England Netball 90th Anniversary Oral History Project

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Interviewer: Brian Worrell

Interviewee: Liz Nicholl

BW: Thank you Liz, it’s great meeting up with you again and for you to agree to be interviewed. This project is about capturing the experiences and stories of our netball history, it includes both oral as well and written and pictorial. I am therefore very interested in your involvement in netball and sport in general and how you may have helped it in your career. My name is Brian Worrell, an England Netball Honorary Life Member and I am interviewing Liz Nicholl, Chief Executive of UK Sport on the 29th September 2016 at her offices in London for the England Netball history project. Could we perhaps start with you introducing yourself by name, where you’re from and what job you do now Liz.

LN: I am Liz Nicholl, I live in Hertfordshire, Hitchin and I am the Chief Executive at UK Sport.

BW: Lovely, could you perhaps briefly outline your career so we know and sense where we are going?

LN: My career, my first job when I left university was actually in inter university sport as the general secretary of the women’s inter university athletic board, which was the women’s equivalent of the university’s athletic union being the men’s organisation all part of what is now BUCS. So I did that job for 2 years. Then my next job was to become the first director it was called at that point in time, chief executive you’d call it now, full time director of England Netball in 1980 and I was with England Netball until 82’ when I took, well actually nowadays you would take maternity leave but I resigned to have my first child in the autumn of 82’ and then actually had two children in that point in time, Lucy in 82’, Simon in 84’ and by 86’ I was ready to think about coming back to employment and coincidentally the post of the Chief Executive of England Netball actually came up again in 86’ so I took a gamble of reapplying for a job I already had and I got the post in 86’ and then I was Chief Executive at England Netball until 99’, then left England Netball in 99’ to join UK Sport and I’ve been here ever since.

BW: I actually remember a memorable trip down to South Wales just before you became Chief Executive of England Netball but that’s not for today. Okay thank you for that Liz, UK Sport, obviously a very challenging job, you probably won’t say it is but from my point of view I think it’s very challenging. You’re in the spotlight continually as a Chief Executive. What’s it actually like being CEO of UK Sport with its lottery and elite athletes and all the NGB’s all coming knocking on your door and demanding your time like me today?

LN: It’s an amazing responsibility we have here at UK Sport and I feel really privileged to be the CEO, genuinely privileged. As an organisation we’ve got a very tight remit. First and foremost it’s about delivering Olympic and Paralympic medal success to inspire the nation and then we also have a strand of our work related to the securing and hosting of major events, again to engage the nation in sport and to provide a platform here in the UK for our medallists to be seen and again to engage the nation. And then we have a strand of our work which is linked to international relations so the focus is all national and international, nothing regional or local and it’s very tight and it’s just amazing because you’re dealing with and working with some really talented people, talented coaches, talented athletes and talented staff here leading in each of our strategic responsibilities.

BW: Could you perhaps therefore explain for the public as it were because it often gets confused, the difference between or the synergies between UK Sport and Sport England for example.

LN: Well as I explained our remit being national and international and Sport England’s main remit is about increasing participation in sport and helping contributing to getting the nation active, that’s its primary responsibility but it also invests in through governing bodies of sport to provide that formal opportunity through structured competition for individuals to continue to participate in sport and to develop their talent to a level where they can I suppose graduate onto world class programmes. So we pick up and support athletes that are within sight of an Olympic or Paralympic medal within the next 2 Olympic games or Paralympic games, so you have to get up to a certain level of talent to be able to be supported in a way that enables you to train full time and be supported by world class coaches, scientists, practitioners and to be able to compete wherever you need to be and train whenever you need to anywhere in the world so there’s a big investment in an individual that’s identified as having a talent to deliver a medal and so we have a big reliance on the underpinning structure of support for community sport for school sport community sport and club sport that obviously is the responsibility of the governing bodies then to develop a sort of county and regional level.

BW: Okay, just a slight aside then, England Netball has just recently in quotes “gone professional” with its national squad of 20, only 20, just 20. How does that then fit in with UK Sport? Because they’ll be full time.

LN: Well we are a UK organisation with a UK focus and so we don’t invest in England success or Welsh success or Scottish success that’s the responsibility of each of the home nation’s sports councils, so each of the home nation’s sports councils does invest in talent to actually represent the home nation’s and clearly where there is a sport that competes at a GB level like cycling, then we will be investing in athletes that can then also compete for Wales, Scotland or England. So it’s the Olympic and Paralympic focus that’s important to understand, we don’t invest beyond that and if we did invest in England Netball then we would actually have to provide an equality of opportunity for us to support Scottish Netball, Welsh Netball but what we are looking to do over this next cycle is to have more impact, have a broader impact not necessarily through money and investment but to look at the expertise that’s been built up here in the Olympic and the Paralympic system to see whether there are any aspects of that that could equally apply to athletes and sport that are out with the Olympic and Paralympic games, so there may be aspects of what we do that actually could be supporting England Netball in terms of the decisions they take about how to support their athletes.

