Juggling act: The challenges of managing a coaching career around motherhood

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Dannielle Starkey

CENTRE OF ATTENTION: Dannielle and Adrian Starkey are captivated by their beaming daughter Brooke

- If being a mother, and all that entails, is tiring, then balancing that with the demands of multiple projects is exhausting.
- Being highly organised, flexible and innovative with your time is imperative.
- A good support network is vital: Enlisting the help of family, friends and work colleagues can make all the difference to new mothers.
- Coaching can help you retain your identity at a time when your other interests have been placed on the back burner – making you ‘feel more human’.
- With sport traditionally taking place on evenings and weekends, as your own children get older, you may have to move from your preferred area of coaching (e.g. seniors to juniors) in order to watch them play for their clubs.

Connected Coaches Community Champions Dannielle Starkey and Krissi Paterson have become adept at balancing life as a mother with studying at university and holding down a job as a sports coach. Their advice to women is that you do not need to sacrifice your career and neglect your own ambitions if you are thinking about starting a family.

Parenting is darned hard work, as every new mother or father will unashamedly tell you. You can prepare yourself all you want, the culture shock that follows the birth of your first child will still knock you off
your feet.

Remember the Tango advert, when the orange man, with bald head and bulging waistline, delivered a slap around the chops to the man in the street after he had taken his first sip of fizzy drink. ‘You know when you’ve been Tango’d’ went the popular slogan.

Well, that’s the feeling I experienced when my first child came into this world – and I’m sure I’m not alone.

Relationships can be hard work too. Having a job is hard work. Coaching certainly isn’t easy, and studying for a degree or PhD is no walk in the park. Now, merge them together. It is impossible for one person to juggle this many principal elements in their life, right?

Mums Dannielle Starkie and Krissi Paterson are used to spending their days spinning a lot of plates.

Dealing with a few hiccups comes with the territory – and I’m not talking about burping your baby after feeding!

But there is a recipe for making life post-pregnancy more manageable, and it means coaching does not have to be taken off the menu.

A hectic mix

Former British junior ice skating champion Dannielle is currently pregnant with her second child.

She and design engineer husband Adrian also have a two-year-old daughter, Brooke.

Dannielle was recently awarded a first-class honours degree in sports science with coaching and works as an ice skating coach at Blackburn Arena.

When I first approached her to see if she wanted to feature in this article, she admitted: ‘It’s been a crazy busy year with the degree and work and home life.’

Krissi is a mum of three children, aged 12, 6 and 4.

Having studied a sports science degree at Liverpool John Moores University, she set up a coaching company in the United States with her now husband, and coached football full-time for six years before moving back to the UK due to a family illness.

On her return, she played for Sunderland Women in the National League.

Krissi has fulfilled various coaching roles, including Head Coach of the Women’s Football Academy at Gateshead College, coach at Sunderland Girls’ Centre of Excellence and coach for the English Universities women’s football team.

She has also worked as a PE teacher and lecturer, balancing full-time work and coaching with being a mum of three.

In 2014, she enrolled on an MSc in sports coaching at Leeds Beckett University (LBU), combining the year-long course with a full-time job mentoring coaches completing apprenticeships, part-time lecturing at LBU and two coaching roles. ‘It was an extremely busy year!’ she explains – although I’m guessing you worked that out for yourselves.

She currently lectures on a range of modules on the sports coaching programme at LBU, where she is also studying for a PhD in the same subject, and, until recently, was working as Head Coach of the RIASA Women’s Football Academy (Richmond International Academic and Soccer Academy).
Introductions out of the way, Dannielle tells me that you don’t have to be Superwoman to be a mother, coach and student, but that it helps if you love your job.

And she says that being a former athlete herself has stood her in good stead for balancing multiple projects.

‘To be honest, if you’ve been an athlete and have been committed to a sport, you will be used to training routines, and you get used to all the juggling.

‘When I was skating, I was also in education and I had a Saturday job too so that helped me learn to prioritise. You become a little bit more efficient with the time you’ve got.’

Talking of time, when does she get a minute to catch her breath? She is self-employed, coaches five times a week, ‘with the big bulk at weekends’ – which involves travelling to club competitions and occasional national competitions – is pregnant, has a two year old, and has, until recently, been in the pressurised final year of a degree course.

‘It was quite hard, putting the work in as a coach while also doing a degree, especially with the little one,’ she admits. ‘I would try and take two hours for myself at night-time when Brooke was in bed.

‘The days I was in university, she was in nursery so I would crack on with some work if any lectures were cancelled and make sure I made full use of every hour.

‘Now I’ve finished university, Brooke is in nursery three days a week while I work, and if I have to go in at other times, my mother-in-law helps when she can.

‘You’ve got to rely on other people sometimes to make it work.’

There are some key observations buried in those paragraphs, namely the importance of organisation, a good support network and making time to decompress.

And, of course, teamwork is crucial. A helpful hubby or partner can make all the difference.

