

# A WEALTH OF UNTAPPED KNOWLEDGE



**TIFFANY BONASERA** considers why there are so few females involved in coaching distance runners. Is it a lack of interest, or a lack of a genuine opportunity that's limiting their involvement in the sport?

IT'S not rocket science to determine that female athletes have inherently different needs than male athletes. The way women approach training and racing, the way we handle the mental pressure of competition and our emotional wellbeing are all factors influencing our performance. A coach is the primary person there to guide you through the highs and lows of life as an athlete. But more importantly, and certainly in my experience, a coach becomes a very important person in your life away from running, too.

I've found it interesting that people tend to assume my coach is male. And I guess it's hard to blame them when, for the most part, coaches are male. But it got me thinking: why aren't there more women involved in coaching? The advantages of having a female perspective are obvious, particularly at a senior level.

Women typically have many of the personal-ity traits required to make an excellent coach: a good listener and nurturer, empathetic and organized, among many other things. Still, the disparity between the number of male and female coaches continues to exist.

Three women who have extensive knowledge and expertise in coaching – Di Huxley (Level 5), Pam Turney (Level 5) and Nicky Frey (Level 4) – speak openly about the challenges they've faced in gaining respect in the sport, the reasons they believe more females should be encouraged to progress into senior coaching roles and ideas about what pathways can be implemented to support this process.

It's not my intention to suggest in any way that females make better coaches than males or vice versa. The purpose of this story is to highlight the potential pool of talent distance running is missing out on.

## Challenges for women coaches

According to Di, coaching is like any profession: the time you are likely to spend focusing on your career often coincides with a woman's child-bearing years, which means family inevitably comes first.

"Traditionally, coaching is a male domain," she says. "It's like any job; lots of women focus on their family and then may decide to get into coaching in their 40s, but there's really no way to get into it."

Pam, who has been coaching for 30 years, agrees most women would prioritise family first and doubts whether many men would do the same. For Nicky, who

is currently the National Youth Development Coach, combining motherhood and coaching, particularly when her two teenage sons were younger, was very difficult.

"By nature, coaching tends to be before and after school," she says. "That challenge could only be met because my husband cooks. The roles in my marriage had to change."

It wasn't only the roles in her marriage that had to change for Nicky to pursue her coaching career. She says it's also been a financial drain.

"There are no ifs and buts about that. It costs money to get to competitions, buy equipment and everything I needed to be a coach. We had to wear that cost. It was my choice. But it was a

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challenge and continues to be a challenge."

Di, Pam and Nicky all feel they've had to be thick skinned to succeed as coaches. "Because females tend to have a different coaching style to men," says Di, "it sometimes is much harder for us to be respected as coaches."

It's about earning your stripes, says Nicky, who recalls the early days in her coaching career when she had to fight for track space.

"You really have to earn your credibility as a coach," she says. "I was looked upon as a passing phase or that coaching was my hobby. I had to fight for lane one and two at the track and gradually built up a group of athletes that were there to stay."

For Pam, the fact she's over 60 has been frowned upon, instead of embraced because of the wealth of experience she can offer.

"Irrespective of who you've coached, what you've done or how much experience you have, if you're over 60 you're considered to be a has-been," she says. "I feel, when teams are sent away, you need people with experience to go with them."

In an environment which remains male-dominated, Di says there aren't the appropriate systems in place for women to be adequately supported as coaches, unlike in other professional workplaces



Susan Michelsson (R), pictured here with Natalie Harvey at the 2000 Sydney Olympic trail race, has been one athlete to benefit from the knowledge of coaches such as Pam Turney

where these systems have been implemented.

Far from dwelling on the challenges they've encountered, however, all three women say the setbacks have made them stronger and more motivated to stick at it, because they believe they have a lot to contribute.

## What can women coaches contribute?

There are a number of key areas where women coaches can make an enormous impact in distance running. The first is being involved in the development of girls, particularly in the 16 to 21 age bracket, where so many talented athletes drop out of the sport.

"One of my passions," says Di, "is coaching female distance runners and saving them from burnout, eating disorders and injury. During the 16 to 21 year age group, their bodies are changing and their programs need to be tailored to take that into account. It means more strength work and maybe focusing on shorter distances for a while."

As a woman, Di says, you have an empathy for and understanding of what it's like to be a female at certain times in life.

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ing after these girls, they're more likely to stay in the sport," she says.

Like Di, Nicky is also very determined to give her young female athletes the support needed to make the transition from the junior to senior ranks.

