

15th ANNUAL ALICIA JOHNSON MEMORIAL LECTURE



3 & 4 DECEMBER 2005

Liz Ellis

CAPTAIN OF THE AUSTRALIAN
NETBALL TEAM



Northern
Territory
Government

Department of the
Chief Minister

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The Alicia Johnson Memorial Lecture recognises and celebrates women's achievements, whilst commemorating the life of Alicia Johnson who was a young Darwin lawyer.

The lecture is hosted by the Office of Women's Policy and covers themes relevant to the advancement of Territory Women.

Author: Liz Ellis

To obtain further copies please contact:

Office of Women's Policy

Telephone: 08 8999 3738

Facsimile: 08 8999 3733

Email: owp@nt.gov.au

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Alicia Johnson...

attended school and grew up in Melbourne. She graduated from Monash University in 1986 with a Bachelor of Law/Economics. She was admitted as a practitioner of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1988.



Alicia began working with the Australia Legal Aid Office in 1988 and resigned to lecture at the NT University Law School in 1991. Some of Alicia's commitments included membership of the NT Domestic Violence Task Force and the Family Planning Association, and being a representative of the NT Law Reform Committee. Alicia was particularly concerned and worked tirelessly for disadvantaged youth, and women who had experienced domestic violence and sexual assault. Alicia died in 1991 aged 28 years.

Liz Ellis....



Liz is one of Australia's highest profile elite athletes. She is captain of the Australian Netball team and of the Sydney Swifts Netball team. In 2002 Liz was awarded Most Valued Player, Players' Player of the year and Goal Keeper of the year.....as well as being a Commonwealth Games medallist!

Liz has appeared on television as a sports commentator and presents a weekly sports segment on Triple J. She is currently writing her second netball related book and hosts a number of netball clinics throughout New South Wales.

The 15th Annual Alicia Johnson Memorial Lecture

It gives me enormous pleasure to be here today to deliver the 2005 Alicia Johnson Lecture, although I will say I felt a bit daunted when I started doing some research and discovered the intellectual calibre of the women who precede me in delivering this lecture and the huge regard in which Alicia Johnson is held for her tireless work with disadvantaged youth and women who were the victims of abuse.

As a result I gave a lot thought to trying to come up with a serious, interesting lecture touching on the issues confronting women in sport.

But then I thought, nah, I am not smart enough to fool you guys into thinking that I am particularly clever, so my apologies. Mind you I told my dad about my concerns, and he reassured me that because I do the crossword every day, I should be ok. I don't quite know how that figures, but anyway!

So what I am going to do today is stick to what I know and talk at length on my favourite topic. Me!

Well, sort of, amongst other things.

It's my understanding that previous Alicia Johnson lectures have focused around issues facing women such as domestic violence and equality. Which made me wonder why on earth I had been asked to deliver this year's lecture – sport is, after all a bit of a frivolous past-time, is it not?

The answer to that is no – sport is a multi-billion dollar business – you only have to look at companies like the Alice's own Centrebet to understand that. It is something that is integral to the fabric of Australian society and a huge part of our national identity.

Recently I have been reminded about how important sport is to Australians.

After losing the Ashes, seeing the Wallabies win one out of their last nine tests, seeing the Kangaroos get done in the Rugby League Tri-Nations series and finally being part of the Australian Netball Team that suffered a record defeat at the hands of New Zealand, I have been met with plenty of enquiries about what is going wrong with Australian sport.

Just five years ago, in 1999, the cricketers, Wallabies, and netballers all won their World Cups in remarkable circumstances, all Australians were basking in the reflected glory of the success of our sporting teams in the lead up to hosting the best Olympics ever.

I would like to spend some time talking about the Australian Netball Team's win in the 1999 World Championships, because for me it ranks as the number one highlight of my entire netball career. I think that the reason it is such a highlight is the way the team won the final, especially when you contrast our effort as a team at the end of the series with the type of team we were when we arrived at the World Championship.

Whilst we were a team dripping with talent and skill, we hadn't really gelled as a unit prior to arriving in Christchurch for the World Championships. Over the course of the World Championships we started to come together as a unit and to win the final in such extraordinary circumstances was unbelievable. In that game we came from six goals down in the final quarter to snatch a win right on the final whistle. I have never experienced anything like it since.

One of the things that I think we can put that win down to is the fact that throughout the final quarter we focused really hard on not winning the World Championships, but rather on doing the little things well in order to win a quarter of netball by seven points. That holds a few pertinent lessons for young athletes – or in fact athletes of any age.

