

Royal City youth soccer thrived under Anne Monk: New Westminster group shocked by the death of the woman who kept busy despite her serious illness.

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Byline: Gary Mason

Column: Gary Mason

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They referred to it as: Before the Coming of Anne.

It was a term members of the Royal City Youth Soccer Club executive came up with to delineate that period before **Anne Monk** arrived as president.

That was three years ago, when the number of kids enrolled in the New Westminster club was stagnant, the organization generally chaotic, when no one, it seemed, had the time or the will to do all the little things necessary to make sure sports is everything it can be for a child.

Until she took over.

With more and more amateur sports organizations being ripped apart by ugly internal politics, personal agendas, members of executives looking out for the interests of a few over the majority, along comes the story of one woman who wanted no part of that.

Someone whose overriding credo was simple: It's for the kids, stupid.

And not just hers.

Monk's two sons, Bryan, 11 and Stephan, 9, both played soccer. They weren't stars. They just loved the game. She was the good soccer mom, attending all their games with her husband, Mel, cheering from the often soggy sidelines, umbrella in hand, encouraging a child every time one touched the ball.

But **Anne Monk** was never content to just stand on the sidelines. She had to get involved.

She was a teacher-librarian in the Surrey school district. When controversy erupted over the banning of certain books, she was in the middle of it, arguing against removing books from libraries. Children, she believed, should have a choice.

When a school committee was struck, Anne was usually right in there, volunteering to look into this or that, fueled by a need to see things done properly but also by a sense of dedication and fairmindedness that ran like a thread through everything she did, everything she touched.

Including soccer.

It didn't take long for Anne to become manager of her kids' teams, and not long after that to find a position on the youth soccer club's executive as secretary. And not long after that to realize the president wasn't showing up regularly, the meetings had no agendas, and a heck of a lot more could be done with the right person in charge.

Soon she was president.

And secretary.

That was Anne.

"It was very difficult for the rest of us to keep up with her," remembers Rick Molstad, a New West lawyer who was on the club's executive.

"She came in and all of a sudden the meetings had agendas, we had to follow Robert's Rules of Order. The teacher in her took over."

Anne Monk didn't come in with grandiose plans. She didn't dream of producing the Lower Mainland's best soccer players. She did dream of making sure the average kid was taken care of, given good coaching, good refereeing, a safe place to play.

So she set out to do just that.

She made sure there were background checks done on all coaches. She made sure coaches were qualified and had passed various levels of certification. She made sure referees, often the source of most of the complaints from coaches and parents, had the proper training.

But she also made sure they were shown the proper degree of respect. No longer would they have to supply their own uniforms and whistles and other tools of the trade. The club would, because they valued what they did and the time they put in.

The refereeing improved.

When needles used by drug addicts were found in the vicinity of some soccer pitches, Monk made sure coaches were supplied with kits so they could safely dispose of the needles.

She knew what concerned parents.

Jobs that were routinely doled out to others in most organizations, she took on herself, happily, including some of the most time-consuming, like registrar. When it came to handing out and collecting equipment at the end of the season, it would be **Anne Monk's** hands the jerseys and balls would fall into.

How did she find the time, most people had wondered.

This is how.

When staff in the parks and recreation department of New Westminster arrived for work in the morning, there would often be a fax from Monk concerning something or other waiting on the machine. At the top it told what time it had been sent. Often it was one o'clock in the morning or later.

She never shied away from the tough job, the inevitable confrontation. To the chagrin of some coaches, she broke up cliques of kids who had been playing together for years. She believed children should be exposed to new friends. And it would allow for fairer competition, too.

"She was bit of a pit bull," says Craig Nichols, who was on the executive with Monk. "When there was something that needed to be done, she just went after it.

"But her focus was always the kids. She always reminded us of that. She made sure there were no other agendas at work."

When she tired of attending games in which kids sunk six inches into the mud, she led the charge and the fund-raising to get an all-weather field built. Many considered this **Anne Monk's** crowning achievement during her time as president.

I don't.

When **Anne Monk** took over, enrolment in the Royal City Youth Soccer Club was 350 kids. Today, it is almost 1,000.

That's remarkable.

It's too bad that the success of an amateur sports organization is so often measured by the distance its elite travel. Make it to the provincials, and your organization must be good. Fail to make it out of your district, and your organization must stink.

Anne Monk's achievements wouldn't even rate mentioning on that shallow level of evaluation.

It wasn't that she was against the development of elite soccer players. It just wasn't her focus. Her focus was the grassroots. She believed in the power of sport, the life lessons it could teach, the fun it could be for tomorrow's teachers and computer software designers, scientists and artists.

Not just for tomorrow's Pele.

"Anne was always trying to figure out how we could squeeze another kid in to play," remembers friend and club treasurer, Stephanie Carlton. "No one was ever turned away if they couldn't afford it. Anne always found a way to get them in."

Earlier this year, Monk had some news for her colleagues. She had cancer. It wasn't a big deal, she insisted, she would lick it.

Few doubted her.

"If you knew her, she would be the person you would have thought would beat cancer," says her sister-in-law, Lynn Litzenberger.

Even through her chemotherapy treatments, Monk never stopped working despite pleas by her friends to slow down.

She didn't talk about dying, about losing the battle, she didn't even make plans with her husband in the event she did die from the disease, because that would be a sign of giving up.

And that's something **Anne Monk** never did.

Instead, she was excited about an annual family holiday in Osoyoos next month. And a lacrosse tournament that her son, Bryan, was going to be in this weekend in Prince George. Yes, she was looking forward to that.

Three weeks ago, Monk suffered a stroke. Two days later she was dead.

The cancer was just too strong.

She was 42.

Friends couldn't believe it. Some had just seen her days earlier and said she didn't look like someone who was dying. No one had any idea she was as sick as she was.

That's the way **Anne Monk** wanted it.

At first, there was a range of feelings. Some felt guilty about the amount of time the soccer club took her away from her family. We should have done more, some members thought.

Other friends were angry. There is so much they would have said had they known. So many things they would have thanked her for.

Many would have said how much they would miss her.

"People used to joke that I was Anne's second husband and she was my second wife," Craig Nichols said. "I can honestly say she was my best friend. We were inseparable."

"You could talk to her about anything," said Stephanie Carlton. "Anything going on in your life, she was just a great sounding board."

For the last few weeks, the people who knew and loved **Anne Monk** have been trying to deal with her loss. Many are still in shock.

The soccer club tried to get the city to name the all-weather field Monk was so instrumental in getting built after her. Typical bureaucratic rules and regulations wouldn't allow it. There'll be a plaque erected in her honour instead.

Her friend, Craig Nichols, meantime, has taken over as president.

"Sometimes I'll be in bed at night and I'll go to grab the phone to call Anne about missing nets at a field and realize I can't do that anymore.

"It's my job now."

I didn't know **Anne Monk**. I wish I had. By all accounts she embodied everything that is good about sports. Everything that is good about people in general.

She was dearly loved. And she'll be dearly missed.