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THE WOMAN WHO'S TEACHING THE NHL HOW TO SKATE

As one of the only female coaches in all of the four major professional sports, Barb Underhill is carving out an important legacy, both on and off the ice.

SAM RICHES · MAR 14, 2014

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Barb Underhill works with Jerry D'Amigo of the Toronto Maple Leafs. (Photo: Sam Riches)

At the Toronto Maple Leafs practice facility Barb Underhill carves long, elegant rifts into a clean sheet of ice. It's early on a Tuesday morning, and bright, white light drifts down from the arena roof, giving everything a hard glow. Jerry D'Amigo, a forward with the Leafs, skates next to her. The arena is empty otherwise and the sound of their steel blades cutting into the surface fills the still air.

"Keep your feet moving," she tells him. "Use your power."

Her short blonde hair curls back in a wave as she dances up and down the ice, alongside the Toronto forward. At 5'11", D'Amigo is not exceptionally tall, but he towers above Underhill, who barely reaches his shoulders. A strong skater by NHL standards, D'Amigo suddenly looks stiff moving next to her.

Underhill taps her stick against the ice, encouraging the 22-year-old, who works through a drill at the center of the rink, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

In 45 minutes, the rest of the team will join him for their morning practice. The camera crews and reporters will then follow, but Underhill, who was hired by the Leafs as an independent

skating coach in 2012, will already be gone. She works with the players individually. A laptop she carries to the rink each day is loaded with files of every player she coaches, their strides photographed and filmed, their movements analyzed, the degrees to which they move their arms, and bend their legs, and tilt their torso logged and identified.

“To be able to help them, I have to figure each player out,” she says. “I never skate the whole team because I can only improve them one skater at a time.”

UNDERHILL SPENT MORE THAN 20 years in the spotlight in her former career as a professional pair figure skater. She’s a former Olympian, a five-time Canadian pair champion, and in 1984, she and partner Paul Martini were the world pair champions. In 2009, Underhill was inducted into the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame.

“Where I feel most at home is on the ice,” she says. “I think when you find something you love, you’ll do anything for it. You’ll work as hard as you need to work. The key is just finding that thing, and for me it’s the ice. Now I’m here. It’s been a weird journey.”

"I THINK HOCKEY IS REALIZING THAT WE CAN HELP. WE HAVE SOMETHING TO OFFER, AND I THINK FIGURE SKATERS ARE REALIZING THERE'S ANOTHER MARKET IN HOCKEY, ANOTHER NICHE."

In 2011, *The Hockey News* ranked Underhill as one of the 100 most influential people in hockey. It’s an honor she laughs off now—“I think they just wanted to throw in a figure skater”—but it signifies the depth and scope of her accomplishments as a coach. With two hockey-playing sons at home and a husband, Rick Gaetz, who has co-owned the Ontario Hockey League’s Guelph Storm since 2006, hockey was always around. It was the former Storm head coach, Dave Barr, who first reached out and asked Underhill for help. Then, at 43, she began her coaching career, and it wasn’t long until the NHL began to notice the results.

Her first NHL contract was with the Anaheim Ducks; the New York Rangers and Tampa Bay Lightning followed shortly after that. The teams would send their players to a rink in Etobicoke, Ontario, where Underhill would work with them, case by case. In 2012, the Leafs came calling and the decision to join the club was a “no brainer,” says Underhill, who lives 10 minutes away from the practice facility. “Sometimes I shake my head and can’t believe it. I wake up every day and I can’t wait to get to the rink and see who I’m working with and see what the day brings.”

Before Underhill, there was Laura Stamm, who began her career in the 1970s, coaching New

York Islanders forward Bobby Nystrom, completely reshaping his stride.

Nystrom was a tough guy, known as The Hammer of Thor, but it's hard to throw a check when you can't stay on your feet. Stamm worked with Nystrom six days a week during his rookie season, the duo privately taking the ice each morning at 6 a.m. Stamm thought the enforcer would want to keep their relationship a secret but Nystrom, whose jersey now hangs from the rafters in Nassau Coliseum, didn't mind sharing. He told the media that he wouldn't have lasted in the NHL without Stamm and, in effect, helped launch her career as a skating coach.

Following in Stamm's wake, Dawn Braid has logged more than 20 years as an instructional power skater within the NHL and junior hockey ranks. Her clients have included John Tavares, the former number one pick in the 2009 NHL Draft, and Michael Peca, a two-time Selke Trophy winner as the NHL's top defensive forward, among others. Cathy Andrade, another former figure skater now excelling in hockey, has worked with San Jose Sharks center Joe Pavelski, her first NHL client, helping him earn a spot on the 2010 U.S. Olympic squad.

Despite all this, there are still players who dismiss the diminutive Underhill at first glance, hesitant to believe that their skating can be improved. Once they get on the ice, though, that perception changes quickly.

