

## SPORTS

# From 'Boston' with love: How Raleigh girls hockey coach inspires next generation

By Justin Pelletier

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Hockey coach Jessica Hughes goes over drill instructions at a Junior Canes Girls U10 Red practice at Invisalign Arena at Wake Competition Center in Morrisville, N.C., on Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026. Justin Pelletier *Justin Pelletier / News & Observer*

Watching Jessica Hughes coach a girls' ice hockey team — no matter the level — you'd swear she's been working on the ice and behind benches for decades.

Hearing Hughes speak while explaining drills, or chatting with other coaches — no matter the venue — you'd swear she's a recent Boston-to-Raleigh transplant.

Neither is true, technically, and yet most who know Hughes know her only as “Coach Boston,” or, simply, “Boston.”

“I grew up to almost like Hannah Montana,” Hughes said, “where you either know me as ‘Jessica’ or as ‘Boston.’ I’m like, I live a dual lifestyle. It’s fantastic.”

Hughes, 38, has been in the Raleigh area for almost 23 years. And while she’s been involved in hockey for nearly all of those 38 years, she only started coaching in earnest about five years ago, after a personal loss nudged her into the embrace of her “hockey family.”

And the “Boston” moniker? It doesn’t take long while speaking with Hughes to figure that one out.

“(The accent) slips out occasionally, especially the *maw* comf-table I get with you,” Hughes said, dropping the “r” in “more” and “comfortable” on cue.



What's abundantly clear through most of her interactions in and around a rink, though, is just how comfortable the Raleigh hockey community has become with *her*.

That she has carved this niche with the [Junior Canes girls program](#) — as a coach, yes, and also as an organizational board member — is all the more significant. In a coaching world still statistically skewed toward men, Hughes' presence affords hockey players and parents the chance to see another woman helping to lead the way for the next generation.

"The girls need it," Hughes said. "They need representation. Even [when the Professional Women' Hockey League](#) came to Raleigh, it was so nice just to see women built for the game as a professional athlete. She was just like me, playing the top tier hockey and getting recognized for it. You don't even know how that makes me feel, you know? She doesn't care what I play, if I play D1 hockey, if I didn't, if I went to the Olympics or if I didn't. She's just like, 'Hey, you're a girl hockey player, and I don't see a lot of those.'"

## **From Boston, to 'Boston'**

Hughes first moved to the Triangle in 2003, when she and her mom relocated to Cary.

"Only child, single mom, she was just kind of burned out with the Northern lifestyle," Hughes said. "She had a lot of coworker friends that were moving to Cary. At the time, I was going to prep school in Connecticut, and I just asked her, I said, 'The only thing I want is, they have to have hockey. Like, that's all I want.'"

There wasn't much, Hughes conceded, but it was enough.

"CAHA (Carolina Amateur Hockey Association) at the time did have a select team that traveled to, like, the Connecticut Polar Bear Tournament, and that was made up of hodgepodge girls in the South," Hughes said. "But there wasn't much more than that for girls only.

"At the time Raleigh Storm had put together like a 16U girls team with Team CAHA," she continued. "And I actually skated, and I think my first weekend ever in North Carolina with the [Trailblazers](#).

While still a student at Green Hope High School in Cary, Hughes joined a group of players playing under the N.C. State women's club team banner for coach Roger Kenney.

"That was how a lot of us our senior year in high school just were able to still play hockey once we did move down," she said.

"The girls have outgrown co-ed leagues," Swingle said. "We all know what co-ed means — boys teams with one or two girls. Before our growth spurt, we were unable to have a full league for only girls teams. Now, there's a need."

"The growth is a testament to First Goal, Lil' Lady Canes, passionate and positive mentors like Coach Boston, (the Carolina Hurricanes') Shane Willis for advocating for positions like mine, and the Carolina Hurricanes at large."

And it's that progress that keeps Hughes coming back for more.

"Knowing that when I came in 2003, there wasn't this, right? I was an anomaly," Hughes said. "Girls didn't play hockey. There was only a handful of us around the entire area, and now you can have a handful of you own your neighborhood."

According to Swingle, leaders like Hughes are a big reason for the sustained growth.

"Having someone as dynamic and respected as Coach Boston in our community helps attract others who want to be part of what we're building," Swingle said. "Dynamic leaders don't just fill a role, they widen the doorway for others to walk through it, and that's exactly what Coach Boston does for the other females here in Raleigh."



Hockey coach Jessica Hughes goes over drill instructions at a Junior Canes Girls 10U Red practice at Invisalign Arena at Wake Competition Center in Morrisville, N.C., on Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026. Justin Pelletier / News & Observer

## Building the brand

Hughes has worn various hats for the Lil' Lady Canes and now the Junior Canes over the past half-dozen years, but she made the biggest transition — from rink rat and assistant, to rink rat, assistant *and* full-on coach — in 2021, after her mom suddenly passed away.

“Only child, single parent, right?” Hughes said. “The game and the community became my local family. A co-instructor with the Lil' Lady Canes said they needed a coach for their women's team at NCSU that season.

“I think people assume I've been coaching 'forever,' when in reality it's only been a little over four years.”

Those four years — since the COVID-19 pandemic — have seen the Junior Canes' overall numbers rebound, and the girls' program continues to show the same trajectory. According to Junior Canes girls program director Sarah (Antonelli) Swingle, there are about 170 girls in the Junior Canes' program alone for the 2025-26 season, and another 50 in the Lil' Lady Canes program.

