

CASE STUDY 7

British Rowing - Start Programme Maternity Cover

British Rowing's Maternity scheme for Women High Performance Coaches in the Start Programme

Background

Steve Gunn is the Manger of the Start Scheme for British Rowing and has been a performance director and a very successful coach, coaching Olympic and World Rowing Championships medal winning crews including a Gold Medal at the 1992 Olympics in the Men's coxed pair. Steve Gunn has managed and overseen the introduction of maternity cover for Start Programme coaches.

GB Rowing Start Programme

Start is the talent ID of British Rowing and has a network of about a dozen full time coaches, some of whom are employed by British Rowing and some by partner organisations. The programme identifies, recruits, and develops athletes for the Olympic team, who otherwise would never get there. People are recruited, from non-rowing environments, non-rowing schools and students new to university and have never rowed. Often, they have tried other sports and have failed to make it to the top of the sport. Occasionally, rowers are selected who haven't had a chance to progress at their club due to a lack of performance focus. The aim is to get athletes into the GB team who would otherwise not get there. Each Start centre is based at a club but operates as a separate group within the club. This means the coach is very self-sufficient and undertakes all the Start tasks such as testing, recruitment, day to day coaching, attending regular camps and if appropriate national team trials and camps.

How and why it was implemented

Start has always had female coaches and female coaches are encouraged to get involved. Start has a policy whereby the strongest female in the application list will be interviewed. Every person shortlisted will receive a follow up, even if they do not get the role. This has led to Start always having female coaches, creating a pathway for them to progress in coaching. Many of those employed in the Start programme are young coaches, and at some point, they will consider starting a family and having babies. The Start coaches work as a group and have good skills and knowledge

on how to develop future Olympic rowers. Not wishing to lose these talented coaches to the sport, the programme decided to cover the maternity leave and support those that wanted to return to coaching. In order to create trust around the process, managing the risk for a pregnant woman was the first goal. There are considerations around pulling in and out launches or any lifting within the boat shed. Work arounds for these tasks need to be supported. The coaches had to feel confident they were supported through every step of their pregnancy. A second goal is to ensure the coach knew that the role would still be open when they wanted to come back to work. As they coach alone then there must be cover over the absence of the coach to ensure the training group is still operating on their return. The transition back into coaching must be supported.

Often mothers returning to work feel that they are obliged by what they said at the outset, but they can re-think this and decide to return earlier or later. This is why it is so important to build trust and ensure good communication with the coach, the rowers and the coach covering the maternity leave. The coach going on leave drives the process but in the knowledge that their original decisions based on what they think they might want to do are not binding. Communication is key to finding good solution for all those involved at each stage of the process.

Achievements

Once it is known that a coach proposes to take maternity leave, then the recruitment process begins for a coach to manage the Start centre in their absence. By taking on a coach to cover the maternity leave, the coach knows there will be rowers to come back to when they return to work. Often the recruit is a young and developing coach or may be a paid coach with another group in the club or occasionally a former volunteer. It is ensured that the Start team support the coaches covering the maternity leave with extra visits and assistance. The stand in coach may just manage the rowers already in the centre but sometimes they also recruit new rowers. All of the women who have gone on maternity leave have returned to work in their centres and where possible, new mothers continue to be supported with extra coaching support from the Start programme.

Further Benefits

A further benefit of the process is that the experience gained by these young coaches covering the leave, enables them to continue to develop their coaching careers. They have taken on roles as Start coaches or gone onto other clubs and a few have risen through the system and are coaching in the national teams.

One challenge is that many of the coaches struggle to return with a second young child, mainly due to the anti-social hours and diverse needs of two young children. But all have remained working in sport or even as a rowing coach but often in a role with more regular hours and less travel and camps.

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