

Marie Fitzpatrick – From Sport To Leadership – The full, unedited version

From Then to Now

When I was asked to provide my thoughts about my journey from becoming an elite athlete to leadership, I hesitated momentarily about sharing those thoughts. I hesitated because I believe I am still on that journey and, I expect it to continue until the day I die. There are many components that were each an essential part of this journey.

I guess a good place to start is at the beginning. Very early in my life I became aware of self. As I ran through the hay field next to my grandparent's farm house, feeling the air through my hair and the sun on my face I was aware of me as a person, as separate from others. I was probably 4 or 5. It felt so good to me that I believe I subconsciously wanted to hold onto that positive feeling, that emotion. I suspect that was my first experience with my own adrenaline and the 'rush' it provided.

I was one of six children. The first four were all girls with me as second oldest. Whether at home, or in school or on holidays I was always on the move. I often tried to organize my siblings, and my cousins when they were visiting, to play games - preferable active games. They weren't always cooperative. As I got older I wanted to do the same thing with my friends.

Our mom used to say that idle hands were the devil's workshop. She tried to keep us busy with music, brownies, guides and of course chores. She didn't encourage me with sports because she said little girls don't do that. However, she insisted that I take piano, viola and singing lessons. I played the viola in the orchestra and sang in the school glee club. The glee club captured my heart and provided me with another adrenaline rush. Our choir director was phenomenal. Anyone who could direct 120 girls from grade 2 - 8 with practice three times during the week and again on Sat, with no one ever missing a practice was a force to be reckoned with. When we sang in concert, I don't remember ever feeling my feet having contact with the stage. I just felt the music. We lived every word that came out of Sister Catherine's mouth. I loved singing and continue to love it as I sing in my church choir. My love of singing did not dull my need to be active. I felt I could easily do both.

Dad loved baseball! I went to ball games with him. He explained the game to me, the rules, where to hit the ball, how to hit it to get a specific result. He taught me to catch and throw and to hit the ball. There were lots of kids in the neighbourhood and most of the boys played baseball or stickball. They allowed me to play with them but only when there weren't enough boys to put two teams together to play. I resented being iced out. I continued to play catch with my dad and improve my skills. I would toss a stone in the air and hit it with a stick to practice my hitting. Eventually, the boys began playing in league ball and there was no place for me. I was angry, frustrated about that because inside me I knew that shouldn't be. There should have been a place for all to participate. I complained, (mostly to my dad) about feeling excluded because I was a girl. I guess I was especially upset because I wasn't valued for the skills I possessed as an athlete rather, I was excluded because of my gender. Dad continued to play catch with me. This was an early lesson for me about inequality and it fueled the fire within me to fight against it and to fight to achieve equality. That fight continues.

At the table every night as a family we talked about what was going on for each of us - school, friends and even politics (more of this as we got older). We all had the opportunity to voice our opinions about most things and polite, thoughtful debate was encouraged. Voices were occasionally raised. When we expressed dissatisfaction with some thing, dad often said if it is

really important to you then you should do something to change that with which you are dissatisfied.

When I began high school (grade 9) I tried out for the basketball team and didn't make it. I was so disappointed but I kept practicing. I tried out again in grade 10 and did make the junior team. I practiced hard, I played hard and I got better. The next year I was on the senior team. I loved playing basketball but did struggle with strategy, mainly because I disagreed with the coach's approach. As I look back it was a time for me to learn some lessons about focus and strategy.

Close to the end of high school, there was a call-out for anyone who was interested in competing in the city's school track meet. I loved to run - I was there in a heartbeat. I didn't get to run in that track meet as the only space on the team was for the high jump. I wanted to be on the team so I did the high jump. The physical education teacher showed me how to do the scissors jump, the style of jumping used at the time. At the competition I learned another valuable lesson when I came in second. The girl who won jumped the same height as I. The rules were that if there was a tie at a particular height the one who had taken less tries throughout the competition would be awarded the win. She had one less try than I did. I jumped at every height, she did not. A tough lesson to learn. This experience wet my appetite for track, competition and knowing the rules. I was beginning to realize how important it was to focus on what I was doing and how I was doing it. If I wanted to win and I did want to win then I also had to hone my focusing skills.

I sought out the local track club and joined because I wanted to run. We went to the track every evening for a couple of weeks to practice before the provincial track and field competition was to be held. Graham Kelly, the president of the club wasn't a coach but he had been a runner so he gave me and the other athletes some direction. Another runner Dave Carroll (Snowy) was also a sprinter and he gave me some further direction.

I entered as many events as I could fit into the meet schedule. I won the high jump, I came second in the 100, first in the 200, second in the long jump and I don't remember about the other events. I felt like I was in heaven. All day I was thinking after each event what I needed to do to improve, run faster and jump higher. I barely lost the 100 because the winner had gotten a faster start than I did. I had sore quads but instinctively knew that I needed to keep moving and learn more about every facet of the event. I definitely needed a better start. I was becoming focused.