I often get asked by young athletes what I do to cope with

nerves and the answer is that I forget about the pressure, not by telling myself to forget about the pressure, because then it becomes a big thing in your mind, but rather by focusing on something else. And that something else is to focus on doing the little things well. For me that means thinking about moving my feet around the goal shooter, getting my hands up in defence in general play and mixing up my defence of the shot. If you are busy thinking about these sorts of things it doesn't leave much room to be worrying about pressure, or nerves or the enormity of the task in front of you.

I think that final quarter of the 1999 World Championship is a testament to all of us thinking about doing the little things well and in doing so, we achieved a big thing. It was a case of focusing on the process and not on the outcome.

Upon our return we were feted with a ticker tape parade through the streets of Sydney and presented with the keys to the city. Some of us were also interviewed by 60 Minutes as part of a story they were doing on Australia's year of sporting dominance (how things have changed!). The interviewer unwittingly asked us a particularly funny question when he asked "Does a win like this set you up for life?" With hoots of laughter we informed him that a win like that doesn't even set us up for a week.

What the reporter didn't – and what most people don't – understand is the fact that whilst in so many other fields of endeavour, women are heading towards achieving pay parity with men, sport is in fact the final frontier. It is the last bastion of sexism, where it is simply accepted that the girls don't earn anywhere near as much as boys.

This is something that is extremely important and needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

WHY? Well it is not because I would like to grow rich as a result of my sporting endeavours – at 32 years of age it is too

late for that. It is also not because my life, and those of my team-mates would be so much easier if we didn't have to work full time.

No, it is because when female athletes are by and large not professional, it is easy for them, their competition and their sports to be at the worst ridiculed and at the best marginalized.

For a start it allows the media to give us less air time than our male counterparts.

This is borne out by the results of the most recent survey of the media's coverage of women in sport. *An Illusory Image: A report on the media coverage and portrayal of women's sport in Australia 2000*, shows that although the nations sportswomen are playing harder, faster and more professionally than ever and have a proven international record, they still struggle for consistent, long-term coverage.

The 2000 survey took a snapshot of media coverage of women's sport from newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations during a two-week period, establishing a measurement of coverage and additional information about the portrayal of women's sport in the media. The results show that media coverage of women in sport is treated very differently from that of men.

The report showed television coverage of women's sport for the period sampled was just 2.0% of total sports broadcasting. Radio coverage showed a total figure of 1.4% of total sports broadcasts while sports magazines, which were also surveyed for the first time, registered 6.8% of coverage devoted to women's sport.

There was some good news however, as the newspaper reportage of women's sport doubled since 1992. However, results showed only 10.7% of newspaper space was devoted to women's sport, compared with men's at 79.1%

What was remarkable that women ranked third in coverage – behind men and horses.

The other point to be taken from this is that the reality – and therefore the perception – that female athletes are unpaid and therefore amateurs not worthy of prominent, high quantity coverage leads to another, unwanted consequence. This is that often the way women are portrayed and described is either as “girls” focusing on how they look and their emotional state, or they are sexualised.

Things are changing – albeit rather slowly. I have noticed during my 13 years playing for Australia that we are receiving more and better media than ever. Journalists are far better versed than ever in the sport and ask far more incisive questions.

It is still not good enough – we have a long way to go.

It is not only the media coverage of women’s sport that suffers as a result of the marginalisation of women’s sport and female athletes.

Often it is the participants themselves who suffer. Often families will sacrifice a young girl’s sporting pursuits for those of her male relatives, usually her brothers, because their sports and sporting pursuits are seen as more important. I wonder if this would be the case if the sports the girls played provided well paid professionals for the girls to look up to as role models.

This is particularly irksome given the already high drop out rate of young girls from sport. To have otherwise willing participants prevented from playing sports because it is not convenient given their brothers sporting pursuits is frustrating, particularly in light of the well documented benefits for girls of playing sport.

These benefits include greater confidence, greater social proficiency and a lesser likelihood of teenage pregnancy, to name a few.

Most importantly though, the pay disparity between male and female athletes means there are far fewer career pathways for young women than there are for young men.

I did a rough count of the “jobs” available in Australian sporting teams to get a comparison between full time paid positions available to female athletes and those available to male athletes in Australia’s various national sporting leagues.

For male athletes the following opportunity’s existed:

- ✘ Basketball - 110
- ✘ AFL – 640
- ✘ Rugby League – 375
- ✘ Rugby Union – 120
- ✘ Soccer approximately - 160

For female athletes the following opportunity’s existed:

- ✘ Netball – 0
- ✘ Basketball – 0
- ✘ Hockey – 0

So there are approximately 1500 jobs in Australia for a professional male athlete and zero jobs for professional female athletes.

