

MM: Hopefully, it's come up on your side that we are now recording. So Elizabeth is joining us on a Thursday afternoon, if I can, please just get you to give a little bit of introduction as to who you are, what your sports are and what environment you're currently coaching within, please.

ES: Yes, so my name is Elizabeth Smyth, and currently I'm coaching football, soccer and ballet. And what was the other question, sorry?

MM: So are you a dancer yourself have you played football or soccer? Like what are your experiences?

ES: Yes, I played both until I was about 17 and I played for a women's squad and there wasn't any, like U16 teams. So I played for women's squad as soon as I turned 15 until I was like 17, so that was kind of a cool experience. And then I went to university and I studied, it was called Health and Performance Science, so it was like a sports science course. And while I was there, I kind of wasn't doing anything and I kind of wanted to get back into it. So when I left there, I decided to do two years dancing and now I'm doing my master's and like the whole the whole coaching football. So I went to the US and I did like summer camp coaching with Challenger Sports. And then I went to the camp, then I went to Canada and I did coaching just as part of like a camp that you stay in. I did dance there. So, yeah, both abroad as well.

MM: Yeah, I went out but I went with a rival to Challenger, so I went out with a company called UK Elite Soccer and coached in America with those as well. But a lot of our students go out with Challenger and coach in the summers.

ES: So I get those 10,000 hours there every day doing it.

MM: So do you have any formal coaching qualifications in any sports?

ES: Yeah. So I have, in soccer, I have it's called PBP2 it's an Irish one. So I was unable to do my youth cert before Covid hit. So it's been rescheduled and postponed.

MM: Yeah.

ES: Just waiting and then I have my degree as well.

2:40 MM: And what got you into coaching in the first place? What was it that interests you about coaching?

ES: I actually started, me and my two friends, started a dance club when I was in secondary school, in high school, and then I just really loved it and I really loved helping others because, like, a lot of people hadn't done that before. And then they loved it by the end of the year and they were so interested in it. And I thought, "I really get a lot out of this, like I want to keep doing this".

MM: Yeah. And what would you say now, is your biggest motivation to keep coaching?

ES: I think like probably this sounds a bit cheesy, for like [inaudible], you know because I didn't really ever know where I wanted to go and like the coach of the football coaches that I had were all male and they were all dads and they didn't really know what they were doing. And so I kind of want to give the players that were wanting it, I kind of want to give them an

opportunity to improve and become really good at something and like learn about life through sport as well and give them that as well. So depends on the player, I guess.

MM: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And then that kind of brings us in now to like the second area of questioning, which is around your coaching philosophy, coaching approaches or like your coaching ethos for want of a better word? I know the term philosophy gets thrown around a lot. So from your experiences and from very different worlds of dance and soccer, how would you sum up your coaching philosophy? How does it look?

4:32 ES: Erm, I suppose, like. Yeah, like long term, that long term development would be a huge part of it. So, like, depending on the age, so I would have coached a lot of it in the fundamental movement skills and that I wanted to get in with, like younger kids like three and four year olds. Like, I really want them to learn through games-based play, because I've seen like when I was in Challenger, like I did a lot of that and I really saw, like, such a big improvement in those kids. And they really had so much fun learning that way. And so I suppose it changes depending on the age group, actually. I suppose the older kids want maybe more structured environment and they don't really want, in my experience, they don't really want as much of games-based play immediately. Like they're not used to it, basically, that's not what a session looks like to them. And so you kind of have to like, kind of drip feed it in and start with your open questions before you go into the rest before you go into games-based learning and asking them questions and getting them to decide and make up things. In dance, I suppose, it's more about confidence and body image and learning, and like I guess trying to make, like, self-regulated learning. Like how can you help the dancers to, I suppose learn themselves, because a lot of dance, like so much of good dance, is like you watch it and you do it. You know, like there's no, like, tactical element like it doesn't change from match to match, you know what I mean, like you learn the dance and you do it really well. And then you copy it, you know, so it's like the structures. I don't know if that answers the question.

MM: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And then I guess that kind of then comes on to my next question in terms of you touched upon a little bit about in soccer, you know, it was male coaches and it was the dads and then how it's a very different environment within your dance around body confidence and image and finding out. So how do your own personal experiences, inform or influence your approaches to both of those disciplines or sports?

