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Jill Ellis: the woman behind the coach

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"I'm not coaching to keep my job, I'm coaching what I believe."

by Alessandra Puglisi



Photograph: Shutterstock

If we talk about Jill Ellis, it is impossible not to think about the US Women's National Team; for better or for worse a big chapter of her life is devoted to her legendary role as head coach of the team and all the achievements that came with it. Likewise, it is hard to talk about the history of the US Women's National Team without talking about Jill Ellis; the former USWNT coach, in fact, made such an impact and paved the road for the future of the team in an everlasting way.

The Netflix docu-series *The Playbook* dedicates an entire episode to the woman who made it possible for the USWNT to win back-to-back World Cup trophies, but it does so much more than that. In roughly half an hour, the episode — narrated by Ellis' herself — takes us inside the life of the former US National Team's coach, often left in the shadows.

With clarity and confidence, Jill Ellis talks about how she became the woman that we know today. Born and raised in Cowplain from a Scottish mother and English father, Jill Ellis says that football has always been in her life. But it is only in 1981, after moving with her parents to the USA, that she started her journey in football.



Photograph: Illinois Athletics

> **After being under the spotlight and often criticized for her game techniques, there is something incredibly liberating in watching Ellis tell her own story. She doesn't shy away from addressing the critiques that were thrown her way, but she doesn't apologize for doing what she believed was the best for the team.**

Despite being mostly known for her position as the head coach of the USWNT, Ellis has actually a long story of coaching at a college level. Her first offer as an assistant coach came in 1994 for the University of Maryland; in order to fulfill that role, Jill Ellis left her previous job of two years as a lead technical writer for a company. To Maryland succeeded Virginia in 1996 and then the North Carolina State University.

> **There was not going back for Jill Ellis, football was calling and she had to answer.**

After gaining experience as an assistant coach, she was chosen to lead the Illinois women's soccer program, but the big breakthrough arrived when she was appointed head coach of UCLA. With the team, she collected eight NCAA Women's College Cups and a record of 229 victories.

In 2012, following Pia Sundhage's departure from the USWNT, Ellis succeeded for a brief period of time, stepping up from her previous position as National Development Director. After US Soccer fired Tom Sermanni in 2013, Ellis again was appointed head coach of the team and remained so until after the second World Cup victory in July 2019.



Photograph: Daniela Porcelli/Getty Images

However, what the episode strives to shows is that there's so much more to Ellis than her accolades. She speaks freely — but not without tears in her eyes — about her struggles to come out as a gay woman in the world of soccer.

> **Ellis recalls the fear of losing her job, the respect of her colleagues and team members, but she also describes the adoption of her daughter with her partner as a turning point to share that part of her life.**

As of today, Jill Ellis has achieved outstanding results and, love it or hate it, her job has brought out worthy outcomes in all the teams she has passed through. After leaving an everlasting mark during her time with the USWNT, she continues to be an ambassador for the US Soccer Federation to help raise the number of women in coaching.

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