I was invited to be part of a provincial team that was going to the Highland games in Moncton, NB.

That winter I joined the Newfoundland Track and Field Association and volunteered to help on the executive. I learned that in 1969 the first Canada Summer Games would be held in Nova Scotia and there would be a Newfoundland provincial team. I wanted to be on that team. In my mind I could see myself on the team, I could see myself running the race. I began to hone in on what I needed to do to reach that goal.

One of the Phys Ed professors from Memorial, Yvette Walton attended that meeting. I didn't know it then but she had attended one of the track meets and had seen me run and wanted to coach me. She volunteered to help out with the coaching of those who were interested in participating in Track and earning a spot on that provincial team. Training began that winter, we ran indoors in a double gym at the airport. Someone volunteered to build banked corners - primitive they were, but they certainly helped.

In the spring of 1969 Yvette had to go back to her home in London, ON. She kept in touch with us providing direction weekly to me for my training and for the rest of the track portion of the team who resided in St. John's. This was certainly a test of my own focus. It was pretty straight forward for me to push the rest of the team to do their workouts and improve, it was much more difficult to push myself. With my eyes on the goal I focused, I lived and breathed running. I did push myself.

A number of times during that year of training I was told by many not to have too high expectations as it was an open competition. This meant that all of the women from the Canadian Mexico Olympic team would be competing. Yvette never said that to me she just encouraged me, helped me to focus and provided a training experience that was a set-up for success. Instead of being intimidated by the negative comments of others, I bought an autograph book to get Irene Piotrowski's (Canadian sprint record holder) autograph. I knew I needed to focus on my own races and do the best I could - run my best times. I did! I set my personal bests in the heats, semis and then finals for both the 100, 200 and 400 meter races. I beat each of the four women from the Canadian 1968 Olympic team in either a heat or a semi. I was running the same times as the women from that Team.

My focus paid off! I was invited by the Canadian Track and Field Federation to participate in the Canadian Championships in Victoria, BC, the week following the Summer Games. Yvette and I flew from St. John's, NL to Victoria, BC on the Friday and I competed on Saturday morning. I matched my times from the previous week despite the 4.5 hour time change and 16 hours of traveling the day before.

I continued with track, basketball, fastball and occasionally other sports for socialization. Focus had become ingrained at this point in my life. It saw me through some very difficult times throughout my life and undoubtedly kept my daughters and myself alive.

Let's fast forward now to the late 80s - I was working for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) as a parole officer in Red Deer. Our contract had expired and we were in contract negotiations. Our employer constantly told us we were invaluable to the functioning and success of the service, yet in negotiations we were not appreciated. None of us were designated and we went on strike for 3 and 1/2 weeks. I was not the local president, in fact I was a term employee on contract and could well have lost my job. I was on the line every day, spoke to my fellow strikers helping to keep up morale our District Director did visit the line despite our line being in Bowden and he was in Edmonton. Our union component leader also came to the line and met with us. Afterwards she spoke to me and asked if I might be interested in taking a position on our local executive. (Focus on the goal was what kept me there for the 3 and 1 and a half weeks)

After the strike was over the District Director spoke to me as he renewed my contract following the strike and said by going out with all of my colleagues I showed him how much I was part of the team and in this job we needed to be a team.

A move to Edmonton in 1995 to the Edmonton Parole Office once again drew on my inner resources and focus. I became the local president during some very trying times. In 2001 this was coming to a head as we were once again in contract negotiations. We were doing intermittent striking across the country when 911 hit us. This strike ended immediately and it ended with a more positive result to our contract. I was the local strike captain even though all of the Parole Officers had been designated and only our administration staff were on the line during work hours. I still applaud all of our administrative staff for the incredible strike lines they held!

At the end of 2003 I moved to Ottawa where I began working as a Policy Analyst for CSC. I was working in the middle of my department's national headquarters, and in the middle of the core of federal public service. I witnessed first hand the decimation of the public service and of the Correctional Service as I had known it. Tough on Crime was being instituted by the government of the time. The former focus of supporting and encouraging change of behaviour from criminal to prosocial was not receiving the support needed to be successful. The focus became more one of punishment. I saw this as a set up for failure for the entire system. I was truly heart broken.

I felt like I could not be as productive as I wanted within my department, morale was at an all time low given the political climate in Ottawa. I thought about it and knew I had to change my focus. How could I impact positive change?

