

Gail Niinimaa: Paving a Path for the Future of Biathlon

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August 3, 2021

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.



Women’s sports have come a long way in the last half century—biathlon in particular. Just ask Gail Niinimaa, Team Canada athlete turned Canada Games coach, who witnessed the original inequalities in the sport, and can easily sniff out which ones remain. Now, the biathlon pioneer helps other female biathlon coaches identify these inequalities, and gives them the tools to combat them.

When Niinimaa was in her early 20s, she traveled to Norway to focus on her studies, but instead fell in love with cross country skiing. When she returned home to Canada, she continued skiing and eventually took up biathlon. She took a great liking to the sport because it wasn’t like the others she had participated in growing up, she said.

“It wasn’t only about the fastest horse,” explained Niinimaa. “You had to actually shoot, and depending on how well you shot and what penalty you had, it wasn’t always clear who would win.”

Niinimaa was one of four women selected to compete in the Canadian championships, which was the only large-scale biathlon competition for women at the time. A few years later, in 1984, the World [European] championships were introduced, and Niinimaa made the national team in both 1985 and 1986.

In 1986, Niinimaa achieved a respectable 5th place, but for her, that wasn’t the only memorable event of that championship. Rather, it was also the inequalities she faced that stayed at the forefront of her mind.

“The men’s team, who was preparing for the Olympics in two years [1988], got to stay at the 5-star hotel on the top of the ski hill, and the women’s team—we stayed down in the dorm,” said Niinimaa. “We didn’t

see the coaches. The coaches were up with the men—they weren't with the women. And there was just this big divide of equity within the team."

After this championship, Niinimaa retired as a biathlete. She figured it wasn't likely that there would be a women's biathlon event at the next Olympics in 1988, or even 1992. Instead, she began taking officiating and coaching development courses.

As an official and coach, Niinimaa continued to recognize the importance of equality in biathlon, and having women's biathlon introduced at the Olympics. She knew that without taking these crucial steps, the sport would have trouble growing into its potential. So, the retired biathlete made a point to give suggestions about how to elevate the sport wherever she could.

Niinimaa offered ideas like having a world cup or finding equal funding, but they were often shut down. She recalled a time when she suggested having a mixed relay, and someone told her that men and women would never compete in the same race, yet, now it's one of the most important races for biathlon teams across the world. Niinimaa knew she was onto something with her insightful thoughts, and felt it was important to continue advocating for women's biathlon.

So, when Niinimaa heard about Biathlon Canada's Women in Coaching Mentorship program, she didn't have a second thought about volunteering. She was assigned two mentees—one from British Columbia, the other from Newfoundland.

"It kind of blew me away, that there were 35 or 40 people in this whole coaching thing, and I hardly knew any of them. Like wow, there were a lot of new coaches, and it was really great to see so many more [coaches]."

Niinimaa took it as an opportunity to teach the new female biathlon coaches not only about the sport itself, but also about the challenges they could face within the sport, such as biases, cliques and inclusivity, and she offered to be an outlet for the coaches to come and ask questions.

"When things are new and starting, there's a lot of growing pains. So, what I was hoping to help them with is avoiding those growing pains," said Niinimaa. "As a young female coach, sometimes you are afraid to ask [questions] because you don't want to look like you're stupid. So, you kind of pretend that you know, and you really don't, so I [wanted to] help them with some of that."

As Niinimaa looks to the future of biathlon, she certainly has large hopes. Although there is now a women's biathlon Olympic event, there still hasn't been a female coach to the Olympics. Niinimaa believes that will soon change. Though the retiree doesn't foresee it being her, Niinimaa says she knows that whichever female is the first, more will follow.

As she put it, "it just takes one."

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