ES: Yeah, I suppose I think there's a lot less pressure in football, I think, because, I'm automatically like I'm this [inaudible] model, so like I'm just there. So, like I feel maybe less pressure to, I don't know, I feel like I'm helping them even by just being there like [inaudible], maybe that's the easy way out. But yeah, and I suppose in my experiences of dance. I had a lot less anxieties when I danced, I was an athlete. So I always felt the football, because I feel like maybe I've put a lot of pressure on myself to do football because I was a girl and I had to do it for all the women ever, you know, and whereas in dance I don't really have that pressure. So it's kind of flipped the coaching environment into the teaching and learning.

MM: Yeah, absolutely, but so in terms of I'm sure you've covered it in some of your degree is in terms of your kind of your background, your epistemology. Actually, that's really influencing. And as you say, there's that almost shift on the paradigm of where your personal experiences are influencing and informing some of your understanding with your athletes that you're working with.

ES: Yes, definitely, I mean, I've done like, like helping out my aunt's friends at Montessori. And like so I've actually gotten to know the ladies as well. It's really nice to see how you can relate to the different ages as they progress in life that you actually can, even though you're an adult you can relate to everybody.

9:20 MM: Yeah, absolutely. So if I came to watch one of your dance sessions or one of your soccer sessions, what would I see? Would they look very different in terms of how you approach them? Yeah. How would they look in practice? How does your philosophy look when you're actually working with your participants?

ES: Yes, erm, I feel like I'm as part of my degree, soccer will have come up a lot and so I feel like I know, OK, so the soccer sessions are just chaos like all the time. And there's like equipment everywhere and the kids are like shouting and they're like talking to each other and they're like doing loads of stuff. Erm, but the dance sessions would be much more structured, I think. And especially like with Covid as well, like they all have to stand in this box and do this stuff anyway, but like they would have always stood in a line and done this stuff. And so, I think I've translated a lot of what I've learned from my degree, much more in the football side of things and like the chaos and the social learning environment and all of that stuff, as opposed to the dance, like the dance would be structured. And it would be like, I stand at the front, I do it, you copy me, you ask questions then, you know. So that's probably what they look like, although I'm trying to have the dance go in a similar way, but it's much harder. I don't know, in my in my head it's much harder to do that with dance because you have to learn a specific, a specific technique, and you have to learn how to do things right. And, I suppose in football, the creativity side is what will win you the game, and you see that immediately. But in ballet, so it's like ballet is what I teach and in ballet if you creatively make up your own technique in ballet, it's not, it's not like it's not accepted within the industry. So you kind of have to prove that you can do that technique before you get to make up your own, you know what I mean? You have to be very established before you before you make up your own way. So I suppose in that sense, you also you have to prepare them for the industry as well. It's not fair to have all these ballet dancers that have their own specific technique of dance and then they go into the industry, and that's not what they want.

MM: So do you find that challenging? I mean, when you said about your two sports, that's why I was like, we definitely have to make this interview work. Because do you find that challenging? So I used to coach netball and football, so whilst there was some distinct differences, there are a lot of similarities. But obviously soccer to ballet, I don't think you could get further on the spectrum. So do you find that challenging having to change your approaches so much in your delivery?

12:33 ES: Not really. I've been doing it for a while, and so I'm kind of used to it now, like I suppose a lot like how you dress actually helps a lot because, like in ballet, like you wear a little skirt, you put on your shoes and you feel prim and proper and like your hair is in a bun. But I'm like this when I'm coaching football. So kind of you feel like the chaos is, erm, chaos and the structure is like you play the two roles with it. But I suppose like the dance helps, because everything's a performance, really, isn't it? Like when you're coaching and like you're communicating and you're demonstrating stuff to people, like you're communicating with them in that way as well.

MM: Yeah. So then if we then start to move that into how you approach, whether it's your dancers, whether it's your players, what do you think are maybe some similar, but

then if there are any differences in terms of the crucial elements that are needed for them to learn and develop a skill and knowledge and understanding?

ES: Yeah, I think. Probably the most is making mistakes, so I'd be much more at ease with making mistakes in a soccer session than I would in a dance session, I think. Like practically like you just have to start, you have to stop and you have to start the music again and you have to go, "No this is actually the way that you're meant to do it", you know. And like in football, I suppose you don't have to stop everything like it's a continuous thing like it, and it's not based off music either. So I think that part of learning like the making mistakes part of learning is, I'd be much more comfortable doing it myself, and therefore probably the players are much more comfortable doing it, erm, but I suppose, like, like that, like a mistake can turn into a good thing in football, you know what I mean? Like the ball can go haywire, but it can go to another player and then, like, score, you know what I mean? Whereas I feel like a lot of the, if you make a mistake in ballet, like first of all everyone else is doing one thing, you're doing a different thing, like immediately like, yeah, it's immediately noticeable. And then also, yeah, that will be the main thing. Erm, that's the first thing I came up with anyway.

