centres that the thing athletes struggle with the most as they transition from high school to full-time training is understanding their nutritional needs,” she said.

With the grant, Allie earned an internationally recognized Sports Nutrition certification. “I wanted to be able to better support my athletes by having intelligent, evidence-based conversations that could drive performance and give them peace of mind that they’re doing the right things to support their health.”

From technical skills to advanced diplomas, the Women in Coaching Development Grant is a powerful example of Biathlon Canada’s commitment to building an inclusive coaching culture where women are empowered to lead, grow, and thrive.

Jacqueline has seen the shift firsthand. “More women are coaching. More organizations are recognizing the need for equity,” she said. “And grants like this are helping open doors.”

Because when those doors stay open, the sport, and the people within it, grow stronger.