

Sports stories. Every community has a few. About star athletes, and neighbours who offer support and coaching. Ashton Bell from Deloraine is a recent story. Ashton helped Canada win gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2022. Her success involves many ground breakers. Some going back 5 generations!

One of Ashton's forerunners was Amber Rommelaere. Born in 1974. 25 years older than Ashton. Amber grew up on a Metigoshe-road farm. Loved skating. Since the boy's teams her age needed players, she was asked to join. She took to hockey easily. When her team shifted to contact hockey, she shifted with them. Amber played as a winger and was on the same line as Chris Nielsen from Goodlands who went on to play in the NHL. Amber's grit and skill would have influenced him.

Amber's mother, Ethel Rommelaere, deserves recognition. By arranging games and calling parents, she made sure there were opportunities for her daughter; helping to form the Falcons, a regional female midget team. She then supported Amber and other girls to represent Manitoba in the Canada Winter Games. In the 1990s parents needed to advocate for girls in sport. When Amber's team won Provincials in 1992, Ethel was their manager. As she says, "Amber wanted to play hockey, so I needed to make it happen."

One of Amber's inspirations was her great aunt Martha Rommelaere. Martha was born in Deloraine in 1922; so a generation older than Amber's parents. Martha worked hard to play baseball professionally. She played on boys' teams and trained as a track star in high school. At age 22 she played semi-professional women's softball with the Moose Jaw Royals. Then moved to Edmonton where she was crowned the Most Valuable Player. From there, she was invited to the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. During WWII, men's professional teams were short players. So women's teams were encouraged to fill stadiums. The film, "A League of Their Own", depicts the hardships Martha and her teammates faced. Martha was honoured in the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame. She gave her baseball card to Amber before passing away in 2011.

A generation earlier than Martha, sports minded women in Manitoba began advocating for themselves as team players. The first

women's hockey team in southwest Manitoba hit the ice in Brandon in 1899. In a photo of the Brandon Ladies' Hockey Team, their uniforms are black dresses with matching bonnets. Hockey was deemed a manly sport with women unfit for such rigors. Trouble was, men wanted women to skate so they could glide arm in arm on ponds and along rivers. With the essential skill of skating taken care of, they picked up sticks, shot pucks and kept their game focused on speed and skill. They became unstoppable. So now we have a female hockey Olympian in our midst.



*Ashton Bell - Team Canada*

Yes, Ashton Bell was helped to Olympic Gold by women over time, but young women from Deloraine also had great mentors like Bob Caldwell, Don Dietrich, Dale McKinnon; men who invested in both girls and boys. They took on anyone who'd work hard and make sacrifices. Both Ashton and Amber took advantage of the early morning Breakfast Club practices these men set up at the local rink. Yep. It takes a village!

*"Women's Hockey" comes from elder interviews with Bob Caldwell and Ethel Rommelaere.*

*Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.*