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Interview for the SheCOACH project

Empowering Women in Basketball: Italian Coach Cinzia Zanotti on Leadership, Gender Equality & Mentorship

Cinzia Zanotti

Born in 1964 and raised in Italy, Cinzia Zanotti has dedicated her career to basketball coaching. She is currently the head coach of Geas Basket, a women's basketball club competing in Italy's first division.

Her coaching career has been exclusively tied to Geas Basket, where she began working with a group of young athletes at the U15 level, guiding them through their development until they reached the first division. Along the way, she led the team to multiple championships, securing two U15 titles, one U17 title, and one U19 title.

As the team progressed, she continued coaching them in Italy's second division (A2). In their first season at this level, they won both the Italian Championship and the Italian Cup, earning promotion to the first division. Since then, she has led the team in the top division for seven consecutive years.

In addition to her club achievements, she served as an assistant coach for the Italian National Team during the 2023 European Championship in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Before transitioning to coaching, she had a successful playing career. She represented the Italian national team 115 times, competing in several European Championships and one World Cup. At the club level, she won both an Italian championship and a European cup.

Interestingly, her basketball journey began with Geas Basket -the very team she now coaches. Her passion for player development and high-level competition continues to drive her work every day.



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What challenges do women coaches face compared to their male counterparts?

From what I was able to see around me, I would say that unfortunately women still need to work harder compared to mens counterparts to reach a similar level of recognition and success. In my point of view, this is linked to both the society we are living in, but also to the nature of being a woman. In my personal experience, I felt that as a woman there was a constant need to prove my ability and demonstrate my leadership, both to myself and to others.

Have you ever faced discrimination or bias as a female coach? How did you handle it?

I consider myself fortunate not to have experienced any direct discrimination in my career, or at least I never perceived it that way. However, there is one thing I find quite shocking: the lack of women coaching in women's professional basketball in Italy. It's surprising to me that, despite coaching in the women's game, there are very few female coaches, and no women at all in top-tier men's basketball. I hope this absence isn't due to discrimination, but it's hard not to question it.

What steps can be taken to encourage more women to pursue coaching careers?

Given my experience, as I was a former basketball player myself, I think one great step we should do is to facilitate the path of becoming a coach for former female basketball players. From my point of view, to encourage more former basketball players to pursue coaching, we should offer dedicated coaching courses and development programs specifically for them. Majority of the players, if interested into coaching, have great advantages, they have a deep understanding of the game and the dynamics around it. Sometimes, they just need the right support to transition into coaching.

At the same time, Clubs could create opportunities for retired athletes to stay within the basketball ecosystem, offering coaching roles or mentoring positions. This would give them the incentive to continue their careers in the sport.

What inspired you to become a basketball coach and did gender play a role in your journey?

What inspired me to become a basketball coach was the support and guidance I received from a coach -who was also a woman. She built a relationship of mutual trust that helped me take my first steps in this career, making me feel supported and never alone, especially at the beginning of the journey. My club also played a key role, providing continuous support and trust, which allowed me to grow and pursue my coaching journey with confidence.



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