"I have to evolve as a coach and think laterally about ways I can help them," she says. "It will mean I have to think outside the square, which could mean they need to train at different times, for example."

Nicky says her strengths as a female are her sixth sense and nurturing quality. She has a background in nursing, which she feels gives her enormous insight into the psyche of a female athlete, as does her gut feeling and intuition.

"It's about caring for the whole person," she says. "What I can bring to the role as a woman is to try and nurture the person before the athlete and help them reach their goals based on what they'd like to achieve."

The other area where there appears to be a need for greater female involvement is with teams that are going away to camps and competitions.

"If you're sending coaches away, and there are 30 to 40 girls in the team, you need the equivalent number of female coaches as male coaches, and that hasn't happened," says Pam. "To be fair, it is improving though."

Women can bring to the sport the best of what a male coach can bring, Di contends, along with the attributes of being a female.

"It's hard for a female not to be emotional, and female coaches have to find that balance," she says. "Men don't generally pick up on the emotional signals, but they do have a business-like approach to getting the job done. Women need to be strong and structured in what they're doing."

## What pathways are open to women coaches?

The career path for coaching is limited. And as Nicky mentioned earlier, pursuing a future as a coach is often financially detrimental, especially for women, when there are so few females employed in high-performance or senior positions. That said, Pam and Nicky are optimistic that Athletics Australia (AA) is working towards changing this culture.

"AA is now going in the right direction," says Pam. "There's a lot more hope for female coaches now."

Recent key appointments at AA, such as Sara Mulkearns as National Youth Performance Manager and Glynis Nunn-Cearns as National Youth Event Coordinator, indicate positive steps are being made.

But according to Di, there's still a gap, especially in the area of mentoring. She says she has been fortunate enough to be able to tap into the expertise and knowledge of many coaches in the development of her career. Through her involvement as a scholarship coach with the Tasmanian Institute of Sport, the Australian Institute of Sport and at the New South Wales Institute of Sport, Di is grateful she's been exposed to many coaching styles and philosophies from all over the world.

"In that time I was always happy to ask ques-



Di Huxley assesses Andrew O'Neil performing running drills

tions, look at what other people were doing and learn from them," she says.

Now working privately in her own coaching and personal training business, Di expresses concern that enthusiastic and promising female coaches don't have access to the kind of mentors that will take them to the next step.

The stabilising force for Nicky has been her role at The Peninsula School in Victoria, where she's employed to develop a culture of fitness as well as coach. It has been the school's support of her coaching career that has allowed her to up-skill and become involved in athletics at a higher level outside of this role.

For Nicky, it's been a case of deliberately seeking out mentors, as the opportunity has never been offered to her.

"I have had a lot of help from men along the way," she says. "I feel like I have been very well received. Women need most help when they're trying to establish themselves, because they're very vulnerable in the early years."

## Suggestions for the future

Di, Nicky and Pam all agree that access to better support is an important issue. While there is definitely a need for a formal framework of support from within the system, Nicky also believes established coaches could be more proactive in forming a support group where they can share knowledge, mentor each other and call attention to any problems or concerns.

Education is another area where improvements can be made. Coaching athletes is an enormous responsibility, and according to Di, the qualification process doesn't necessarily adequately prepare you for these demands.

"You can basically become a coach in a weekend," says Di. "But this doesn't prepare you to be a coach. There's so much more to being a coach."

The other main area that needs to be looked at is ways to utilise the skills and experience of people like Di, Nicky and Pam in coaching both female and male athletes.

"There seems to be a policy of bringing in people who are younger, which is fine, but you also need people with experience, too," says Pam.

## Finally ...

Being a coach is not easy, whether you're female or male. It's often a thankless task for the coach, who spends their own time and resources managing the expectations of athletes of all levels and ability.

With so few professional coaching roles available, athletics clubs around the country rely on these community-minded people who become involved, motivated by nothing more than a willingness to help athletes in the best way they know how. For this, we as athletes are grateful.

But if we're serious about getting results at the highest level in the sport and giving promising athletes the best guidance in their development, from juniors through to the senior level, then we have to be serious about educating our coaches and giving them the opportunity to learn, grow and prosper. Moving forward, our coaching ranks can only benefit from having more women involved. According to Pam, the journey is well worth it.

"To be a female coach you've got to be tough and hang in there," says Pam. **☺**

## Useful Link:

- Australian Track and Field Coaches Association <http://www.atfca.com.au>