

## Hockey Coach, Skills Instructor, Administrator, and 'Never Too Late' Program Co-Founder Heather Morning to be enshrined next month in the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame



Heather Morning is regarded by the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame nomination panel as 'a driving force behind the growth of women's hockey' and she takes these earned compliments in stride as we chat about her exemplary coaching, instructional, and administrative career.

Morning, a resident of Aurora for over twenty years, has served as an Aurora Panthers coach, clinic instructor, and on the Central York Panthers' Board of Directors, as well as a skills development coach with the Aurora Junior A Tigers, and she co-founded the 'Never Too Late' hockey program for women who want to embrace hockey later in life.

The 'Never Too Late' initiative is one of Morning's fondest accomplishments and her excited tone permeates her anecdotes, especially when discussing the number of moms and grandmothers who have embraced hockey in the later stages of life.

'There were a lot of women who grew up in an era where hockey was for boys. I just got back from a 60+ tournament where the ladies will be able to tell their grandchildren that they spent the weekend playing in a hockey tournament. Most of them started when they were 40 or 50 or 60 and it's so inspiring to see mid-life women taking this kind of risk and being vulnerable. It's also been cool to see them take their tentative steps on the ice. They have an incredible thirst to understand the game and get more skilled. Then they share their experiences with their own children and grandchildren, which is especially useful when their own kids or grandkids face similar challenges when tackling something new.'

In addition to encouraging a multitude of Canadian women to embrace the game of hockey, Morning discusses the satisfaction of seeing the connections that form between the new players: 'It's made a community'they've found a bond and they bake sourdough bread together.'

Coach Morning shares her feelings of pride regarding the success of the Central York Panthers program, especially given the Junior Tigers' excellent 11-1-0-1 start to the 2025-26 season.

?The Central York coaching staff?Steve Dempsey and his team at the U22 level ? does such a great job teaching the game.?

When I mention the shooting skill that is demonstrated throughout the Junior Panthers lineup, the skills instructor's voice lights up: ?Shooting the puck?lots of technical skill goes into it. Guys can get away with muscle and strength. Women don't have the same muscle mass so they have to be technically better. The Panthers have to trust their bodies and not think about mechanics. At Central York, it's always been skills-focused. I know the girls love playing for Steve and they work hard for the coaching staff. I ran the hockey camp that Central York uses to this day. They've done a really good job at bringing their scholarship players back to the skills camps as models for the younger players. Passion breeds more passion for the sport.?

Seeing the authentic mentoring that goes on in the Panthers' organization is also pleasing for Coach Morning to see.

?There is a steady building up of the organization?it's great to see how Mark [Dubeau] and his team encourage the older Panthers to look after the younger Panthers. Sports are so important for life skills?learning about resilience and dealing with what life throws at you. What they accomplish on the ice and how they're also excellent students dedicated to their schoolwork shows what kind of student-athlete is being developed. It's so nice to see the Panther players coming back to coach and mentor at this point in their lives. It's a cyclical process that's great to see. I think it extends the players' joy for the game when they come back and instruct and coach-- and it's super-satisfying for them.?

Morning adds, ?I had the pleasure of seeing authentic mentoring at the training camp I ran for fifteen years. As it grew, when we moved it to SARC, I wanted it populated by all-female instruction. My daughter enjoyed the camp and, years later, she helped run the camp. Players who are now USports athletes in Canada or at Ivy League hockey schools in the States were in these camps as seven-year-olds. They're such amazing role models?really.?

The veteran hockey coach reflected on the most enjoyable part of being a bench boss and Morning's affection for the sport is evident: ?I always loved the game, loved being at the rink, loved the people at the rink. Athletes are a special breed of people. Helping hockey players with a skill set and to see them enjoy the game more?nothing was more satisfying.?

Also satisfying for Morning is the success and expansion of the PWHL.

She shared her feelings when the league opened for its first season of business.

?At first, I had trouble believing that it was actually happening and I was amazed that we've gotten to this point. It's been a long road, but it's happened. The game is so fast and physical and the PWHL is so accessible with its prices and it is thrilling to watch. There is a super infectious feeling at the games and the league has shown itself to be a much different product than the NHL. The stadiums, being filled with adult men and women and young boys and girls, is so incredibly impressive. Also impressive is how it's been embraced. In the last Olympics, when the games were going on, the women embraced the moment. There was a lot of joy?even in the stressful moments. It was fun to watch these women play. Sports are supposed to be fun and a source of joy.?

Another recent development in Coach Morning's life that has generated fun and joy was the call she received from Aurora Sports Hall of Fame staff regarding her enshrinement: ?It was very surreal for sure?you never really think that it's going to be you. You just get so much satisfaction from coaching and teaching the game and that's enough, but getting the call has helped me reflect on all the years. It's an incredible honor.?

By Jim StewartLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter