

## **Maco Balkovec**

Balkovec is currently the Executive Director of RINK Hockey Academy Kelowna and his past experience includes time with Bowling Green State University, Burnaby Winter Club, and The Canadian Sports School Hockey League amongst others. Balkovec comes from a teaching background that has been intertwined with coaching ever since he began his first teaching position nearly 20 years ago. Balkovec played two years in the BCHL and was drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks in the fifth round of the 1991 NHL Entry Draft. He would spend four years playing in the NCAA for University of Wisconsin before having a two year pro career in the ECHL and Germany.

JM: So, the first question I asked everyone, we're kind of turning back in the opposite direction a little bit here now, but what was the first thing you were excited to do most once the world started to go back to normal a little bit with COVID restrictions.

MB: That's a good question. I had not even thought about that. It's a couple of things. I mean, I'm still very cautious just about jumping back into things because, you know, we have to be very careful in how we do it. I mean, obviously, we want to go back to normal. But the thing that I think we've talked about, and we talked about in our groups and with our teams is that we have to expect things not to be normal again. And that this is the new normal. And until we really have a hold of this, I just think we have to expect that there's going to be things that we don't expect. It's probably a bigger version of what life is like, right? It's a great lesson for all of us that, you know, there is no straight-line in any situation. You have to just be comfortable with where you're at this moment. And obviously, you have to be prepared for what's to come but it's really important to enjoy the moment. And so, we're going to enjoy the day and enjoy having the opportunity to practice as a team and enjoy looking forward to having games. But we're really going to try to take it one day at a time.

JM: Paint a little bit of a picture for me of where you grew up, where you live now, family situation, any pets' things like that.

MB: Well, I grew up in Port Moody, BC and it was just a total like 'Wonder Years' type of situation where we had all these kids in our neighborhood that we're all pretty close to the same age and all really good athletes. And, you know, we played street hockey and baseball and rode bikes in the summer and had sleepovers. And it was like super ideal, I don't know, it was something that I would love for any kid growing up to have. So that was really cool. It's probably not a realistic thing in today's world. Because I don't think we have the same community set up overall. So, I think that's something that we try to recapture with the academy. Yea, grew up in Port Moody and then, you know, hockey ended up taking me to play in the BCHL and played in Merritt, after a year-and-a-half in Cowichan, and then I got drafted. I got a scholarship in my second year in the league. I went to Wisconsin and had four great years there and played a little bit of pro for two years, one here, and one over in Germany. And then I just kind of got disillusioned with the game and the way things were going and decided that that was that. It might be something that I would look at doing again. I just wasn't in a great head space and I think that it happens sometimes, you know, you work really hard for a long time and that things

haven't gone the way you want. And you think, you end up packing it in and it was probably premature but I just was you know, like it's not a bad thing to play in Europe and I probably could have played for 10 or 15 years over there, but I just wasn't into it at the time and I kind of kicked myself up on that.

I ended up going back to Milwaukee because my wife is from there and just started teaching and built ourselves a really good life there and we were both teaching. I taught High School; my wife taught Middle School. The kids that went through her came to me. I was a social studies teacher and I had my own course, that was probably the most popular course of the school, it was a current events class. I was also coaching hockey and built a program there and then ended up going to another school because of, you've seen what's happened with the teaching profession there's been a lot of cutbacks, especially in the US, and that led to some changes there. So, I had to go to another school, built a program there, and then I had the opportunity in 2014 to come back here. So, I taught for 17 years and coached for 17 years in the US. And then we had the chance to come back here and run Burnaby Winter Club and that was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up and that was five great years of doing that. There was a lot of fun.

Then I had another opportunity that presented itself. We had the opportunity to go be in college hockey. And that was an awesome opportunity as well. So, when that thing came about, we jumped at that too and just said, let's go do it. You know, why not? And it was a really cool experience for us. But you know after going through it, we realized that maybe the things that we valued about and we love about Canada we're missing a little bit. I think that it was difficult for us as a family living there, even though I loved the coaching and loved the kids and loved being on a college campus and everything that that was about. It just wasn't a great fit for the family. So, we had this other opportunity in Kelowna come up and that's how we ended up coming back here.

JM: Awesome. That's quite the journey you've had.

MB: None of it like no planning, you know, you go to job interviews and they ask you like what's your five-year plan, right? And I always go I'm just trying to be good right now (laughs). I want to be great in five years, of course, I do. But, you know, I don't know what that's going to be like. My original plan was at the school that we went to where we started. I mean, where I started at the district that we were in. Like I thought I would be a guy that would start there and end up retiring there. You know, build hockey programs and have a good cycle too and have those kids come back to see you. You know, like that. Life just takes different turns, I got one so.

We've jumped at a couple of opportunities, we've passed on some other ones and it was no real plan, to be honest. But along the way, we have two beautiful children. Our daughter Brennan we just dropped off at the University of Victoria and that was you know, emotional and a big deal. Birds leave the nest but it's always tough you know, she's close but she's not here. We're dealing with that and something that all parents deal with when their children go away. And, you want them to be amazing at what they do, but you have loved them for a long time so, that's a hard thing to do.