BW: Okay, thank you for that. When I looked on Wikipedia you started as you said with UK Sport back in 1999. What was the greatest challenge in doing that? I mean here you are coming into a massive organisation, Chief Executive, what was it that faced you as a challenge and perhaps how netball, your previous career in netball helped you?

LN: Well the first challenge was actually deciding to apply for the job in the first place, having been with England Netball for over a period of 16 years, you know 2 years and then 14 years so netball is a big part of my life and you know the whole England Netball family becomes part of your life when you’re actually working in that environment in a governing body and so that was a big decision. What helped me at the time I was appointed as director of performance here and so what helped me was the fact that through England Netball we had applied for a world class programme award to what was then the GB sports council or Sport England and was successful in that so developed a performance plan, applied for an award through Sport England, appointed a performance director from overseas, we were on our way with developing a world class system in netball so I understood what that was all about. We’d also hosted you know the world netball championship in 95’ so again experience as championship director then of actually you know what it takes to actually deliver a world netball championship and those are two key areas that is UK Sport responsibility in world class performance and major events. So I had direct experience at the front line in the responsibilities I was going to take on across Olympic and Paralympic sports. Biggest challenge was netball isn’t an Olympic or Paralympic sport so actually I didn’t know whether there was anything different about this world of Olympic and Paralympic sports that I needed to know to be able to actually be a credible director of performance at the time. But what I found is that actually it’s all very similar that you know the challenges in an Olympic sport are the same as the challenges in England Netball and so the experience I had over all those year of working with England Netball definitely put me in a place where I’d understood the challenges the sports were facing so in our engagement UK Sport with the sports it was eased by the fact that I’d had that experience and the leaders in the sports I was dealing with knew that I understood and I’d been there in their place and so I think that really helped my transition into actually you know leading a team, a performance and investment team here at UK Sport.

BW: Okay right, if I remember rightly you mentioned your netball close to heart. I believe you were an international player for Wales?

LN: I was yes, I was brought up in South Wales.

BW: What is it that made you choose netball as a sport?

LN: Well I grew up playing in the local park playing with my brothers and I played football and cricket with my brothers so you know ball handling skills just came naturally to me so when I went to grammar school in Cardiff, you know netball we didn’t have school playing fields we had a hard playground so netball was the sport that was played there and I really took to that very quickly because I was used to playing in goal and playing cricket, catching and throwing so it came naturally to me, I loved it, but the big thing that, I always wanted to represent the Welsh school girls and when I got to sixth form I broke my wrist playing basketball so I missed trials and I missed out on an opportunity, but as I left Cardiff and I went to university I remember a PE teacher from another school saying don’t lose touch with Welsh Netball, and I remembered that and I thought well why is she saying that, she’s saying you know you could do it so when I went to Nottingham University to play netball and do a chemistry degree, not to play netball but to do a chemistry degree I didn’t forget that and I did go back to Welsh Netball trials and then it was just brilliant timing because I was selected for the to play then in the 75’ world netball championship in New Zealand which was just an amazing opportunity.

BW: That’s lovely, yeah. So you represented Wales from when until when? 75’?

LN: Yeah so it was actually 74’ to about 80’/81’.

BW: Right okay.

LN: So I went to two world netball championships 75’ and 79’ so Trinidad in 79’ and yeah it was amazing. Great opportunity.

BW: I mean I enjoyed it later on you know after that with England of course so, as Chief Executive of the All England Netball Association now England Netball you covered a period of significant change in netball, not just locally at home but also internationally. How would you actually describe your 16 years at the helm of England Netball?

LN: Well I always felt that we were going forward as an organisation. I always felt there was a willingness to be better as a governing body of sport. So the first day I started, I had a part time individual member of staff that didn’t turn up on day two so I was just on my own on the very first day I started as director of England Netball and I read everything, I read as much background as I could over the first few months. I recall you know having some great support and advice from experienced volunteer members of the organisation, but I remember some significant things like the merger of England schools netball and England Netball bringing schools netball back into the fold, I remember doing work on strategy which was about improving performance, increasing participation and quality support just three very simple objectives, I remember all that the work that was done and the strategy then that sat behind that. I felt over those years that we were a leading governing body actually and I’d felt that because there were a number of occasions where I was asked to go and speak on various platforms about the good work England Netball was doing and for me it was all about the willingness of individuals that held positions of responsibility at a lot of different levels, being willing to change and willing to go forward and wanting to be better, so that’s probably the thing that stands out for me most.

BW: So out of all the, I mean you’ve mentioned a few, what do you consider to be your single most significant achievement then?

