

COACHING FOR PERFORMANCE

BY LOUISE SAUVAGE AND JO LOUDON

Louise Sauvage dominated the sport of wheelchair track and road racing during her career winning a total of nine Gold and four Silver Paralympic medals from four Paralympic Games. She also won two Olympic Gold medals and an Olympic Bronze medal. Representing Australia, Louise broke World Records in every distance on the track from 100m to 5000m and has first place victories in some of the world's most prestigious road races including four Boston Marathon titles. Louise has received the Medal of the Order of Australia and in 2007 was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame.

In 2003 Louise completed an Applied Science (Coaching) Certificate. The following year after competing in the Athens Olympic and Paralympic Games she retired from racing and began coaching. Coaching was one way that she could stay involved in her chosen sport. *"I saw coaching as a way of giving back to a sport that had given me so much. It is such a big part of my life and I needed to stay involved in some way."* Louise said.

In 2013 Louise was named *Coach of the Year* by the NSW Institute of Sport. Utilising her extensive racing experience, she works with the only wheelchair track and road program in Australia. Working with elite athletes her life revolves around a four-year cycle between Paralympics, World Championships, Commonwealth Games and other competitions.

Training

Most days she attends a session with her athlete at the track, she may ride a hand cycle, the equivalent to a bike, which she uses as a coaching tool. Louise also rides on the road and trains with her athlete, giving Louise a different perspective to coach from. She can help so they can draft, or she can pace them. Louise explains *"In wheelchair racing they can go in behind each other and so they cut the wind, and sit in behind. They can sit in behind me and I can try and pull harder. They are still working but it is a little bit*

easier they can go higher speeds and then I pull out and they can go. I can do that as a coach. Sometimes I get a rider for them, someone on an actual bike for pacing."

Louise trains her athlete in a Heat and Hypoxic Chamber, set between 32-35 degrees celsius and/or at an altitude of 2500-3500 feet. The chamber makes it harder to breathe and enables athletes to train at a different level of intensity and reduces the risk of injury.

Louise is strategic and conscious of giving her athletes longevity in the sport. She monitors their performance and trains smart to avoid injury, get the most out of the athlete and not push them too much. *"There is a lot more on offer, a lot more available to athletes now than there was to me. So they have a lot more opportunities to be a better athlete. Not only financial, but even through their recovery, nutrition and in other ways, it is very different now."* Louise said

Sports psychologists play a vital role in building the resilience of a professional athletes. Louise used a sports psychologist for big decisions. Psychologists can help athletes with things that affect them on a daily basis, anything from their personal life to specifics about competition, races and how to overcome fears. *"The sports psychologist can really help them in trying to make them well-rounded athletes and trying to achieve their goals. I think they are another valuable member of the team that makes up the whole support crew they have around them. So many different people on that team from physiologists to nutritionists. There is such a variety of people that contribute."*

Communication

According to Louise, good communication skills are essential for coaches. She learned this skill from three coaches during her sporting career. She uses open and honest communication to get the most out of her athletes and to help figure out how they tick. Louise often asks her athletes about their needs and wants, as she believes that open communication strengthens the



Image by James Rankin

coach/athlete relationship. *"It is part of figuring out how the person works and what they need from me to get the most out of them for that session, week, month etc."* She acknowledges that all her athletes are different and have different communication preferences and ways of planning and training.

Planning

Planning well and executing the plan is very important. When she was racing each year Louise and her coach would plan the year ahead setting realistic goals and plans of how to achieve them.

They would continually monitor and reevaluate these goals. Louise explains what she expects of the athletes she coaches *"Ultimately it is about them. They need to be committed and really wanting it. At the end of the day their goals are my goals and I'm here to help them achieve and get the best out of themselves and achieve their goals."*

At the NSW Institute of Sport Louise is in a perfect environment to learn from a variety of different coaches and support staff from different sports, team and individual. Her network of coaches and friends are available to discuss ideas

"At the end of the day their goals are my goals and I'm here to help them achieve and get the best out of themselves and achieve their goals."

and give feedback on ways to approach different issues.

Performance

Louise defines performance in the sporting realm as *"How well you do. For me it is achieving goals, being better at something than you were before. Performance is doing what you have been trained to do. As an athlete, I'm focused on winning, a lot. Performance can have a lot of different meanings."*

Motivation

Throughout her sporting career Louise was a self-motivated athlete performing consistently at the highest level. She was very motivated to train, improve and be at the top of her game. Once she got to the top Louise knew she had to train long and hard to stay at the top. *"It was even harder to stay there. You have to keep pushing further and trying more things, innovate and try to stay ahead of everyone else. One thing that could motivate you is knowing that somewhere around the world your competitor is in training. If you don't get out there then you are missing out and they are gaining on you."*

Reflecting on her athletic career Louise acknowledges that she was fortunate to be sponsored by *Invacare*, a wheelchair manufacturing company. This support contributed to her performance as she was kept up-to-date with the latest chairs and equipment. Louise explains *"When I was an athlete there wasn't as much technology behind it as there is now. The Top End chairs were at the cutting edge of what was available, so I was very fortunate to have the right equipment. Then it was about the workload and trying to keep up-to-date with what everyone else was doing but also innovate again to stay on top, to be the best, to train a little bit different to gain that edge."*

Learning

As an athlete most of Louise's learning was hands on, there was not a lot of published information with regards to wheelchair racing. In 2015 Louise completed a two year coaching, leadership and development course with the Australian Sports Commission. Louise believes that you learn from everything that you do. She tells her athletes *"Whether you think that was a bad race or a good race, come back and*

learn something from it. Take something away from it. You'll go into the next race having more knowledge."

