

# TEAM PLAYERS

PART 2 OF 2

On Tuesday, Gateway sports editor Robin Collum profiled two of the dozens of assistant coaches whose second-in-command roles are an integral element of varsity sports. In the second half of this installment, we go behind the bench again with two more of the Bears' and Pandas' best.

WRITTEN BY ROBIN COLLUM  
PHOTOS BY MIKE OTTO

Like most of the other assistant coaches on campus, Ted Poplawski has a day job—working with varsity athletes is something he does on his own time. That said, he finds a lot of parallels between what he does with the Golden Bears hockey team and his nine-to-five teaching social studies at Archbishop O'Leary High School. "I think it's a natural fit; they go hand in hand," he explains. "You have to be able to observe, monitor, and adjust, basically. You see what they're doing, and you have to get your point across in some way. That's what I do at the high school as well, except here at the university, I think it's a little bit different in that the kids want to be here."

Poplawski is in his 14th year as an assistant coach with the U of A men's hockey program, though that wasn't his first introduction to the team. He played for the team from 1976–1980, then played minor-league hockey for a season before moving on to teaching. He never lost his passion for the sport, and says that coaching is a way for him to combine that with his teaching experience—not to mention the relationships he's developed with the rest of the staff.

"I really enjoy it," Poplawski says. "There's the camaraderie—even on the long bus trips, we have some good times. You like to see the players improve, and it keeps your foot in the game. I loved hockey, and I

still do. And winning helps."

The Bears have done quite a bit of winning over the years that Poplawski's been with the team, including seven Canada West banners and four national championships—1999, 2000, 2005, and 2006. A lot of that success has been because of stellar performances from the team's goalkeepers, which is Poplawski's purview. Right now, he's working with top netminders Aaron Sorochan and Blake Grenier.

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"I just try to watch what they're doing; you're not going to change their styles at this stage, but you look out for little things they're doing wrong, or doing right, and give some advice," he says.

Poplawski gives the players almost all of the credit for Alberta's success in net, however. Even the contribution that he's made he hands over to the various head coaches under whom he's worked and played.

"I think it's a combination of really good players, and I think [head coach Eric Thurston] does a very good job coaching," he explains. "We've learned a lot over the years. We had Rob Daum as head coach for ten years, and I played under

Bill Moores and Clare Drake, and if you don't learn something from those kind of people, you're not paying attention."

But Thurston, for his part, is quick to praise Poplawski.

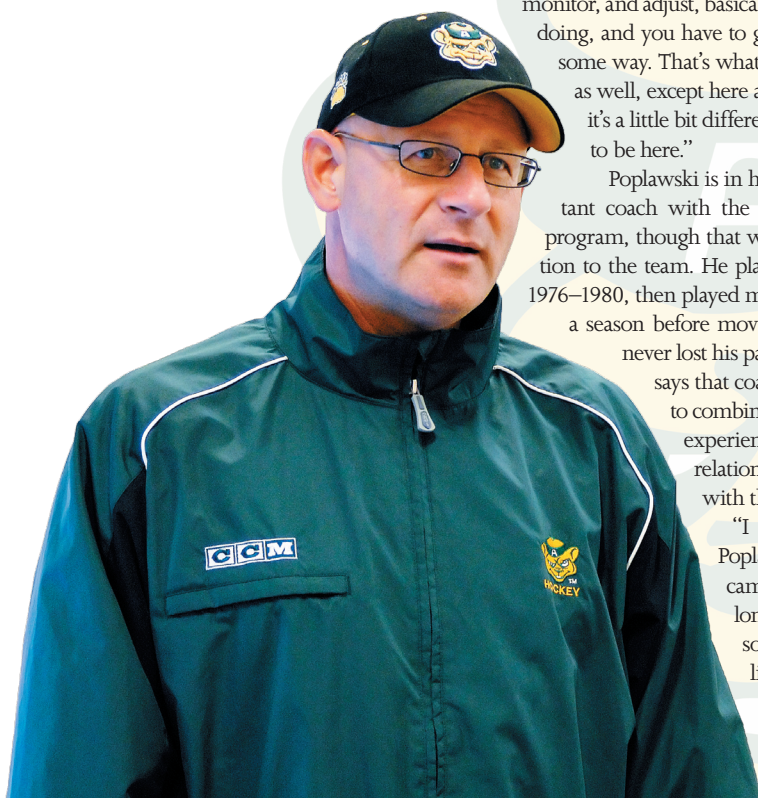
"He has a great read on goaltenders. He has a very calming and a very technical approach to the game. He relates very well to the kids, and I know he's very well respected, especially among the goalies," Thurston says.

