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Ice Queen

By [Joan Tuppance](#)

February 1st, 2010

Angela Ruggiero's explosive smile as she faced off against the Finnish ice-hockey team is something her former Olympic coach, Ben Smith, will never forget. Ruggiero was only 15 back then, playing alongside her older teammates on the U.S. Women's National Team for the first time.

"She had a grin so big and so wide that it was laughable," Smith recalls. "You could see all of a sudden she was beaming and ready for the women's hockey world. It was 'Here I come, so watch out.' She never looked back. She's always kept that grin."

Flash forward to the present. Ruggiero, now 30 and a three-time Olympic medalist, is once again hitting the ice, competing this month with the U.S. Women's Hockey Team in Vancouver for a medal in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. The seasoned veteran is considered to be one of the greats in the history of women's ice hockey. Her many awards and accomplishments set a high standard for future players.

In 2003, The Hockey News voted her the Best Female Hockey Player in the World. A year later, ESPN.com ranked her as one of the Top 16 Female Athletes in the World.

At the 1998 Olympic Games she and her team won gold. In the 2002 games, they scored a silver medal, and in 2006, a bronze. In addition, Ruggiero was tapped for the Top Defenseman Award at the Winter Olympics in 2002 and 2006. She received the same award for the 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2008 World Championships. The list goes on and on.

Ruggiero's passion for ice hockey started at the age of 7 when her father signed her and her younger brother, Bill, up for the sport. Ruggiero's sister also played for two years. "It was a good outlet for us to be together as a family," she says.

It didn't take her long to realize how much fun she was having on the ice. "It was super fast," she says. "You are just gliding across the ice."

What didn't dawn on her was the fact that area youth ice hockey teams were dominated by boys who weren't thrilled with the notion of having a girl on their team. Participating in the sport was often a struggle. "There were a lot of boys on other teams and parents saying 'Get off the ice' or not picking me," she recalls. "You remember that kind of thing. That motivated me to work harder, not to give up."

Ruggiero's resolve is legendary. Smith, who coached her in the 1998, 2002 and 2006 Olympics, knew when he laid eyes on her in 1995 that "she was something special."

"She's well focused on the ice," he says. "She's an outstanding athlete, a physically imposing type of player. She's hard nosed and very talented. She is one of the top two or three players in her sport at her position."

Not daunted by the temporary obstacles, Ruggiero continued playing ice hockey throughout high school and college. During her senior year in high school at Choate Rosemary Hall, she was picked to be a member of the 1998

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U.S. Olympic hockey team, which won a gold medal in Japan. It was the first women's ice hockey game to be played in the Olympics. "I had the coolest senior year possible," observes Ruggiero. "To have the opportunity to graduate with my class and represent America in the first-ever Olympics for women's ice hockey and also be the youngest member of the team, I couldn't have scripted it better."

Ruggiero continued her winning streak at Harvard with a team medal in the 2002 Olympics. She also captured a number of major awards, including the 2004 NCAA Top VIII award as one of the top eight student-athletes in the NCAA and the 2004 Patty Kazmaier Memorial Trophy, awarded to the best college hockey player. As if that wasn't enough, she graduated cum laude from the prestigious Ivy League school.

She admits she was intimidated by Harvard at first but quickly "fell in love" with the school and the people on her hockey team. "I thought it would be the perfect fit for me," she says. "It was one of the best decisions of my life."

Her brutal schedule forced her to become an expert at time management. "You have to learn to discipline yourself," she says. "When I applied myself, I could get good grades and that allowed me to realize where my potential was."

The year 2005 was a special one for her. She scored the tournament-winning goal at the Women's World Ice Hockey Championship and played in a professional hockey game with her brother, giving her the distinction of being the first female non-goalie and the first brother-sister team to play in a North American men's professional hockey game.

Her male teammates, she says, treated her like one of the guys. "At first they tried to see if I could hang with them but it quickly occurred to them that I could play hockey. It helped to have my brother out there. He's a big supporter of mine and I am a big supporter of his. He's the one that got the team to invite me down."

Hockey is hockey, she adds. "It's like training for the Olympics. You are not thinking you are female, just that you play hockey."

Ruggiero's determination is as strong as her physical and mental discipline when she steps on the ice. "You have to be fully in the moment," she explains. "You are definitely not supposed to think about consequences. You have to work hard and use all the skills you have."

An elite athlete like Ruggiero doesn't think about the situation. She just responds. "The second you get into your own head and start thinking, you are defeating yourself as an athlete," she says. "You have to just be there performing."

Michele Amidon, USA Hockey's director of women's hockey and a former teammate of Ruggiero's, sees her as "a force to reckon with on the ice."

"Luckily she is on our side," Amidon says with a laugh. "You don't want to be on the end of one of Angela's hits. She's a very aggressive player on the ice. She is solid and sturdy."

Off the ice is different. Ruggiero is extremely personable and open. "She can draw you in immediately," Amidon says. "She's easy to speak to and she's not shy in front of the cameras."

Fans of Season 6 of NBC's "The Apprentice" saw that side of her when Ruggiero was a cast member on the spring 2007 show, not getting fired by "the Donald" until the 10th episode. She found the reality television experience tiring. "You can't really prepare yourself for not sleeping," she says. "I definitely had a good time. It was a grueling process but at the same time I was getting exposed to a lot of neat people."

The show's originator, Donald Trump, offered her a job after the season ended but Ruggiero politely declined. "I wasn't ready," she says. "I wanted to compete in one more Olympics."

Amidon sees Ruggiero as an inspiration to the younger members of the Olympic hockey team. "The team itself is very young," she explains. "A lot of kids are still in college or just out of college. Angela brings a lot of knowledge. She's had to be a leader of this group. A lot of girls turn to her for advice on and off the ice."



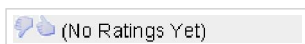
Ruggiero's participation in ice hockey has boosted the visibility of the sport as have her off-the-ice activities. She has authored her autobiography, "Breaking the Ice," and served as color analyst for CSTV. She is the former director of the New York Islanders' Project Hope, an organization that provides "young Chinese athletes with access to educational opportunities," and the founder and president of Angela Ruggiero Girls' and Women's Hockey School, which she started in 2003. "It's a natural fit to be able to talk to young female athletes," she says.

Currently, Ruggiero serves on the board of trustees of the Women's Sports Foundation, founded by tennis great Billie Jean King, one of Ruggiero's role models. "I am a benefactor of what the organization has done," she says, explaining her commitment to the foundation. "I wanted to help the community and young girls get involved [with sports]."

Yolanda Jackson, the foundation's senior director of athlete marketing and promotions, says Ruggiero brings her "deep love of sport, dedication and a sincere desire to help girls achieve" to the organization. "She has shown girls that they can do anything and surpass even the boys at times. She has been a leader for all those women athletes who have been denied access to proper facilities and the training it takes to be a champion. She's a person who never gives up and who will always fight for what she believes in."

On the ice, Ruggiero may appear fearless, but she acknowledges that everyone has some fears. The key is how you approach them and tackle them. "I will be done with hockey soon and am going to my second career and there are fears surrounding that," she confides. "Am I going to be successful? Am I going to enjoy it? It's a new adventure for me. I'm fearful of the unknown at times but it's better to try than sit back and be comfortable."

Jackson sees Ruggiero as much more than just a hockey player. "I have met and come to know many athletes in my day and Angela is among only a handful I would call a true role model."



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