While this is a pretty startling statistic, I was able to find an upside. That is that those of us who are not highly paid professional athletes are in fact more likely to be better prepared for a professional life after sport because we, by necessity, have a professional life during sport – even if it means sacrificing things like time with family and friends, sleep and occasionally, sanity!

For me this meant concentrating on my education.

Neither of my parents were in the position to achieve a high level of education and they were determined that my sister and I did.

When I was offered the opportunity to go to AIS at the end of Year 11, I declined after much soul-searching, in order to be able to stay in my own home environment and concentrate on study. This did not mean that I had to give up netball! On the contrary. I continued to play Club, State League and for the NSW schoolgirls and Under 19's team throughout, using netball training and playing as a useful and welcome distraction from studying.

One of the reasons that I wanted to really work hard at my studies in my final year was because I had decided that I would like to study Law at University. When I announced this to anyone who would listen, one of my friend's brothers told me that there was no way I was smart enough to get into Law at University. Well that was like a red rag to a bull and as soon as I heard that I was more determined than ever to get the required marks.

His taunt worked a treat and I finished with the requisite marks to get into the ANU in Canberra as an undergraduate studying for a combined Arts/Law degree.

Following my graduation I took up a position in a large corporate firm in Sydney practicing primarily Property and Infrastructure Law. In my mind I was going to make partner in five years AND continue to play for Australia. After four years of practice it occurred to me that I could not do it all – I couldn't combine the 60 hour-weeks required of a young lawyer with the 20 hours of training a week required of a member of the Australian Netball Team.

Something had to give. Fortunately, it was not netball.

During months of deliberation about my future, I kept on recalling the advice given to me by a solicitor I had worked with during a stint at a large suburban firm one summer break. As a young solicitor he made the decision to give up his career as a First Grade Rugby League player in order to concentrate on his

legal career. It was something he regretted. He told me that if you are fortunate to be able to play your sport at the highest level, do it for as long as you can.

That really was the piece of advice that made my mind up. I decided to quit, much to my husband's consternation – he felt that it was a decision that I could have made before we mortgaged ourselves to the eyeballs to enter the Sydney property market!

It was a big risk, but in hindsight it was worth it. Now I have a great business running and coaching at junior netball clinics, doing some work on TV and radio and writing books. I have been fortunate enough to find a career I love. It taught me that the bigger the risk the bigger the rewards, and sometimes you just have to back yourself and go. Believe me – you need to believe in yourself because if you don't nobody else will!

I have to say though that my current netball career is a far cry from when I started.

I almost didn't start playing netball. Initially my mum rejected the request of one of her friends to let me play in order to make up numbers in a team that she was putting together. Mum felt that I was too uncoordinated and a bit of a bookworm and so I wouldn't enjoy the sport. Thankfully her friend knew better and persuaded her to let me play. Mum relented and the rest is (almost) history.

I say almost because while I loved netball from the first moment I stepped on court, I wasn't particularly good at it. Sure I was bossy and a ball hog and that's why I got put into centre, but mum had been right in one respect – I was fairly uncoordinated and I spent most of my time on my butt or on my knees. Hardly an auspicious start!

While I was not the most talented player going around, I was a very determined little player. I believe that hard work and determination will always make up for a lack of talent – there

are plenty of talented players who I played with over the years who never made it out of their comfort zone and so never reached their potential.

The assumption people often make is that I was always a superstar, somehow destined to play for Australia. Not so!

I was good enough to get selected for the Hawkesbury Under 11's rep team, but not the Hawkesbury under 12's the following year. As much as I was upset at the time – I loved playing reps and I couldn't believe that I had missed out – it was a valuable experience for me, and I learned a couple of important lessons.

The first lesson was learning to accept setbacks with dignity. When I started to bawl my eyes out after I wasn't named in the team, mum yanked me aside and told me to dry up – some of my friends had been selected in the squad, and it was unfair of me to spoil their happiness and excitement by blubbing. So I dried up and congratulated them – and waited until I got in the car on the way home to cry my eyes out!

The second lesson was that selectors don't select you, you select yourself. I had turned up to selections thinking that I would be a shoe-in because I had played the year before and I thought I was pretty good. But I didn't perform particularly well and so I was dropped, simple as that.

That taught me that if you want to be selected in a team, you need to make sure that you perform so well, that the selectors can't not pick you.

As a result I never take selections for granted. Not even as captain of the Australian Team!

