

# Al Morrow

## Career Summary and Interview

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What makes a sports hero? A sports hero must be athletically excellent. They must also have charisma; a quality to inspire enthusiasm to themselves and the sport. A sports hero is a role model whose identity is conveyed across society. This being said, Al Morrow is correctly considered a sports hero. In fact, he is a member of Sport Hamilton's Sport Hero Banner Series. A greater look at his career will explain this impressive title. Morrow is an accomplished athlete and coach and has greatly furthered the sport of rowing in Canada.

Al Morrow was born on December 28, 1949 in Hamilton Ontario. He always gravitated towards sports and played a variety of them while growing up in Hamilton. He began rowing in 1965 at Central High School in Hamilton out of the Leander Rowing Club (6). His home rowing club from 1970 to 1972 was in St. Catharine's (12). He rowed while attending The University of Western Ontario from 1969 to 1973 (6), during which time UWO won three Ontario Universities Athletic Association Championships (2). Morrow was a member of Canada's National Team in 1970, 1971, and from 1974 to 1976 (6). He participated in three World Championships: 1970, 1974, and 1975; in 1975 he won a bronze medal at the Pan-Am Games in Montreal (2). His involvement as an athlete culminated in 1976 when he was a member of the Canadian national rowing team as a spare at the Olympics in Montreal (6).

Morrow was an accomplished athlete, but it is through his coaching that he has and continues to make a significant impact on the sport of rowing. After the '76 Olympics, when Morrow was 26, he stopped rowing competitively (6). He moved to western Canada and became the head coach of the men's rowing team at the University of British Columbia while attending the university's graduate program in Physical Education. Though he was a young coach, he experienced early success and in 1977 he was named assistant coach with the National team.

Morrow became head coach of the University of Victoria's rowing team in 1978. Over the course of the next decade (until 1988), he helped the team win two championships (9). During this time he became National head coach starting with the 1980 Olympic team (as an employee of Rowing Canada). In 1985 Rowing Canada established 2 centers for National teams, the men's in Elk, British Columbia and the women's in London, Ontario. In the winter of 1987 it was determined by the technical director of Rowing Canada, Jim Joy, that Morrow would help the women's rowing team (6). This initially began as a six month assignment to help Rowing Canada's women's program, but as Morrow himself describes,

...it led to a really good fit... It was interesting that it kind of clicked. I think it was a good time in my life. I had a lot of experience as a rower. I already had at that point about eleven years of experience coaching, but mostly more as an assistant National team coach, or a club coach, or a university level coach. So I was building up this resume of experience. And this coincided with a lot of other things in my life... I got married in 1987. We had our first child in 1989. I turned 40 in 1990... I've often said by the time you are forty, if you have been coaching already for fourteen years you've still got a lot of youthful enthusiasm... but you've also built up a lot of wisdom that you have built up over many, many years of trial and error... It was just a good switch that worked. (6)

He worked with the team that was preparing for the 1988 Olympics as an assistant coach, although he did not go to the Olympics with them. Morrow continued to work well with this team and officially became the head coach on January 1, 1990 (6). During this time (from 1988 to 1989) he moved to London and continued to be a full time employee of Rowing Canada as the head coach of the Women's National Rowing team (6). Morrow's main job since 1988 has been working at the National Team Women's Center in London. On the side, he is the head coach of the women's rowing team at the University of Western Ontario. In 1992, the Olympic women's rowing team won four medals at Barcelona; Morrow was put into the world spotlight when Marnie McBean and Kathleen Heddle won three gold medals. In 1993 Morrow was inducted into the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame (2).