As a coach, Louise acknowledges that she plays different roles in supporting her athletes. *"You get to a point where they know that they can rely on you and you are not going to let them down."* She sees her role as trying to get the best out of her athlete. *"You are really trying to work on how I can make the most of their abilities. We all have our own disabilities. We are all really, really different. Even though you compete in the same classification you are still very different."*

Disability

Louise has never really shied away from talking about her disability, which she has had since birth. Her honesty and passion helps to educate others about disability and assumptions. She says *"I'd rather them ask. Most people assume what you can and can't do. I'm like 'Well did you ask me?' If you ask me if I needed any help and I said 'no' respect that as well. It is all about education so that is why I am more than happy to talk anyone to try and give someone a different perspective or to educate them on just how I am. We are all*

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Paralympic Games

1992 Barcelona - 3 Gold Medals and 1 Silver Medal
1996 Atlanta - 4 Gold Medals
2000 Sydney - 2 Gold Medals and 1 Silver Medal
2004 Athens - 2 Silver Medals

Olympic Games

(demonstration sport)
1996 Atlanta - 1 Gold Medal
2000 Sydney - 1 Gold medal
2004 Athens - 1 Bronze Medal

Commonwealth Games

2002 Manchester - 1 Silver Medal

IAAF World Athletics Championships

Winner 1993, 1995, 1997, 2001

Boston Marathon

Winner Women's Wheelchair
1997-1999 and 2001.

Berlin Marathon

Winner Women's Wheelchair 1997

Honouring a champion

In 2012 Louise Sauvage was inducted in the Paralympic Hall of Fame. Louise lit the cauldron at the opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games in Sydney 2000. A SuperCat class ferry used to transport passengers around Sydney and a pathway were named in her honour. Her image has appeared on Australian postage stamps.

For me it is achieving goals, being better at something than you were before. Performance is doing what you have been trained to do. As an athlete, I'm focused on winning, a lot. Performance can have a lot of different meanings.

very different, we all have different needs and wants. Don't assume is probably one of the biggest things."

Louise thinks Sydney 2000 was one of the biggest turning points for the Paralympic Games. Prior to the Games there was an educational campaign involving schools and the community. Louise was an ambassador and was determined to have people attend The Games. *"To understand it, the classifications, our sports. To come and support us and enjoy it for what it was and that was pure sport. For me that was one priorities for people to come and they did, they came. We were on the Front page and the back page of the newspaper during that period."* she proudly explains.

Louise believes that on the 'food chain' of sport there is men's sport, women's sport and then there is sport for athletes with a disability. Although she can't see it ever being equal, Louise believes the boundaries are continuously being pushed. *"It is trying to get away from attitudes that we are there as part of rehabilitation and isn't it great that kind of thing. It has been like that in the past. When I started in sport I was in the human interest pages of the newspaper. I wasn't on the sports pages where we all are now. That is a change that has happened along the way and being seen as real athletes not just a person with disabilities having a go. Attitudes have changed slowly."* Her goal is to see it get bigger and better representation and recognition of people with disabilities.

Support

In her memoir *My Story*, Louise mentions that she thinks about the people who came along to training

in the early days to help out. Growing up she was no ordinary 16 or 17 year old. Thankfully her closest friends understood why she couldn't go to the parties or stay up late. Friends and family from Western Australia came to Sydney 2000 and watched Louise represent Australia at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. *"A lot of my friends and people that had supported me through thick and thin, my family came to the games in Sydney and they were like, "This is what it is all about." It really kicked in what I did and why I did it, and the enormity of it."* Louise said.

Accessibility

In 2010 Louise was appointed the first accessibility ambassador to promote the Sydney Opera House. The iconic venue continues to promote its accessibility achievements for patrons. Louise believes access to venues is still an issue in Australia. *"With venues what one person thinks is accessible is not necessarily what another person thinks."* she explains. Armed with a list of questions, Louise calls ahead to ensure that venues are accessible and meet her needs. According to Louise *"One of the beauties of living in a city is that I have lots of options. If the venue is not accessible I'll go somewhere else. The main thing for me is to have options."*

Commitment

Louise finds being a coach rewarding and enjoys seeing her athletes achieve. She is passionate and described her level of commitment as very high. *"My end goal is that I want to make a difference. That is what I want to do. I love seeing them do well and I get very excited and*

show it." Her approach to coaching is *"I will give more than 100 per cent if they are giving me the same back. You give me the respect and be punctual I will give you the world because if you are committed on that level and everything I'm 100 per cent there. If you are wanting to do this then I am there totally."* With her level of enthusiasm and commitment, Louise will achieve her ultimate goal as a coach, to coach a Paralympic gold medalist.

References

Sauvage L, and Heads I, 2002, *My Story*, Harper Collins Sydney

Louise Sauvage is coach at the NSW Institute of Sport. She is a successful Australian Paralympic and Olympic athlete. Louise is affiliated with Wheelchair Sports NSW, Rainbow Club Australia, Assistance Dogs and Westmead Children's Hospital. She is passionate about raising awareness of athletes with a disability.

Jo Loudon (@aitd1) is the Editor and Communications Manager with AITD. Contact via editor@aitd.com.au