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## The world's greatest hockey mom

**Team Finland's Riikka Väilä will play in her fourth Olympic Games this month, continuing a storied international career.**

02/09/2018, 11:30am CST  
By John Conley



In 2010, Finland's Riikka Väilä became the fourth woman inducted into the IIHF Hall of Fame.

Hockey Mom is a moniker that comes with tremendous pride attached, evidenced by Sarah Palin using the label to convey character during the 2008 presidential campaign. These women have made the progression from carrying a child to changing diapers, then carrying a Mite's hockey bag before tying skates after shuttling the kids to various rinks. The sport would not exist without their contributions. With millions of hockey moms in this world, one stands above the rest, the remarkable Riikka Väilä.

Born July 12, 1973, she began playing hockey – “with the boys,” as she tells it – at age 7. Now, at age 44, she will suit up for the Lady Lions of Finland in her fourth Olympic Games. In between, she has wholly embraced roles with a family, as a career woman and as a world-class athlete. Several lifetimes have been packed into her 130-pound frame.

A trailblazing pioneer – honing her chops when there was no international competition for females – she competed in the first Women's World Championships in 1990 at age 16. Eight years later, her seven goals and five assists led all Olympians in scoring and propelled the Finns to a bronze medal finish in Nagano, the first time women's ice hockey was an Olympic event.

She had achieved both team and individual success at 24, the average age of national team players today. She would go on to play in the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City before retiring from the sport to become a “triple mother” to sons Emil (now 14) and Elis (12), plus daughter Helmi (9). All while working as a physical therapist.

Long retired, Väilä became the fourth woman inducted into the IIHF Hall of Fame in 2010. A spark flickered while attending the 2013 World Championships in a support role as Finnish team manager, which led to her announcement of a comeback in August of that year. Skeptics would question being able to play at the Olympic level at age 40 after a decade away, but she quickly shook off any rust to earn a spot on the team. The Lady Lions failed to medal when the surprising Swiss took home bronze, but she enjoyed things enough to relaunch her playing career in earnest.

It is no small feat to balance a large family while playing over 20 games annually with the national team and another 25-30 with club teams JYP and HV71, plus practicing and carving out enough time to maintain an elite level of fitness. Everyone who sees her play now is in awe, marveling at a top-line center who logs heavy minutes and is never more than a couple of strides from the puck. American forward Kelly Pannek remarked,

“Honestly, I wouldn't be able to tell how old she was. You couldn't really pick that out,” after Team USA played Finland in the Four Nations Cup. “It's pretty cool what she's been able to do continuing her career and having a family and playing at such a high level.” Teammate Venla Hovi added, “Riikka's conditioning is better than all of us.”

A.J. Mieczko is a contemporary, 42 and a member of the United States team that won gold in the 1998 Olympics. Now a broadcaster, watching clips of the first Olympics is a reminder that memories of her previous career are reaching a long way back. “It wasn't in HD. Everything about the video looks so long ago.” A mother with four children around the same ages as Väilä's, Mieczko says, “Of course I remember going against her. She was Riikka Nieminen then. I can't even imagine still playing.”

For an indication of how much things about hockey for girls and women have changed, consider the anemic support for Riikka's budding career as a little girl. “My father tried to change my mind. Why are you playing hockey because there isn't anything when you grow up? His wish was for me to continue playing tennis, basketball, and track and field. I was quite talented in those sports, too,” she mentions as a matter of fact. Ever modest, she failed to mention that she has also been a national champion in bandy and was voted Finland's Player of the Year three times in pesäpallo, a Finnish sport similar to baseball.

Today, all kids play, and she has coached Helmi. Family games of shinny are eventful, as husband Mika was once drafted by the Pittsburgh Penguins and enjoyed a long professional career until 2005 in Scandinavia.

Nearly 30 years removed from her first international competition, Riikka is a credible source to ask about the advancements in women's hockey over that period. “I think the biggest change is that the players are more like athletes. They are stronger, faster and that makes the game faster and better. The individuals are much better these days so the game is better, for sure.”

Yet as much as things have changed, she's occasionally provided the comfort of knowing some elements remain the same. An example is the Rahunen family, who bridges her first career with the second act. Defender Isa now is Väilä's teammate, just as her mother was a generation ago.

There's an expression that behind every great man is a great woman. In this case, a corollary applies. She says Mika's role is critical for her continued play. “I have his full support. He's a great husband to take care of the kids while I'm away,” at international competitions. There is a limit to this support, however, because he didn't relish workouts during his own career and hasn't been a fitness partner now that his wife resumed intensive training.

Leadership naturally accompanies a player with so many years in the game, no matter how demonstrative. Asked what it is like having her around, teammate Mira Jalosuo said, “She's a very calm person who doesn't panic ever. I would say that she's not a vocal leader; she leads by example. When she has something to say during the intermission breaks or before or after a game, everyone will pay attention.”

Of course, her maternal nature comes out at times. “She's like the mom of the team. If somebody's missing something, they'll call to Riikka and say do you have this, and usually she has that. She's always taking care of people,” according to ex-Gopher Jalosuo.

You can watch Riikka and the Finns take on the United States in their first game from the 2018 Olympic Games in PyeongChang on Sunday, Feb. 11. Judging from her recent performance, you will probably see Riikka with the Finns during Beijing 2022 from China as well!