



Shauna Neary, who grew up in Fairmont, Antigonish County, is one of 12 referees assigned by the International Ice Hockey Federation to officiate the women's hockey competition at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy. Contributed

FAIRMONT — Describing it as “the pinnacle of my officiating career,” Shauna Neary is ready to take her place in the international spotlight at the 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in Italy. “When I found out, it didn’t really sink in,” the native of Fairmont, Antigonish County remembered of learning she would be donning the black and white stripes for the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) at the women’s competition later this month. She added, “It is truly an honour,” of being selected as one of 12 referees for the global showcase of the top athletes – and officials – in her sport. Word of achieving her Olympic dream is the reward for a multi-year journey that began when countries like Canada nominated officials to be “carded” by the IIHF – the governing body for the sport at the Olympics. From there, Neary and her colleagues entered an evaluation cycle over a four-year period, one in which they officiated in tournaments, such as the U18s, world championships and pre-Olympic qualifiers. Throughout that process, the officials are constantly assessed on their performances. Neary made the cut when the field of candidates was trimmed to 30 heading into pre-Olympic qualification tournaments. She remained in the hunt for one of the prestigious spots when 24 officials were chosen to officiate at the 2025 Women’s World Championship in Czechia. “It was quite a process, so it was tremendously satisfying,” she recalled of receiving word that she made the final roster of referees, who will also share the ice in Italy with 10 lines people. Starting her journey, having the opportunity to officiate in the international spotlight will serve as the

latest chapter in her hockey journey that began as a young girl with the Antigonish Puppy Dogs, an all-female, learn-to-play program founded by the iconic Frank Isherwood. During a school skate when she was in Grade 2, the treasured educator encouraged her to start playing hockey. And the rest, as they say, is history. Neary embraced every chance she received to strap on her goalie gear and get between the pipes as she moved up the ranks, often playing with older athletes. After finishing Grade 10 at Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School, she made the move to the United States to play and study at a prep school. Upon her return to the Maritimes, she continued her athletic pursuits and education with the Mount Allison Mounties of Atlantic University Sport (AUS), where she garnered an all-rookie team selection. After her varsity playing days, Neary continued her deep ties to the sport as a coach, including a multi-year stint with AUS's Dalhousie Tigers. While behind the bench, she noticed the lack of female officials, something she wanted to help change. "I thought it was a great way to give back," she offered of donning the stripes in the sport that provided her with so many opportunities. Neary remembered jokingly of her dual commitment that she had placed in her truck for both hockey bags – one for coaching and the other for officiating. "I fell in love with it," she said of officiating, describing how she discovered a "different hockey family," one that has provided her with great friends and teammates. Neary added, "I eventually decided to put all my eggs into the officiating basket." Her resume expanded quickly – one that includes IIHF world championships, Canada-US Rivalry Series, AUS, USPORTS, Premier Hockey Federation (PHF) and, since its launch in early 2024, the Professional Women's Hockey League. Her first IIHF assignment in Bulgaria helped cement her desire to pursue her craft at the highest level. Neary, who is a field operations manager with the Canadian Hydrographic Service, part of Fisheries and Oceans at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, balances that career with her ever-growing officiating pursuits. And, despite the demanding schedule, she continues to fulfill her passion for working with young hockey players. On Saturday mornings, Neary can usually be found at the Centennial Arena serving as an assistant coach with the U9 Halifax Hawks, which includes her son. At a most recent session, she received a surprise – a celebration of her Olympic achievement, one that included cake, plenty of hugs and well wishes. "It was really touching," she said, noting that the players were "unbelievably excited." The adoration reminded her that she sets an example for young players and officials, an example of how hard work is a key to reaching goals. "It is pretty neat," Neary offered of "setting a goal and achieving it" – an example she takes great pride in setting. 'Chance of a lifetime' Considering she will be surrounded by the best officials, coaches and athletes – not only in female hockey, but also other sports – she anticipates having a "great experience" at the Olympics. "It is a chance of a lifetime," Neary said, taking great pride in achieving a goal she "worked so hard to achieve." She won't be the only person with Antigonish roots who will be experiencing that chance of a lifetime. Antigonish native Matt MacPherson – who recently officiated his 1,000th NHL game – will be a linesman for the men's hockey competition. "It is amazing," Neary said of having two officials "from home" taking the international stage, noting how hard MacPherson has worked while crediting him for his achievements. She described it as a "testament" to the place where they grew up and the people who provided them with great opportunities through the AMHA. "I wouldn't be where I am now – it is phenomenal," Neary said of that unwavering support system. She offered a heartfelt "thank you" to everyone, especially the AMHA and Hockey Nova Scotia. And, of course, her parents Patrick "Patty" and Eileen, who have backed her every step of the way on her hockey journey. "That's the biggest thing," Neary said of having "humility," when asked if she had any advice for aspiring officials. And, of course, a commitment to hard work, a willingness to ask for support, listen and take advice. "If you put in the effort, it will come back ten-fold," she added. As for her mindset heading into the Olympics, Neary indicated she is focussed on giving her best performance with each game assignment. And, like the athletes, she has a goal to be on the ice when the final game is played. "I would love to be in the gold medal game," she said.



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