

Angela Winstanley-Smith

If someone tells Angela Winstanley-Smith that she can't do something, she takes it as a challenge.

And after being two goals short of the Paris Olympics, her drive is bigger than ever to take her team to an Olympic Games.

The head coach of the New Zealand women's water polo team since 2017, Winstanley-Smith used to be the only female head coach of the sport in the world, but that wasn't necessarily her plan.

A former player herself, Winstanley-Smith grew up in the UK, and represented Great Britain at the 2012 Olympics.

She always had a love for training, keeping a diary for 12 years with every detail of her training as a swimmer. So stepping into coaching felt like a natural fit when her playing days for her country came to an end.



"I went to Europe to play professional water polo from the age of 18, 19, and any club that I was at, I just picked up swim teaching or coaching water polo and I just really enjoyed coaching and really loved the game," she explains.

"It's always been an interest for me, with how my brain works when I'm interested in something, I'm really interested, so I think it kind of just grasped me.

"My analytical approach to my own training, wanting to understand why and constantly questioning and evolving in that space probably got me interested in then stepping onto the poolside out of the water."

When Winstanley-Smith stopped playing, she found it really difficult to adjust to life outside of water polo.

"It's really challenging when you get out of athlete life, your whole identity and purpose is just so nailed to what you do," she says.

"I'd been a professional for 10 years and then coaching for so long, I didn't know what I was going to do."

It's one of the reasons why she's so passionate about having a holistic approach towards the players she coaches.

"Having that foundation and that eye on life after sport is really important, so any opportunity I can help create for a young athlete where they can progress in their skills, but also evolve as a human for their future is hugely important," Winstanley-Smith says.

"I want my players when they're 40 and they're chatting about 'Oh I loved Angie as a coach because she was a great coach but also I felt like she really cared about us', that's important to me too.

"I think we have responsibility and duty of care as leaders of national programmes to do that with our people."

She first came to New Zealand to work at Diocean School for Girls in Auckland, working mainly as a water polo and swim coach. She picked up coaching for the Marist club too, and saw success there too, as well as with Dio, winning every premier tournament she coached for the school.

She started coaching the NZ under 18 team, and stepped into coaching the women's team on an interim basis in 2017, but proved herself with a consistently improving team, who were just two goals away from qualifying for the Paris Olympics - an achievement Winstanley-Smith was told would never happen.

"When I started this journey, people said to me 'You'll never get funding' and we did. And they were like 'You'll never get to the Olympics', and we nearly did, on a pipe dream," she says.

"When someone says to me 'You'll never do it', I'm like we will, that's like my philosophy in life - when someone tells me I can't do it, the more I'm like 'We bloody will'."

It's still a challenge to balance water polo and work, Winstanley-Smith being promoted to director of sport during her time at Dio, matching her passion for young girls doing sport at all levels.

"I can't begin to say how much Dio support me as a human being and in my coaching, the time away, working remotely, letting the women use the facilities.

"It makes my days pretty long, sometimes I'm here at 5.30 and I'm not out of here till 8 with the coaching either side of a busy work day. But we're not a fully funded professional programme, so that's kind of what it would take to do the change that we did."

At the 2024 world champs in Doha, New Zealand lost to Canada 14-12 in the playoffs, meaning they just missed out on a spot in the quarterfinals, which would have qualified them for the Paris Olympics.

"It was quite hard coming home from Doha in February being so bloody close, can't believe how close we were, but that pride in the sense that I think we did everything we could," Winstanley-Smith says, NZ finishing 9th.

"For us to even be in the conversation to qualify for Paris, with a largely self-funded programme was a pretty epic journey since 2022. So I feel like this is actually the beginning of the journey for the women."

It's convinced her even more that the Kiwi women belong at the Olympics, with the 2028 LA Games being a goal, and the 2032 Brisbane Games even looming as a medal opportunity with how quickly the team is improving.

"I feel like everything we could have done, we did, we threw everything we had on what we had, and we came out the other end thinking LA has to be a goal," she says.

"We're kind of knocking on the door, like hey we're here for LA. Brisbane for me is not a participation opportunity, it's a medal opportunity."

Money is still an issue for the team, Winstanley-Smith estimating the team spent around \$15,000 each last year to play, and her still working full-time to pay her bills.

Funding from High Performance Sport was a game changer.

"Those things we've unlocked through a small amount of funding have been hugely beneficial," she says.



"Every resource we've got, we've maximised as much as we can."

At the end of the day, it's all about Winstanley-Smith's love of the sport and coaching. No matter how bad her day is, she finds joy at the pool, still coaching the Year 7 students at Dio.

"Especially as you move into high performance, you can lose sight of why you started and why you do this," she says.

"Holding onto that why and keeping that more in your heart than anywhere as you journey through those real tough times, the ups and downs of high performance, like why do you do this.

"Ultimately it goes back to your philosophy of coaching, and mine is simple, like I just love to create opportunities for youngsters and to be able to do something they love, and learn and grow."

The athlete in her still loves the adrenaline of match day, and the thrill of close games.

"I think if I didn't have that in my life, I'd probably have to start reading books or something," she laughs.