

Ways Women Lead in Sport



Contents

Minister's Foreword	3
Overview	4
Sue Crow	6
Dasha Kopecek	7
Debbie Lee	8
Dianne Trotter	9
Judith Kent	10
Lynne Johnston	11
Michelle Harris	12
Ros Milverton	13
Elli Wellings	14
Sue Sofarnos	15

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Minister's Foreword



These stories are about 10 women who have made a difference to sport in Victoria by taking on decision-making and leadership roles in their sporting community.

Some have worked in paid roles, while others have worked as volunteers.

They have experienced frustration and hardship trying to break the glass ceiling in a male dominated sector.

Despite the challenges, they have all shown amazing resilience, dedication and passion for their sport.

They have also made the most of opportunities to improve their knowledge and decision-making skills and develop their leadership skills.

The State Government is encouraging more Victorian women to take on leadership roles in sport and inspire other women to sign up and stay involved in sporting clubs.

Our Sport Development for Women program seeks to increase women's importance and influence in sport.

The program provides opportunities for women in paid and voluntary leadership positions – such as sports administrators, coaches, officials and event managers – to develop their skills and knowledge and share their experiences with other women.

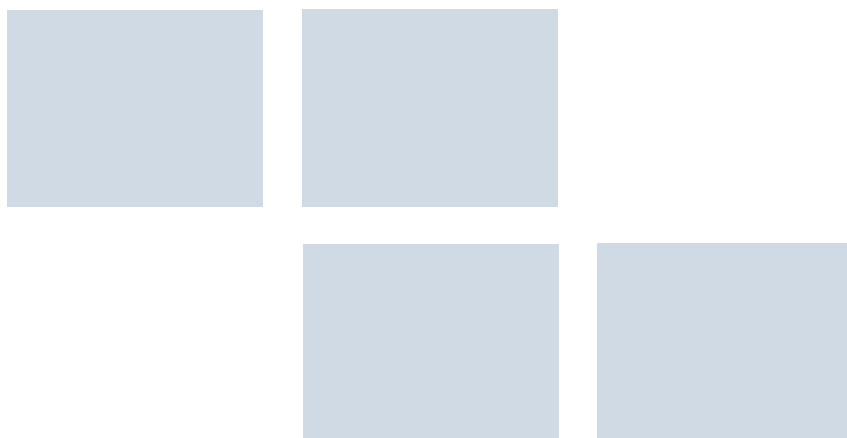
Since 2003, the program has supported women involved in a diverse range of sports such as gymnastics, lacrosse, fencing, softball and lawn bowls.

The Sport Development for Women program is just one example of how the Government is helping more Victorians 'go for their lives' and become more involved at all levels of sport.

I'm sure you will find these stories inspiring examples of women in sport.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Justin Madden". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Justin Madden MLC
Minister for Sport and Recreation



Encouraging women's leadership in sport

The Victorian Government promotes women's participation in all aspects of sport, whether as players, volunteers, coaches or officials.

The Government's Sport Development for Women program supports the vital role women play in the sport sector by providing opportunities for professional development and training in sports management or for coaching and officiating.

Formerly known as Women in Sport Leadership, the program's format has evolved to reflect ongoing research findings about what leadership means to women and what helps and challenges their leadership development.

Conducted by the University of Ballarat* and funded by Sport and Recreation Victoria, the research tracks the development of women involved in the Sport Development for Women program and uses data made available through other Australian leadership programs for women in sport.

The research shows women in sport benefit from networking and peer support, which helps them deal with the isolation often associated with working in a predominately male field.

As well as providing a grant to support women to complete training relevant to their role, the Sport Development for Women program involves a two-day live-in workshop which further develops their leadership skills and provides the opportunity to network.

The workshop is also a good forum for women to share their stories with others who have faced similar challenges and help each other solve problems.

The research also shows women leaders are committed to making a difference and regard honesty and trustworthiness as key aspects of their leadership style. They recognise the value of being a positive role model and are committed to mentoring others to reach their full potential.

Even at the highest level, the women are often reluctant to view themselves as leaders; instead, they see themselves as a member of a team, which has helped and motivated others to create change.

Overall, the women involved in the Sport Development for Women program have felt it has been beneficial to their leadership by increasing their confidence and awareness of their leadership ability.

For some, it has also given them greater credibility within their own sporting organisations, which has opened up opportunities to take on new leadership roles.

For others, it has increased the recognition and acknowledgement they receive for their contribution to their sport.