I can empathize and sympathize with other families who drop their kids off at a younger age, even to come and play hockey at RINK. So, you got to make sure you take really good care of all our kids and make sure that they're loved and treated like they're our family. My son's going to play for our Academy this year, he's 15. Going to play for our U16 team so that'll just be a really cool experience as well. And my wife's going to be working at getting a teaching job in town here. And we have a dog that we acquired in Ohio, Stanley, who is an amazing, dog. He's an old soul, he's two and a half years old but he acts like he's ten. We've been super lucky I got to tell you; it's been great.

JM: That's awesome. You kind of touched on this a little bit. And this is obviously your second go around. But how did you originally get involved in the CSSHL and how did you get back involved again with RINK?

MB: Well yeah, the journey into the CSSHL is, you know, when I came back to the BWC they had two existing teams and they had just gotten in the league the year before. So, there was a lot of work to do from that standpoint and you know, obviously expanding the program out to four teams there and probably pretty close to max.

I met the guys from Winnipeg in 2015, when they came into the league and I was just struck by what great people they were. And, you know, we had chatted with them about kind of what we had at BWC and how we've worked on building the culture there and helping add to what they have done. And obviously, as a tradition there, speaks for itself, 49 guys in the NHL, 50 now that have come out of the BWC. But I really like those guys, Brad Rice and Ryan Cyr and just enjoyed talking to them and spending time with them. And they told me about their vision, how they were going to build their own rink, and it's a really lofty goal, and I thought, wow.

You know, a lot of people say a lot of things but we'll see what they end up doing. Men of their word, two years later they have a rink and it's unbelievable. Not just a rink, it's an incredible facility and it's the flagship facility now I think in our league, and I remember the first time we went there and got the tour and just blown away by it. And so that just, you know, kind of had me from there. Then Ryan just reached out to me when they had acquired POE and sort of like a 'what are you doing' kind of conversation and it just kind of evolved into you know, my family was like well, we're not super happy where we're at. Family's always first as I know everybody does, you make decisions based on your family. A job is a job, even though you're passionate about it and it takes up the majority of your day. Your family always has to be first.

I loved coaching in the NCAA and I loved everything about that job, and I'm so thankful to Ty Eigner for giving me that opportunity. It was awesome. Like it really was, I always wanted to be an NCAA Division I coach. And to get that chance at 48 years old, like you don't think you're going to get a lot more of those offers, right? Those jobs are normally given to young people.

People much younger than me. So, I cannot thank Ty enough for giving me that opportunity. The first kid I signed was a kid that played for me at Burnaby Winter Club, and he's going to be an awesome college hockey player. And that was hard too because I had to tell him when we left, you know, like sorry I keep going back to the CSSHL. There are so many different emotions and things that are tied into that. It's such a great league and I think we had 28 kids get scholarships

that played for us. Another like 32 kids that played for us played in the BCHL last year, we had Kent Johnson who got drafted fifth overall by the Columbus Blue Jackets and there are other amazing things too.

I have a kid that played for me, that is going to medical school. And, you know, I just helped him with a letter of recommendation. Just to be in touch with all those players still and talking to the guys and seeing just some really, really cool things happen with the guys. Like that's why you do it, you know, it's about those relationships, it's not just about teaching a kid for one year or coaching a kid for one year. It's having an impact and building relationship and having something that lasts. So, guys want to reach out and check in and see how you're doing or see where they're at and how things are going. I mean that's still really cool for me.

So, to get back to answering the question. When Ryan gave me this opportunity, it just made sense. You know, it was a great fit for our family and I have an incredible amount of faith and confidence and belief and trust in what Ryan and Brad do, and they've never shown that that's not who they are. So, culture really matters and being around good people really matters. That's what we're building here in Kelowna.

JM: Awesome. Again, you kind of touched on this a little bit. What about the CSSHL model do you like the most?

MB: It's so similar to the college model, right? I just think it's the best model there is for development. To be able to do everything inside your day and not interfere with the rest of a child's day to be able to have dinner at home, to be able to have that opportunity to do social things with your friends. The fact that we get to have excellent training and access to incredible coaching and, you know, the ice times and the off-ice programming, the excellent schooling that we have. Like, it's all of those things. It's the NCAA model on a smaller scale.

It's the three parts of a child's life. You have your academic side, you have your activity side, whatever it might be, and this obviously, our players are passionate and that's why they're doing it. Then you allow them to have the social aspect. That's not taken away from them, they're able to be kids still. That's what I love about it.

JM: Well, that's perfect. That's a pretty common answer here. Jump back a little bit into just kind of some of those random questions I had. What's the first thing you would do if you won the lottery?

MB: I would probably make sure that everybody in my family was taken care of.

JM: That's a good one. Someone else said that as well. Favorite animal? Doesn't have to be a pet just a favorite animal in general.

MB: Oh, it's our dog. He's the best. It's ridiculous how good he is. He's almost as good as a guide dog, to be honest. Like It's stupid how good he is.

JM: Awesome. Biggest pet peeve?