Another great lesson I learned as a little kid that has stood me in good stead over the years is from a throwaway line mum used when I was little. She had taken me up to the local netball courts to watch the A Grade competition. She wanted me to see how the big girls used all the space available to them,

rather than simply everyone running to the person with the ball, as we were want to do in the under 11's.

I made the comment that I would never be that good – she replied “someone has to be, it might as well be you”. That stuck in my head and didn't really mean much until I went to watch my first ever test match, which was the Australian team playing Jamaica in the semi finals of the World Championships in 1991. The Aussies won that game and the next day, as an 18 year old scholarship holder at the AIS, I went along to watch Australia play New Zealand in the final.

That final was the match that put netball on the map in this country. The Prime Minister was there, along with 10 000 screaming fans. Australia won by one goal – it was awesome and I wanted a piece of that action! I kept thinking though that I could never be that good. Then Mum's words popped into my head – someone has to be, it might as well be me.

So I made two decisions that day. One was that I really wanted to play for Australia. The other was that I would do whatever it took to get there. After all, someone has to play Goal Keeper for Australia, it might as well be me!

I wrote some goals, the first of which was to be selected into the Australian Netball Team for the 1995 World Netball Championships. But it is one thing to write that sort of goal down – it is another thing to achieve it. In order to achieve my main goal, I also wrote down with it some “work” goals. In doing so there was no point in writing as a goal something along the lines of “I will work hard to improve my game” – I needed something small and concrete. So I went and found out the fitness test results of the defenders in the Australian Team and set those results – for speed, agility, vertical jump and aerobic fitness – as my goals. I figured that if I could reach the same level of physical ability as those women, then I would put myself in a pretty good position to be selected!

Just over a year after setting these as my goals, I was selected into the Australian squad and six months after that my opportunity arose when one of the incumbent Goal Keepers withdrew with a back injury. At the time someone commented to me after I was selected to replace the injured player that I was so lucky to play for Australia. This comment got up my nose because I didn't feel lucky – I felt like I had worked really hard and while I was fortunate to have the opportunity due to injury, it was my hard work to reach my goals that had got me there.

Since then I have really enjoyed my career in the Australian team. Despite being in the team for 13 years, I still make sure that I set my goals high and work hard to achieve them. I still also never take selection for granted! Every time I turn up at Australian team selections I make sure I have done all of the work to ensure that I select myself, rather than waiting on the selectors to select me. After all, I hate missing out!

Which is why I have struggled so much with coming to terms with my recent injury. On October 29 in a test match against New Zealand, I ruptured my anterior cruciate ligament, requiring a full reconstruction and 6 months off netball.

It has been a real roller coaster ride for me – I was desperately upset when I was diagnosed! I have to say that I was pretty pathetic in the days following – especially on the plane ride home, where I bawled my eyes out for several hours! But I soon realized that feeling sorry for myself was not going to get my knee better. I needed a plan.

Within a few days that plan had materialized. I had appointments with a physio, doctor and surgeon all lined up and I quickly set about the long process of getting better.

Whenever I feel down – which is often! – I keep reminding myself that I am not the first and I certainly won't be the last netballer this has happened to. Plenty of girls have gone

through this and come out the other side to continue their careers. I have come to the realization that this injury is a really good test. I hope it will allow me to become a better player and a better person. For the first time in a lot of years I desperately miss netball and netball training, so I am finding my passion for the game all over again.

I think that my injury is a great example of what sport has given me. When I look back at my life and career so far, there is no getting away from the fact that netball has been the single biggest positive influence, outside of my family.

Sure there are times when I get frustrated – the fact that when you look up “women in sport” on the net you are greeted with pages and pages of websites covering the issues facing women in sport, shows that we have a long way to go – but that doesn’t mean that sport cannot be an overwhelmingly positive experience for women and girls.

This is because you learn more than just the rules when you play sport. Sport has taught me self confidence, discipline, a strong work ethic, goal setting and the ability to work as a member of a team.

It has allowed me to meet some extraordinary people and travel to some amazing places. I have made great friendships with people on and off the court through my involvement with netball.

Yes there have been obstacles, but so often I have found that I am a better athlete – and occasionally a better person – for having overcome them.

Which is why I will finish with one of my favourite quotes.

**We learn far more from failure than from success.
We often find what will do, by finding out what will not do,
Which is why she who never made a mistake,
Never made a discovery.**

For enquiries or copies please contact:

Office of Women's Policy

Telephone: (08) 8999 3738

Facsimile: (08) 8999 3733

Email: owp@nt.gov.au

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