

# Toni Minichiello delivers candid insight and a ton of fun

Published 01/05/19 by [Blake Richardson](#)

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**As the respected coach to former Olympic gold medal-winning heptathlete Jessica Ennis-Hill, Toni Minichiello forged a reputation as one of the best in the business.**

Ennis-Hill's incredible career achievements rightly earn her glowing tributes. But just as Ennis-Hill dominated the world of athletics for the best part of a decade, so Minichiello, as the other half of that dynamic double act, strode the coaching world like a colossus.

And he continues to make strides to this day.

Imposing in frame and manner, he openly describes himself as a 'bear of a man' who doesn't suffer fools. To many in the industry his words come as a welcome breath of fresh air – but they can elicit a sharp intake of breath too in some quarters. Those occupying British sport's corridors of power have found themselves on the wrong end of a scolding statement on more than one occasion.

But sport is all about opinions, and it speaks volumes that, since Great Britain's track-and-field legend hung up her spikes, Minichiello's power and influence have continued to grow.

That is testimony to his unswerving passion for athletics and coaching – which he has been involved in since he was 18 – and to the equally unflinching level of support and loyalty he shows those athletes under his wing.

He nurtured Ennis-Hill throughout the entirety of her 17-year athletic journey, from 13-year-old novice to 30-year-old multiple World champion.

It was no surprise when he was voted by his peers to take on the role of Senior Coaches Representative on the UK Athletics Members' Council. And his knowledge, charisma and talent (sorry, swap that word for 'ability' quickly – you'll soon discover why) as a motivational speaker means he remains one of the most recognisable names and faces in coaching.

Hence there was a palpable buzz in the room when Minichiello took to the stage for the evening keynote at The Open University's fourth Annual Sport and Fitness Conference.

Here is a whistle-stop review of the best bits from that presentation – My Child: The Athlete, From Beginner to Winner – and ensuing panel Question & Answer.

From his opening gambit, 'My reputation goes before me. I've worked really hard to be a grumpy so and so,' you just knew it was going to be entertaining.

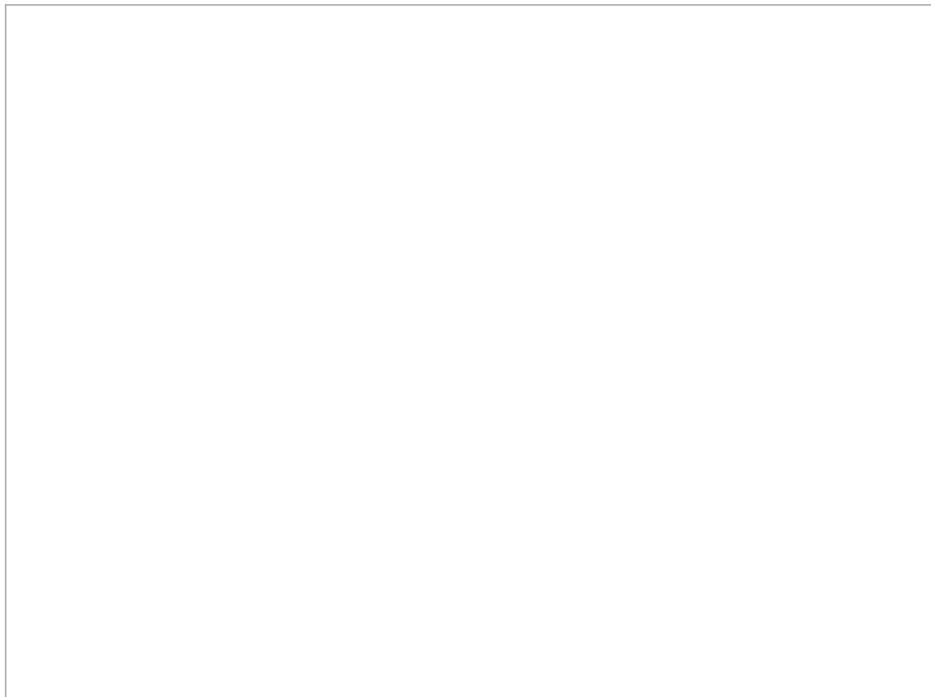
Never backward in coming forward, there was the odd step into delicate territory, where he questioned the coach education process, methods of increasing participation levels and the role of governing bodies, with UK Coaching, Sport England and UK Sport all getting namechecked.