MB: I just don't like negative people. There are so many great and beautiful things about life and to be worried about and wasting it on the bad parts. Like we all know what it's like. It's a choice, you don't have to be negative all the time. I'm not saying to be like uber false positive. Like I think that's hokey too, you know, but yeah.

There's a reason that 'Ted Lasso' is so popular. Like it's a part that's missing. I think joy is such an important part of our lives and I think we skip over it because it's so easy to be negative and sucked into the negative all the time. So, yeah, I just wanted to put that part in.

JM: Okay, perfect. There are two ways to look at this next question. Some people went back in time in their own lives to change something or just go back in time in general. But if you could go back in time, what year would you travel to?

MB: Well, I have to think about this. I'm a big history guy so, the two things that I think about that just had monumental impacts obviously were in recent times anyway, would be the rise of Hitler and September 11th. I just wonder in terms of those two things, if something had gone a different way, how things would have been different. So, you know, do you go back in time and kill Hitler? And does that change the course of history? I think maybe that's the one in history that I would do. Does that change everything for the better? 9/11, just living in the US and the path that the country was on and then the path the country took after 9/11 we're so starkly different. The change, that has happened since the past 20 years has just been, it's like you're gobsmacked seeing what's happened.

JM: Those are good answers. Go-to-karaoke song if you got one.

MB: The hardest song to sing but probably the best one is 'Don't Stop Believing', right?

JM: Someone else said that one too. That's a good one.

MB: It just gets everybody out of their seats. That or 'The Gambler' because that's the one that everybody loves.

JM: Yeah, that is a good one too. What's something that most people from around the hockey world might not know about you that's either a big part of your life or just an interesting part.

MB: Well, I don't even know. I'll think about it.

JM: If you're a pretty open book, that's fine as well.

MB: I think I am but I don't know, maybe I'm a big softie but I think people already know that. I'm pretty emotional.

JM: Not a lot of an off-season, obviously with hockey between recruiting and everything, but what do you like to do away from the rink and in your free time?

MB: I love golf.

JM: Okay, obviously Kelowna has a good spot for that then.

MB: Yeah, it's not bad.

JM: I just got two more here for you then. Best piece of advice you've ever received in life and it doesn't have to be hockey-related.

MB: Well, it's just from my dad. He always said he used to write it on my hockey sticks. He'd write D-Y-B, do your best.

JM: That's a good one. I like that. Last one here for you then. Just your favorite hockey memory, something that stands out to you. Maybe just even the most unique hockey memory, something that when you think back on the game, that's always the first thing that comes to mind.

MB: You know, I'm a huge Canucks fan and that Stanley Cup run in '93 when they lost the Rangers was just magical like all the overtime goals, the save by Kirk McLean. Like I am such a huge Canucks fan. I am a die-hard homer and I love watching pregame. I'm so invested I don't know why, it's crazy. At 50 years old and, you know, I would love to like work for the Canucks. I just love the Canucks. I don't know why but they're my hometown. Like I grew up listening to Jim Robson and Tom Waterside on my radio while going to sleep every night. So, that is probably from a fan perspective, the coolest thing from coaching or from a playing perspective.

My freshman year we played the University of Maine and they must have had, I don't know, like, ten NHL guys on that team. Mike Dunham and Garth Snow were their goalies and they were an unbelievable team. They're the number one ranked team, and we played them in the Bradley Center and it was sold out. We were winning 3-2 with a minute to go and we called timeout and the coach fired up the end and the band played, it's the band song, but they say, "When you say, Wisconsin, you've said it all". So, the old Budweiser song, "when you say Budweiser, you said it all".

So, they're playing and they're behind their bench and the crowds going nuts and they're singing the song and I remember our coach like bringing everybody in getting in close so you can hear him, he's talking and you can't hear him. We're all like five feet away from each other and you can't hear anything. Like I get goosebumps talking about this because the crowd is just going nuts and it's everything and the bands playing, and the singing "when you say Wisconsin, you've said it all"! Then we won the game and that college atmosphere is so special and so unique and something that you don't get in any other situation and I would love for every person to experience what that's like. You know, as a person who's playing in that game, like it's just very cool.

So, from that standpoint and then the teams that I've coached the last few years at Burnaby Winter Club were, we're such special kids and we had really worked hard on building a culture of inclusion and a culture of togetherness and we called ourselves the 'Brotherhood' and we really meant it. And so, my favorite moment of all coaching was we were playing my second to last year there and in Delta and we had a power play. We had, you know like Ken Johnson was

on that team, and I got 10 other kids on that team that had scholarships and it was such a good group. Our policy was we rolled the bench. So, we're in the third period, it's a close game and we get a power play. And my top line, even though we didn't really have top-line it was supposed to be up, and they turned around and looked at me and said, 'these guys haven't been out for a power-play yet. Can they go ahead of us'?

And I was like, this is the best. This is absolutely the best, that three players who are all like the top scorers in the league want their brothers to go have a chance on the power play because they haven't had one yet. Even though it's a big game, there's scouts there, blah, blah, blah. They're like, we want them to go have this opportunity because we've already had our chance and I just felt like bawling right there. I'm like, what a beautiful moment, that's when you know you have everybody on the same page. That to me was what you knew you had the culture dialed in.