

Year of the Coach

CAROL JACKSON INTERVIEW

Carol Jackson says she “blames” former Olympic medallist Janet Simpson for getting her into athletics; it’s said in good humour of course, but it’s somewhat coincidental that almost 40 years later, as she takes her place on the newly formed UKA Women’s Coaching Advisory Committee, she herself, as a successful female coach, is in a position to be “blamed”.

“I met Janet for the first time in 1963/64 at a sports day,” she recalls. “There were some invitational events and she was racing on the grass track. Two years later she was my PE teacher and she was my inspiration for getting involved in the sport.”

Jackson, by her own admission, was only a very mediocre athlete, but she was incredibly passionate about the sport and would go to every meet she could find. As an athlete she’d trained with Pat Pryce, a GB Olympic hurdler, and through Pryce she met Olympic gold medallist Mary Peters and Olympic silver medallist Lillian Board. “I suppose I was involved with some of the strongest female characters in the sport at that time,” she reflects. It’s said with some sadness, or perhaps it’s just in the knowledge that such female role models are less prominent in today’s sporting society. “I really want women to be out there, to get more involved in athletics,” she says. “I think that needs to be a real focus of the Women’s Advisory Group, to help raise the confidence of women and help them believe that they can be the best person for the job.”

It’s a cause close to her heart, but she’s not a feminist and is very clear that women should not be recruited for positions simply because they’re women; they do however need to be exposed to opportunities which can contribute to their knowledge, experience and overall development.

Jackson’s own coaching practice has been refined through years of watching, learning, communicating and sharing information with other coaches, something that traditionally has not been well done in this country. She was 21-years-old when she received the call which would catapult her into the coaching world. “I got a call from Eric Laxen, at the time one of the top British high jump coaches, asking if I wanted to get involved in some high jump coaching,” she explains. “The squad included Mark Naylor, a former British record holder, Trevor Llewelyn and Colin Harris - there were three guys in the squad who’d jumped over 2.20m - as well as Denise Hinton, a high class female high jumper at the time. We were based in Uxbridge on a really old track where we had to carry the high jump mat out to the track each time we wanted to use it, but I was hooked.”

One of her prominent memories of the time was hearing that Geoff Parsons had jumped 2.25m off a cinder track in the English Schools. “He was only 18! We couldn’t believe it,” she says, still shocked at the thought. “We were at another track meet and there were no mobile phones at the time, but the word got around. I just didn’t think anyone could ever get close to that off a cinder surface!”

She was assistant coach to Laxen until the mid 80s but drifted out of the coaching community for a period. It was ironic that as she tried to get back into it, her new position as Athletics Development Officer made it difficult; “I moved up to Bedford in the early/mid-90s

but I found it hard to get back into coaching as the job was funded by different councils and I couldn't coach in one town with athletes from another," she said.

But when Tom McNab, a former National Athletics Coach and architect of the national junior decathlon Programme which produced Daley Thompson, asked if she'd coach some high jump, it was an obvious route back into the sport. It was also the start of a journey which would take her to a series of global championships. "On the first night I met a young athlete called Mark Crowley but we couldn't jump because of bad conditions," she says. "He'd only just got into it, but three weeks later he qualified for the English Schools; he didn't even know what the English Schools was BUT he won the silver medal. He was my first English Schools athlete. He went to the World Juniors in 2002 but I couldn't go out to watch him because I was down to officiate at the Commonwealth Games. He was the guy that got me to where I am. We made the journey together and we progressed together."

Following Crowley, Jackson experienced success with a number of junior athletes, most notably GB internationalist Robbie Grabarz who joined her in 2003 before eventually moving away to study in Loughborough. It was Grabarz's progression from 2m to 2.22m that set the performance bar - both figuratively and literally - for her training group as they began to reap the benefits of her innovative, German-inspired sessions.

"I still don't really know how Robbie made such a significant improvement," she admits, "but he definitely started to run better and become more conscious of his body as he improved technically."

"Overall, the biggest impact on his performance came after I was invited to a national coaches conference led by West German coach, Wolfgang Killing. Robbie joined me for one of the sessions where Wolfgang did a lot of body awareness, free approach, some hurdles work and some gymnastics; we were really inspired by what we did and within six weeks he'd jumped 2.22m, I'm absolutely sure it was down to Wolfgang's work."

There were other aspects of his training methodology which have served her athletes well, and even now she maintains that "sand-pit drills" have been a key factor in injury prevention. "One of my aims is to keep my athletes injury free for as long as possible because I think that contributes to their careers as seniors," she says. "The longer we can keep them injury free the better."

It wasn't just her coaching CV that advanced with her relocation; her event management credentials were tested and proved when she was asked by Phil Green to co-ordinate the Bedford International Games (BIG) in 1995. 16 years on she's still leading proceedings and with this year's event, which takes place on Sunday 15th August, she's looking to continue the trend of attracting maximum internationalists on minimum funding. "The first year we put it on we had three weeks' notice," she laughs. "People said nobody would compete because we weren't paying them but we had two Commonwealth Records that year! The staff at Bedford Stadium have supported us throughout and I'm really grateful to them."

Athletes have inevitably come and gone over time, many of them associated with unforgettable sporting moments. She remembers when she first saw Alan McKie jump after he'd walked into Brunel with his PE teacher in April 2006. There were very few high jump coaches around at the time and she'd been involved in setting up a session at Thames Valley Athletics Track so potential athletes could come along and try the event under coach supervision. "When I first saw him jump it was one of the most significant coaching experiences I've ever had," she reflects. "He wanted to get into the English Schools. His PB

was 1.90m and he needed 1.96m. We watched him jump and we had no idea where it came from – he jumped 1.96m that night and four days later jumped 2m at the Brunel Open Meeting. He won the English Schools that year with 2.02m. He did his first ever winter sessions through 2006/07 and in 2007 won the English Schools with 2.17m and went on to finish seventh in the European Juniors with a 2.19m PB. The following summer (2008) he jumped 2.21m at BIG.”

McKie has had some time out from the sport but Jackson’s hopeful he’ll get back into it this year and deliver the heights he’s capable of. In the mean time, she’s focused on another of her group, Sam Bailey, as he prepares for the 2010 IAAF World Junior Championships. Bailey, a “self-contained, focused and confident athlete” according to Jackson, has been developing under her mentorship for five years – they linked up when he was aged 14 with a 1.68m PB – and is likely to be the seventh athlete she’s coached to a major championship on the global stage in just over a decade. His development has been a challenge in more ways than one as the pair have battled his uncontrollable growth spurts over that period, but she hopes he’s at last topped out at 6’6”; if so, they can finally concentrate on height progression of the right kind.