

# INTERVIEW WITH JILL ELLIS

## THE COACH'S PERSPECTIVE

– Interview by Monique Fischer, Switzerland



### INTRO

*"A woman once said to me, 'can I give you some advice?' She said, 'you know Jill, you have a platform. And as a woman, you need to be visible; be a voice and build a community. That's your responsibility.'"*

Jill Ellis understands the power of a narrative. Her own is inspiring in itself: the most successful coach in the history of the women's game; winning back-to-back FIFA Women's World Cups with the US National team in a decorated three-decade coaching career. She's just been inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame. But it's the future she's focussed on - and not her own. She sat down with Monique Fischer on her personal pilgrimage to improve the landscape of women's football.

### COACHING

The FIFA Women's World Cup Australia & New Zealand 2023™ – the single biggest female sporting event in the world – looms ever closer and the statistics are alarming. Only 12 of the 32 qualified teams have a female coach.

### Where are the women?

More females are completing their coaching badges than ever before. And yet, *"There's*

*still the perception that somehow a male is more qualified, more experienced, and given a little more grace when it comes to performance than women"*, says Ellis.

*"Females have to really excel to be afforded the same respect that by default is afforded to men."*

So, Jill Ellis is personally providing women with those platforms. Since accepting the role as President of the newly established NWSL club, San Diego Wave, in the top women's football league in America, she's purposefully hired talented females. A decision that appears to have paid dividends, with the club unprecedentedly reaching the playoffs in its breakout season.

### So how much change can one person evoke?

In Ellis' case, her influence is creating its own waves. Others are following suit. When Ellis joined the NWSL last year, there was only one female coach in the league - a year later there are 3.

But the prejudice is still there, and the anecdotes are enough to make you wince. One head female NWSL coach recently described how people continue to come up

and shake the hand of a male member of staff, assuming they're the head coach.

*"Before I hired Casey (Stoney) I was talking to another President from the league. He said, 'Jill, are you going to hire a female coach?' I said, yes, I am. He said, 'but there's not that many good ones out there.' And I said there are, you've just got to look."*

Ellis is encouraged by the increasing number of females in top sporting roles; empowered by the likes of Kim Ng, the first female General Manager in Major League Baseball and the first GM in the history of North American professional men's sports. The NFL has made similar progress. Trailblazers are scattered across the globe; women have led at World Cups, are leading in domestic leagues. Chan Yeun Ting became the first woman to coach a top-tier men's team in a professional league – and win it; an achievement that echoes Ellis' sentiments.

*"Sport shouldn't be considered exclusive", says Ellis. "Women - talented professionals - should be in sport, period."*

And that's her passion; *"How do I make it better for those who come after?"*



**Image:** Team USA celebrates winning the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup France Final match between the USA and the Netherlands.

*"One of the biggest challenges once you get into coaching is that you're often on an island. You're isolated, you're always in the minority. So, we decided to implement a mentorship programme."*

It's not about putting women in positions for the sake of it, she says. Regardless of gender, competency is crucial.

The 'Jill Ellis' Scholarship, a parting gift from US Soccer, is similar to FIFA's Coach Mentorship Programme, in which a female coach earning their Pro, or 'A' license is provided financial aid and assigned an experienced coach for one year. It's something Ellis is incredibly proud of. Her mentee, Emma Thomson, is now the assistant coach of the North Carolina Courage. The goal is to double the number of elite female coaches by 2024.

The experience has been an eye – and door – opener.

*"What you realise is that when women connect with women you create the same opportunities that men naturally have by*

*being in the majority in the sport's market. Meaning, you suddenly have people not just to speak and consult with, but you have people willing to make recommendations, introductions and create a network – so that was the two-pronged approach we took."*

Recent statistics show that at least 75 % of head coaches are male in each of the top professional women's divisions across the US (NWSL), Germany (Bundesliga), Spain (Liga F), Italy (Serie A), and France (Division 1).

Ellis believes accelerated efforts to have women involved in the game and to see coaching as a viable career path will help normalise the percentage of females in the game.

*"With more opportunity comes responsibility. We have also got to take care of women, by not putting them into positions without experience and without a pathway to develop. That's our responsibility."*

#### MEDICAL TEAM

As head coach of the US National Team, a competent medical team was an integral

part of Jill Ellis' back-to-back World Cup-winning squad.

*"We don't win world championships without player availability and the primary people responsible for that are our high-performance team in conjunction with our medical team."*

She believes their role is critical – now, more than ever.

