

# Basketball pioneer Hrycak is elected to Hall of Fame

Wrapped up 48-year coaching career as head coach of UQAM Citadins in 2015

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Olga Hrycak, a woman who made her mark coaching men's basketball teams, is the latest addition to the Basketball Canada Hall of Fame.

Hrycak, who wrapped up a 48-year coaching career when she stepped down as head coach of the UQAM Citadins in 2015, was selected along with former NBA player Todd MacCulloch.

"It's a great honour," Hrycak said. "I was surprised because there were about 15 very deserving candidates on the ballot and this was the first year I was on there."

Hrycak's career took her from a part-time high school coaching job to the CEGEP ranks to a university job, which she said was not quite a dream come true.

"I never dreamed that I would coach at the university level because I didn't think there would be a job open," Hrycak said. "John Dore was at Concordia, Butch Staples was at McGill, Eddie Pomykala was at Bishop's and Université de Montréal had stopped playing."

But the landscape changed in 2003 when UQAM decided to establish a program and hired Hrycak, who had won eight provincial CEGEP titles at Dawson College.

"They had a woman athletic director and that might have helped, but I had the resumé for the job," Hrycak said. "It was a great experience being able to take a new program and build it from the ground up."

Hrycak guided the Citadins to provincial titles in 2006 and 2010 despite facing some hurdles along the way.

"The biggest problem was finding players," she said. "Being a French-speaking university, we were drawing players from a very small talent pool. Basketball isn't a big sport in French high schools and CEGEPs. The other universities can draw from players across the country or the U.S. and they also compete with us for Quebec players. We got some French-speaking players from Ottawa and we've had some foreign players from French-speaking countries like France, Tunisia and Morocco."

Hrycak became involved with coaching men by accident. After playing at Université de Montréal, she accepted a position as a physical education and religion specialist with the English Montreal School Board. She also coached women's teams at Holy Names and Sir George Williams University.

"Holy Names went coed and Eddie Pomykala was coaching the boy's team," Hrycak said. "He was also coaching at Dawson and I started helping out with the men's team."

Her next stop was Champlain College in St-Lambert, where she coached for seven seasons before moving to Dawson.

She sent a number of players on to U.S. colleges, including Pascal Fleury (Georgetown and Maryland-Baltimore County), Abel Joseph (Marquette) and Prosper Karangwa (Siena). Fleury later played for the Harlem Globetrotters, while Karangwa is currently employed as a scout for the Orlando Magic.

“My other claim to fame is that I coached Joel Anthony for one semester,” Hrycak said. Anthony went on to play at Nevada-Las Vegas and won two NBA titles with the Miami Heat. He currently plays with San Antonio.

Hrycak’s success caught the eye of legendary coach Jack Donohue and she joined as an apprentice coach with Canada’s national team in 1984. She served as an assistant coach with the national team from 1985 to 1987. When she joined UQAM, Hrycak became the first woman in North America to coach a university team. There wouldn’t be another woman coach until 2013, when Bernadette Mattox was hired as an assistant coach at Kentucky.

“I never had any problems when I went to CEGEP because a lot of players I coached knew me from high school,” Hrycak said. “It was the same when I went to UQAM. The only time people questioned me was when I went to the United States. There were coaches who wouldn’t shake my hand and when we beat a team, there were coaches who had trouble accepting that they were beat by a team coached by a woman.”

A bad back forced Hrycak to step away from coaching, but she and her longtime assistant coach, Nevio Marzinotto, are working with Basketball Québec on a project to identify young women coaches. “I still drop in to see UQAM play,” Hrycak said. “I miss coaching, but I don’t miss the recruiting and I don’t miss the 16hour bus rides to Nova Scotia.”

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