



May 2025

Interview for the SheCOACH project

“My job is to grow, lead, and serve my team”: Serbian-born, Australian-based basketball coach Jelena Todorovic on overcoming challenges and pursuing excellence

Jelena Todorovic

Jelena Todorovic is a Serbian-born, Australian-based professional basketball coach with a specialization in player development.

Although she spent most of her life in Australia, her career spans internationally, with significant experience in men's basketball in both the USA and Australia.

Jelena is an alumna of the first generation of the Euroleague Head Coaches Board (EHCB) Academy and has since made her debut in European men's basketball. She now also serves as the EHCB Academy's Operations Manager.

Jelena holds a degree from the University of Belgrade and studied Molecular Genetics at the University of Cambridge.



She is a certified personal fitness trainer, licensed basketball coach, and a Mensa member.



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

Women will always face challenges —some negative, but also many positive opportunities for growth. Over the past few years, I've learned something that has truly changed the way I approach my career: I stopped focusing on being a female coach and started focusing on simply being a coach. My energy now goes into learning as much as I can, growing every day, and preparing myself to be ready when the right moment comes. Also helps that I am a proud Serbian woman and I have “Inat”. In our cultural context it refers to a deeply rooted sense of stubborn pride, defiance, or persistence, often in the face of adversity or authority. It's not just being stubborn —it's about standing your ground out of principle or pride, even when it's difficult or inconvenient.

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

The most important lesson I've learned is this: don't waste time and energy on things you can't control. Yes, you will face challenges but complaining won't get you anywhere —but focusing on yourself will. Surround yourself with people who are more experienced, wiser, and smarter than you. Listen to what they have to say. Most importantly, embrace criticism. If you can take it, learn from it, and grow through it, I truly believe you can go far in your career.

At the end of the day, there are far more serious issues in the world than me not always being treated fairly as a female coach in a male-dominated space. That perspective keeps me grounded.

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

As for encouraging more women to step into coaching: it starts with investing in yourself. This applies to everyone —not just women. Don't be lazy. Dedicate your time, effort, and resources to becoming the best version of yourself. If you commit fully and give it your all, the results will come. That's something I know from personal experience —and I'll stand by it. The sports industry is incredibly competitive, with limited opportunities to go around. It's a field where only the most dedicated and resilient truly make it. That's why it's so important to focus on becoming part of that top percentile —on being good enough, prepared enough, and capable enough —regardless of gender. Excellence is what opens doors, so put your energy into mastering your craft and standing out through your work.

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

My love for the game inspired me —it was always about that first. The strategy, the team dynamics, the challenge of pushing players to reach their potential. Gender didn't really drive my decision, though it has definitely shaped parts of the journey. But again, I try not to let it define me. I'm a coach, period. My job is to grow, lead, and serve my team —and that's where I put my energy.



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