But, hey, it's what you would expect of someone who wears his heart on his sleeve.

### **Early philosophy: building resilience and preventing injury**

'I started coaching Jess when she was 13 years of age and it was all really about planning for talent, planning for development. And part of that is about making your athlete resilient. And I mean physically resilient. Injury free. Can I lay three to four years on top of each other without any significant injury to hold her back?

'The best piece of advice I've ever had from any coach was "hold her back. She's gifted, she's got great speed, but she's quite thin, quite small and narrow wasted, so just don't rush. Take your time and her abilities will come through naturally". And they did.'



### **Setbacks and balancing ambition with caution**

Elite level sport is nothing if not complicated. Best laid plans and all that.

So when, in May 2008, Ennis-Hill broke her foot in three places, it put the brakes on her meteoric rise and shattered her hopes of winning an Olympic gold medal aged just 22.

Juggling massive ability and soaring ambition with the utmost caution is a precarious balancing act for

elite coaches. You are forever walking that tightrope.

‘Jess graduated from university in 2007 and went full-time. At the same time, I had started working full-time as a coach. Added to that, world number one Carolina Klüft had decided to retire and not go to the 2008 Olympics [in Beijing]. And Jess had finished fourth in the Worlds in 2007.

‘So it went from a very steady progressive programme to, “we’d better get on it, it’s Olympic year”.

‘Olympic disease gripped us by the throat and the volume of training went up and that created a stress reaction and three stress fractures in her foot.

‘But as a coach, dealing with setbacks is part and parcel of it. You change the way you train, you change the way you move forwards and you step on from there...

### **Family tree: The wider team working alongside the central coach-athlete relationship**

... and a critical part of that is the environment created around her. [You need] a strong team to help you deal with the setbacks. The left hand washes the right. We’re in this together. Everyone feeds into the outcome.’

The screen shows a slide displaying the composition of a typical Team GB athlete’s dedicated support team: sport scientist, biomechanic, nutritionist, doctor, soft tissue expert, physiologist, strength and conditioning expert, physiotherapist, sports psychologist. And also the wider (still) team: family, agents, sponsors, the media.

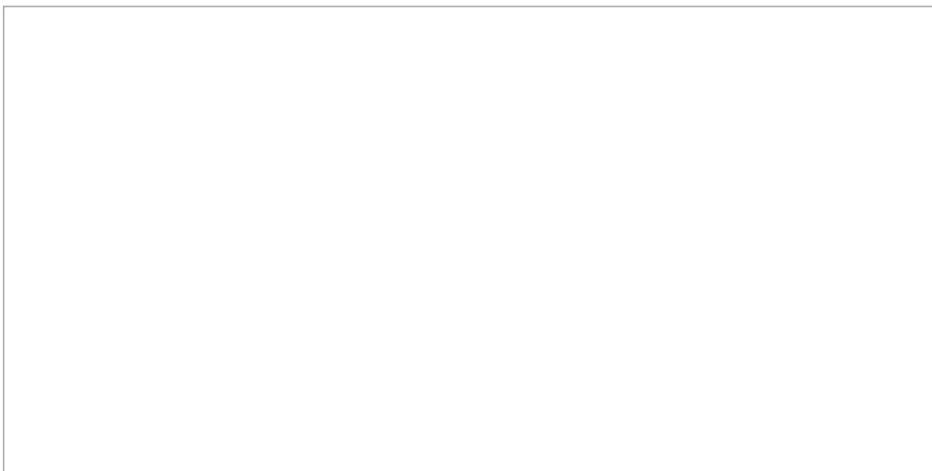
‘We’re all cogs within the machine. Sometimes you’re going to be a big cog, and sometimes you’re going to be a small cog. So if she’s injured, the physio will be a big cog, the nutritionist and psychologist might be a medium sized cog, and the one turns the other.