*"The higher velocity we're seeing the game played at, the intensities, the frequency of games... it's imperative to have a medical team that can balance the demands of the environment with the health of the player and make smart and educated decisions. You need to have trust; trust and communication."*

*"I was very specific about the doctors I wanted with me in my team, and they had to have experience and expertise in the 'cooker', meaning they had to understand the sporting arena. It's one thing to have someone make a decision in an office but to make a split-second decision in a high-pressure environment in front of 50,000 people is something else."*



***The team that can win will have to have a lot of belief. The US walk into that arena not just with a lot of experience and expectation but also a tradition of winning so I think it's going to be a team that believes they can do it.***



Ellis explains that players going through an injury will walk between three phases: being injured and out, returning to play, and being full in – the key to navigating that, she says, is great communication between technical staff, high-performance staff, and the medical team. There has to be an understanding that you're doing what is best for the player.

Ellis believes having expertise in female physiology and biomechanics is becoming a prerequisite to working with world-class female players.

*"Many would argue that the men's and women's game is the same – yes, certain elements of it are but physically we are fundamentally different. I think that expertise now has to be a part of the vetting of medical staff."*

Ellis credits having had the likes of high-performance coach Dawn Scott in her team as pivotal to the US' success.

*"A lot of her training and warm-ups would be making sure we were replicating the movements of the game. She did a lot of research into women's health, like how a player's performance is affected by her menstrual cycle. Every customisation down to what players were drinking post-training was all specialised. I said to the team we need to take advantage of every piece of information that can help us improve and her knowledge and research were certainly a component."*

#### YOUTH

*"What America does very well is opportunity. We see hundreds of thousands of little girls playing every weekend. The opportunity is there and that's why I think many countries could take a page out of the US playbook because that's what kids need: an opportunity to play in a fun and safe environment."*

America may be leading the way for girls in the game however, according to a FIFA Global Report, worldwide on average a male player training from U6 to U21 will take part in 481 more sessions than a female player.

*"We're talking in the NWSL about how to continue to evolve our game, and a component of that is supporting the youth landscape. We want to help create an environment that gives access to all kids to have a chance to play and have it be a welcoming experience. Youth sports have become pressure filled and expensive – ultimately, we must put the player's experience first and make sure we don't lose kids participating in youth sports."*

Overall, Ellis sees the future for youth players as encouraging.

*"We're seeing female academies around the world, young players having more pathways to pursue, more federations investing in the female game, and we can't forget more talent on the pitch."*

Incredibly, two 15-year-olds have professional contracts in the NWSL. One of whom, Melanie Barcenas, recently made her debut for Ellis' club.

*"I think professionally the women's club game will continue to get bigger and bigger and it's a really exciting time. Clubs will continue to invest and in return be compensated for development of young talent."*

#### CURRENT STATE

The biggest boost for women's football is fast approaching. FIFA Women's World Cup 2023™ kicks off on 20 of July and is expected to be watched by more than 2 billion viewers – a 90 percent increase from the tournament's last edition in France four years ago.

But the ever-looming ninth edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup™ is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to equality. Ellis is calling for increased investment in the women's game.

*"We have a remarkable product. World class athletes, hometown heroes, fierce competitions – the narrative is no longer 'please invest in us...it is why would you not invest in us?'"* says Ellis.

The fanbase is growing exponentially as we see television ratings growing and stadiums full.

*"Unfortunately, we still have to fight the 'way we have done it' mindset of*





**Image:** Mallory Pugh celebrates after scoring the goal at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup France, match between the USA and Thailand.

*some networks and investors. Of course viewership for men's sports is higher, they have always been given the best time slots, but I absolutely guarantee women's sports will close that gap."*

*"If we really want to develop the game it's going to be every platform's responsibility, and every stakeholder."*

*"Every league, every sport has gone through challenges, the NFL broke up and came back together, the NBA almost failed... so I think it takes strong leadership. I think it takes belief in our sports and I'm talking about all women not just football – from people that are in positions to invest, willingness to showcase, and willingness to champion. Because we've got to hit it financially in marketing, and we've got to hit it in television. We're still probably the best-kept secret."*

So come July, and the biggest tournament of the women's sporting calendar, who can beat the US? A coy smile. *"The team that can win will have to have a lot of belief. The*

*US walk into that arena not just with a lot of experience and expectation but also a tradition of winning so I think it's going to be a team that believes they can do it. Seeing some of these huge personalities not getting to be in the World Cup because of injury is unfortunate, so squad depth is going to be critical as well."* She pauses. *"All I can say is the US is capable. They've got enough firepower for more."*

Exactly how you could describe the work Jill Ellis is now embarking on.

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