

EMPOWERING FEMALE COACHES

Coaching spotlight: career advice and the girl's pathway

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this article came after a conversation I had with Mark Bitcon at the UKSCA Conference last year. At that time, Mark was working for the Rugby Football Union (RFU); he told me he was keen to work on projects bringing more female S&C coaches (and female rugby coaches) into rugby. This led to more meetings with him, during which he introduced me to various RFU staff members to see if we could create more opportunities for female to work in sports roles within elite sport and elite sport pathways. This article contains two interviews with some of these staff: the first is women's pathway S&C Coach, Emily Pratt, who discusses her role and her career, and the second is with Martin McTaggart, player pathway manager from the RFU. I hope their thoughts and advice will inspire upcoming female S&C Coaches to see how they can progress their careers in women's elite sport.

Interview with Emily Pratt



'WHAT IS YOUR JOB TITLE AND JOB ROLE?'

My job title is 'Under 18s S&C Coach' in the Women's Performance Pathway. It's a very broad role, encompassing everything from in-camp delivery to working with the Centre of Excellence (part of the girl's pathway for rugby). We also work alongside other initiatives, like the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), to align and create S&C support for U18 women across the country.

'WHAT MADE YOU PURSUE THIS CAREER?'

I've always been very sporty: I was the girl in school who was always trying too hard in PE. But I was never aware of the roles available within professional sport - eg, in S&C, physiology and sports nutrition - until I was completing my undergraduate degree. As a result, in my third year I

focused my broad science degree on human and exercise physiology, thus enabling me to get onto an exercise physiology course at Loughborough, where I really gained insights into the jobs available within professional sport. I was playing sport myself during this time and had access to S&C within this, which also helped create awareness of the roles available. After Loughborough and COVID, I was fortunate enough to get a professional studentship in S&C with Ospreys Rugby and my career has progressed from there.

'HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY CHALLENGES BEING A FEMALE COACH?'

I wouldn't say I have encountered any challenges from being a female. At Ospreys, I was an intern working with a professional men's team, where all the S&C coaches were male, but that didn't create any difficulties. I gained lots of experience within the role and the main challenges within that role came from it being my first exposure to professional level sport. I learnt quickly

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about working unsociable hours, always adapting on the go and therefore gaining an understanding of the high-level physical requirements needed in the professional game.

‘That opportunity enabled me to get a graduate role in S&C supporting the Ealing Trailfinders Men’s Academy and leading the Brunel Women’s performance pathway. From the experience gained across both these areas, I was able to land the role I am working in today with the RFU women’s U18s.

‘I do believe that within female sport there is rightly a desire to have a female S&C coach: whether that aids conversations around women’s specific subjects, like the menstrual cycle, or just having someone with whom they feel they can chat a bit more openly. It might be that the player feels that I am better able to relate to how their body responds to training, or even aspects of the game. Being female working with female athletes in rugby does allow certain insights, but it’s important not to limit yourself to only coaching females – lots of the knowledge and experience I can bring to the female athletes was gained from working in the men’s professional or development space.’

‘WHAT CAN OTHER ORGANISATIONS DO TO HELP FEMALE COACHES?’

‘I think it’s a lot to do with visibility. As I said earlier, I didn’t realise that being an S&C Coach was a job you could do with the

degree subjects that I had chosen: I think that’s probably different at schools now.

‘Having visibility of female coaches working at high level sport is critical. I read an interesting article from a female S&C coach who works in motorsports recently, which was incredible, given the limited coaching opportunities available. Again, it wasn’t until I was an S&C coach that I realised Formula 1 drivers even had S&C Coaches!

‘I also think it’s about offering experience for females and I’m aware this is an area in which I can hopefully have an impact. I’d be open to offering aspiring female S&C coaches the opportunity to come into the pathway and see what we do with the girls. We have several female practitioners here including those working in analysis, medical, technical coaching and psychology.’

‘WHAT’S YOUR FAVOURITE THING OUTSIDE WORK?’

‘I feel like it’s really a cliché to say sports! I play a lot of sport, training and running regularly. After a busy day, it’s important for me to make time to go to the gym or to get out and be active.

‘The other thing I really enjoy is cooking. I’ve found this links well to my job, which is a real benefit. I do a lot of work on emphasising the importance of nutrition with our U18 athletes: how to fuel your body for performance. So, when we’re on camp I chat with players about what I’ve cooked at the weekend. I sometimes bring cakes

‘Use the resources available and don’t be afraid to send an email or message, it might be what gets you in the door’

in, but not for the team! They can only be for other members of staff – when I bring in things like banana bread it makes me number 1 S&C coach! But it’s a really nice way to relax. It ties into everything but also, I really enjoy it.’

‘WHAT’S YOUR FAVOURITE THING TO COOK?’

‘It depends on how I’m feeling but I tend to bake if I want to relax. I was very ambitious, and made my sister’s wedding cake. That was a funny story: on my very first day at the RFU camp, I was chatting to staff at the end; the coaches were debriefing on how the day had been and Coops (head coach) had brought in some rocky road squares that his daughter had made. Someone asked me if I was into baking and, when I said yes, asked what the last thing I had made was. As this was just a week after my sister’s wedding, I had to admit that it was my sister’s wedding cake! Obviously, after admitting that, the next time I came into camp I had to bring some cakes in – I shot myself in the foot with that one!’