To find out more about the Sport Development for Women program visit www.sport.vic.gov.au.

*Women in Sport Leadership research conducted by Sue Brown, Lecturer in the School of Human Movement and Sport Science, University of Ballarat.

What helps women become better leaders in sport?

Many women in sport already display some of the qualities required to be a leader, such as a willingness to dedicate time and energy to make a difference, an open communication style which is consultative and inclusive, a passion for their sport and a commitment to making improvements.

Taking up opportunities for training, professional development, networking and peer support can help women build on their confidence and leadership skills.

The research shows women who are leaders in sport have generally worked towards achieving the following:

- Personal acknowledgement and recognition of their roles and themselves as a leader.
- Self-belief and awareness of what they want to achieve – and a plan for how to get there.
- Confidence in their abilities when being challenged beyond their comfort zone.
- An ability to make tough decisions and manage conflict.
- An ability to move from being the ‘doers’ in sport organisations to being strategic and feeling comfortable with delegating.
- An openness to approaching mentors for guidance and advice in their leadership pursuits.

How can sporting clubs and organisations help women become leaders?

The research shows women value support from their sporting club and organisations, which could include the following:

- Identifying and positioning women within organisations as potential leaders as coaches, officials and administrators.
- Providing opportunities to develop women’s leadership skills, such as coaching, officiating, accreditation training and mentoring.
- Working with women to develop a long term plan which identifies pathways and areas of skill development.
- Providing opportunities for networking or peer support.
- Providing recognition of women’s achievements.

Sue Crow

“Leadership is about being a good role model for others to follow.”



SUE Crow's determination and passion for sport has driven the mother-of-two to reach heights in sports administration women have rarely reached before.

Since 2004, Sue has held the top spot at Softball Australia as Chief Executive Officer.

Her rise started after she diverted from her original career of teaching physical education. She was appointed state development officer of the Victorian Football Development Foundation in 1990 after proactively approaching the organisation about the merits of appointing a woman to their development ranks.

Since then, she has occupied positions in development for the Victorian Women's Cricket Association and the Australian Football League.

In 1995, Sue was appointed Executive Director of Women's Cricket Australia. In this role she strove to build the reputation of women's cricket, put in place strategies to regain the World Cup (India 1998) and initiated the integration of women's cricket into Cricket Australia.

Many young women today are benefitting from her fight to gain equality.

“Cricket is a sport – it's not women's cricket, it's cricket for men and women,” she said.

Sue strives to be the very best leader she can possibly be and values opportunities to work on developing herself further.

“The Sport Development for Women program was great. The public speaking course certainly helped me and the management course was good too,” she said.

“It has given me more confidence to speak in public and put forward my opinions when I know others may disagree.”

Sue currently divides her time between Softball Australia and her position on the State Sport Centres Trust, which oversees the management of the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre and the State Netball and Hockey Centre.

Sue said through her sport leadership career she had become accustomed to attending meetings with a vast majority of men. “I go to many meetings and often I am the only female there,” she said.

The disparity has inspired her to encourage younger women to adopt leadership roles with the aim of creating a more even balance in the boardroom.

In the Active Girls program she mentored aspiring leaders over breakfast and she has also spoken to participants in the prestigious Williamson Leadership Program.

“Leadership is about being a good role model for others to follow and to set a good example in everything I do,” she said.

Passionate about the importance of remaining fit and healthy for life, Sue swims and plays netball regularly.

“Sometimes you wonder if you are making a right judgement or are you doing the right thing by the sport, but when you find out that you have, you are in a better position to back yourself next time,” she said.

Dasha Kopecek

“I feel empowered now that I can contribute and make a difference.”



DASHA Kopecek is no stranger to the ups and downs of elite sport.

In the past five years her experiences have ranged from the exhilaration of being named the first female coach on an Australian kayaking team, to the pain of having her training program dumped by an athlete.

Dasha said the highs and lows of her experience as a top kayaking coach had taught her to take hold of seemingly negative situations to create positives.

Dasha's challenges forced her to look at alternatives, and resulted in her current role coaching a squad of up to four athletes who have Olympic Games in their sights.

“The things I look for now are the opportunities that exist, whereas before I wasn't looking for them,” she said.

“I saw everything as bogged down with negatives, but now I actually see you can create good things out of what looks impossible.”

In 2001, Dasha became the first Australian female coach on a national team in the kayak flat water event.

Dasha hopes her successes will help women gain recognition in a male-dominated sport, where women are out-numbered four to one.

