



Leadership: One GOALLLLLLL!

June 18, 2020

Strong leadership, especially during uncertain times, is more important than ever. Join our moderator, Hugo Scott-Gall, co-director of research on the global equity team, for a conversation with Jill Ellis, former head coach of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team, on creating a dynamic environment, making sound decisions, and working with diverse personalities.

Jill's comments are edited excerpts from our podcast, which you can listen to in full below. (30:09)

https://media.blubrry.com/the_active_share/b/content.blubrry.com/the_active_share/The_Active_Share_-_Jill_Ellis_-_Mix.mp3

Growing up in England, there wasn't any organized soccer for girls. How did you develop a love for the game?

Jill: In England you can't help but be entrenched in the sport; it's a national passion. My father was also coaching. I ended up in the schoolyard playing with the boys. Then, when I was almost 15, I came to the United States and tried out for a girls' team. It felt amazing when I put my jersey on. It was the chance to follow a dream. It was just ironic that I had to leave a country that was so entrenched in it to do that.

When did you realize you wanted to be a soccer coach?

Jill: Coaching was never on the radar; I went into the business world for a couple of years. Then I was offered a

coaching job for minimal pay. I took a leap of faith and followed my heart. Passion over paycheck.

Did you know right away that coaching was for you?

Jill: I loved it. I love everything about it. It's just so gratifying. In coaching you're a caretaker of dreams; you're helping facilitate achievement. I'm connecting with people, finding out ways to help them grow and be their best. Sometimes you have to push them; sometimes you have to encourage them.

Can you talk a bit about talent identification?

We have a massive scouting network because talent is our lifeblood. When our head of talent identification asked me what I was looking for, I said, "Give me one more as good as our best." But ultimately you have to bring players in and vet them in your environment. That's where you really truly see if they sink or swim. You can't write a player off too early, but you also can't hang in there and wait if it's not going to happen.

But successful coaches have to see people through different lenses, correct? You're looking at raw physical talent but also at mental toughness?

Jill: You certainly don't make an elite team unless you have the ability. But I've also had a lot of incredibly talented players that didn't have the mental fortitude. The Women's National Team is competitive; day in and day out you have to grind and prove yourself over and over and over again.

The pressure can be too much. So I think it's a combination. To win a World Championship a team has to have the trifecta: athletic ability, mental strength, and technical knowledge of the game.

Is grit teachable?

Jill: I don't think so. You can expose players to hard situations, and over time young players harden themselves, but I truly don't think that competitive instinct is something you can teach. I've had phenomenally talented players that I just can't light a fire under.

How do you manage a squad of different personalities? How do you ensure you're giving everyone the right sort and amount of attention?

Jill: When you build a team, three things are important. First, you need to have a sense of the people you're around: this player responds better when she's called out in a group; this player responds better to a one-on-one meeting.

Second, you have to allow people to be who they are. Players aren't a commodity; they're human beings. Allowing them to have a voice is critical. I never step into a situation or mute a player unless her commentary spills over and negatively affects our performance or another player.

Third, you have to value all of your players. If I have 23 players, all 23 have to feel important, even if only 11 are starters. For example, when we put up the starting lineup for a game, instead of putting up substitutes or the benchwarmers, we said, "These are our game changers." It immediately sent a message: "My role coming in off the bench is to impact the game; I'm there for a reason." It also sent a message to our starters that it takes 23 players

to get a result.

How much of this was your plan going in?

Jill: I've evolved in my coaching persona. When I was young, I was very independent. Gradually you realize that you have got incredible people around you, especially your staff. Over time, I recognized the value of maximizing my staff.

I also evolved in how I attack the challenge of coaching such a high-level group. It's about knowing your audience, and this audience responds to a challenge. When you work with elites, they're always trying to achieve more; they're always looking for the next ridge line, the next mountain to climb, the next technique to master. My first meeting with Alex Morgan, she asked, "How are you going to help me get better?" So, the very first time I met the team, I put up the quote, "Even if you're on the right track, if you sit there, you'll get run over."

You've had to make some tough decisions. How do you know when the time is right?

Jill: You're constantly getting a flow of information you can use to make an educated decision. After the Rio Olympics, our lowest finish ever in a major world event, I flew to New York to meet with my bosses and I said to them, "We need to shake things up." But I've always felt that when the decision is there it's the right time to make the decision.

How do you communicate the decision?

Jill: I approach all decisions with truthfulness and empathy. I never candy coat; I never delay because I don't want to hurt someone's feelings. At one point I had to fire one of my close friends, not because they did anything wrong, but because the team needed something different. When you're a leader, you make the right decision for the whole.

How do you get people on your team to give you honest feedback?

Jill: You have to encourage people to be honest. Sometimes subordinates don't want to give an opinion because it might be wrong. I always say, "Listen, nothing is off the table. Give me your craziest idea." But if you make the decision based on feedback, you have to own it, especially if it's the wrong one.

It's easy to say these things about decision-making in hindsight, but in the moment, it doesn't feel good, right?

Jill: When you're going to make a big decision, it helps to get ahead of it and involve the shareholders in the outcome.

For example, in 2017, when we weren't close to a major world event, I wanted to experiment. A lot of coaches will play young players for 10 minutes at the end of the game, but you don't learn anything about them that way. So I looked at that period as a development period. I tried new players. I tried different systems.

I told the media, “This is what I’m going to do.” When I told my bosses I wanted to increase the depth of the roster, I explained that meant we might have some tough results because I really wanted to play young players in tough situations. And I stood in front of my players and I said, “Some of you will be left off rosters, and there will be a branding impact and a financial impact, but this is my priority.”

Were you ever worried about losing your job?

Jill: The day I got into coaching, my dad said to me, “You’ve never been a coach until you’ve been fired.” He was saying that you have to coach to what you believe, not to keep your job.

There will always be things levied against you. When people have an issue with leadership, it usually comes down to three things: strategy, communication or lack thereof, and culture. For example, one of the complaints levied against me was that I didn’t ride the bus to training with my team; I went out early so I could set up.

I’ve always fought to keep my job because I thought I was the right person with the right plan. A reporter at a press conference once asked me if I was worried about losing my job, and I said, “I’m not coaching to keep my job. I’m coaching to what I believe.”

Within soccer, are there coaches or managers you really admire?

Alex Ferguson, who managed Manchester United from 1986 to 2013, recognized the importance of having a fluid environment and made a lot of change decisions at the height of a successful run. There’s something to be said for that. I also like the way Mauricio Pochettino, who was most recently the manager of Premier League Club Tottenham Hotspur, conducts himself.

What about sports outside of soccer?

My first head coaching job was at the University of Illinois. I learned two things from Lon Kruger, the University of Illinois basketball coach. First, he recognized that everybody around you has a part to play in a team’s success. He knew the janitors’ names; he knew the secretaries’ names; he made people feel valued. He also did everything on a clock, which made me realize I don’t need a two-hour training session if I can do it in 70 minutes by being efficient and intense.

I was also very blessed to be at UCLA when John Wooden was there. My third year was the hardest because we’d gone to the National Championship in my second year, and I’d gone from being off the radar to having a target on my back. I remember asking Coach Wooden how he managed pressure, and he said something to the effect of, “It is a privilege because it means you did something that got people’s attention. Embrace that.”

Why isn’t soccer bigger in the United States?

In Europe, soccer is the sport in every country, so it maximizes television time. Here, we’re sharing that stage. But I do think that as time has gone by the profile of soccer has grown. Americans are falling in love with our game. So it’s definitely here to stay.

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