

# COACH IN THE CORNER

WOMEN IN SPORT EDITION-INTERVIEW SERIES



*Women in Sport Edition*





# Mary McKenna- Celtic DCH

**Events: Middle distance**

*Coach in the Corner- The Women in Sport Edition* aims to recognise the contribution, commitment and dedication of some of our female role models and leaders. The unparalleled commitment given by these women must be recognised and celebrated, because without them, we would have no athletics. Over the next number of weeks, we will showcase some of the most influential coaches who have made enormous impacts on their local, provincial and national communities.

We hope this interview series will encourage more females to get involved, create an understanding of the pathways that exist for personal development and highlight the opportunities the sport can give us!

## **How did you get involved in athletics?**

My Dad was a very good athlete who competed for Glaslough Harriers in Monaghan in the late 40s early 50s. When I was a child people used to ask me was I 'going to be a runner like my Daddy'! At National school, Mr McGreevey (our Principal) used to have us run around the school and the little wood beside it every day and I used to be delighted as I would beat all the boys. Following this, Fr Peter Corrigan came to our parish (I think in 1972) and he started up Truagh Athletic Club. With the assistance of my Dad and Felix Sherry, the three of them brought us to athletics competitions all over the country.

After years of competing as a juvenile and junior, I moved to Dublin in 1979 where I joined Dublin City Harriers, it was here that I met my husband Brian (who is DCH's sprints & hurdles coach) and former international sprinter. . When I moved to Dublin I then joined Dermot Nagle's group and was coached by him throughout my time in DCH. I completed mainly over 800 and 1500m. I medalled at Nationals in both events and the British 3 'A's and represented Ireland at the European Indoors at 1500m.

In 1998, I retired from competition due to recurring back problems. With the help of other retired DCH athletes who lived in my area we revived Celtic DCH Athletic Club in the Navan Road area of Dublin and thus began my journey in coaching.

## Who or what has helped you as a coach?

I have learned a lot from my own experience as an athlete, as a parent of athletes and also being married to a coach. I essentially have 'lived' in the sport for most of my life so I have learned a lot from watching other people's stories over the years and have also learned a lot from the people I have met along the way.

I guess I learned quite a lot from those who coached me from the very beginning, Fr Corrigan and Felix Sherry when I was a juvenile athlete and also from Dermot Nagle who coached me when I moved to Dublin in 1979.

## What is your coaching philosophy?

I have a few key areas that I always keep in mind - think the most important thing to remember that **athletes are people not machines**. We need to allow young people time to develop, to work hard and most importantly to recover. Not many people will remember who won the under 12 All Ireland, but they will be a lot more likely to remember who won the National Senior title.

There are only seven days in a week, so my view would be when coaching juvenile athletes **'get as much as you can, out of as little as you can, for as long as you can.'** There is plenty of time to 'up the load' when young people get older and stronger. As coaches we shouldn't be afraid to 'call it' if we think an athlete needs to take a break because it's important to note that sometimes athletes need protection from themselves and that's where you need to be responsible and look out for them – anyone can send someone out to run laps of hills for hours but it can sometimes be more difficult to get an athlete to pull back.

Similarly, as a coach it's important to remember **athletes are not your property** and if there comes a time where it is in an athlete's best interest to join a new group, club, or coach, there should be no hard feelings – be proud of the work you have put in to help to get an athlete where they are today and be excited for the new journey ahead of them.

I am also aware that it is very few who make a decent living from athletics. Sometimes athletes can put in all the work and do everything 'right' but things just don't go their way, it can be a very unfair sport in that regard. I always advise to **never let a sport completely take away from a young person's school work or a college education**. Having career prospects as a safety net is important for when sports career ends prematurely or otherwise.



### What keeps you involved in athletics?

I don't really remember a life without athletics, so it would be hard to imagine what I would do if I wasn't involved. I didn't retire from competing by choice and I really missed racing. Coaching filled that hole to a certain degree, but seeing someone you have helped fulfil their dreams is the next best thing to winning yourself.

Of course, managing much of the club activities for Celtic DCH as well as the athletics teams in local schools in the Navan Road area keeps me very much involved with the sport on a daily basis. In addition, sharing a house with another coach and a senior international athlete means there's certainly no easy escape from it!

## Advice for newcomers..

*Talk to other coaches - there are many female and male coaches alike out there who are willing to chat and share ideas and past experiences.*



**Any stand out coaching highlights or memories ?**

There have been so many over the years with various athletes I have coached, it would be hard to single out just one! I am particularly proud of our current senior women's team in DCH, most of whom are with us since they were in primary school with some now competing at international level. It has been great to see them grow from young girls to confident women and role models who are leaders in their sport and in their respective careers. . Similarly, it has been great coaching in St Dominics College Cabra and seeing the teams' success year after year.

Being a part of Pierre Murchan's journey from belated success at juvenile level to competing at the World Juniors followed by his return to excellent form this year after a few tough seasons has been very fulfilling. Sean Donoghue's journey through teenage competition has also been memorable.

I also have to mention my two daughters Susan and Catherine McManus who have both helped create great athletics memories over the years. They have been competing since they joined the Club aged 6 and 8 and they are still enjoying athletics 22 years later.





## The Importance of female coaches

*Much like diversity in any walk of life it is about bringing a different perspective.*

*Whether it be diversity of gender, nationality, age or level of experience – different perspectives can bring fresh ideas and new approaches.*

*Female coaches can bring a different perspective to a traditionally male dominated sporting environment.*



If you would like to highlight any of your female coaches as role models for this interview series, please contact [lillyannohora@athleticsireland.ie](mailto:lillyannohora@athleticsireland.ie)