‘It is important you can find a group of people around you who can help you. People who can bring something extra to the table.

‘But as critical as that is, it’s about finding the **right** people. Because communication and relationships must be just as strong here [as within the central coach-athlete relationship].

‘It was all a family to me [he revealed he is still close to many of them to this day].’

On immediate family, Minichiello added: ‘Ignore the family at your peril. They are the initial UK Sport, before UK Sport. They are the funder, they buy the kit, they drive the taxi, they pay for stuff, they are the people who are massively invested. Include them in the team.’



## **On encouraging competition and fostering, not suppressing, a winning mentality\***

*\*Note: this comes with conditions. See final line of quote.*

‘The landscape is driven by the athlete, regardless of what academia says about it not being competitive [at an early age]. I think kids keep score because they are naturally competitive. And you have to respond to that [as a coach]. You know the Vince Lombardi statement, that “if winning isn’t everything, why do they keep score?”’.

He pondered whether competitive instinct is in our DNA, and an important part of human identity. If you weren’t competitive in prehistoric times, then the long and the short of it is, you wouldn’t get fed!

Having noticed a competitive streak in his own young daughter, he added: ‘I don’t want to blunt it, because life is competitive – you may get a job, you may not get a job; there’ll be ups, and there’ll be a lot more downs. So my child, the athlete, I am going to keep her trying to be that little bit more competitive. But I will, as a parent – I promise, promise, promise – keep asking her, “Was that fun? Are you still smiling? Are you still enjoying it?”’

## **Why he baulks at the word ‘talent’ and why proficiency comes with practice**

‘For me talent is God-given. You are gifted, as if Harry Potter came along and waved a magic wand. My view is it limits people because they think, “if I’m talented then life is a conveyor-belt and it’s a God-given right for me”, and the work ethic goes.

‘In Daniel Coyle’s book *The Talent Code*, he talks about a maths class and how they were divided in half and told, “you lot are talented at maths, and you lot are good at maths and if you work at it you’ll get better”. And then he gave them the opportunity to take a test. And the people who are told they are talented picked the easier test, and the other half picked the harder test. What Daniel takes from that is that, if I am identified as talented and I fail, I feel that I am no longer talented.

‘We talk incessantly about talent programmes, talent pathways, yada yada yada, but they are more ability pathways. The number of people who get funding and think it’s a conveyor-belt! Funding is an enhancement opportunity. You’ve still got to keep working [hard] to work at a higher level. Nothing comes for free.’

## **And finally... his immediate response to being asked how the knowledge from the academic community had influenced his coaching – delivered with a cheeky smile**

‘Here’s a lesson to academics: please communicate to coaches as if they are eight-year-olds. I do not understand long words.’

**Do you agree with Toni? Please leave a comment below.**

**Further reading:**

UK Coaching interviewed Toni Minichiello as part of its Coaching Bootroom series. Here are a few of the highlights. You can [listen to the full interview here](#).

### **On person-centred coaching**

‘It’s recognising in the individual what makes them tick, what lights their blue touch paper, what makes them want to stay involved.

‘And over time it’s about trying to improve your relationship with them to get the improvement. Because I think if you can get an improved relationship you can get an improved performance.’

### **On how learning from coaches in other sports will make you a better coach**

‘My best development experience? Understanding that your answers to your sport don’t lie in your sport alone. Looking at different sports, learning from different sources and different coaches. For example, learning from leadership and teamworking from the world of business, surgeons and the medical practice, music and orchestras, things like that. You can find the answers in lots of different places.’

### **One final observation on the word that shall not be spoken**

‘The word talent is so restrictive. So black and white. You are talented, you are not talented. I would ban the word talent completely and talk about your ability level, and trying to improve your ability level on some sort of scale – and taking the time to develop people as human beings. Attached to their ability is their personality, their confidence, things like that. Those are the things you need to improve. If you improve that, then you will see people take ownership of themselves and I think the performance will follow.’

**Toni will be a keynote speaker at this year's [UK Coaching Conference 2019](#) taking place in Loughborough from 4-6 July. Click on the link to find out all about the conference programme and how to book tickets.**

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