“I'd like to think I assisted in pioneering the way and created stepping stones for other women to follow,” she said.

However, she is deeply conscious of the barriers that lie in their way and the persistence that was needed in her own climb to the top.

Dasha said one source of her determination was her mother's positive example.

“Without her influence I don't think I would have ever been involved in sport, so she was special as a mother figure in a leadership role,” she said.

Dasha is also grateful for the formal training she gained through the Sport Development for Women program, which gave her the confidence to strive for innovation and change, and break down barriers on the way.

In recent years, she helped lead Canoeing Victoria forward by creating a database of coaches, which could hold the key to improving leadership skills in the future.

“It gives Canoeing Victoria the possibility of sending out emails, of coaches getting together and looking at the development of coaching from a leadership point of view,” she said.

She has also been a part of countless wins by athletes she has trained in national and international events.

Dasha said she was looking forward to more highs for herself and her athletes as a result of the skills she has worked hard to develop over the past 15 years.

“I feel empowered now that I can make a contribution and that I can make a difference,” she said.

Debbie Lee

“I’ve learnt the importance of finding people’s abilities and treating them as individuals.”



IT HAS never mattered to Debbie Lee that football is often considered a men’s sport.

Even as a three-year-old, she preferred to play with a football rather than a netball, much to her parents’ surprise.

Since then, she has fought to break down barriers and create a whole new acceptance of women’s football.

Her determination to play was challenged when she was a teenager and her club opted against funding the women’s team, resulting in the team folding. Debbie took action and formed her own team, which won its first premiership 12 years later.

“It was unbelievable – the greatest day of my life,” she said.

The club now hosts a senior and reserves team and has a partnership with the local secondary school to field a youth girls team.

It was this passion which propelled Debbie to her position as president of the Victorian Women’s Football League, which she has held for the past three years.

She has used the role to change perceptions of football as a men’s sport. Under Debbie’s leadership the women’s football league has expanded from 17 teams in 2000 to 28 teams in 2005, and has welcomed a new regional competition in Geelong.

However, Debbie believes there is still a long way to go before women’s football receives the recognition it deserves.

“Some men still believe women shouldn’t play football. But the fact is the perception of football has changed from a blokey sport

to a game the whole family can watch and enjoy,” she said.

Debbie said her long-time experience in the male-dominated field had helped her cope with some old prejudices and break down barriers.

Involvement in the league has not only lifted the profile of women’s football, but also helped her in her own professional life after she was employed by the Western Bulldogs Football Club.

She said she was fortunate that her passion had led her to her ideal job.

“I’m very fortunate, but the way I see it, I served my apprenticeship for many years volunteering for the VWFL and now I’m reaping the rewards.”

Formal training through the Sport Development for Women program has also helped her gain communication skills to better manage people.

“I’ve learnt about the importance of finding people’s abilities and treating them as individuals. What pushes one person forward might not influence another,” she said.

Debbie’s secret to success in the league is simple – she has a strong passion for the sport.

“I remember watching the footy every Saturday as a child, and now I’m administering the competition and working in the industry full time. It’s quite amazing.”

“I would like to think that women’s football has been able to enjoy the benefits of my passion for footy,” she said.



“We need to create pathways for young people to ensure our girls don’t feel intimidated.”

DI Trotter is a well known identity in Horsham, renowned for her endless energy and dedication to improving sport and recreation in the Wimmera region.

For the past 16 years, Di has held the position of Executive Officer for the Wimmera Regional Sports Assembly and her successes have been many and varied.

For all the hours she has spent in her professional role with the assembly, she has spent an equal amount of time in a volunteer capacity.

“When I first moved to Horsham and had a young family, the first thing I did was join the local sporting club. I went along to an annual meeting and ended up being on the committee of management for the next 15 years,” she said.

“My kids started playing basketball; we needed some coaches, so I offered to help. They needed some referees, so again I offered to help.

“The clubs provided me with an opportunity to grow and develop new skills, and to socialise and meet new people.”

Using a Sport Development for Women grant, Di attended a two-day live-in leadership workshop, participated in a Community Leadership Initiative, and attended the World Health Conference in Melbourne.

“The grant has provided me with some great skills – not just for work, but also in terms of my own life. I feel I have grown as

a person and as a woman. It has helped me realise I can step away from a situation and really view it from a different perspective,” she said.

Di believes her ability to talk to people at their own level, keeping herself abreast of current issues and developments and providing support to help others are all key factors to her success as a leader in her community.

