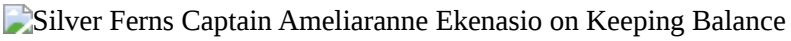
Silver Ferns Captain Ameliaranne Ekenasio on Keeping Balance

Theme:
Indigeneity



Rebecca Annan
Netball New Zealand

Silver Fern netball captain Ameliaranne Ekenasio reckons she wouldn't be playing netball right now if she had specialized early.

- Variety is the key to having fun and enjoying the sport
- Care and connect
- Be authentic

Growing up in Bundaberg on Australia's Queensland coast the specialist shooter knew nothing about netball until she became a teenager.

"My friends suggested we play netball one day, I didn't even know what it was but I went along with it because everyone else played it at lunchtime and I had nothing else to do."

A teacher encouraged her to trial for the school team, seeing her height as an advantage.

"But I only played because my friends did, it was just another sport to me, I wasn't hugely talented or athletic, I just played for the love of it, and I never thought about it becoming more than that, not for a very, very long time."

Today the tall, agile and graceful athlete is a household name – she has played for the Central Pulse in the ANZ Premiership since 2015, the Silver Ferns since 2014, was instrumental in her Pulse side winning the ANZ Premiership in 2019 and a key cog in the Silver Ferns 2019 World Cup-winning triumph.

Yet Ameliaranne says her netball career wouldn't have even begun had she not been a late starter.

"People often say I would have been in a better position earlier had I trained in a netball-specific sense earlier, but I don't know if I still would be playing if I'd done that.

"Being able to play a whole heap of different sports at a younger age helped me to develop so many different skills, rather than specialising in one sport, and it was better for me not only physical, but mentally, to keep my life in balance."

Variety and Fun is Key

As a Balance is Better ambassador and a seasoned athlete, Ameliaranne's passion now is to encourage youth to play multiple sports, just as she did.

Throughout her childhood she played every sport on offer, from t-ball to athletics, touch, jump rope for heart and tennis – she was in the school orchestra which competed state-wide.

"My family wasn't very sporty, not in a competitive way, but more in a real enjoyable kind of way – we would always go and play tennis for hours at the beach with our entire family, which is one of my fondest memories actually."

As a result Ameliaranne never felt any pressure – until the netball fraternity suggested she move away from home and go to boarding school in Brisbane to pursue a netball career.

"We lived in a small town with no indoor courts, so I was told if I didn't move I wouldn't make it – but I was a real homebody and I didn't want to leave my family."

That pressure saw Ameliaranne give up netball completely until she finished college and moved to Brisbane for work.

Again the pressure got too much and her enjoyment of the game waned to the extent she walked away from the court.

"Coming from the country I was a bit green, I was told I didn't have enough training, I hadn't been through the gym, I didn't really feel like I belonged, I had a few bad experiences with some coaches and the system, and it wasn't enjoyable at all."

A coach from the under-19 Queensland team convinced her to return to the game.

“I was really happy with my life at the time, if they hadn’t reached in I could have potentially not got back into netball, but I knew the coach, I knew the girls and I gave it a shot.

After playing and winning a national title without the pressure of selections she was offered her first professional netball contract with the Queensland Fireboards.

“It was a big jump for me, not having a huge training background I was very under-conditioned but I was lucky to have a good group of leaders within the team that I really loved who took me under their wing.”

Four years later and with limited court time at the Firebirds Ameliaranne was about to give it all away again when a fellow netballer in New Zealand helped her to secure a Pulse contract.

“There were a whole lot of things I wanted to do that netball prevented me from doing and I thought it was time to do something else.”

However, the Pulse contract and move to Wellington has paid dividends – not only has she risen to the top of her netball career, she’s also since met and married her now husband Damien, has three-old son Ocean and two step-kids, aged 12 and 14.

Care and Connect

Now, as a leader within the Pulse and Silver Ferns environments, a mum and an ambassador for youth sport, Ameliaranne calls on her experiences to get the best out of others.

“I am a really big people person, I prefer to be selfless than selfish, and because we play a team sport, I see so much value in looking after each team member genuinely rather than what you see on the surface level.”

Ameliaranne has had her own mental health challenges along the way, especially after her Mum died five years ago.

“It was one of the hardest things I’ve been through, I had people checking in on me to see how I was really going and I know the value of that – what’s going on off the court is potentially not helping on the court, so when you’re genuinely being thrown a lifeline I know first-hand how much it really helps.

“Genuine human connection and caring about the whole person first is so much more important than performance – I’m a huge advocate for that.”

It’s something adults supporting youth in sport must work on.

“Sport is an outlet for so many youth, why would we not want to support them as a whole person so they can genuinely get that feel-good factor out of any sport they play?

“We are creating more support, but there’s so much more that can be done, we only look at mental health when somebody’s at the edge of the cliff, but how do we stop people getting to that point?

“As adults we need to check in and have a better understanding of the whole person, not just the person at training or on court because there is always more going on than what you see.”

Ameliaranne’s own journey has taught her to be grateful when things are tracking along nicely and enjoy being in the moment.

She lives by the mantra “if it’s meant to be it will be”, a reminder to trust the process and that everything happens for a reason but not without hard work or hiccups along the way.

“The biggest learnings I’ve ever had was when things haven’t gone well, there have been lots of those times and I’m grateful for them – it has 100 percent made me the person I am today.”

Be Authentic

Authenticity is also key.

“What has got me to where I am is just being who I am and this has only been in the last year or so where I have really had enough courage to show up as me and not be filtered or watered down in an attempt to please people.

“Now I constantly remind myself of not straying away from being authentically me and that gives me a whole lot of confidence.

“As soon as I start saying ‘I should be doing this or that’, I go back to my mantra, and take time out to check in with myself.”

It’s where sport/life balance comes into play.

“Movement that isn’t competitive or training is huge for me and good for my mental health – I love yoga, the beach and walks in nature with my family.

“What I do off the court adds so much more value on the court.”

Whatever the activity or sport, Ameliaranne’s advice to young people is to not be afraid to “throw yourself into things, especially things that make you nervous because you never know how enjoyable it might be”.

“If you love it put 110 percent effort in no matter what, and make sure you always enjoy what you do, that will show you the way.”

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