

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2290

Kimble, Ronda

(1946 -)

Born 19460101, Randwick New South Wales Australia

Occupation Netball Coach, Netball Player, Sports administrator, Umpire

Summary

Ronda Kimble was a netball player who advanced through the ranks to become an All Australian netball umpire. She has been involved in the game of netball for nearly forty years, as a player, coach, umpire, administrator and archivist.

Details

One Saturday morning in 1996, Ronda Kimble woke up and said to her husband, 'I think I am cured'. Twelve months earlier, she had retired from netball umpiring in an official capacity, an act that literally involved changing the habits of a life time. For close to forty years, Ronda's Saturdays had been given over to the game she had played, coached and umpired (often all on the same day) from the time she was twelve years old. Netball fixtures even determined when she got married; her wedding day was the first free Saturday after the 1967 season had finished. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that her 'convalescence' after retirement was lengthy and sometimes painful. Ronda had dedicated much of her life to netball, although she would argue that what she gave was nothing compared to what she had received.

Apart from the sheer enjoyment of running around on a court, either wearing a bib or with a whistle in her mouth, Ronda loved Netball because, through it, she established friendships, networks and skills that have given her a lifetime of fulfillment. Her story reminds us of the important role that women played in the development of communities through sport, as well as the development of community sport. It is also a story of the important role that community sport can play in the development of women as individuals and leaders.

Ronda Sewell was born in Randwick in 1946 to working class parents, neither of whom was particularly interested in sport. She had one younger brother who was similarly disinterested. She was, however, part of the 'Olympic' generation of children who grew up with female athletes as role models. Always an active child who loved running around in the street and the playground, the 1956 Olympic Games captured her imagination. She loved listening to the radio broadcasts and kept a scrapbook to record the events. She ran her own 'School Olympics', organising her classmates into running races in the playground at lunchtime. When house sports were held, Ronda, a house captain, issued all the members of her house with coloured streamers to wave as they cheered their teammates on. Ronda started her voluntary career in sports administration at an early age!

By the time she started high school, Ronda was living in Sydney's Sutherland Shire in a suburb called Miranda. As a first year student at Port Hacking High School, she had to pick a sport that she would play for her house. A friend told her to pick netball (then called basketball) because not many people played it. The benefit of this was that, even though she was new to the school, she would probably get a better chance of playing regularly than if she put down one of the more popular sports as her first choice. She had never played it before, had no idea what the rules were, but it didn't matter. The game agreed with her and she was hooked. Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance to play interschool netball until her last year at high school, not because she wasn't good enough, but because the administrative structures were not in place to support schoolgirl netball until then. This was a common problem for girls growing up in developing suburbs in the 1950s and 60s, and who attended state high schools in these areas.

She was, however, able to play competitive netball outside school and this she did for nearly ten years with her local club, the Miranda Magpies. The Magpies were a large sporting club with a focus on men's soccer, but at roughly the same time that Ronda was becoming interested in the game, they established a netball club. Ronda signed up as soon as she had the chance; it was close to home so she didn't need to rely on her parents for transport and it was cheap (important, because the cost of membership came out of her pocket money.) Furthermore, her involvement in Saturday sport meant that she no longer had to help with the weekly shopping, a much loathed chore indeed! For the next decade, Ronda played, coached

(she started this when she was fourteen) and umpired (at around thirteen) for the Miranda Magpies Basketball Club. She served on the executive of the Sutherland Shire Netball Association, to which the Magpies belonged, and became umpires convener.

All the while, she developed her coaching skills to the point where she was successfully coaching a representative team for Sutherland. Despite the fact that she had never been coached herself and that there were no official coaching manuals for her to refer to, Ronda was a very successful in the job. On reflection, she thinks this may be because she always had the skills to be a very good teacher; she just never had access to the tertiary education that would have made her qualified to be one in the classroom. Coaching was teaching and for her to be successful she needed to apply the same skills – knowledge of and enthusiasm for the ‘subject’, good planning, excellent communication and, very importantly, a sense of fun. Perhaps these same qualities also combined to make Ronda a good umpire. Very early in her career, after spending the whole day on the same court, umpiring at a carnival in which a young team she coached was participating, another umpire asked her what grade ‘badge’ she had, meaning, what level of qualification. That day marked the beginning of her quest for an All Australian Umpiring Badge, an honour she eventually received in 1991.

Ronda also became a highly competent administrator, establishing relationships and networks with people who mentored her, teaching her, essentially how to run a sporting club. Fixturing, enlisting volunteers, fund-raising, communication with members, these were all very time consuming tasks in the era before the internet, email and mobile phones. While serving on the executive of the Sutherland Shire Association, she watched and observed how the senior operators did things. She was invited to represent the association at state seminars and meetings – these occasions also gave her more opportunity to listen, learn and develop administrative skills. When she got married in 1967, people thought she would pull back on her involvement in the sport; this was not the case. If anything, Ronda’s career as a netball all-rounder was just starting to take off. Her husband recognised how important netball was to Ronda (he would have had to be blind not to!) and was not the type to suggest she should cut back. Besides, he had sporting interests of his own. On Saturdays, the Kimbles went their separate ways, meeting up for dinner in the evening.

