

Reimagining high performance sport

*A Long Win story by Laurence Halsted from his interview with
2021 Canadian Olympic rowing Champion Andrea Proske*

Connection, discovery and the triumph of love over fear

"10 strokes for Michelle!"

"10 strokes for Kathleen!"

Those were the words of coxen of the Canadian women's 8 rowing boat that took them over the line at the Tokyo Olympics to win the gold medal, just 0.91 seconds ahead of the New Zealand crew. This was the first time in 29 years that Canada had won that event – the previous time involved the Kathleen named in that last, heartfelt call. More about her later. This win was particularly impressive because just two years previous, right before the Covid pandemic struck, the Canadian crew were at best, outside shots for a medal at the Games. Then the world closed down, racing stopped, and everyone had to find their feet in a new world of training for an Olympics in isolation from their entire squad.

But that is only scratching the surface of the incredible journey of this crew over those two years, that led them to an historic and profound gold medal, but from a far darker starting point.

I had gotten a brief glimpse of the story when I interviewed one of the winning crew, Andrea Proske, to become a mentor in TAP's global mentoring programme last year. What she told me then about the culture that their coach, Michelle Darvill, had fostered, stuck with me. It was obvious something special had gone down. Then, more recently, I read the book, *Reinventing Organisations* (dull title, fantastic book), which inspired me to write about the lessons we could take from the most maverick, pioneering businesses that I believed we could put to brilliant use in an elite sport context. A very quick recap is that these organisations are characterised by three breakthrough practices:

- **Integrating wholeness** – bringing our whole selves to our endeavours, allowing us to connect on a deeper level with those around us and the world in general
- **Self-management** – a radical sharing of responsibility and autonomy to those people actually doing the work. No hierarchy, no middle management, no bosses making decisions for those beneath them.
- **Evolutionary purpose** - a long-term, higher purpose for the existence of the organisation, related to the positive difference it wants to make in the community or the world

The organisations that were role modelling these breakthroughs achieve astounding results – greater employee retention, engagement and satisfaction, at the same time as rapid growth and

high profits – basically all the things businesses care about. They are making work more humane, meaningful and fun, and that leads to all sorts of knock-on benefits.

I was convinced that there must be sports teams or organisations out there that are applying similar practices to great effect, so I decided to try to find them. I wanted to see if there was evidence of high-performance sport being done in a compassionate, fun and meaningful way, while also achieving top class results.

My first thought was back to the story I had heard from Andrea Proske about the experience of her crew around the Tokyo Games. So, I got in touch with Proske, and with Darvill, the coach of the team, to find out more detail about what went down. My hypothesis was that their approach would, at least partly, mirror the breakthroughs of those pioneering organisations, described above. In fact, what I heard about their crew's culture and practices positively hummed in resonance with all three of the breakthroughs. But to understand how they got to that place, it is important to set the scene of where they were coming from.

Darvill was first brought into the team as assistant coach in 2019. She started working under a head coach who led with a very different style. He had a far more traditional approach to elite sport, where athletes were supposed to grow tough and resilient through brutal and humiliating training and treatment. Team members were pitted against each other, physical punishments were meted out for indiscretions, training scores and results were kept secret from everyone, booking time with the physiotherapist was considered a sign of weakness.

The culture could be characterised as being rife with fear and anxiety, with a single, authoritarian coach ruling over the minutiae of the lives of the athletes, while encouraging them to see each other as rivals to be beaten.

Then in February 2020, this coach was removed from his position, Darvill stepped up, and everything changed.

Immediately, the world outside changed too as the pandemic took hold and the whole team was separated into its individual parts. Darvill's challenge to band this group of women together just got a lot harder, as all communication between them would have to take place over zoom and WhatsApp. She told me that her number one priority during that period was to create the space that would keep hold of those team members that might be tempted to retire or dropout.

Now you have heard the backdrop, this is where we'll pick up the story, exploring how this crew embodied the three breakthroughs of the most pioneering organisations in the world.

Integrating wholeness

Given the upheaval created by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, Darvill recognised that the athletes were going to struggle and adapt in very different ways, and as Proske tells it, she gave them space to stop and find their feet at their own pace. In fact, Proske remembers that it was only after a month or so that Darvill even asked her whether she had started exercising at all. That certainly is a relaxed approach, when you consider that at that point the Olympics was still due to be taking place in 17 months' time. Darvill would set daily tasks for the group, but they would be as simple as to go for a walk outside or share their favourite workout tune.

The main focus of the Zoom and WhatsApp communication was about creating space for the women to open up and share how they were feeling, their concerns and anxieties. Proske felt that entire period was far less about the workouts than it was about fostering *connection* between the group members. People were encouraged to show their true, unpolished selves, being vulnerable with each other, and this had the effect of steadily growing and deepening the spirit of the team.

The group completed personality profile assessments and shared their strengths with each other. They co-created fun nicknames with and for each other. Proske relays how Darvill brought in a running coach to give some advice on technique, not because it would mean they could train harder but because she wanted them to have the knowledge and skills to be able to continue exercise, life-long. Darvill was even integrating their future lives into their present situation.

