

SUDBURY SPORTS



Cara Brown: Riding two separate waves of ringette success

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There are few feelings in sport that can rival the excitement one enjoys being part of a wave of talent that washes its way over the sea of success, building from a very basic foundation to reach a crescendo that represents the very pinnacle of their sport.

To be an integral part of such an environment on two separate occasions - well, in the words of the well-known commercial, that just might be priceless.

When it came to her life in ringette, **Cara Brown** would not only come to know this journey intimately, she actually travelled the bulk of this special pathway with her younger sister at her side.

Cara and **Lisa Brown** moved to Sudbury when both were at an age when many children would first be introduced to the more competitive aspects of sport: eight (Cara) and six and a half (Lisa). For the next decade (1973-1983), the siblings formed a key part of what would become a ringette dynasty in these parts, producing teams that medalled at provincials and nationals with regularity.

Then the Browns did it all over again in Calgary, beginning in 1983.

Now in her fifties, Cara Brown can look back with pride on an incredible career that would see her earn an induction into the **Ringette Canada Hall of Fame**, only the second athlete to be so honoured in 2002 (Lisa followed in her footsteps six years later). At least as impressive is the fact that Brown has established herself as one of the leading forensic economists in the country, having testified as an expert witness on more than 50 occasions.

It's clear that Cara Brown could excel equally as well in the courtroom or on the ice.

"I think somebody came by the house one day and asked our parents if we wanted to try ringette," said Brown, recalling her start in the sport. "I am kind of a *sit back and watch until I can really contribute* type of person, and it took me a year to decide that I could contribute."

Once that decision was made, however, look out.

"I wouldn't say that I was instantly athletic, but Lisa and I did excel at the sport quickly," she said. It was the perfect time to do so.

While the Browns were making a name for themselves at *Downe* playground, the likes of **Paula Giacomini** and a ringette powerhouse were being developed close by, at *Ridgecrest*. When they all gathered to form the Sudbury travelling teams, championship banners were almost inevitable. Years later, there are some very special emotions that are stirred as Brown recalls the nostalgia of her youth.

"I remember, for the longest time, that we (Downe) could only play outdoors - somehow, we never seemed to rank to get indoor ice. But that outdoor rink has such a resonance with so many Canadians of our age. I continued to love winters for years, just because I loved my sport so much."

There was so much to love. The early ability to play both playground and rep ringette, doubling their exposure to the still in its infancy all-female athletic pursuit. Parents, with absolutely no background in ringette, jumping aboard whole-heartedly, with both her mom and dad coaching and eventually penning a book on the sport.

And, of course, the on-ice success.

Winning provincials at age ten, then again at fourteen, a feat that carried with it the opportunity to compete at just the second national championships ever in ringette. Little surprise that gold would be the colour of choice of the Ontario entry

from the northern mining town.

“The caliber of ringette in Sudbury was just so high,” said Brown. “I’m not sure if it was just because there were so many hockey families in Sudbury, but for some reason, the Sudbury teams dominated in all ages at provincials.”

Cara Brown was 18 when she and her mother and sister made the move west, to Alberta. The talented teen had not yet been humbled by the life lessons that ensued, her ringette point of reference of Ontario providing very little perspective to the landscape of the sport, at that time, in Calgary.

“I was at my first practice (in Calgary) and with typical Ontario arrogance, I kind of matter of factly announced that we were going to win provincials that year,” she said. Between the laughter around the room came the sudden realisation that she wasn’t in Kansas any more.

“I found out early that they were way behind,” stated Brown. “Calgary had never won provincials, in any age group.” The following spring, Brown would lead her Cowtown teammates to victory, the first of nine consecutive years in which her Calgary team topped the podium, most of which would occur with Lisa at her side.

On a larger scale, there was still plenty of work to be done.

“In 1984, our Calgary Debs came last at nationals and won just one game,” recalled Brown. By 1986, with her mother behind the bench and her sister as a teammate, this equal mix of athletics and academia would break through with a bronze medal performance at the cross country competition.

Even on a global stage, the gradual growth of the sport was anticipated, and eventually celebrated as more and more legitimate contenders entered the fray. “The inaugural Worlds were just a start,” said Brown, who captained the Canadian entry to world titles in 1990, 1992 and 1996.

“I looked at it as the same thing that happened to ringette, in general. At first, Ontario was the only big province. At first, Sudbury would arrive knowing that we would beat everyone at the tournament - but that slowly changes. And that’s exactly what happened with Worlds.”

“In 1992, playing in Helsinki, the Finnish team was starting to get really good,” said Brown, recalling one of her favourite events. “They are nuts about ringette in Finland.”

Many would say the same of those women who continue with the sport long after most others have stepped to the sidelines, focusing on careers and families. Somehow, the Brown sisters and their kindred spirits found a way to squeeze it all in.

To some extent, she likely speaks for so many who have travelled this same road.

“The people who play ringette just love ringette,” Cara Brown exclaimed. “I had every intention of playing ringette as long as I possibly could. There is something about ringette that hooks people. Maybe part of it is that the women who are drawn to it and stay with it and excel at it have that very competitive nature.”

>Women like Cara and Lisa Brown, armed with the intensity and drive to climb the mountain of creating a ringette dynasty not once, but twice, two time zones apart.