

'Eyes in the Boat'!
Reflections of a Blind Athlete

Athlete Profile: Ron Pelletier, Caravela team (Montreal, Quebec)

Randy Pinsky

From world-champion in lawn bowling and now dragon boater with the Caravela team for blind and partially-sighted paddlers, Ron Pelletier doesn't take breaks from competitive sports. After retiring from lawn bowling, the blind athlete was looking for a team sport to join, and the energy, drive, and camaraderie of dragon boating just fit the bill.

Sponsored by the Habilitas Foundation, [Caravela](#) is the first of its kind in Quebec and is affiliated with 22Dragons at the Lachine Canal.

Dragon boating is a particularly good match for blind individuals as it requires minimal adaptations. Through verbal cues and specifics for improving paddling technique, the team has demonstrated their grit to the dragon boat community.

Indeed, seeing a group of people with white canes or guide dogs walk up to the dock may surprise some, but once they start paddling, disability is forgotten completely. "At first, the outside world thinks you can't do it," shared Pelletier, but when Caravela demonstrates its skills on the water, "they realize you can in fact accomplish a heck of a lot."

The Caravela paddlers have challenged many assumptions about their abilities, from [scoring well in races](#), to rescuing an overturned outrigger canoe. Using a 'come from behind' strategy, the team had impressive performances in Montreal's Trifecta competitions, which includes the H₂O Open, Montreal Challenge, and Quebec Cup, as well as the annual McAuslin race. Through cohesiveness and sheer determination, the group proves it is the will to succeed more than visual ability that truly defines a team.

Caravela is composed of both blind and partially-sighted paddlers, as well as several sighted volunteers (present company included). "It's not just the sport," explained Pelletier, "It's the fellowship, where people who don't have a disability accept us for who and how we are."

While Coach Magda Morawski (known for leading Canada's national women's team) was at first unsure about what adaptations would be required, she quickly adjusted to the team's needs. "The coddling did not last too long," Pelletier chuckled. "She's very demanding for technique- *she wants performance.*"

Together, the team has discovered ways of optimizing the experience for non-sighted dragon boaters, including the drummer (paddler sitting up front reinforcing the pace) hitting the side of the boat to reinforce the rhythm for synchronization. Speakers placed in the middle of the boat also help the group retain focus and reinforce Morawski's yelled instructions.

As a former technology instructor at the Montreal Association for the Blind- Mackay Rehabilitation Centre for 22 years, Pelletier is adept at analyzing accessible technology options for clients with specialized needs. Among the various technological tools used by visually-impaired people includes the speech synthesizer (“the program that makes the computers talk”) and voice- to-text technology (“If I’m going to visit a friend and I’m almost there, you think I’m going to waste time typing it? To heck with it”).

(In fact, during this interview Pelletier wanted to send me stats on his lawn bowling accomplishments. In the background, I could hear a mechanical voice stating, “drop-down menu, tab, table of competitions, 1994, 1995’, and Pelletier’s, “Ah here it is,” and remarkably, it was sent within seconds).

As a member of the Quebec Lawn Bowling team, Pelletier competed internationally, from England to South Africa and across North America, garnering 5 gold, 2 silver, 4 bronze and several runner-up rankings in his career (1996-2004).

In addition to collecting this hardware, Pelletier is also extremely well-versed in sports psychology. One technique he frequently uses is to ‘visualize’ races from start to finish. Before lawn bowling competitions, Pelletier would visit the grounds to get the feel of the layout, slopes and inclines, and other extraneous distractions.

Overlooking such mental preparation is what throws off new athletes in races as they are quickly overwhelmed by the excitement, sounds and smells. In contrast, the Caravela team members are calm and prepped, focused only on the race at hand. “[When you’re blind], you learn to filter out and ignore external noises- then they’re a part of your game and not a distraction to it.”

Yet even they were befuddled at a race! Their original coach has an identical twin brother who leads a competing team, and the uncanny similarity of voices giving conflicting directives nearly cost them a race...

Pelletier ended with another wise word of advice: don’t beat yourself up after a competition or practice if there was a less than ideal performance. The danger of sulking over a mistake is that the negative feelings and pent-up frustration can transfer to the next set, and reduce your output overall. As Pelletier advises, “Every game/race is a place to start completely fresh- mindset and mental attitude is a huge part of sport. If you can’t do anything to control it,” he concluded, *“just let it go.”*

Wise words from a world athlete and now dragon boater. Advice for the sports world, and life in general.