

SportsLetter Interviews

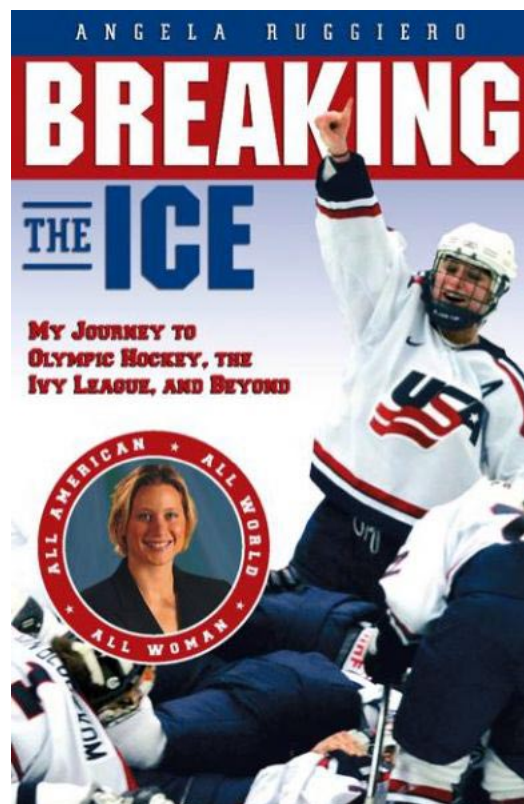
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Angela Ruggiero

Unlike its basketball and soccer counterparts, women's ice hockey has managed to slip under the media radar (except for Olympic years). Angela Ruggiero wants to change that — and soon. Her new autobiography, "Breaking the Ice: My Journey to Olympic Hockey, the Ivy League, and Beyond" (Drummond Publishing), details her life in hockey, from her childhood playing in Southern California, to college stardom at Harvard, to Olympic glory and disappointment.

The timing couldn't be better: Ruggiero is on her third U.S. National Team and readying to compete in Torino. (Women's ice hockey was added to the Olympic program in Nagano; Ruggiero is one of a handful of players worldwide who have participated in all three Olympic Winter Games.) She's also won an NCAA title, was part of the U.S. Team that won the 2005 world championships, and was the first female non-goalie to play in a men's professional hockey league. In her spare time during the summer, she runs ice-hockey camps for girls.

Most puck experts believe the Torino competition will end up as a showdown between the U.S. (gold medallists in Nagano) and Canada (gold medallists in Salt Lake City). The Canadians have the advantage



going into Torino, having won eight of the last 10 meetings against the Americans, but Ruggiero points to their upset of Canada at the 2005 worlds as proof that the U.S. will be competitive in Torino.

SportsLetter spoke with Ruggiero as she traveled on the team bus along the Massachusetts Turnpike, en route to Connecticut, where the U.S. was scheduled to play one of its last pre-Torino scrimmages before leaving for Italy on February 3. The U.S. opens Olympic “Pool B” play on Feb. 11 against Switzerland, then plays Germany (Feb. 12) and Finland (Feb. 14). After that? Oh, Canada.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: You just turned 26 – why did you decide to write this book now?

Angela Ruggiero: wanted to put something out there because there’s such a lack of information about our sport. You know, I do hockey schools every summer, and I get asked the same questions all the time — about my childhood, about making the team, obstacles I had to overcome, and how to train. It just seemed like the right time for me to answer all of those questions. I had a year off after I graduated from Harvard in ‘04, and I knew that we’d be getting a lot of attention coming into these Games.

SL: How did the process of writing the book work — did you do this yourself?

AR: I originally started out with a ghostwriter at the beginning of February of last year. We talked and she helped me lay the framework for what I wanted to do. When I got back from the world championships in April, I sat down and wrote a lot of it. Then my editor at Drummond helped me to smooth things out. It was fun. I guess it wasn’t as hard as I had anticipated because it’s just my life — it’s not like I had to go and do too much research. It was just remembering names and dates.

SL: In the book, you write that your father pushed you and your brother into ice hockey. How did you feel about that at the time and how do you feel about that now?

AR: My dad always made it clear that I didn't have to play hockey. But if I chose to play, I was agreeing to this schedule and this type of life. I think it's a great lesson for kids. When I have kids, that's what I'm going to say: if you choose to do something, you have to follow through and go to all the practices and fully commit yourself to it. There definitely were times as a kid where I would want to skip practice or stay home, and my dad wouldn't let me because I had committed myself in the beginning of the season to go to every practice, even if it meant having to juggle a million things. I wouldn't be here without my dad's help as a kid, and him showing me what hard work, dedication, and commitment can do.

SL: Your relationship with your father revolved around hockey, but you write that he saw you play very infrequently because of the travel and expense. How has your relationship with your father evolved over time?