‘I’ve got a very good husband. He works full-time, Monday to Friday. So at weekends, when I’m working, which will be from 6am to 2pm, he will have Brooke. He takes her out all over the place, and they have a really good relationship. That’s great as it means I don’t have to worry when I’m at work.

‘But then, on the odd time I have had to take her into work with me, the parents at the rink also help out.’

‘Dead on my feet’

If you are blessed with a strong family unit, having a baby should not have to come at the expense of your career. There are ways and means of manoeuvring around the logistical problems and time pressures that are part and parcel of motherhood.

For Dannielle, it never boiled down to a straight choice between one or the other.

She worked until she was 39 weeks, gave birth two weeks late, and was back at work when Brooke was eight weeks old. She admits that if she’d taken maternity leave any earlier, she would have been ‘bored stiff’.

‘You are tired, of course, but we were very lucky, she was a very good baby so she slept from quite young. But there are times when they have a regression or when their teeth are coming through so it’s not
all plain sailing.

‘I remember one day, she woke up at 2.30 in the morning and would not go back to sleep. I’d gone to bed at 11pm and was meant to be up for 5am for work. So my day effectively started at 2.30am and finished at 2pm. When I got back home, I was dead on my feet.’

That horrendous ordeal might live long in Dannielle’s memory, but the positives far outweigh the negatives.

‘Those odd days apart, I enjoyed going back to work and to see how my colleagues were doing. It gave me the chance to use my brain again, to speak to people and just feel more human.

‘I think it’s easy to lose your identity if you have a child. You suddenly get all these responsibilities thrust upon you, and it’s very easy to forget who you are.’

Each to their own

Sports coaches are used to dispensing advice to their athletes: on looking for tactical solutions to problems; on the need to work hard and the advantages of persistence; guidance over the need to develop inner strength and a positive mindset to help manage emotional responses and control pressure situations.

Advice that is also pertinent to new mothers.

In which case, Dannielle has been practising what she preaches for two years now.

To quote another favourite coaching expression: It is important to get to know every athlete as an individual. That aphorism, too, can be related to life outside of sport.

And if you follow that guiding principle, then it follows that not every female coach who has a baby should feel compelled to return to work within months of giving birth.

Every new mother will have their own ideas on work-life balance, and there are myriad factors to consider that could sway them one way or the other.

Dannielle explains: ‘One of my friends has got two little girls and hasn’t gone back into coaching, but that’s for financial reasons. A lot of the rinks have been taken over recently and are hiking their rents up. And if you’ve got to put your children into nursery as well, sometimes, it just doesn’t make financial sense to go back to work if you are a paid coach or self-employed coach.

‘Maybe if I was coaching an elite athlete, as a female, I think that would be a lot more difficult. There would be a lot more expectation on you and not the same flexibility of shift patterns that I enjoy.’

Pitching in to help

Krissi agrees with Dannielle that it is possible to continue coaching when you have children, but that having supportive people around you is vital.

One of her biggest challenges when she went back into full-time coaching was the evenings, when Krissi and her husband would pass each other like ships in the night.

With university training sessions from 8–10pm, her husband would take their eldest two children to judo while Krissi settled the youngest (then aged two) in to bed.

As soon as they returned home at 7.30, Krissi would dash straight out to coach.

‘Without that support, I couldn’t have coached that team. Being organised and working together is vital,’
she says.

On more than a few occasions at work, Krissi has spent her lunchtimes in her car snoozing, ‘trying to catch up on some sleep’.

But whenever help was needed, it was readily available.

‘While coaching university matches last year, my son and eldest daughter would be close by, collecting worms, doing cartwheels, copying the linesman running up and down, with many willing team members and supporters keeping an eye on them,’ she says.

‘It was nice to know you had ready-made babysitters willing to help out.’

**On balance, it’s worth it**

Krissi is pleased to report that, as the children have got older, the challenges have become easier. But that’s not to say that some obstacles don’t remain – and for which there is no satisfactory solution.

The bane of every parent who coaches is the fact that being employed in the sports industry invariably involves working evenings and weekends.

So, how do you take your own children to their clubs – often in different places at the same time – and enjoy the role of avid spectator when you are likely to be coaching yourself?

Krissi has found herself in a no-win situation.

‘I don’t want to miss out on watching my kids taking part in their sports. So, as a result, I’ve had to consider different types of coaching – moving from coaching senior players to helping coach one of my children’s teams, or at least another team in the club that trains at the same time.’

She admits that, at times, she has questioned whether she is even being selfish, wanting to keep coaching, due to the demands it places on her husband and children that wouldn’t otherwise be there.

But she has come to the conclusion that it is worth it.

‘I feel I get a whole lot from it in return. Being a mum is great, but sometimes, you feel that you start to lose your own identity,’ she says, echoing the thoughts of Dannielle. ‘Being a coach has enabled me to have another identity other than “Saša, Karter and Kjra’s mum”, and it connects me with a wider group of people.

‘Coaching helps me be a better parent, and being a parent helps me look at coaching through a different lens and be a better coach.’

**Are you a mother and a coach? What is your story? Have you any ‘juggling’ tips to share?**

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