Brian Boyle is one of Underhill's more notable success stories. The 6'7", 244-pound forward was a fringe NHL player a few seasons ago, before the New York Rangers sent him to work with Underhill. With a near two-foot height difference between them, they struggled initially to find chemistry on the ice.

"He shows up and he's looking at me, and I'm looking at him, and I'm sure he was thinking to himself, 'What the heck is she going to teach me?'" But the next day he came into the rink and he couldn't walk," she laughs. "His hips were so sore from our session that he knew there must be something to it."

After an offseason of training together, Boyle's skating improved tremendously and so did his play. Soon after, he found a role within the team and has remained on the Ranger's roster ever since.

"She doesn't see boundaries," says Sandra Bezic, a figure skating choreographer, former Canadian Olympian, and member of the Skate Canada Hall of Fame. Bezic choreographed

Underhill and Martini's 1984 World Championship routine. "I have such respect for her. Her Mighty Mouse size among all those big hockey players, and she just flattens them all. She can outskate all of them. You just have to step back and say, 'Wow.'"

AFTER PRACTICE, UNDERHILL WALKS up to the second floor of the arena. There's a large unlit space overlooking the two practice rinks, and the glare of the ice below fills the room. The Maple Leafs are on one side, their American Hockey League affiliate, the Toronto Marlies, on the other.

Hockey now moves at a faster pace than ever before. There is more science backing the technical elements of the game, a greater understanding of the importance of positioning, maneuverability, and agility. Sidney Crosby, arguably the sport's greatest player, is also one of its fastest, most technical, and most efficient skaters.

"Skating is so critical now," Underhill says. "If you can't skate you can't play this game. Every guy is out there looking at how they are going to be a better skater, and they are more open to working with figure skaters."



She clicks through images of D'Amigo on her laptop, yellow lines are drawn onto the photos, highlighting the angle of his stride, how he's using his body, and where he's putting his weight. Her first step with each player is to film their stride, searching for inefficiencies in the biomechanics.

Underhill found her teaching blueprint in the movements of Mike Gartner, who for 19 seasons flew up and down the NHL ice with one of the fastest strides in the history of the game.

"I was determined to understand and learn his stride," she says. "It's very different from figure skating. I couldn't just jump in and teach it. I had to get some background."

By pulling apart Gartner's mechanics, she found concrete numbers. Gartner bent his lead knee by an average of 83.5 degrees and kept his torso tilted forward at a 45-degree angle. There was no wasted energy, no inefficiency, every movement had a purpose. It was the perfect stride.

Each player is a different case study: some have issues with flexibility, others with strength.

“It takes a lot of people to improve the skating,” Underhill says. “I’m just the one who can determine what needs to be done. I work closely with the strength guys and trainers. I can’t improve their skating until they fix it in the gym or training room.”

IN MEN'S SPORTS, THE culture of the locker room often encourages sexist attitudes, affirms traditional masculinity, and serves to further the gender gap. Studies of men’s relationship to sport suggest that sports tend to unify men in the domination of women and women’s movement into sport is seen as a challenge to that domination.

There remains an obvious under-representation of women in men’s sports, with only a handful of women having coached or trained players in the NHL, NBA, NFL, or MLB.

In March of last year, Nicole Kirnan became the first woman to coach a men’s pro hockey team, leading the Federal Hockey League’s 1000 Islands Privateers, a minor pro team in Watertown, New York, for the final five games of the season and into the first round of the playoffs. Breaking down the coaching barrier, Kirnan faced gratuitous and baseless criticism—a firm reminder of the stereotypes and patriarchy embedded within the culture of men’s professional sports.

Last season, the New York Rangers, on their official site, posted an article called “A Girl’s Guide to Watching the Rangers.” It included tips like waiting until the whistle to ask a question, and it equated men’s love of hockey to the passion with which women approach a “70 per cent off sale.”

With figure skating and hockey, Underhill sees a relationship that could work to erode the traditional narratives.

“I feel respected here,” she says. “I feel like they understand and trust what I can do.”

“I think hockey is realizing that we can help. We have something to offer, and I think figure skaters are realizing there’s another market in hockey, another niche. I think both sides are starting to come together a little bit.”

While that gradual process continues, Underhill still finds working with younger players and those fighting for a spot in the league as the most rewarding—helping those who might seem out of place to fit in. On her cell phone she keeps a message from J.P. Cote, who first played in the NHL during the 2005-06 season. After eight games he was sent down to the AHL and bounced around the semi-pro circuit for eight seasons, playing for teams like the Hamilton Bulldogs, the Scranton Penguins, and the Hamburg Freezers. After working with Underhill this past summer, Cote signed a two-year contract with the Tampa Bay Lightning in December.

“When I got his message and he told me that after eight years he was heading back to the NHL, I felt like crying,” she says. “It’s the greatest feeling to play a small role in somebody’s dream. When you see it, and see how badly they want it, how hard they work, and the effort they put in—to see it come to fruition, that’s why I do this.”

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