



Stories from Jill Ellis

By Susan Hitchcock

From World Affairs Council 2020 Women's Day Celebration



March 2020: Women's History Month

March 8th is celebrated globally as International Women's Day. Last week in ATL, a ballroom full of women, men, students, etc. attended the World Affairs Council's 5th Annual celebration of this special day. The featured guest speaker was Jill Ellis.

If you don't know, Jill is the "All Time Winningest Coach in U.S. Soccer History," Former Head Coach, U.S. Women's National Soccer Team who won the World Cup in 2015 and 2019. That pinnacle achievement is just the latest of a career of "highs."

As I listened and watched Jill being interviewed by the distinguished and very talented journalist, Ricky Bevington, I was completely mesmerized. The conversation was more than a typical interview. It revealed Jill's strengths as well as her vulnerabilities along with some very personal and deep-seated feelings. Her story of how she grew up, her career path, her journey as a coach, as well as her views on women and leadership, teams, and life – all were inspiring to the nth degree.

Here are some highlights from Jill's very impactful story:

Growing Up / Dad's Influence & Wisdom

- "I grew up in Portsmouth, England and came to the U.S. in 1981 at the age of 15. I was not particularly interested in soccer."
- "Actually, when I was a kid, I was kind of ashamed to say my dad was 'just a coach.' But over the years, my opinion of my dad obviously changed completely. I wouldn't be the person I am or the coach that I am without my dad's influence."

- “After a big loss one time, by dad said, ‘Own It, Build It, Believe It – Share your success, own your failures.’”
- “Dad also said, ‘If you have ability and you’re a good person, you’ll always land on your feet.’”

Coaching Career Experience & Insights – Winning and Losing

- “I went into the business world at 23 and was actually killing it. But I took a leap of faith when I decided to leave a high paying position to take a much lower paying position, \$6K a year job as an assistant coach. Some people thought I was crazy, but I chose ‘passion over paycheck.’”
- “I once asked John Wooten (knowing his stellar career and he was 97 at the time) about the pressure of winning, having a target on your back. His response: “Ah, my dear, It’s a privilege!””
- “Diversity on a team gives you more tools to handle whatever comes at you. Have a club in your bag to hit any ball (just like in golf). You need all profiles on the team; differences are strengths.”
- “When I coach and select players for my team, I’m looking for not just ones to win games today, but for the future. As a coach and a leader, you have to lead for the future.”
- “After the devastating loss to Sweden, I told the team, “You can cry now but the most important thing is how you RESPOND. There’s always another game. It’s your choice.”
- “After wins, I like to show a photo of the whole bench celebrating. After we won the World Cup, we were celebrating 23 women who won, not just the 11 starters who were on the field. Every person on the team has value. Subs and reserves are called game changers because that’s what they are.”
- “You’re not supposed to hang out on the top of the mountain. The air is thin and there isn’t much space. You have to start to climb all over again.”
- “My leadership did change from our 2015 World Cup win to the 2019 game. In the first I needed to lead from the front, but in 2019, it was more holding the reins and empowering the team.”
- When asked how she handled transitions throughout her career, she responded, “I like change.”
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More Advice Especially to Young Girls:

- “One lesson people should have learned from our World Cup team members who spoke out about pay inequity is the importance of advocating for yourself. I want every girl to learn that lesson. When you have a platform to speak what you believe, you need to use your voice.”
- “Young girls who play soccer or any sport need to see behind the acclaim of the big winners - the scars it takes to get there.”
- “Playing sports builds resilience, character, relationships, and self-esteem.”
- “When you lose you need to get over it. Failure is an opportunity to be better. It’s how you respond to something that matters.”
- “I think one thing that would make a big difference is how everyone, particularly parents etc. treat coaches. Need to show them respect, help them be better.”

Advice to Younger Self & More Words to Live By

- “I would tell my younger self to be a better listener. Early in my career I was independent and demanding and would tell my assistant coaches ‘Here’s what we’re going to do.’ Later my goal was to harness everyone’s ability and I became more collaborative, asking for their advice and what they were thinking.”
- “I’d also say don’t be too concerned about what other people think or say about you.”
- “Mentor others because you don’t realize how much experience you sit on.”
- “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you stand still.”
- “Where you are today is not good enough for tomorrow.”
- “On negotiating, pick a number that doesn’t make you laugh out loud, and go for it.”
- “The pursuit of excellence is a noble thing. Honor yourself and your team by celebrating your wins. Be unapologetic about who you are.”
- **“A coach is a caretaker of dreams. Also true of a parent.”**

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