AR: It's evolved in that, before, it was a lot about hockey. I'm more mature now and I can understand some of the things that he went through. I can relate to him better. We're in a really good spot — he supports me even though he can't be at all the games. He checks the box scores on the U.S. hockey website. He won't be at Torino, but my mother will be there.

SL: Growing up, you played a lot of hockey with and against boys (including your brother). How did that affect your development as a player?

AR: My brother is one of my best friends. He supports me so much. He still plays pro hockey in Michigan. Every summer since I was 16, he'd work it out so that I could go and skate with him and his teammates. And that's been huge in my development.

Playing with the guys — they're naturally more competitive and bigger. As a kid, having the mentality of always having to prove myself, they pushed me to be better, to accelerate my game.

SL: You recently played in the Central Hockey League with your brother against other men. What was that experience like?

AR: Playing with Billy was the most supportive thing I had out there

— it was like when we were kids. The biggest challenge was that they were men. They're great athletes who are very powerful and strong and explosive. Just trying to elevate my game to a level that I had never played before was a big challenge — and doing it under the spotlight. I never expected it to blow up like that — it was the brain-child of my brother, just to play a game together — but it turned into a media frenzy.

SL: Do you have plans to play again in the CHL?

AR: Not right now. I'm trying to just focus on these Olympics. When the Games are over in a month, I'll sit down and figure out my next step.

SL: You write about being kept off one all-star team when you were a kid and, later, that you were refused access to ice-time because of your gender. Why do you think that happened? And, did that motivate you?

AR: I think it's normal that it happened — I know it's happened to a lot of girls who speak to me and tell me their stories. Women's sports, in general, are becoming more and more accepted, but there are definitely still pockets where it isn't. The team that I was trying out for at age nine [in Southern California] was going to Canada, and they didn't want to be embarrassed by having a girl on the team, even though I could hold my own out there. As a kid, when you're faced with something like that, it was obviously very powerful to go through. It taught me a lot. It completely motivated me.

My first two years of hockey were about enjoying the sport. Everything was so much fun — I was playing with my brother and my sister. But from age nine, from that point on, I felt that I was out there alone. My sister ended up quitting after two years, and so I became the only girl out there. I'm such a competitive person, so for these parents to tell me that I can't do something because I'm a girl became my motivating force as a kid. Every time I was on the ice I felt I had to prove myself. It's really all I thought. The experience at the rink in 1998 [when Ruggiero went to play drop-in hockey at a Michigan rink and was told the ice-time was for men only] caught me off guard. I had just won the gold medal [in Nagano], and this was a city-owned arena. But they resolved it, and it's the same rink where I have my summer camps now.

SL: You write that there is a double standard regarding female athletes exhibiting aggression: why do you think this is so?

AR: I think just because, traditionally, sports have been exclusive to men. Women have been able to participate, but if you look at the ones that are really accepted in the mainstream, it's the sports where you can see finesse and the feminine side, like tennis and golf. Obviously, it's changing now, but if you're a tough, aggressive hockey player or soccer player or basketball player, you run into age-old stereotypes. They say you play like a guy.

SL: You also write about your size and advise young women who pursue weightlifting and other strength sports to embrace their body types. Was that difficult for you as an athlete?

AR: It definitely was. Luckily, I never had an eating disorder although I was surrounded by it at prep school. I felt more of an appreciation about my body because this was the means through which I was going to excel in my sport. I knew I needed to be stronger and fitter — and that's not necessarily the body type that you're going to see in the magazines. I'm 5-9 and 185 pounds — I'm a big, strong woman. I was only able to embrace that through sports.

I've worked on a few projects with the Women's Sports Foundation. They emphasize getting adolescent girls involved in sports for that reason — that you're going to have a healthier self-image if you play sports. Boys tend not to have the same body-image problems that girls have, and so that's why getting girls involved in sports is so important.

SL: How has women's ice hockey changed since you started playing as a kid?

AR: It's grown I don't even know what-fold. There were about 5,000 girls registered in 1990. Now, that number's over 50,000 in the U.S., and if you were to go up to Canada, there would be a lot more. That number doesn't include the girls and women who aren't registered through USA Hockey and the girls and women who play against men.

I think a lot of that has come from having the sport go from non-Olympic status to Olympic sport [in 1998] and then from non-NCAA status to full NCAA sport [in 2001]. That was huge: parents can see that, while their kid may not necessarily be good enough to go to the Olympics, she could be good enough to get a full scholarship to a great university. To me, that's one of the best things about women's hockey — the academic opportunities that are now open.

SL: What was the difference between your first two Olympic experiences — in Nagano and in Salt Lake City?

AR: Nagano was the first Olympics for everyone. Even though I was the youngest, everyone was a rookie in terms of Olympic experience. We went in there wide-eyed and excited about every little detail. We weren't expected to win, so when we came out with a gold, it kind of put us on the map. For me, it was a whirlwind of a year — it was my senior year [in high school] and I was able to get into Harvard that spring. It was like, wow, things can't get any better.

