

FITSPIRIT



CLAUDINE LABELLE: ATHLETE TURNED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

This story of a Laurentian-born woman's journey from tough obstacles to unbelievable success is worth some contemplation. Hard work and dedication in elementary and high school led her on a path to high-intensity events that would one day change her life. These events brought forward hurdles which would force her to push beyond her limits. We all have to make hard choices sometimes, but the choices made in this story are quite extraordinary.

This is a tale of a young woman who knew how to see the opportunity in every difficulty. She has taken this approach to life. Thanks to the life lessons she learned along the way, she now spends her time transmitting her knowledge to generations of future young women. Life comes with its fair share of challenges, especially for young women, but it also comes with wonderful moments of joy. Claudine Labelle wants young women to grasp the wonderful moments. Here's how it all began.

THE FIRST STEPS WHICH LED HER TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Born in St-Jérôme, Claudine Labelle was a shy and reserved little girl. When she first found sport, it was a far cry from being love at first sight. Instead of embracing the activity her athletic father had enrolled her in, Claudine was much more interested in botanical art than soccer. Her dad wanted to transmit his passion for soccer to his daughter, so he brought her to the soccer field. He was a little surprised when Claudine chose to spend her time picking flowers for the spectators and rolling around in the grass. Finally, a perseverant and determined coach entrusted little Claudine with the mission of dribbling the ball as far as the goalposts of the opposition; a challenge which Claudine accepted with enthusiasm and satisfaction, carried by an encouraging crowd.

At this very moment, Claudine's eyes lit up with a spark. This marked the onset of a discovery. An avid fan of physical activity was born. Claudine developed a thirst for a range of sports and physical activities. She pursued soccer and went from strength to strength, joining high-level team after high-level team all the way up until the age of 13; an experience which would teach her diligence and discipline, values which she would carry with her in other aspects of her life.

The transition from elementary school to high school wasn't without its stumbling blocks. Claudine's choice to invest in friendships with other girls led her to drop sport in an effort to fit in with her friends, who weren't keen on sports or exercise. The spark that was ignited by her very first soccer experience was becoming dimmer and she began to lose interest in studying.

Once she reached Grade 11, one of Claudine's teachers was able to get through to her, reigniting her love of sports by inviting her to join a lunchtime training club. Claudine accepted. She dove in and quickly rediscovered the pleasure and wellbeing that sports brought her during her childhood. Her passion returned so fiercely that she applied herself to sports with all the gusto and intensity that had been such a major part of her character. She joined a national duathlon team and, after motivating herself to become a skilled swimmer, she trained to become a swim coach for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. This experience allowed her to grow up, to develop a certain level of maturity, and to focus on something other than her obsession with sporting performance for a short while. The conviction that came with having an impact on the lives of these children led Claudine to discover the additional benefits of sport and physical activity and to understand their potential social benefits.

THE JOURNEY OF AN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF YOUNG GIRLS



SPORTS AT THE HEART OF HER DAILY LIFE

In the years that followed, the intensity of Claudine's training formed a large part of her daily life. In **2002**, she moved to Toronto, where she trained with high-level duathlon and triathlon athletes and began applying a sense of team spirit to cycling. In the fall of **2003**, she took a break from this whirlwind to explore Europe by bike; a 6,000-kilometer-long expedition during which she began to reflect upon her dreams and aspirations as well as the social role that she wanted to play.

THE LIFE-DEFINING EVENT **2004**

Back in training, a life-defining event happened in June **2004**. At 22 years old, Claudine was hit by a car on her road bike. She suffered a severe head injury and had to undergo rehabilitation, a grueling process, which lasted two years, including a year of hyperbaric oxygen therapy. The long road to recovery was rough. Despite this, Claudine took the opportunity to deepen her reflection and nourish her spirit. She did a lot of research during this time and read extensively about the dangers of leading a sedentary life. Many articles discussed how teenage girls drop out of sports around the same time she did. As she read about the lack of physical activity in the lives of young girls around puberty, she realized that nobody was doing anything about the issue. There were no programs encouraging young girls to participate in sports.