15:15 MM: Thinking back, I mean, my ballet career ended very swiftly. But I remember, you know, doing all like my what do you call them like your grades and stuff and going and being in front of a table of examiners and having to produce a routine that had certain moves, and my feet were in certain ways. And so I guess in terms of as what you were saying before, you, there is much more of a set criteria and a set way that you produce a move in ballet, which just, yeah, how you kick a football and how you kick a ball in soccer or football, is certainly nowhere near as rigid as the moves are expected in dance.

ES: Yeah, exactly like, there's a certain way to do this. And if your feet aren't in this position, then you can't do the next thing correctly and then your weight placement is off and you're not going to make the next move, you know. And the music is going to go ahead of you and you're going to be gone. So I suppose, yeah, there's a lot, lot less wiggle room.

MM: Yeah. And do you think that then that impacts the role that you play in the learning of that skill? So do you feel that you are more prescriptive and maybe coach- or instructor-centered within ballet than you are in your soccer?

ES: Hundred percent, yeah. And I feel like maybe I haven't taught contemporary dance, right, but contemporary dance would be the version of dance, that would probably be more like soccer, you know. I've studied it, but I haven't taught it. So I feel like in that sense, like when you're making up choreography and you're doing all that sort of stuff, you can definitely have it like a student-led environment. And like have them all, or if you're just doing a show or of course they can make up their own moves to put on the show. And but I think this depends on what you're doing with your grades, like. Yeah, you have to, you know the moves, they need to know the moves, that's kind of how it goes. Yeah, so it would, yeah, because I suppose they're never going to discover it on their own. You know, they're never going to discover how... I suppose they could, you're making me question it. I'd have to I'd have to try really hard, I suppose, I'd have to do a lot of guided in the discovery part, you know, to help them along.

MM: Yeah. Yeah. And then so then. Yeah, if we almost flipped it to your dancers and your players, in terms of them supporting in the learning process, whether it's of

themselves or whether it's of others in the session, what do you expect from them to help with the learning process?

ES: Say that again, to me.

MM: So when, if we're now looking at the learners, whether it's for themselves or whether it's for others in the session or in the team, what do you expect from your learners to help with the learning process of a scale or a practice or a set play in soccer, for example?

ES: Yeah, and mostly just try. That would be like 'try' and 'effort' would be my key words, I guess, and, yeah, that's kind of it, like yeah, that's it.

19:02 MM: So like, in ballet, do you use do you use dancers to provide you demonstrations or do they go off and help correct each other's technique? Or is it very much you as the instructor leading that process?

ES: Yeah, actually depends if they're further along, like if they've already learned the dance, erm, sometimes we get them in twos and like one of them performs it, and the other like gives them feedback, that sort of thing we can do. And there's mirrors as well, so they can self-correct in the mirrors as well, which is a really big thing. Erm, yeah. And like, I'd probably be more likely to ask open questions, I suppose, in soccer and less so in ballet.

MM: Yeah, no, and this is where like for the students that would be watching this, you know, we just really want them to get a feel that it is different, that they're both, they're both classified as sports and physical activities. So, but they would require a very different element of instruction and utter engagement or ownership because of that desired outcome that they're working towards. So, yeah, I don't imagine you would ever have a ballet session where you're like, "What do you want to work on today?" and, "Let's just go..."

ES: Like sometimes, erm, yeah, like you...if you have, like say, a class that you didn't expect to have or something, you can be "Yeah guys work on whatever you want", if they're all OK. Or you could say like, "Oh, these are the three things that we want to work on, which do you want to work on first?" Maybe, but, yeah.

20:26 MM: And then my kind of wrap around question for you then, really, Elizabeth, is, as you've talked about, you know, you've had your own journey and also the fact you're a student of this discipline as well. So what would you say is the biggest lesson that you have learnt with regards coaching and coaching approaches or coaching pedagogy to date?

ES: So many, so many lessons learned mainly the hard way. I suppose, recently, it's like context, so like your leadership style depends on the context, open questions and closed questions depends on the context. You can't, yeah, like one size doesn't fit all and you can't expect yourself to be...you can't expect to plan a session and then just do it like that, it never works, it never happens that way.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

ES: You have to trust that your intuition might know more right now. Like in this context, like intuition, trust it, go with it. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, well then that's a learning thing. And so, yeah, it depends on the context, everything.

MM: Perfect. I'm just going to pause.