

WOMEN'S SOCCER COACHING



A WAITING GAME

BLACKBURN ROVERS' GEMMA DONNELLY ON WORKING HARD FOR 17 YEARS TO BECOME AN OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

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WE United: the project raising the bar in Nepal

In the shadow of the Himalayas, a female-led initiative is dispelling local gender stereotypes and empowering women to become coaches and inspirations

Known best as the home of Mount Everest, and for its unusual two-pennant flag, Nepal is hardly synonymous with women's soccer - but one initiative is changing perceptions.

Founded by Amanda Cats-Baril and Anne McGuinness in 2014, We United empowers women and girls in the Himalayan nation not just to play and officiate in female-friendly spaces, but coach as well.

We got the lowdown on the project from **Maura McGlynn**, WE United's head of coaching advancement...

WSC: How did the WE United initiative come about? What is behind the drive to get more females into coaching in Nepal?

MM: "Our co-founders, Amanda and Anne, were living in Kathmandu. Both loved soccer but in looking for an outlet to play, it was apparent no-one was organizing women-only recreational soccer. So they created that space and the WE United project was born.

"It began organizing women-only friendly drop-in sessions, which evolved to include an annual tournament and then, as the number of female players increased, Nepal's first multi-week women's futsal league, the Mahila Premier League.

"Over the years, the number of female players, organizers and even referees greatly increased. One of the areas women were largely missing from, however, is coaching.

"And there are many benefits to having women in leadership positions in sport. It makes spaces safer for young girls, it increases player retention, challenges gender stereotypes around leadership and builds confidence in all spheres of life.

"The WE Coach Nepal program is this year's iteration of what began as the Mahila Coaching Initiative in 2018, with support from the European Union, and then evolved into the Dare to Shine program, with support from the US Embassy in Nepal."

WSC: What does the WE Coach Nepal program involve?

MM: "Applications were open to women and girls in Dhangadi, Kathmandu and Surkhet. These regions were chosen because WE United has a network in these areas,



spearheaded by WE Coach alumni who will serve as coach mentors.

"In total, 12 applicants were selected, four from each target region. The chosen applicants, or "coaches-in-training", first go through two curriculum intensives.

"The leadership curriculum focuses on theories related to coaching, including gender equality, safe spaces, breaking barriers, women's empowerment and, of course, an addendum this year for Covid-19.

"One of the areas women were largely missing from in Nepal was coaching."

"The coaching curriculum covers the practical aspects, including planning a training session, giving drill instruction and feedback to players, and creating a supportive and inclusive team atmosphere.

"On completion, coaches-in-training return to their communities, partner with a local school, and begin coaching their own girls' team there.

"Each coach is responsible for hosting a minimum of 10 two-hour training sessions for at least 10 players. They are supported by

each region's mentor coach, along with the WE United administrative team.

"To conclude the approximate 10-week training period, WE Coach Nepal will host a tournament for the four teams in each region. Coaches and players will gather to celebrate the progress and achievements of the last few months."

WSC: What are the backgrounds of the coaches you train up?

KP: "Given soccer in Nepal is still predominantly played by men, many of our coaches come from within our network.

"In Kathmandu, for example, they are usually women who have been playing for a number of years, and often participants of other WE United initiatives such as the Mahila Premier League or annual tournament.

"WE United have worked hard to develop contacts in other parts of Nepal. Our network is slowly growing and this year, previous graduates were able to recommend women from their regions, which was incredibly helpful.

"Each coach forms a team of at least 10 girls and, as such, WE Coach Nepal alone will directly impact at least 120 girls by providing them with safe spaces to play.

"WE United provide as much flexibility and autonomy to coaches-in-training as possible



when it comes to selecting the schools they work with. But we encourage them to choose a school that does not have an existing girls' soccer program and allows them to work with students aged 12-16.

"The secondary target audience of WE Coach Nepal is the Nepali public at large, particularly the communities where the coaches-in-training and teams are from.

"We want players' classmates and school personnel, and their families, to be inspired, rethink gender stereotypes and hopefully recognize the girls and women's successes.

"Through social media and in-person sharing of impact stories and images of strong women, the public will be inspired to #repicturewomen as leaders and athletes, and challenge stereotypes about the roles of women and girls in Nepali society."

WSC: What response have you had?

MM: "All positive. There is a demand from women hoping to coach, as applicant numbers have risen in all three years.

"At this year's launch event, the president of the All Nepal Football Association spoke, and attendees included national-level athletes, female business owners and other prominent figures actively working in or supporting the advancement of women in sport in Nepal.

"Largely, the communities in which WE United work have been incredibly supportive and encouraging. In one village, the head of school and mayor publicly celebrated a coach and her team for their superb leadership work.

WSC: What can someone joining WE Coach expect from it?

MM: "All women and girls who participate in our program will learn in safe spaces,

be held to professional expectations, be seen as leaders in their communities, be connected to a wider network of like-minded women, find recognition and support, challenge themselves, gain confidence in their leadership abilities and fall in love with coaching."

WSC: What outcomes have you seen from the WE Coach initiative, in terms of development of coaches and development of people?

MM: "WE Coach Nepal uses soccer as a platform to empower young women to become leaders and active participants in their local communities.

"The overall goal of WE Coach Nepal is to contribute to a future in Nepal where empowered women and girls can participate in different aspects of sports at all levels with support and recognition from their communities.

"One outcome we have definitely seen

is the strength of the network of women trained under WE Coach, their support for each other and peer-to-peer learning. The coaches also learn from the girls they coach.

"Once girls are provided with an initial safe space in which to play sport, it is only a matter of time before they develop a passion and friendships on the basis of this participation.

"A last, but profound, outcome is how female coaches challenge gender norms and stereotypes, and how our programs support them in developing the tools and language to be models for challenging these constraints everyday."

WSC: What are the plans for the future of the WE Coach initiative program? What do you hope to achieve next?

MM: "The dreams are big. Ultimately, we'd love for all of our initiatives to be connected. WE United imagines a girls' and women's soccer club with paid coaching positions, staffed by WE Coach Nepal graduates.

"There would also be satellite leagues and networks throughout Nepal, and in other countries, plus year-round leagues and tournaments, and an expanded version of the coaching curriculum.

"WE United also want to be an example for other actors working in the space of women's empowerment through sport and contribute to an institutionalization of best practices in this space; this would include working more with official actors like the All Nepal Football Association.

"The need for promoting women's equality and empowerment through sport certainly isn't going anywhere and, luckily, the foundation of all of our programs, including WE Coach, is really strong.

"We are hopeful to see many of these things come to fruition and positively contribute towards lasting change in Nepal and around the world."

'THE PLAYERS PUSH ME TO COACH BETTER'

"I love the energy and efforts these little girls put into their training sessions. I love that we share the same love for soccer. I love that we are pushing each other and helping each other grow. I push them to play better. They push me to coach better."

Pratigya Joshi, 2019 cohort

"I had relatives who thought it was not ladylike to play sports...I always dreamt of an encouraging environment where girls get appreciated for their love of the game - where someone is there to help them, to guide them through. And now, with WE United's help, I feel I can finally have a small role in inspiring a generation that dares to live up to their dreams."

Coach Silika Shakya, 2018 cohort

"Some girls were shy to play because it was their first ever time to play. Later, they slowly tried and then they were so excited to play more that they wanted extra time."

Coach Suji Gurung on the girls she coached in 2019