In 2002, it was great that the Olympics were in Salt Lake City — we were able to have so many family and friends there and to have the whole country behind us. We had a great hockey team, but for a million different reasons we didn't end up with gold. I don't think we had the best chemistry, and I think we felt a little more pressure because we were the defending gold medallists and the Games were in the U.S. Expectations were a little bit higher.

SL: How has the caliber of play in women's international ice hockey changed since Nagano?

AR: Dramatically, really. It's kind of funny, you see the same teams dominating, but the caliber keeps going up and up because each country is putting more and more resources into it, especially the teams at the top. It's getting harder and harder to make the national team. With the caliber of play today, back in '98 I wouldn't have made the team.

Sweden and Finland have picked up their programs in the last couple of years. You can tell — when we play against them, it's one- or two-goal

games now. Luckily we're still on top of them.

One thing that I hope for is that some of the countries that have great men's hockey teams — like Russia, the Czech Republic, and other Eastern European countries — would put some of the same sort of resources into their women's teams. They have the potential to be really good — they have the numbers.

SL: A couple of well-known veterans were cut from the U.S. team in 2005 — how would you describe the U.S. Olympic Team for Torino?

AR: We're a little bit younger than in 1998 and 2002 — the average age of this team is about 24. This time around, we have the perfect blend. We have some rookies, we have some veterans. These Games, we're going into it with a little less pressure.

We obviously miss Cammi [Granato, the U.S. team's all-time leading scorer] and Shelley [Looney] quite a bit — their leadership and their experience and what they've done for the program. They're great hockey players, and they helped every individual on this team. We've had to find our own identity as a team, and I think we've done that recently. We're all figuring out what our roles are — designated checker, designated scorer, whatever it is — and how we can help the team. It's been all about the team.

SL: You've been switching back and forth from your usual defense position to center: what will you play in Torino?

AR: I'm back at "D" as of the beginning of this week. I look at it as, now that I played a month at forward, if Coach [Smith] wants to put me out front, he can do that. If they need me back at defense, he can put me there. Whatever the team needs. It was tough at first, getting use to the uncertainty, but I've accepted it. Now it's almost like a new challenge me. You don't know where you're going to be, but just play well wherever you are.

SL: Your chief international rival has been Canada: how would you describe the rivalry? Which game against them — win, lose or draw — do

you most remember?

AR: Every time we play them — that's my favorite. It's like the Red Sox and the Yankees. It's that intense. I love it — I play hockey to play Canada. Every time we come out to play them, it's really about who's going to show up. In sports, you love that because it could go either way. When I'm in the gym and on the ice in the summer and all the little extra things I do — I always have Canada in the back of my head.

SL: In 2005, you ended Canada's eight-year run as world champs, and yet they've had the advantage over you since then: are they the team to beat for gold in Torino?

AR: Canada is definitely the team to beat right now. They got together a little bit sooner than us — they got the jump in terms of their schedule a good couple of months before us. We're hoping they've already peaked because they beat us earlier in the season and were the better team then. We're just hoping that we'll peak at the right time this season.

They're a hockey nation, and their country is behind them. They have great skill players across the board. They live for their hockey, and they have a lot of support from their federation.

SL: What does women's ice hockey need to grow the sport?

AR: One, more exposure. Next month, you're gonna see us on TV a lot, and I guarantee the number of women hockey players will go up, especially if we do well. Little girls across the U.S. will want to play hockey and be like Team USA. That's a sure way to grow the sport.

Also, having more NCAA institutions with women's hockey teams will help grow the sport.

SL: There's now an opportunity for women to play ice hockey after college with the Canada-based National Women's Hockey League: do you think the league will make it?

AR: I played half of a season there last year [for the Montreal Axion]. It's a

semi-pro league — we don't get salaries, but we have sponsors that take care of everything else. I think it's a great springboard if we can get some more sponsors and expand the league, possibly have a few teams play in the border cities of the U.S. Start small, otherwise you run into some of the problems that the women's soccer and basketball leagues had. Don't try to enter markets that are already saturated with other sports teams. Start it like minor-league baseball — in smaller venues and get the cities really excited about it. We have a great product — we have a great sport — but when we're done with college, most women hockey players have to retire. We lose a lot of really good talent: women peak in their late 20s and yet they're retiring when they're 22. The potential is definitely there, it's just a matter of getting the support.

SL: You founded the All-American Girls Hockey School: are you still involved in that?

AR: I'm in the process of organizing schools that I'm going to be working with this summer. I know I'll do one school in Detroit. I'll post the schedule later at my website — www.angelaruggiero.com. At Torino, I hope to keep a journal and post every few days.

SL: Do you have plans to play hockey after Torino?

AR: I'll definitely play next year for the national team. I'm kind of taking it year by year. I have to figure out what the next stage holds for me. I've been thinking about going back to school — maybe business school — but for now I'm just trying to focus on the next month. When I get back home in March, I'll re-evaluate everything.