Through her own experiences growing up and now living in a rural town, Di is determined to promote the issue of equality within the community. She believes women are often disadvantaged in country areas because of a focus on a few dominant sports that are more readily available to men.

“We need to create pathways for young people to ensure our girls don’t feel intimidated,” she said.

To encourage the next generation of women leaders, Di has become involved with the Active Girls Breakfasts and also speaks about leadership and participation opportunities in sport and recreation at secondary schools and universities.

In 2004, Di received the Minister for Sport and Recreation Award for her contribution and involvement in sports including netball, basketball, tennis and swimming, as an administrator, coach, referee and participant.

Di still feels she has more to give and to achieve. “I don’t think I have done all I can do and I am keen to look at the future to see where else I can go,” she said.



“The skills I’ve developed have helped me improve the accessibility of shooting to different groups in the community.”

JUDITH Kent had never contemplated taking up the sport of shooting. In fact, she considered herself to be “anti-guns” before she was convinced to have a go.

A friend booked her in to the licensing test and she went along for the ride.

“Once I got my licence I was taken down to a gun club and I hit the first clay target to come out of the skeet trap house, and everyone thought I was a natural,” she said.

When she was not able to shoot at the level required, she remained involved in the sport by gaining positions on the committee of the Victorian club of the Sporting Shooters’ Association of Australia (SSAA).

Judith moved on to become secretary of the Victorian SSAA State Executive Council, which oversees 22 branches and 24,000 members across the state.

In this role she has revolutionised the management of the organisation by driving the implementation of corporate governance.

“I went to the Australian Stock Exchange web site and I got the corporate governance document off there and that’s really how I went about it,” she said.

“The change ensured the organisation operated more professionally and gained recognition from government bodies.”

The strengthened partnership with government has unlocked new opportunities for hunting.

“We’ve been working with the government on environmental culling, which has been a plus for government and a plus for the sport,” she said.

Not happy to be uninformed, Judith has moved to further her understanding of conservation and hunting in recent years.

“In the past it was an area I fell down in because I didn’t know much about it. Now I make a point of knowing what is going on,” she said.

A Sport Development for Women grant was another way Judith ensured she was operating at her best.

She took courses to improve her management skills and cement her position at the top of the Victorian SSAA.

Judith said the skills she developed have helped her drive to improve the accessibility of shooting to different groups in the community.

“Shooting used to be a male-dominated sport, but this is changing,” she said. “We’ve been running programs across the state to try to attract young people, women and people of all abilities,” she said.

While the path has not always been easy, Judith has relished the leadership challenges and opportunities.

The next step in Judith’s climb up the ranks in shooting is to be among the very few women in Australia to gain an A-Grade judges accreditation in the clay target discipline.

Lynne Johnston

“When you have an understanding of yourself and a belief in your skills, you feel you can make big decisions.”

AN EARLY introduction to disability set Lynne Johnston on her path of volunteer work.

When she was younger, Lynne witnessed the challenges her mother faced as a sufferer of arthritis.

As an adult, Lynne has dedicated her time to creating more opportunities and recognition for people with disabilities through Disabled Wintersport Victoria (DWW).

She said she was inspired to volunteer in the field by the hardships her mother had endured because of her condition.

“She has been quite crippled with arthritis since she was 40, so I see what she has had to overcome,” she said.

“It has given me a better understanding of the issues involved in living with a disability.”

Lynne also represents Victoria on the board of Disabled Wintersports Australia.

At the helm of the organisation, Lynne developed an ambitious four-year plan for improving disabled winter sports programs.

In 2003, she travelled to Canada and the United States through the Sport Development for Women program to learn more about the management of disabled winter sports.

Lynne said one of her priorities was to discover ways of making ski guides who worked with people with disabilities more visible to the mainstream skiing community.

“People who assist disabled skiers are often considered carers, and their skills are ignored,” she said.

“I want them to be recognised and be more visible.”



It was her dedication to the issue that eventually saw her give up the top spot in DWW in favour of vice presidency, although she remains secretary of the Victorian Snow Sports Association. The move has given her the time to pursue the development of a volunteer ski guide training program throughout regional Victoria.

“It’s something that needs improving and I need time to do that,” she said.

In 2004, Lynne’s significant contribution to disabled winter sports was recognised when she was named National Australia Banks Community Hero.

The prestigious award acknowledged the equivalent of full-time hours Lynne spent in her role with Disabled Wintersports.

However, she remains modest in giving reasons for her commitment to the cause and her rise up the ranks in DWW.

