



GOLDEN GIRL

England Netball head coach Anna Mayes tells Caroline Roberts about her coaching journey and the importance of having a clear focus on your goals.

England Netball head coach Anna Mayes has always had a clear focus on her goals. At the age of 16, she decided that, one day, she wanted to coach the national side. The opportunity came sooner than expected, and now, at just 32, she already has two successful years in the role under her belt and is looking not just to the 2014 Commonwealth Games, but to her longer-term aim of developing a squad that can become world champions by 2019.

If her achievements so far are anything to go by, the dream will become a reality. January 2013 saw a 3-0 series whitewash of current world champions Australia – only the third time England has beaten the Diamonds. There soon followed a second 3-0 series win against Jamaica on their home soil, and another clean sweep against South Africa in the autumn, the unbeaten record only faltering in the Fast 5 tournament in New Zealand in November when Mayes fielded an inexperienced side.

The unprecedented run of success earned her a nomination for High Performance Coach of the Year in the UK Coaching Awards, alongside the likes of UK Athletics lead sprint coach Lloyd Cowan, who coaches Olympic gold medallist Christine Ohuruogu, and rugby union's Warren Gatland, coach of the Wales side. Speaking before the announcement, she

says: 'I don't by any means think I'll get the award. But it's just very humbling to be shortlisted with such prestigious coaches.'

Mayes may be young for a national coach, but she is far from inexperienced. The former England junior and Wales senior international (she qualifies through her Welsh father) developed a passion for coaching while completing her Level 1 qualification when she was 16. She went on to deliver at England talent camps and at the Welsh Netball Academy. In 2008, she hung up her boots and applied to the England under-21 side, where she became co-coach, before being asked to join the senior team as an assistant to head coach Sue Hawkins. She was appointed to the top position in November 2011 after Hawkins returned to her native Australia.

She started with a clear vision of the squad ethos that she wanted to create. 'We needed to have a bit of a shift in terms of performance culture, and to establish how England wanted to be described, not only by ourselves, but the opposing teams,' she explains. To this end, she has introduced a series of 'trademarks'. 'One of our trademarks is being united – ensuring that in everything we do, win or lose, we stand together. Another is to be relentless in the offensive power with which we're grinding down the opposition. We need to be



England celebrate beating Jamaica 53-52 in the bronze medal playoff at the Commonwealth Games

relentless in everything we do.' Others are to be fearless, resilient, and to utilise the diverse talents of the team.

She also favours a holistic approach that covers everything from nutrition to lifestyle management. 'It's something we've invested in as a governing body. We've really tried to have a balanced team behind the squad and make sure we have all the disciplines covered.' Balance is something that matters to her. 'At the end of the day, they're pretty much professional athletes, and at the same time, they are all either in education or have full- or part-time jobs. Pamela (Cookey), my captain, works full-time as a service manager at Airbus, and some of the others are teachers.'

The undoubted highlight of her tenure so far has been the series win over Australia. But it was the manner of the win that was most significant for Mayes. 'The squad showed real composure and resilience, and there was a real air of belief in themselves, each other and what they were trying to do. For me, that was a significant breakthrough.'

'You need to scrutinise a win, just as you would with a loss, and we're very consistent about the way we debrief every international and every test series' she explains. And a winning streak can throw up its own challenges. 'There's a massive expectation of you as a team, and the pressure that comes with it. People get carried away and become fixated on winning, but there's a bigger picture. Obviously, every time we step on court, we aim to win, but there are some other objectives. I'm trying to build the breadth and depth of this squad as, at the Commonwealth Games and world championships, you really do look to your bench. I think, in previous years, that's where England has been left wanting as we haven't had the real depth to call on. That's what I'm trying to do, while still maintaining that winning momentum.'

Looking towards the 2019 target, another challenge is that a number of athletes are in the latter part of their careers, and some may retire after the 2015 world championships. 'I'm trying to look at the younger athletes we've got coming up. We also need to address how we are getting the best athletes playing netball and actually keeping them in the sport. We lose some good athletes to other sports, such as basketball.'

Some powerful role models have helped shape Mayes' coaching philosophy. 'I've been very fortunate to have strong and determined women in my life. My mum has a psychology background, and she talks a lot about emotional intelligence and how to build a rapport with athletes. That's been a massive influence on me.'



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Another is New Zealander Lyn Gunsen, her former netball coach at Bath University. 'I really enjoyed the way she created an environment where athletes take more ownership and responsibility for their own learning. Not only was she tactically and technically astute, she was also a great people person. I learnt a lot from her in terms of the athlete-centred approach and also the holistic perspective - how the game is shaped by multiple disciplines and how you have to work with them.'

'The best moments are when you see an athlete make a fantastic decision or deliver a skill at a particular point in the game where it's become either habitual or they've recognised a cue. I get enormous satisfaction from seeing an athlete flourish and take ownership of the decision making about what we need to change out there on court and start running it themselves.' But to achieve this with a squad takes time, she adds.

Other role models are coaches who have had sustained success - she cites Sir Alex Ferguson, Ric Charlesworth, the Australian hockey coach, and the coaches who have guided the British Cycling team to gold medal after gold medal.

So can you take things from these sports and apply them to netball? 'Absolutely. You'd be ignorant not to try to learn from different sports. That's why I'm in a very fortunate position to be on the UK Sport Elite Coach Programme with some highly successful coaches. It's very much about sharing your experience with others, and I feel very honoured to be part of that group and get to have those conversations. It's a

bespoke programme, with the first year focused on making us more self-aware, and thinking about our philosophy and understanding of leadership. For me, it's about lifelong learning. It sounds cheesy, but every day, I'm learning something, whether it's about myself, the athletes or the situation, and it's very enlightening to be talking with like-minded coaches.'

She is now seconded full-time to England Netball from her lecturing role at Cardiff Metropolitan University, but she continues to work on her PhD in autoethnography, a form of research that reflects on personal experience and connects it to the wider world. 'It's about my coaching narrative,' she explains. 'Critical instances that have helped shape my future actions. It's probably going to be another five years before it gets written up. While it's making me more self-aware, I don't want it to distract me from the job. But I like to reflect and learn from my actions and behaviour so I'm constantly gathering data.'

For Mayes, it's evident that development as a coach is a never-ending journey. So what advice does she have for those who are just starting out? 'For me, experimental learning is absolutely fundamental so try not to do the same thing week in, week out. My best years of learning were the first few years when I was 100% out of my comfort zone, and I enjoyed that challenge. Also, take time to get a feel for the group, get to know them as people and have fun with it. You put so much time and effort into it that, at the end of the day, you've got to make it fun.' **CE**