

Claire Tomlinson- A pioneer in a male environment

This week, I attended the memorial service for Claire Tomlinson. Her story, and my own involvement, are worth recounting.

About 25 years ago, I was part of the development of a new organisation, the 'National Coaching Foundation'. The NCF organised non-sports specific workshops on a wide range of subjects of interest to coaches. I helped develop and deliver the workshops around the field of sports psychology- mental preparation, motivation etc.

Claire was strongly of the view (and most of her views were strong!) that polo was too introspective, and that not enough attention was paid to how other sports developed high performance and what other factors were involved. Way ahead of her time in the development of polo, she had heard about the NCF and asked if the Hurlingham Polo Association, the governing body of the sport, could have some of the NCF workshops delivered for polo coaches. I was invited to take the first, which took place at Claire's home, Down Farm, where the renowned Beaufort Polo Club is based.

So it was that I led a workshop for about 20 coaches of a sport I had never even seen in the flesh. Claire was enthused and asked if I could do more with them. So it has transpired that for the past 20+ years, I have taken about 4 workshops each year for the HPA on different aspects of improving polo coaching and performance.

Let me take you back to Claire and the battles she had to fight on behalf of herself and other women in her sport. She was born in 1944 into a family with horses, and from an early age demonstrated great equestrian skill, determination and ambition. She became in due course the best female polo player in the world, but she was not allowed to play 'high-goal' polo, the top level of the sport. There was no 'high-goal' women's polo, and she was not allowed to play alongside men at that level. It was considered too physically demanding. We should remember that at that time women did not run marathons for the same reason!

Claire was a star at polo below the top level, but she was committed to playing alongside male elite players. She engaged the support of David Gemmell, a high-goal player, and set about acquiring the quality of horses needed to put out her own high-goal team, in which she could play! She had already developed a love of Argentina, having previously worked there for several years. Here she had honed her skills at the home of the best players and horses. Having decided to challenge the system, she returned to Argentina and managed to source the 'horse-power' she required. In the meantime, back in England, the HPA was still not inclined to allow Claire to take part in high-goal polo, this becoming a big political issue in the sport. Claire had a handicap (an important part of the game) higher than many of the male players who were allowed to play high goal, so it was clear that many barriers had to be broken down.

In due course, Claire's team, 'Los Locos', with her playing, was allowed to take part in the prestigious Queens Cup in 1979. Remarkably, Los Locos went on to win the trophy, which was presented to Claire by the Queen.



Claire went on to have a hugely successful career, playing alongside some of the world's best. It was not just as a player. Claire and her then husband Simon, in due course were parents of Luke and Mark, still two of the finest English polo players ever, and their daughter Emma, who also performed at a very high level.

My own work with the HPA has led to a few of the organisation's leaders attending all our FLS workshops and conferences in recent years. This would never have happened had Claire not made the bold move many years ago to look over the fence and see what other sports were doing.

Stories like Claire's inform us about the difficulties and indignities women have endured in being recognised in sport. It was men who decided that women remained second-class citizens in tennis, challenged successfully in due course by the likes of Billie-Jean King. It was men who decided that women were not physically strong enough to take part in many athletics events. When I went on to the then all-male Committee of the Rugby Football Union in 1995, women were not allowed in the royal box at Twickenham and women did not even play the game.

Most sports have similar tales to tell, though times have changed enormously for the better in recent years. Some would say that more change is needed, and there are still nowhere near as many female leaders in sport as there ought to be. It is telling to note that women account for only 10% of the officers in the British Army, despite a stated policy to even the numbers in recent years. There is still a distance to go.

With people like Claire Tomlinson in mind, one of our FLS events in the coming year will consider such matters, when we hold a conference on *'Developing leaders in, of and through sport'*. Keep your eye on the FLS website as we, post-covid restrictions, attempt to catch up on several postponed events.

Bob Reeves