“To be honest, I was bored and thought disabled skiing would be more of a challenge than mainstream skiing,” she said.

“I also wanted to help people, and it was in a sport that I enjoy.”

Lynne said the skills she had developed through her leadership experience with DWW and the Sport Development for Women program helped her gain a new confidence which impacted on both her volunteer role and her full-time job at National Australia Bank.

“It has made me a more positive person in my job. I actually don’t sit back as much now – I am more inclined to have my say.

“When you have an understanding of yourself and a belief in your skills, you feel that you can make big decisions,” she said.



“It has helped me arrange my time better to ensure I can get the best out of myself for my family and my organisation.”

With the help of management courses through the Sport Development for Women program, she has learnt the value of delegating and, rather than working long hours, she now trusts others to complete tasks she has set.

“Before I would have stayed at work until I finished something, and it wouldn’t matter if I had worked on the weekend,” she said.

“But just being there for everyone and working the long hours doesn’t necessarily benefit you or anyone else. Being tired, overworked and stressed is not a good thing.”

In 2005, Michelle expanded her role to include overseeing Recreational Reserves and Parks, Committees of Management and a range of community groups, as well as playing a more significant role in strategic planning in the rapidly growing rural council.

She said formal courses and her experience in these organisations gave her the confidence to speak out for the benefit of council.

“I’m one of three women on our management team of 13 people and it is pretty hard to operate in that environment when you’re not used to it. It takes time and confidence to contribute and share your thoughts and values with the group,” she said.

Michelle’s next aim is to develop partnerships with community groups ranging from sporting clubs to walking groups.

“We need to work closely with each group to provide the best solutions for everyone, so they can operate at their full potential and achieve the best outcome for everyone in the community,” she said.

MICHELLE Harris did not think twice about entering a half marathon, even though she had never considered herself to be a good runner.

She knew if she put her mind to it she would be able to complete the gruelling event – and she did.

In her role as Manager of Mitchell Leisure Centres, Michelle approaches challenges and obstacles with the same self-belief.

“When I decide I want to do something, it doesn’t matter if people tell me I can’t do it, because I will just keep on and will never have any doubts that I will achieve,” she said.

The desire to lead was evident in Michelle’s school days when she always aimed for the top.

“I always tried to be the house captain and the captain of athletics and I loved that responsibility,” she said.

A wide range of sporting organisations have benefited from her determination, including the Upper Beaconsfield Netball Association, the Victorian Canoe Association and the Mitchell Leisure Centres.

Michelle’s role at Mitchell Leisure Centres, where she supervised six recreational facilities in country Victoria, did not suffer after the birth of her first child.

Instead, it helped her arrange her time better to ensure she could get the best out of herself for her family and her organisation.



“It’s about empowering people and making sure they are involved.”

LEADERSHIP at the Mildura Netball Association is in the blood for Ros Milverton. Ros is president of the netball association which was co-founded by her mother, the vice president, more than 60 years ago.

However, Ros has made the role her own and plans to introduce changes in the organisation to keep up with an ever-evolving society.

“My mother was a big influence in getting me involved, but I think we both have quite different opinions on some issues in the association,” she said.

“Mum likes the way some things have been done all along. I am more receptive to change and try to move with trends in society, which involves change management.”

A particular change Ros would like to introduce is a greater involvement of older people with the association.

She believes this would increase the dwindling number of volunteers and appeal to retirees.

“The fact is, people don’t have the time to volunteer any more. After working 40 hours in a full-time job, they don’t feel like working in an administrative role for their local sports club, which makes it difficult for us. With an ageing society we have a resource of potential volunteers that we’re not tapping into,” she said.

The benefit would extend both ways to build a sense of community involvement for older people.

“Helping out with the netball association is a great way for retired people to feel valued, meet people and be part of the community.”

To help the organisation cope with the shortage of volunteers, Ros has contributed her own time to coaching, umpiring and serving on the board.

She has been a driving force behind the replacement of the association’s 12 courts, including an all-weather surface which has reduced the workload for volunteers, improved the quality of the surface and cut the risk of injury.

The association raised \$425,000 over many years for the project through its Spring Carnival, which hosts around 120 players.

The momentum will continue when the pavilion is redesigned and refurbished.

Courses in leadership and management through the Sport Development for Women program have given Ros the skills to get the best out of players and volunteers and turn major projects into reality.

“It’s really important to understand where different people are coming from and take that into consideration when you’re making decisions,” she said.

“It’s about empowering people and making sure they are involved.”

