

Nichole Andre: Building a Biathlon Community From the Ground Up

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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.



Up until last year, Nichole Andre had never skate-skied, shot a biathlon rifle, nor had she coached a sports team. Fast forward not even two years later, Andre is now a certified community coach, can skate-ski, is learning how to shoot a biathlon rifle, and most notably, has brought a biathlon club to a town just outside of Saskatoon.

All of these opportunities came to Andre after her son, who was 12-years-old at the time, was introduced to the biathlon by his friend at school. After just two training sessions he was hooked—and so was Andre, by association.

However, soon after, the biathlon club in their town closed. Andre and three other families, including the family that got Andre’s son into biathlon in the first place, began commuting over two hours out of the city to a new range that didn’t have a club. This changed quickly.

“[Biathlon Saskatchewan and the Saskatoon Wildlife Federation] handed [the range] off to us four families and said ‘hey, you guys need to start this club,’ and we were happy to do that,” explained Andre.

With each family varying in biathlon, coaching and programming experience, and with another small group in the area who was also without a club, all the families came together to start the Saskatoon Wildlife Biathlon Club.

In starting the club, Andre was responsible for administrative duties, like getting athletes registered, scheduling programs, organizing practices, and creating a website. Being in the middle of a pandemic, there were extra hoops to jump through, like setting up screening forms and contact tracing.

On top of that, the club was also short on coaches. Since Andre had acquired a general interest in biathlon when her son began the sport, she started taking community coaching courses.

"It was really good. I enjoyed meeting the other people that were there to take the coaching training—that was pretty cool. And I learnt a lot of the basic shooting skills that I didn't know at that level of detail, and kind of how they break down the shooting skills—that was really good as well," says Andre.

Not only was Andre a new coach, but she also entered the position completely cold with no prior knowledge of the sport and no skill or experience to back her up. With biathlon being a male-dominated sport, many people would've been intimidated to step into this sort of position.

Andre was used to it.

She explained that as a civil engineer, she was often the only female around since early in her career. Her key to success was always understanding that confidence means not being scared to ask questions, and knowing that being frustrated or confused is just part of the learning process, and ultimately makes you more relatable to others.

"I tell the kids that I'm learning too," says Andre, "And use this ELMO model: E for effort, L for learning, M for mistakes, and then O is whatever ridiculous thing you want to come up with on that particular day. And the coaches always go first, and I tell them, 'This is the mistake I made, this is what I've learnt today.'"

Looking back, Andre has no regrets, and she's proud of the club that she and her small group of biathlon parents built. There's one key moment that sticks out in her mind when she looks back on the journey of how she got here—a journey that began with her knowing nothing about biathlon, but ended with her being able to skate-ski, shoot a rifle and say she started a biathlon club.

"I remember driving home from the coaching training last July, and I was like OK, if I flashed back five years, never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed I would be driving home from training to be a biathlon coach. It's just kind of a path your life takes, which is pretty neat."

Andre isn't sure where this path will take her next, but if it involves biathlon, she knows she'll be pretty content.

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