Self-management

Going from having every aspect of their lives controlled and manipulated by the old head coach, Darvill's leadership style could not have felt more different. In her own words, "They were all grown-ups, and I wanted to treat them like that. I believed that they want to do what's best".

I was half expecting to hear that the athletes were given responsibility for deciding every aspect of their training programmes, but that wasn't the case. However, a few key aspects of the culture stood out in relation to self-management. In the start, during lockdown, the athletes were allowed to find the training routine and structure that worked for them. Later on, when any of the crew wanted to get time off for any personal reasons, Darvill would always be open to it, as long as they explained their reasoning to the group and asked for their permission. When it was time to come back to train together as a squad, Darvill asked the group what would be reasonable to expect for everyone to show up. The group decided that a date range made sense, so people could turn up any time within that period, but they had to be 100% ready to go when they did. Darvill handing over decisions like this to the group ensured far greater buy-in and motivation than if she had simply taken them herself.

Performance data was made public to everyone in the squad. Gone was the secrecy of the previous regime, where no one knew where they really stood in relation to the others and the coach held all the cards, to be replaced by complete transparency. Full information transparency is, coincidentally, a key practice in those pioneering organisations I read about. Trust grows quicker when there are no secrets. Proske said that Darvill was a master at making sure the crew felt heard in important decisions, so they trusted her implicitly when she picked a line.

Evolutionary purpose

The crew spent time defining their vision, mission and values. It was no surprise to hear that values such as kindness and fun were prominent. Darvill's own purpose is clear – "*to support athletes discovering how to be their best*" and "*to guide them to taking ownership of their journey*". But something Proske told her teammates at one point made me think that their higher purpose was about something even greater than becoming brilliant athletes and people. She told them "*I am so*

motivated to prove that Michelle's approach wins medals". For these rowers, who had been through something akin to a toxic, abusive relationship with the former head coach, to see that it doesn't have to be like that, and in fact, high performance sport can be something beautiful and full of harmony, this was about showing that love can win out over fear. If that sounds a bit too soft and cuddly for the harsh world of elite sport, well it makes perfect sense that an uplifting, supportive environment would get the most out of people. Darvill wanted to create an environment where "people were super excited to be around". As if following from that thought, Proske reflected, "It is incredible how much I could push myself to my limit when I didn't have the emotional baggage weighing me down". This highlights the power of a community built on connection, support and love, to be able to push each other to the limits and weather all storms. And there was a major storm brewing, one which tested the group's spirit to the max.

6 weeks before the Tokyo Olympic opening ceremony, the squad were on their final training camp, at the stunning, isolated lake in Strathcona Park, on Vancouver Island. The crew headed out to do some road cycling training and three of them were involved in a serious crash. Lisa Roman had road rash from head to toe and Avalon Wasteneys was badly concussed, but Kasia Gruchalla-Wesierski came off worst, breaking her collar bone and requiring 56 stitches and a metal plate put in. The shock and sheer uncertainty of what was going to happen reverberated through the team. They gathered in Darvill's cabin by the lake and all of their connection training came to the fore, as they shared openly their deepest worries and doubts about what this would mean for them. It was an incredible test at the last minute, on the back of all the other tests that this group had overcome. What they had built together was so strong that they were able to navigate this period with grace, as they expanded the group to include an extra crew member, Becca Zimmerman, should she be needed.

Unbelievably though, Gruchalla-Wesierski passed the fitness tests and made it back into the boat just days before the first Olympic race. She was originally told by her doctors that she wouldn't be able to row for the rest of the year, and in the end, it was just seven weeks between breaking her collar bone and standing on the top step of the podium with an Olympic gold medal around her neck.

"10 strokes for Michelle!" – this call makes a lot of sense knowing more about the two-year transformation of this crew under Michelle Darvill's guidance.

"10 strokes for Kathleen!" – The night before the Olympic final, the crew gathered by the remembrance tree in the Olympic village, together with Canada's Chef de Mission, Marnie McBean. McBean had been in the victorious women's 8 from the Barcelona 92 Games, along with Kathleen Heddle. Kathleen had passed away earlier that year from cancer, and McBean explained to the crew that they would be honouring Kathleen's legacy when they took to the water the next day.

When they lined up on the start line, with dark, rumbling clouds overhead, one of the crew looked up and said, "Kathleen's watching, girls", and they were away.

I asked both Darvill and Proske what they believed contributed to that gold medal, that we hadn't already spoken about. Proske said that the big secret behind it all was Darvill's moral compass.

The Long Win

Cath BISHOP

Darvill said that the women all truly enjoyed the process, and that the process was one of self-discovery and that of discovering their teammates.

We have heard so much about how a no-compromise focus on the process, and the likes of marginal gains have led the best teams to glory. This story shows us how a culture founded primarily on connection and discovery, guided by deeply rooted morals, can be even more effective.

Blog written by Laurence Halsted, Director of Mentoring at The True Athlete Project, and author of 'Becoming a True Athlete, from an interview with Andrea Proske, Canadian Olympic Rowing Champion in Tokyo 2021 and former mentor with The True Athlete Project.