‘WHAT’S THE BEST THING ABOUT YOUR JOB?’

‘I think the best thing about my job is working with the athletes, either on pitch, in the gym or in educational workshops. Most of the role is remote, which is tough when the best thing is seeing and working with the players! So, when I am in camp or on a club visit, it’s the chance to interact with them, improve their ability to move, educate them and hopefully see them progress. It’s when you see them have those lightbulb moments which really sticks – I love those ‘Ah-ha’ moments you can help them achieve.

‘It’s a long pathway to becoming a Red Rose [senior international player], so ensuring that U18 players are developing at a rate that’s appropriate to them is essential. You only get to know what’s suitable for each player by working with them. In camp we can introduce these players with relatively low S&C training ages to S&C and show them that it’s fun, it’s essential for their sport and it’s going to help them progress to a higher level of rugby. Adding value through education and physical development.’

‘WHAT’S THE BEST PIECE OF CAREER ADVICE YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN?’

‘The idea of keeping everything simple and sticking to the fundamentals and foundations. I think that’s incredibly important in my role now. Generally, these girls have relatively low training ages across the board (there is still a lag in female pathways in terms of access to S&C Coaching compared with male pathways, which have been established for longer in many sports), so we push the basics with them and get them to nail the foundations. There’s no need to make it over-complicated.

‘As an S&C coach there’s a lot of information. There’s always CPD or some new method to try. But usually, this is aimed at higher level athletes. In my role, if your athlete can move well, do foundational movements to a high standard, and keep progressing week on week, then you are getting them to where they need to be. Nothing more complicated than that; they just need to go from A to B and progress while enjoying it.’

‘WHAT PIECE OF ADVICE WOULD YOU PASS ON TO OTHER COACHES, MALE OR FEMALE?’

‘I obviously came into the profession in a non-traditional way. I didn’t do an undergraduate degree in sports science and I only got into S&C post-master’s degree. The bit of advice that I would offer is that you don’t have to follow a traditional route. You can create your own experience and your own pathway. Think about working in the less traditional sports – outside of rugby, netball and football – as options to gain experience.

‘For female coaches, try to get into female teams and sports: the opportunities are there. Personally, having worked with male and female athletes, I really enjoy working with female athletes, particularly now with the way that women’s sport is growing. As a female there is a niche there. More females coaching females would be good to see in the future. But don’t just limit yourself there.

‘As a female coach in a male-dominated discipline, it’s important to be confident in your own abilities and knowledge. But also,

always be looking to learn from whoever you can. There are so many great coaches within S&C and across other technical areas. That's my plan going forward – the best tips and knowledge I have gained have come from other coaches who've worked in the game for a long time.

Use the resources available and don't be afraid to send an email or message: it might be what gets you in the door.'

GIRLS' PATHWAYS AND S&C

As someone who has coached many sports and who works with teen S&C clients privately, I have noticed a lack of S&C opportunities for girls in particular. With biological sex differences elevating the risk for things like ACL injuries, I think it is so important for girls to access S&C coaching early on to help ensure good movement patterns and strength to reduce such injury risks as they progress to elite level.

I also met with Martin McTaggart, aka Tags, from the RFU, who is the player pathway manager. Tags has a goal to ensure all girls within the pathway have 12 opportunities – ie, one a month – to access S&C coaching every year. He describes his work below:

Interview with Martin McTaggart



'DESCRIBE S&C FOR THE GIRLS' PATHWAY'

'S&C for the girls' pathway is about athleticism. It's athletic movement – movement and movement capacity. That's what I am working to develop. I

think pushing the word athleticism is key to engage girls.

'It's also about having girls and women as role models, promoting females in the sport so that girls can see people like them doing that.

'I can never know what it's like to be a female wanting to play sport and the barriers in place, whether there on purpose or not. But what I can be is a voice and you've gotta shout loud. I'm bored of having gatekeepers who get in the way. The girls can tell you what they are ready for. Talk to the athletes – what would make this easier for you? They will tell you.'

Acknowledgement

A huge thank you to Mark Bitcon for making these introductions for me and thank you to all of the RFU staff I have had communications with recently. It was great talking with both Emily and Tags – thank you for your time. I look forward to seeing what the future holds for girl's pathways and women's sport.

Call to action

NETWORKING GROUP FOR EMPOWERING FEMALE COACHES AND GROWING THE GIRLS' PATHWAY IN SPORT

If you are interested in joining a sector-wide networking group to discuss how we can further develop girls' pathways in sport, ensuring girls have access to early S&C Coaching while also encouraging opportunities for female coaches, please get in touch with me at: v.craft@lboro.ac.uk.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



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Val is an accredited S&C coach with a background not only in sports coaching, but also in the social sciences. Val is a postgraduate teaching assistant in strength and conditioning (S&C) at Loughborough University. This includes doctoral research within women's football as she works towards completing a PhD. As well as a postgraduate certificate in S&C and a postgraduate diploma in applied sport and exercise physiology, Val has also completed a postgraduate diploma in women's studies at Ruskin College in Oxford and has a keen desire to help support more female S&C coaches into the profession.