On February 24, 1995 Morrow received the prestigious *Meritorious Service Medal* (civil division). He received it because,

Mr. Morrow, head coach of Canada's national rowing team, coached three multiple women's crews to place first at both the 1991 World Championships and the 1992 Olympic Games. In the world of amateur sports he is known as a builder who encourages individual achievement as the basis for total team commitment. His dedicated and successful leadership has been an inspiration to Canadian athletes. (5)

His rowers won three Olympic medals in 1996 in Atlanta (4). In 1999, he was recognized by the International Rowing Federation (FISA) as Coach of the Year (8). Morrow was coach of the women's eight in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games who won a bronze medal (8). He received the *Jack Donahue Award* for service to Canadian Coaching in 2001(7). In 2002, The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) awarded him with the *Geoff Gowan Award* which recognized his lifelong contribution to coaching development (11). The description of this award is a good overall explanation of Morrow's coaching accomplishment: "It is awarded to a coach who has presented a positive public image of coaching and enhanced the role of the coach with the Canadian public." (11)

In 2003, Morrow coached the national women's team at the World Championships in Italy to a bronze medal (9). In 2005, he was honoured by the Western women alumnae with the *Alfrida Berzins Award* in the builder's category (3). In 2006, he was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame (3). Also in 2006, Western's women's rowing team won the National Championship under Morrow's coaching (4). In 2008, Morrow coached the lightweight women's doubles who won bronze at the Beijing Olympics (8). He received the *2008 Petro-Canada Coaching Excellence Award* from the CAC as the coach of Tracey Cameron, Olympic bronze medallist in lightweight double (10). Morrow currently lives in London with his wife Julia and four children, all between the ages of 12 and 19 (6).

If we consider his career, his achievements are both impressive and consistent. He has coached National teams to 9 Olympic medals. He was named Ontario Male Coach of the Year in 1991, '92, '96, '98, and '99 (1). He has coached World and Olympic medallists notably Marnie McBean, Kathleen Heddle, Emma Robinson, Alison Korn, Lesley Thompson (8). He was the Head Coach of Canada's National Women's Rowing Team from 1990 to 2005 (6). Although his coaching position title changes every three to four years, his present position (as of March 2009) is the head coach of the light weight women for Rowing Canada, a position he will hold until the 2012 Olympics (6). Morrow plans to stay in coaching for Rowing Canada for the next 10 years.

The following information comes from a telephone interview we had with Al Morrow on March 20, 2009:

**When did you first begin rowing? Why did you start rowing; did you play other sports?**

Al Morrow began rowing in 1965 at Central High School in Hamilton. The high school program was run through the Leander rowing club. This type of set up was very common as clubs will have the proper equipment and most high schools would not. He began rowing in the same way many people begin taking up new sports, he was invited by a friend and needed something to do, in Morrow's case during the spring. He was always an active person being involved in many different sports all throughout the year.

**What are your thoughts on the city of Hamilton? How did the city impact your sports career?**

During Morrow's youth, the city of Hamilton had many more opportunities. There were outdoor ice rinks in most parks, meaning you would only have to walk a block or two to go skating. Today, outdoor rinks are rare and typical ice rinks cost money to use. There used to be outdoor hockey leagues, unlike the leagues of today which are all done indoors. In Morrow's opinion

Hamilton was a great place to grow up in, with many different opportunities. Not all sports were established as well as hockey, soccer was just beginning to become established and he can recall there being one casual league when he was in high school. As he was growing up he played baseball and house league hockey. He was not able to play on school teams because there were older and taller kids on the teams. Even without being on school teams he was able to be physically active as the opportunities were much greater, an example would be Chedoke Winter Sports Park that allowed him to go downhill skiing for a cheap price.

### **Did the reason for your participation in sport ever change?**

Sport is something he always gravitated towards; he always enjoyed physical activity. He believes he always participated for the same reasons, having fun, trying to be the best you can and wanting to be challenged. Now he believes that you should always “try to leave the sport with the values you went into it with.” This is something he believes he has done and still focuses on having fun and trying to be the best he can be. One problem he points out with today’s society is we focus too much on winning and that sport changes from being a fun activity to competition where the only goal is winning. Instead of maintaining the fun idea, coaches and parents demand more of their children and soon nothing is good enough except winning.

### **What are your career highlights?**

Although there are moments of his career that may stand out on paper, he believes that no one distinct moment stands out for him. This is due to the context in which highlights occur, for example his first hit in baseball at age ten was a very exciting moment, perhaps even as exciting as going to the Olympics. All highlights are relevant to the moment. Today, he considers himself very fortunate to have experienced so many different things, both as an athlete and a coach and has many stories to tell. Some of the stories are not always about great achievements; they could

just be stories about teams over achieving, which is often as exciting as very good teams winning.