Other area hockey programs like the Carolina Thunder in Hillsborough and the Raleigh Raptors have girls on various co-ed teams, the North Carolina Golden Bears have started to form girls-only teams — “they have about 40 players,” Swingle noted — and the Polar House Hockey League has several teams with multiple girls on their rosters.

“It's been the best part of my life,” Swingle said. “Picking up where Alyssa started, and seeing the continuous growth year after year. The growth and retention of the program is something I am very proud of.”

That success in the Triangle and beyond has led program leaders like Swingle and Hughes into talks about forming a girls-only regional hockey league. Currently, girls travel teams are allowed to join the Carolinas Hockey League, but most teams they'll face are made up of all boys.



The Junior Canes Girls 10U Black team gathers at the bench before the start of a game in Winter 2025. Trevor Holman / Trevor Holman Photography Trevor Holman / Trevor Holman Photography

## Hughes' 'why'

Hughes cruised around during Junior Canes Girls 10U Red practice at Wake Competition Center last week, making sure each of the team's players were on task, working on the drills she'd just diagrammed.

Watching as the group of 9- and 10-year-old skaters made progress toward their personal goals — each skater, of course, with a different path, a different plan — brought a smile to her face, especially when the new concept “clicked” for some of the players.

“It's got to start with love and the game,” Hughes said. “You've got to want to show up to the rink, right? You got to want to do the drills, you've got to want to do the work, you've got to want to take the shots. Whether you take that to be a D1 athlete, that's on you, but show up and embrace it and know that it's a place where you can make a mistake, it's a place where you can fail, and just still build little tiny best friends and not just hockey players.”



Junior Canes coach Jessica Hughes works with 10U Red player Emily Quicksell during a practice at Wake Competition Center in Morrisville, N.C., on Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026. Justin Pelletier / News & Observer

Hughes hasn't just stopped at growing the youth game. In addition to being the head coach of two teams, Hughes was elected last year to the [Junior Canes Board of Directors](#). She also runs skills sessions for adult skaters, helps out with Hurricanes outreach programs like ball hockey, and volunteers with the [Triangle Special Hockey Association](#), whose mission it is to "educate, motivate and encourage individuals with developmental and/or physical disabilities to participate in ice hockey in an adaptive environment."

"'Boston' is truly one of a kind," Swingle said. "Boston was my first friend in Raleigh, and I think she is that person for many. She is one of the most experienced and influential coaches in Raleigh, male or female. She is motivated by impact, not compensation.

"Coach Boston is an authentic person, friend and coach, and rallies around those in our community, always," Swingle added. Everyone needs a Coach Boston in their corner."

And many do, judging by how many people want to bend Hughes' ear every time she's at a rink.

So, how often is she at a rink, really?

"I don't think it's as bad as somebody says," Hughes said, pausing to count. "Probably around 15 (hours)? With no kids in the program. Any situation where somebody says, 'I want to play the game,' and we can put a stick in their hand, I'm like, 'If I'm around, I'm good.'"

Anything, Hughes said, to give back to the game she believes has given her so much.

"I think I stumbled upon my passion accidentally," Hughes said. "I did not think I would be a hockey coach when I moved here — I didn't think I'd be a hockey coach 10 years ago — and I stumbled upon it. I like the person I am when I'm in this environment, and it feeds me, right? And I just have fun with it. You just can't outperform someone that's doing it for fun."

Hughes paused. She sighed. She thought about all the hockey hats she's worn in recent years — and continues to wear; the hours she's spent on the ice. At 16, she'd arrived in Raleigh hoping there was any hockey at all. Now, she's on the front lines of the sport's continued growth among girls and women, helping the next generation find and fuel its passion.

"I'm exhausted," Hughes admitted after her reflection, her Boston accent finding its way to her lips again. "I'm exhausted, but in the best possible way, though. In the best possible way."

After she graduated, Hughes stayed in Raleigh, playing on a mix of elite women's teams and traveling to play the sport she loved — a lot.

## Joining the Junior Canes

The women's hockey community grew slowly in Raleigh, while the Junior Canes organization — and hockey leagues in general — blossomed as the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes planted deep roots in the Triangle.

By the late 2010s, though, participation in the girls' program began a sharp rise. Alyssa (Gagliardi) Sleasman led the Junior Canes' girls' hockey efforts from 2019-2022, coming off an award-winning playing career in college and in the women's pro ranks.

Through the local women's hockey community, she knew Hughes, who had continued to play competitively with various local clubs and teams, including the Lady Hurricanes, a wildly successful Raleigh-based club that competes in USA Hockey's 21-plus Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 divisions, and the 30+ Tier 1 division.

After one particularly strong showing at a national tournament, Gagliardi had Hughes and some of her teammates speak to a room full of young girls in the Lil' Lady Canes program.

"We had Colleen Murphy, and Alyssa had known her from playing, and they were like, 'Hey, you know, you can come out to Canes' Girls and help out.' And now it's Lil' Lady Canes. And I was like, 'Oh, yeah, like, what else do I have going on? Yeah, OK, this will be fun.'

"And I think it was at PNC Arena (now Lenovo Center) at the time, and I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I'll skate on Canes' ice. Say less.'"



Junior Canes girls hockey players listen to instructions during a practice at Invisalign Arena in Morrisville, N.C. on Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2023. Kaitlin McKeown kmckeown@newsobserver.com