"Ted has a very good sense of humour, and he's also very passionate, which is one of the things he brings to the table. We've become great friends throughout the years."

Not grabbing the glory is fine for Poplawski, as the payoff for him comes directly from working with the players and other coaches.

"We have a good time together," he says. "It's almost like a *Seinfeld* episode in the coaches' room before practice; we have some good laughs.

"That's what makes this fun. If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't do it," he continues. "It's the longest season on campus—it goes from September to hopefully the end of March—so if I didn't love it, I wouldn't be doing it."



**Ted Poplawski**  
Bears Hockey



He's already coached for 26 years, but something keeps Ron Thompson coming back to the university season after season to coach the Bears' and Pandas' track and field teams—and it's more than just a passion for the sport. What really keeps Thompson engaged is the ability to help shape young athletes not only into better sprinters and jumpers, but into better people.

"I have thought about retiring several times, and in fact I thought I would be retired by now, but there's always reasons you come back," says the 57-year-old, who coaches sprints and horizontal jumps. "You tend to be attracted both by the love of the sport and the people that you work with.

"I like to see people excel, not only athletically, but as a person. There are a number of instances where athletes of mine have excelled in the professions they've chosen, and that's something you really enjoy—seeing how athletes develop into responsible, great citizens."

Thompson wants to be able to share the knowledge and experience he's amassed in a lifetime in the track and field world with the Bears and Pandas he

trains. He started his career as an athlete in Jamaica and continued his involvement with the sport even after he moved to Canada in 1978. He works nights for Canada Post, but still manages to find time to put in at least two hours of coaching most days during the week, and says it's worth it because he enjoys teaching so much.

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"I try to impart as much as possible to the athletes from my knowledge and my life," he explains. "Every one of us makes mistakes, and those mistakes help us guide people so they don't make the same ones."

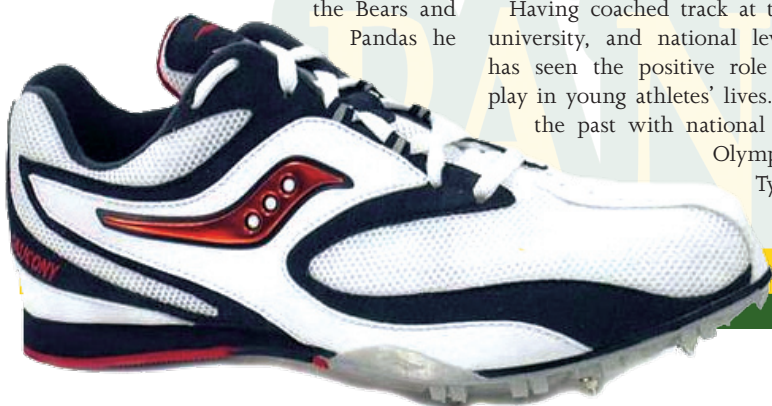
Having coached track at the high school, university, and national levels, Thompson has seen the positive role that sport can play in young athletes' lives. He's worked in the past with national champions and Olympians, including Tyler Christopher,

the former Bear who's now ranked sixth in the world in the 400m sprint. But it's not just those high-profile cases that stick with him.

"I have some very, very great memories from coaching high school in Lloydminster, not only of success in terms of coaching, but very touching memories of athletes who were regarded as bad boys but who turned out to be military officers or whatever else," he says.

It's clear that those he works with are as fond of Thompson as he is of them. As he speaks, a steady stream of athletes exiting a team meeting wave, make faces, or clasp his shoulder as they walk by. He credits his ability to relate to the athletes as one of his strengths as a coach, but admits that he can be tough on them if he doesn't feel they're living up to potential.

"I believe that I'm very patient and very easy-going, but I also like commitment, and if I don't see commitment, I'm not very happy about it," he says. "It's one of my pet peeves when people don't show up to practice or take things for granted because they're wasting their time and mine."



**Ron Thompson**  
Bears/Pandas Track and Field