

## **Sophia Marnik:**

# **Making an Individual Sport into a Team Sport**

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*This article is part of the "Women in Biathlon Series". With excellence and leadership at the forefront of Biathlon Canada's values, we will be featuring some of the great female athletes, coaches, officials and volunteers that support us in sport and help build our close-knit community. Follow us on social media @biathloncanadaofficial to keep up with each story as we hear from women across the country.*



Biathlon is more than just a sport. It's witnessing the accomplishments of an athlete when they hit their targets; it's seeing the community come together during hard times and developing skills that can be taken from the range and into young kids' lives.

Sophia Marnik, who fills the role of Secretary on the Biathlon Yukon Board of Directors, has seen the impacts of the sport over the last decade.

"I started officiating at races, as you do as a parent," said Marnik "Then I was offered the opportunity to come and learn the computer system and thought that would be way more cozy than to be outside at the range."

As part of her role, she organizes volunteers and officials to make sure events and races run smoothly.

In a year where there were event cancellations, delays and uncertainties, Marnik dealt with them head on, and made a positive out of a negative. Recently, she and the Yukon Biathlon team turned an unfortunate race cancellation into a booming success.

"COVID-19 hit mid-March 2020 and we were supposed to have the Arctic Winter Games," Marnik explained. "We were going to have athletes come from Alaska, Russia and the Northern people of Scandinavia. It was cancelled 10 days before the Games were supposed to start. It was devastating for everybody."

Knowing athletes were looking forward to the Games and see their training pay off, she and Biathlon Yukon – with the guidance of Biathlon British Columbia and Biathlon Canada – were able to safely facilitate their own Games in just two months.

"We knew we couldn't do outside [leaving the territory] competition so we created in-house competition and called it, 'Grey Mountain Cup'. We ran full competitions, with 30 volunteers – that was COVID-19 safe," said Marnik.

Organizing the Games gave the community a sense of hope and stability during a time where uncertainty lingered.

"These athletes had goals to work towards and they could keep their training up. It was just a really great opportunity for these young people to continue to compete in a year where no one else was able to."

Despite the success of the Games and the dedication that went into putting it together, she knows there is still more work to be done.

As the sport continues to grow, so does its popularity. Marnik explains that their facilities cannot support the number of prospective athletes and says many are currently on waitlists.

"We are at capacity for the upcoming year. We're limited by the number of rifles and the number of coaches that we can get out. It's good, but it's challenging having to say no to people and that's not what we want to do. We're basically running all on volunteers."

Seeing how many people are interested in the sport is an exciting challenge, but she knows it's not the only one.

As a woman sitting on the board, she hopes she can use her position as a catalyst to diversify the sport and ensure that no one is overlooked, no matter their race, ethnicity, gender or personal pronouns.

"I would like to see our club grow even more and have more coaches involved and more coaches that are diverse, and that are women and young men [...] The more diverse we can be, the more people see themselves in that sport or being able to do that activity."

Marnik knows how impactful the sport can be on a community and strives for everyone and anyone to be included and accepted.

"We call it, 'the best individual team sport' because our kids are so enthusiastic for each other's wins. Yes, they compete against each other but they're so positive and they're so encouraging of each other, and when we go out [of the Yukon] they cheer for everyone. They're just so enthusiastic for other people's success."

For Marnik, it's the sentiment of competing as one but coming together as a team and community that makes biathlon in the territory so special.

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