WHEN THE FITSPIRIT ADVENTURE TOOK ROOT **2007**

This troubling realization led to the birth of a fantastic idea. Claudine decided to raise awareness by doing presentations in schools. Once her rehabilitation was over, she brought together some athlete friends, including Lyne Bessette and Anouk Leblanc-Boucher and set off on a tour giving presentations all over Quebec and Ontario.

Beginning in May **2007**, 5,000 girls took part in presentations delivered at their schools by Claudine and her team. Four months later, at the beginning of the new school semester in September, she did it again. This time, 18,000 teenager girls were reached in more than 80 schools.

Each time, Claudine saw the same reaction in the girls. She was met with crossed arms and hard stares, but as she continued talking, the girls would begin to relax and soften as they warmed to the ideas she was expressing.

Claudine Labelle's dream began to take root. As it did, the social entrepreneur inside her wanted to breathe life into the project so that she could continue making a difference.

FitSpirit offers and promotes a range of activities, encouraging girls to move with fun and fellowship. One of FitSpirit's major events is its Snow Challenge, which brings together physical activity and the joys of winter. The FitClub program was created in **2009**, the year when Claudine Labelle received the FÉÉPEQ and Student Sports achievement award. The first FitClub brought together 27 girls, one of whom, Karine, made an everlasting impression on Claudine. Exhausted, short of breath, and very emotional during the race, young Karine courageously continued, supported by her mentor, Claudine. When they finally crossed the finish line hand in hand in last place (but a proud last place), Karine burst into tears; tears of joy she insisted, since she had just achieved her best time in a running race.

Claudine understands that each participant's sense of achievement is measured by her own personal experience. The experience of surpassing their limits and achieving more than they ever thought was possible leads to a sense of profound personal satisfaction for these girls. The fact that FitSpirit achieves this kind of impact proves that all Claudine's hard work is worth it. Inspiring young women of the future to get active improves their self-confidence, and this is at the heart of Claudine and FitSpirit's mission.

Women and girls who do sports show more self-confidence and self-esteem.

The Confidence Gap.
The Atlantic, 2014.

Claudine Labelle took on a tough challenge: she wanted to offer young girls an experience which would allow them to discover the benefits of physical activity; something that would serve as a strong asset and allow them to thrive both in their present and future lives.



CLAUDINE LABELLE: AN EXAMPLE OF OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND **2010**

In **2010**, the Women's Executive Network (WXN) named Claudine one of Canada's top 100 most influential women. In the same year, she also received the Young Woman of Distinction award from the Toronto YWCA and the TELUS Quebec Innovation Award. Claudine didn't just achieve this by working alone. She solicited the help and support of precious mentors who accompanied her and bolstered the growth and development of FitSpirit. She humbly recognizes the expertise of her partners and values their advice. She never strays from her values and the mission she has set herself. In the same year as these other accolades, Claudine was named a Fellow of Ashoka Canada. This opened the door to McKinsey & Co. who were given the mandate of developing FitSpirit's first strategic plan.

FITSPIRIT BUILDS MOMENTUM **2011**

Claudine Labelle acknowledges that she has invested her body and soul in the FitSpirit project. She admits that it was inevitable that she would have to make certain sacrifices along the way. When she became a mom for the first time in 2006 and then had her second child in 2008, she had to keep her dream at arm's length for quite a while. With the unwavering support of her spouse, who never stopped believing in her, she pushed through.

Thanks to the involvement of François Côté, then CEO of TELUS, FitSpirit officially became financially viable in **2011**. Claudine has always maintained that the members of her team should get remunerated for their work before she does. She is also careful to emphasize the value of the FitSpirit team, highlighting the fundamental role that each member plays in the success of the organization, employees, ambassadors, and volunteers alike.

FitSpirit finally had the wind in its sails and the number of teenage girls participating in the project grew by 91% between 2012 and 2015. During this period, Claudine's influence as a change agent was recognized in many circles and she was awarded a number of prizes and accolades:

- ▷ CAMH prize for being a Leading Canadian for Mental Health in 2017;
- ▷ Meritorious Service Medal from the Governor General of Canada in 2016;
- ▷ Quebec Young Leader, Social Responsibility 2016 from The Junior Chamber of Commerce of Montreal;
- ▷ IOC Trophy for Sport and Innovation 2015 from the International Olympic Committee;
- ▷ La Presse Personality May 2015, (in the Social Entrepreneur category);
- ▷ Ernst & Young Quebec Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2013;
- ▷ Montreal YWCA's 2012 Woman of Distinction Award (in the Sports and Wellness category).