### **What was it like representing Canada at the 1976 Olympics?**

Al Morrow's experience at the Olympics was a lot of fun, however it was different for him than the majority of competitors as he was a spare. He always needed to stay motivated and ready in case someone got injured or had to be replaced. From an athletic perspective going to the Olympics was ok, but did not get enhanced by being able to compete. The atmosphere of the Olympics and the accessibility athletes have compared to normal spectators was incredible: being able to go on the rowing platform and being much closer to the actual competition area. Also being a competitor he was able to go view other sports which was also a great experience. Morrow said the experience was a lot of fun with the fact that it was in Canada helping amplify the fans and Canadian spectators.

### **What was the training like when you were an athlete compared to today?**

The training the Morrow went through as an athlete going to the Olympics was much like the training athletes go through now. They trained very hard: rowing throughout the week, going many kilometres. At the time, unlike previous teams, the team Morrow was on was more like an all star team, taking the best rowers from different teams and putting them together. Previous Olympic teams would be the best club team, rather than all the best rowers. The training they did was also a more modern style as they would have year round training and systematic testing.

### **Major Supporters for Sports Career**

Morrow started rowing in 1965; since then there have been many supporters but to avoid leaving people out he did not want to name names. While rowing his family was supportive, telling him if he made wise choices that they would support him in any way, emotional, logistical, or

financial. His family also was happy with what he was doing and would encourage him as he would further his rowing career.

During his athletic career he has rowed for 5 different clubs, these clubs all had good coaches and he can remember 6 outstanding coaches who helped him and may be the reason he now coaches. As a competitor he always would seek out better athletes to train with, these athletes would often push him so that he would become better.

**Were there any barriers you had to overcome as an athlete? As a coach?**

When rowing Morrow believes there are no barriers, just challenges. These challenges occur in every sport, such as transportation. He feels fortunate that when he was a rower there was lots of opportunity and good athletes and coaches to help him grow as a competitor. As a coach he maintains his philosophy that there are no barriers, just challenges that you need to find a way through or around.

**Was there anything in particular that inspired you to start coaching?**

He began to coach because he was inspired by previous coaches, as well after the Olympics he wanted to stay in the sport but was passing his prime as a competitor. He felt that becoming a coach was a good way to offer back to the sport. Early into his coaching career he was fortunate to coach younger athletes who had a lot of enthusiasm for the sport; this helped motivate him to become a better coach and continue coaching. As these athletes motivated him he was able to see the result of his coaching and see the improvement in some of his athletes.

**In 1988, you made the switch from coaching men to coaching women (both at the National level and at the University of Western). What motivated this decision?**

This switch from coaching men to women allowed Morrow to make the switch from being an assistant coach to a head coach. The idea of him becoming a head coach was that of the technical



director of rowing Canada who assigned him to the women's rowing team. At the time of the switch there was an abundance of good coaches for the male team, however the woman's team needed help and the switch worked well. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1990 he officially became the national woman's head coach. He maintained this position until 2005 when his title changed as more coaches and specific roles for coaches were introduced.

### **What is your current coaching position?**

He is currently employed by Rowing Canada as the head coach for the lightweight woman's rowing team and will maintain this position till after the 2012 Olympics. The title that he goes by changes every few years.

### **What are your future plans with the sport?**

Morrow plans on coaching for at least another 10 years as he is 59 years old and many coaches continue on until they are 70 years old.

## **Conclusion**

Through both our research and our interview, we have come to a deeper understanding of Al Morrow as both an athlete and coach. Perhaps one of the nicest aspects was how approachable he was during the interview process. His philosophy of trying to leave the sport with the values you went into it with is very encouraging to hear promoted. There are certain people who participate in sport because they thoroughly enjoy it and can give so much back to the sport, and Al is one of those people. To learn more about Al Morrow you can go the Rowing Canada's website: [http://www.rowingcanada.org/national\\_team/coaches\\_2009/](http://www.rowingcanada.org/national_team/coaches_2009/)

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