I had become President of my local at CSC Headquarters where we worked hard to engage our membership. I was part of my union's Regional Women's Committee, the Area Council and eventually I ran for the position of Regional Executive Vice President representing the National Capital Region. For the three years I held that position. I worked very hard to represent our membership, in negotiations, Union education and Joint learning with our employer - the federal government. We provided joint training in Anti-harassment, Respecting Differences/anti Racism, Understanding the Collective Agreement and Union Management Consultation. All of these, with the goal of achieving better working relationships between frontline workers and management so that we could provide the best possible service to the public.

2012 - I was closing in on my retirement, I requested a pre-retirement transition back to Alberta so that I could be close to my family. This was a move that was supported by my department as all of my work was done on computer but it was on my dime.

When I arrived back in Alberta, I began to see politically that the same things I witnessed in Ottawa in terms of regressive governing was happening in Alberta. I was so frustrated as this did not support the people of the province. I joined my local NDP constituency association Lethbridge East and the federal association. I knew that complaining would not change things and I thought about what I could do to effect the positive change I was seeking.

Mark Sandilands, president of the Lethbridge federal association noticed my interest and action on local issues, one of which was fracking inside our city limits. He asked me if I would consider running for the Federal Riding for the NDP. I graciously declined because I had no intention of going back to Ottawa. I told him I was interested in politics but I felt I could do more good locally. Mark and I talked about municipal and provincial politics and many of the things that needed to be done. I talked it over with my family as I needed their support. I then asked the previous NDP candidate in Lethbridge East if he would be running again. When he said he didn't know, I immediately made the decision to run for nomination. A campaign needed to begin and it needed to begin right away. I focused on the issues that were problematic in Alberta but in particular, here in Lethbridge. I attended provincial NDP meetings and honed my thoughts about those issues and spoke on them whenever possible. The federal campaign had begun and I was canvassing in the Lethbridge East area for our local NDP federal candidate, Cheryl Meheden. Rumors began to fly that an early provincial election may be called.

Our association executive met and organized for a nomination meeting. I won the nomination and I focused on the campaign with our fantastic and truly committed team. I retired from the federal government effective Feb 14, 2015 and we began our intense campaign on Feb 15 right through Election Day May 5, 2015.

That successful campaign led to my being in the Alberta Legislature representing the constituents of Lethbridge East and representing all Albertans. When I was in the legislature and working in the community as an MLA, I realized how important it was to be laser focused on each issue to do the work that had to be done. This allowed me to truly represent my constituents. Several times I have looked back at where that focus came from and I could easily trace it back to those days on the track running; a time when I did not hear anything but my heart beating and not see anything but 10 yards past the finish line - total focus on the goal.

The focus as a political leader was and still is, what is the end result for the constituent and will it be positive. Will it make life better for Albertans. The question for me was, what do I need to do to make that happen? I needed to focus on the task at hand and not pay heed to the misinformation about the 'bill of the moment' being provided to Albertans by the opposition (at the time).

My focus was and is to make life better for all Albertans;

- * to include all Albertans;
- * to eliminate racism;
- * to eliminate misogyny;
- * to make sure no person is subjected to domestic violence;
- * to bring real equality for all;
- * to make sure everyone has a place to live and food to eat;
- * to encourage real community where we look after one another;
- * to live reconciliation.

This was and is what I want for my community and to achieve this is where I am focused. I believe that being involved in sport especially at the elite level is where I developed and honed my skills to focus on what needed to be done to achieve the target goal.

Every training session whether on the track or in the weight room had an objective. I had to build strength – to be faster out of the blocks. So if I had 3 sets of each exercise I had to work as hard on the last as I did on the first. When I practiced my starts I had to react instantaneously to the commands and the sound of the starting pistol. I had to focus to hear nothing but those. I had to build my endurance to improve my ability to run heats, semis and finals possibly all in one day and to do each at the fastest speed I could run. I had to do that at every sprint practice and every run had to be the best/fastest I could run that day. When I practiced I heard nothing that was going on around me, I could feel my heart beating and my body moving but I didn't even feel my feet on the track. My was 10 yards past the finish line.

Another question I had been asked was about nature vs nurture. I think nature played perhaps a bigger part in that I believe I had some natural talent, my body build was suited to be a sprinter. I could push my self and I could work hard.

But then was that a part of the nurture? Although my mom did not feel girls should be participating in sports she didn't stop me and my dad encouraged me. She did attend my track meets, basketball and fastball games and she volunteered to chaperone at a few of the out of town meets. All of the things I did through which I learned to focus did put me on a path of leadership. Even though I had never thought of putting myself forward in politics when the need arose I put myself out there in 2014 to get ready for the May 2015 Alberta election and I will do so again for the next election in 2023. I have already begun to focus on campaigning.

I hope this part of my life story will encourage others to become involved with sports, learn to focus and become involved in making your community a better place to live for everyone.

Maria M. Fitzpatrick