

Blake Bolden discusses emBolden her, a 6-month mentorship program for aspiring female hockey players



By Julian McKenzie (/author/julian-mckenzie/) 5h ago



Blake Bolden remembers feeling at a low point while sitting in a locker room stall in 2014 after a game, when she even considered quitting hockey altogether.

It also happened to be the moment she had an epiphany.

Bolden had made history the prior summer as the first Black player to be taken in the first round of the Canadian Women's Hockey League Draft after being the captain of the Boston College Eagles of the NCAA. The rookie defenseman suited up for the Boston Blades and felt she was at the top of her game. Bolden even thought she'd have a chance at making Team USA's roster for the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia.

It wasn't to be. Seven of her Blades teammates, including Meghan Duggan and Hilary Knight, got the call instead. Even a college teammate, forward Alex Carpenter, made the roster.

In that locker room, as Bolden sat at her stall with a “crushed” ego, a young girl with a poster with Bolden's name, number and a whole lot of glitter approached.

The fan waited after the game for Bolden, and not her Olympic teammates, to tell her how well she played and to strike a conversation.

“That meant the world to me that I, just by playing the sport, influenced her to want to try it,” Bolden said. “I just told myself that I'll just give back. If you give, you receive in tenfold. I think that's very important for everyone to learn.”

The experience is what led the CWHL and NWHL all-star and champion to become a mentor and, three years later, develop her own program for aspiring young female hockey players. It has since become a free, virtual six-month program called “emBolden her,” featuring 25 girls from the United States and Canada.

The participants will hear from Bolden, and other special guests, about setting goals, managing their time, self-motivation techniques and other lessons. The sessions, 90 minutes each, take place on the first Saturday of each month of the program.

Blake Bolden's emBolden her Mentorship Initiative | Play It Again Sports



“A lot of young girls and young athletes are just trying to figure out how to be their best selves on and off the ice,” Bolden told *The Athletic*. “I really wanted to develop a program for these individuals to set goals, and not only set them but achieve them. Everybody should have a path. Everybody should have a marker that they want to reach to. And it’s not necessarily to say that if you don’t make that marker, you fail. But you’re learning along the way.”

“I’ve been through a lot of ups and downs in my career as a professional athlete. I’ve been cut numerous times. I’ve been told I wasn’t good enough. I’ve won championships. I’ve been MVP. I’ve captained my teams. Life is a roller coaster, and I wish when I was younger that I had someone that I could just use as a resource to say, ‘This is what’s going on in my mind and help me unpack it all so we can make a plan.’”

The program is now a part of the work calendar for Bolden, who is already taken up by her duties with the Los Angeles Kings as a scout

(<https://theathletic.com/1641580/2020/02/28/five-questions-with-the-kings-scout-blake-bolden/>) and as a contributor to ESPN’s NHL coverage

(<https://twitter.com/ESPNPR/status/1409904963900280842?s=20>).

“I think that juggling things is that something you just learn as you go,” Bolden said. “I just turned 30 in March, and all these opportunities have come to me because of who I’ve been in the past. Because I’ve just kind of put my head down and took it one step at a time and really believed in who I was as a person. I think people see that, see my passion and are attracted to it.”

The Winmark Corp. and Play It Again Sports, a sporting-goods franchise under Winmark, are listed as the sponsors of the mentorship program. Bolden mentioned Play it Again Sports in an article she wrote for The Players’ Tribune back in March, eventually catching the attention of the company and leading to the partnership.

“We thought, can we form a partnership with her and sponsor her so we can keep inspiring these women to go play hockey in a huge growing sport?” said Renae Gaudette, the president of franchising at Winmark. “That’s kind of how it started. And now it’s just evolved, and we hope it continues. I actually saw the first mentor program (session), I was watching it, and those girls are so inspiring to me.”

Darby Anderson-Cooper is one of the 25 girls involved in the mentorship program. She’s a Black high schooler from Silver Spring, Md., and a member of The Academy of the Holy Cross high school girls hockey team. Two years ago, the 16-year-old took up hockey after her high school didn’t offer a figure skating program.

Ice hockey, naturally, was the next best thing.

“I did something that seemed kind of similar to it,” Anderson-Cooper said.

The teenager has never been to any hockey game beyond the ones she plays, but she is a fan of the closest NHL (<https://theathletic.com/nhl/>) team to the state of Maryland, the Washington Capitals (<https://theathletic.com/team/capitals/>). According to Darby’s mom, Bri, her team is supposed to play a game at Capital One Arena before the end of her season.

Bri recognized her daughter’s interest in playing hockey and sought advice from someone in the know who could point her in the right direction. One Google search eventually led to Brett Peterson, the Florida Panthers’ assistant general manager, the first Black person in NHL history to hold that position.

“I didn’t even know about him,” Bri said. “I was just trying to find out about different opportunities for youth hockey ... and his name came up.”

Bri found his email address, she and Peterson soon connected. Peterson eventually recommended Bolden’s mentorship program.

“I’ve known Blake for a while,” Peterson said. “I think she’s certainly an ambassador for women’s hockey as a whole as well as women’s hockey for young women of color. I just thought it was a natural connection.”

Darby applied for the program and wrote an essay detailing how she got into hockey and her time in high school. She was accepted and took part in the program’s first session last month, which served as an introductory meetup for everyone.

“We all introduced (ourselves) to each other, the girls,” Darby said. “Blake Bolden introduced herself. We got to know a little bit more about her and how she started hockey. We talked about goal-setting, our strengths and weaknesses, and we tried to support each other and give each other ideas to help our anxiety.”

Bolden said the girls also filled out a questionnaire. The hope, she said, was to discover how many of the girls aspired to play professionally and to learn more about them. The responses moved Bolden to tears, as some mentioned a desire to play as far up as the Olympics (<https://theathletic.com/olympics/>).

“That’s really what we’re always doing it for,” Bolden said. “We’re always doing it for the next generation. We’re always giving back, the ladies that are playing now. We’re always giving back, we’re always going to clinics. Interacting with these girls, it’s so important for them to see and have role models.”

By the way, Darby is a defender just like Bolden, and aspires to play university hockey after she graduates from high school. Darby acknowledges that she didn’t know anything about the program before she enrolled, but she was happy to see someone who looks like her imparting wisdom to her and other girls her age, and she is also happy that the program has allowed her to get to know other girls who share her dreams.

“I think it’s a great support system,” Darby said. “All the girls help each other out. If you have a problem, you can ask them during the meeting. It’s really nice, and they’re just always there for you.”

(Top photo of Blake Bolden: Juan Ocampo / NHLI via Getty Images)

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Julian McKenzie ([author/julian-mckenzie/](/author/julian-mckenzie/)) is an Associate Editor for The Athletic covering the NHL. Before joining The Athletic, he worked as a part-time reporter and editor for The Canadian Press and as a live blogger and columnist for the Montreal Gazette. He has also worked for and contributed to Yahoo! Sports, FiveThirtyEight, Habs Eyes on the Prize, Sporting News, CTV Montreal, TSN 690, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of Concordia University and Syracuse University. Follow Julian on Twitter [@jkamckenzie](https://twitter.com/jkamckenzie) (<https://twitter.com/jkamckenzie>).



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Been a fan of Blake's since the Buffalo Beaut days, great article!



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Andrew R. 4h ago

I needed a "hockey is good" story after all the Blackhawks news lately.