THE EVOLUTION OF FITSPIRIT **2016-2017**

The years **2016-2017** were spent putting everything in place to allow the organization to grow.

FitSpirit sought partnerships with schools and communities in an effort to generate a sustainable range of physical activities for teenage girls. In order to do this, the organization took a global approach in presenting its tools and services. This approach was based on a flexible support service, helping schools to get their girls moving! FitSpirit's activities are specially adapted for pre-teen and teenage girls, carefully bearing in mind their issues and realities. The FitSpirit approach really took flight between 2016 and 2017!

During this period, FitSpirit began to work on diversifying its sources of revenue. It launched its first major fundraising campaign "Let's Ramp Up The Movement" and the first of its fundraising events, the Father-Daughter Ball. In 2017, FitSpirit also launched its first advertising campaign with the aim of reawakening teenage girls' love for sports.

This was the year when Claudine Labelle saw how far she had come. With a tender sense of pride, she reflected on how much progress her brainchild had made. She realized how very bright its future promised to be.

A NEW CHALLENGE FOR FITSPIRIT

Despite what FitSpirit has already accomplished, Claudine's work is far from being over. Among other things, statistics on sedentari-ness reveal that for every 2 girls, 1 gives up sports when she reaches puberty. This trend gets drastically worse between the ages of 12 and 17 and by the end of high school, 9 out of 10 girls have stopped doing the recommended amount of physical activity (according to Canadian guidelines). Faced with this reality, FitSpirit embarks on its next decade with the challenge of reversing these statistics and raising awareness about the importance of a healthy and active lifestyle. FitSpirit wants to spread this message to teenage girls from all over Canada and make a lasting impact on their lives.

Strengthened by her successes, Claudine has also matured as a result of the challenges and difficulties she has overcome along the way. With the knowledge and experience that she has garnered over the years, Claudine wants to give back. She wants to act as a mentor to the next generation of social entrepreneurs, a little-known sphere, yet an important vehicle for driving change and progress.

Thanks to Claudine Labelle's hard work and strong vision, FitSpirit succeeds in inspiring, motivating, and encouraging a whole generation of girls to get moving. Far from being complete, the work of this exceptional social entrepreneur is in a phase of rapid expansion. This dedicated woman is hungry to drive positive social change across the country. As a strong and passionate change agent, it is clear that Claudine Labelle's future is full of promise.



94% of women in the C-suite played sports, 52% at a university level.

Where will you find your next leader?
EY and ESPNW report, 2015.

Girls who do sports are more likely to achieve a college degree, find a job, and occupy a position in industries which are normally dominated by men.

The Confidence Gap. The Atlantic, 2014.

CLAUDINE LABELLE: AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- 2017**
 - CAMH: Leading Canadian for Mental Health. (CAMH Change Agent = The 150 Leading Canadians for Mental Health)
- 2016**
 - The Governor General of Canada: Meritorious Service Medal;
 - The Junior Chamber of Commerce of Montreal's Gala ARTISTA: Quebec Young Leader, Social Responsibility.
- 2015**
 - La Presse: La Presse Personality, Social Entrepreneur;
 - International Olympic Committee (IOC): IOC Trophy for Sport and Innovation.
- 2013**
 - Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Quebec Awards, Special Citation: Social Entrepreneur.
- 2012**
 - Montreal YWCA's Woman of Distinction Award (in the Sports and Wellness category).
- 2010**
 - Ashoka Canada Fellow;
 - Women's Executive Network: Voted one of Canada's Top 100 Most Influential Women;
 - The TELUS Montreal Community Board: TELUS Innovation Award;
 - Toronto YWCA: Young Woman of Distinction.
- 2009**
 - FÉÉPEQ: FÉÉPEQ and Student Sports Distinction Award.
- 2008**
 - Women's Executive Network: Voted one of Canada's Top 100 Most Influential Women.