Ronda endured (very unhappily) an enforced six month break from netball in 1969 when she and her husband moved to Greystanes, a new housing development in Sydney’s western suburbs. There was no established netball competition there, so she and the other new families had to make their own. Responding to an advertisement from the local school she found in her letterbox, she and three other people met to form a committee with the aim of establishing a team. Within six months, they fielded a senior team. As the area developed and more families moved in, the number of teams for juniors and seniors grew accordingly. Once again, Ronda was involved in a club and representative association (Parramatta/Auburn) at all levels, one with which she remained involved until her retirement in 1995. From the roneoed newsletters produced on the ‘gestetener’ at home every week, to the chook raffles on training nights, the fundraising progressive dinners (pity the soul who volunteered to do dessert because they were always the last to get to sleep), the reams of paper used to complete the fixtures, the phone calls to team managers...Ronda was everywhere in that club, enjoying every minute of it (well maybe almost every minute) and making sure that the netballers of the Greystanes area never had to endure the agony of a six month lay off, like she did. Little surprise she was made a life member of the club (as she was of her first club, the Miranda Magpies).

Little surprise, as well, that the administrative skills she developed as a volunteer eventually qualified her for paid employment in sports administration. In 1981, Ronda saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a position as an administrator at the New South Wales Gymnastics Association. The position called for someone who could organise competitions, teams, newsletters; in short, someone who could do all the things she had been doing in a voluntary capacity for years. Her application was successful, and she remained in the position for six years. From there she moved to a position as executive officer for the New South Wales Netball Association and then, finally to her current (2007) position at Netball Australia. She has enjoyed many different office management positions within the organisation, including membership of the finance committee during the 1991 world championship series in Sydney. She is now the official archivist and has developed a record-keeping system that should be the envy of any sporting organisation comparable in size and complexity to that of Netball Australia.

In fifty years of involvement with the sport in some capacity, Ronda has seen continuity alongside significant change. At a personal level, the fact that netball was ‘always there’ was a reassurance to her, as it was to other women, when everything else seemed to be changing. When she was feeling isolated and all at sea after having a baby, morning netball competitions provided her with a welcome respite. Ronda says the courts in the 1960s and 70s were surrounded by babies in bassinets as women in the suburbs used community sport to connect and keep themselves sane. When her mother died, Ronda found the regular connection with friends through netball an enormous comfort. If she felt stressed or angry, netball was always good therapy; an hour on the court ‘ran it out’ of her. The constancy of the netball season provided stability when other things seemed out of control.

There were personal changes, too. Netball provided an important outlet for self expression and growth, in an era when sexual politics at the domestic level were being redefined to acknowledge that women had rights as individuals, not only as wives and mothers. As Ronda put it, quite simply, ‘playing netball, well it was something you could do for yourself.’ She was always meeting new people and learning new skills through her involvement in the sport and, as mentioned, she used these opportunities to develop her own professional skills at the same time as she worked hard to provide a service to the local community. Netball gave her the opportunity for personal growth. Some women, however, had to fight tooth and nail for this opportunity. Their husbands resented the time they took away from home ‘to do something for themselves.’ According to Ronda, there was one woman who always turned up late to evening games because her husband would insist upon the

house being spotless before she left it. Each week, just when she thought she had everything covered, he would invent some new task that needed to be completed before she could leave the house. The simple act of playing a weekly game of netball represented a challenge to his domestic authority.

Perhaps the sexual politics associated with playing sport explain why some other organisational changes have been difficult. Ronda sat through many an executive and general meeting at a local and state level in the 1980s and 90s where arguments about the involvement of men in the administration of netball were heated and divisive. In an era where access to skills, funds and volunteers were scarce but crucial to the survival of clubs at a local level, there were many women, Ronda included, who believed that if men of goodwill wanted to be involved, as players, coaches, umpires and administrators, then the structures should be put in place to permit this. As she put it bluntly, 'We needed men because we started having trouble getting volunteers'. As more and more women worked full time, and with the advent of Saturday trading plus the fact that more people were playing the sport, the pool of volunteers, the people who made the competitions function, was becoming shallower. Furthermore, as Ronda pointed out, men participated in business networks that women still didn't move in. 'We could get the bread and sauce for the sausage sizzle, they could get the building supplies and electrical contractors to install the court lights'.

Many women whose experience was, quite reasonably, coloured by old struggles with men over the resourcing of women's sport, were defensive and suspicious about the motives of men who wanted to be involved. Would they try to 'take over'? Do they believe we are so incompetent that we can't do it on our own? Ronda's view was that, at a community level, cooperation between men and women was necessary to see the sport develop and grow. Recently, this cooperation at a grassroots level has been formalised at a corporate level, with Netball Australia and the Australian Football League in 2006 agreeing that by strengthening the links between the two organisations, the two organisations will be strengthened. It is a sign of the times that in 2006 the leadership of Netball Australia, rather than feel threatened by linkages with men's sporting organizations, entered into partnership with them, so that both sports can benefit. In a bittersweet twist, though, this new, mature, partnership will spell the end of Ronda's formal relationship with Netball Australia. The office will be moving to Melbourne, meaning that the Sydneysider will give over to someone else the task of organising the archives. She will maintain an interest in the sport, no matter what.

Ronda Kimble had her moments in sport at an elite level (as an All Australian netball umpire) but her most remarkable achievements have been at the community level, as her life membership at two local clubs attests to. Who knows what would have happened if, all those years ago, Ronda had chosen to play hockey rather than netball? One thing is for sure; hockey was the loser in the deal!

Published resources

Site Exhibition

She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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