In the future, Ros aims to focus on youth obesity and depression, which she plans to tackle through involving young people in sport. These are areas on which Ros and her mother agree.

“My mother’s philosophy is that it is important for kids to have a focus and sport is a great way to get them actively involved.

“While we need to create space for elite athletes, we also need to be accommodating so everyone can be involved,” she said.

Elli Wellings

“If you are trying to encourage more women, these kinds of recognitions are really vital.”



ELLI Wellings did not have to look much further than her own backyard for her introduction to the sport in which she would become a champion.

When she was just seven years old, Elli heard the sound of swords clashing in her neighbour's yard.

She peered over the backyard fence and saw a fencing training session in progress.

Since then, Elli has gone on to become Australian and Oceanic champion in individual and team fencing events.

Elli took time out from her busy schedule of training, coaching and completing her PhD in Criminology, to volunteer at her local club. She believes she has a duty to give back to the sport which had welcomed her since she was a child.

Since taking on her role as president of VRI Fencing Club four years ago, Elli has helped the membership grow from 70 to 200.

For the past three years the club has been named Best Overall Club by the Australian Fencing Federation.

Elli comes from a family that has always valued community involvement and given her a sense of social responsibility.

“My father is a retired school teacher and deputy principal. Ever since I can remember he was involved with volunteer organisations, so he was a bit of a role model for me,” she said.

“I've always enjoyed working with other people and sharing skills, and I always seem to have ideas.”

Elli was elated when she found out she was a successful candidate for the Sport Development for Women grant.

“If you are trying to encourage more women, these kinds of recognitions are really vital,” she said.

Elli used the grant to attend international coaching training and a management course to gain a better understanding of her role and responsibilities.

“Beforehand I had helped run things, but what I did was based on commonsense, rather than any formal training.

“Now I've learnt about things like delegating and I feel more confident in what I'm doing.”

The likelihood of a busy year ahead – including aiming for qualification in the Commonwealth Fencing Championships – has not prevented Elli from setting down ambitious goals for her volunteer roles with the VRI Fencing Club.

“I want to keep forging ahead and helping the club stay strong financially and in terms of membership and elite results,” she said.

In recognition of Elli's leadership qualities, she has been elected as senior vice president of the Victorian Amateur Fencing Association.

Sue Sofarnos

“The biggest thing I have learnt is you have to be real and help people grow, but do it with enthusiasm, passion and knowledge.”

EVER since she was a child, Sue Sofarnos has hated giving up on the sporting field. She could never see why players would stop trying to win when they were behind.

“If they were 10 goals down, they would drop their heads, and it used to drive me nuts,” she said.

Her never-give-up attitude propelled Sue to the top as an athlete when she was selected in the Australian Senior Women’s Lacrosse Team.

She went on to become one of only three players in the world to play in five Lacrosse World Cups, including being a member of the World Champion Australian Team in 1986.

“It’s about hanging in there and waiting for that moment when you can turn it,” she said.

“You have to be responsible for how you play and how you respond to others.”

It is a message that she has passed down to countless other players in her role as a coach at club, state and national levels.

After almost 30 years of coaching and through courses funded by the Sport Development for Women program, she has learned that attributes such as humour and flexibility can be just as vital to a leader as persistence.

“In the past 12 months undertaking the women’s leadership program, and being a coach in particular, I have learnt I don’t have all the answers,” she said.

“Sometimes holding back and not giving away everything is the best way to get your leadership across and get the group where it needs to go.”

Sue said she learned as much from her mistakes as from her successes.



“You want to be real as a leader,” she said.

“I want to make mistakes and I almost want the team to see that, so we all grow together.

“The biggest thing I have learned is that you have to be real and help people grow, but do it with enthusiasm and passion and knowledge, and things will be ok.”

Her new leadership skills have not only helped her on the sidelines, but also at home.

Sue said her husband and two daughters, who have always supported her sporting career, had seen some of the benefits.

“I guess I practice a bit of it on my teenagers, as leadership skills are required in being both a good coach and a good parent. It is all wrapped up together.”

This year, Sue has been coaching at the Newport Club, where she helps teach up-and-coming coaches.

She rates her greatest achievement as a coach as being assistant coach of Australia’s World Champion team in 2005.

As for the future, her sights are set on the position of head coach for the Australian Women’s Team in the 2009 World Cup.

“I am going to go on and hopefully step up and be a successful coach; it’s been a long time since Australian lacrosse has had a female head coach, which is one of my goals.”

“I’m inspired to do that,” she said.

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