LN: I think the most significant achievement was the way everybody managed the World Netball Championship in 95’ and the way that as an organisation we built on that platform. There is a lot of talk now about major events and legacy and we naturally did that through the team of development officers and the youth development officers that we had at the time that really aligned activity and opportunity to the profile and the platform that the World Netball Championship gave us at the time so that was one thing that stuck out. The other thing I think is that we enjoyed a period of several years when we actually had three correspondents in the media who wanted to write weekly about netball and that was a moment in time I think when there were three correspondents that were interested. One was a guy he was from New Zealand and I think the other two were women but I mean we had space we had commentary and we had some building profile. What’s changed now I think is and it’s fantastic, is there’s more televised netball through the interest from Sky because what I was hearing at the time was that TV companies weren’t interested in putting on anything but international netball but the creation of the Superleague which was on its way when I left, there was discussions about developing that and changing the calendar to fit a Superleague in to support the performance preparation was I think a significant change that was completed after I’d left so I can’t take any credit for that at all.

BW: I’m not sure about that Liz. Okay, coming back then to the 9th World Championship, it was based at the NEC in Birmingham.

LN: The NIA.

BW: Sorry, the NIA it wasn’t the NEC that’s different, of course, thank you. The NIA, of course it was the NIA. For us who are involved at the grassroots if you like, can you describe the experience of actually directing that group of, that team of people who put that on, its trials and its tribulations and obviously of course, certainly from my point of view and I suspect yours, the ultimate success of that championships?

LN: Yeah I don’t think about trials and tribulations, I really do think about all the opportunity that we had and the opportunity that we had to learn from other major events that were being held at that point in time, we obviously had, I was able to go and meet with other sports that had held championships particularly in the national indoor arena to learn about how they had gone about it. You’ll remember you know obviously Gordon Padley was on our Board at that point in time and he had experience in Sheffield and knew people in Sheffield that had experience at the World Student Games, so we were learning a lot from other events and that was just great to be able to again learn and be better and think about all the functions that had to be developed and brought together and managed so I think we had a really good board, event board, championship board and we were learning on the way, it wasn’t easy, we were having to learn as we went along but that was quite exciting and challenging, and the volunteers were, that’s my memory and you can see from major events that are held now in London how important the team of volunteers is in the delivery of any event, they were absolutely terrific.

BW: Good, okay, wonderful, moving on then. As a Welsh international, we’re gonna sort of go backwards a little bit in this conversation, can you describe to us what it was like on your first international appearance, walking out onto the court, the excitement, the environment, the enthusiasm?

LN: Well what I remember most is actually the first time I actually played an international match at Sophia Gardens at the national sports centre in Cardiff so to do that in front of your home crowd that is amazing to stand up and be lined up looking at the flag and singing the national anthem was just terrific. I mean it took a while to become a first team player and you know not first team, first seven on the court, but it was just terrific, and then I also remember an England Wales match actually at Wembley when it was the first time my father had actually been to an away match in the Wembley arena and watched that and I remember a photograph Brian that you took of me being clobbered by Marion Lofthouse as I was playing wing attack and Marion was playing wing defence for England, but those were terrific and then to move on and then have the opportunity to play in a World Netball Championship was just extraordinary.

BW: I can imagine. What’s it like touring?

LN: Yes touring is great because you actually get to know, you know the team really becomes a team when you’re on tour and it’s just fascinating so you know to go to New Zealand I’d never I’d hardly flown anywhere, we weren’t a family that, I was from a big family you know we didn’t have family holidays abroad so to travel to New Zealand was amazing and to you know to be in Auckland and to be getting to know your team mates better than ever before because you’re spending really quality time with them was great and then also to be you know playing alongside you know the other countries in the same accommodation as other countries it was just fantastic.

BW: Lovely, I wish I could do some of that. Obviously we’ve just spoken about some internationals that you played that you found interesting and exciting and obviously your first one out in Cardiff and then the England Wales match at Wembley. Rather than perhaps the most memorable international, what are the sort of the funniest moments that happened when you have an international? What are the things that happened behind the scenes as it were before or after I suppose when you step out onto that court, what are the things that go on behind the scenes?

LN: Oh gosh Brian, I mean it’s a long time ago now, it’s hard to drag those memories out, I’ll have to have a think about that one, not sure I can answer that question.

BW: Okay, okay, shall we move on then?

LN: Yeah move on from that.

BW: Right okay, out of all the jobs you’ve had, what did you find actually was the most rewarding? Is it in UK Sport? Was it in England Netball? Was it at University?

LN: I have to say it has to be in UK Sport actually because to be responsible for something that’s having an impact on the nation is just a real privilege and there’s one thing about supporting the development of one sport and the development of the athletes in that sport and the engagement of individuals in that sport, when you’re able to look across the sports like I can here at the Olympic and the Paralympic sports and see you know the difference that the national lottery funding and the exchequer funding and the support of government can provide through very targeted strategy is just brilliant and you know the number of people that are employed in the performance system that are working day in day out just to make a difference and to help the athletes that they are supporting succeed is just fantastic. I think the national impact of this job, there aren’t very many jobs at all like this, I can’t think of any other job that’s like this actually.

BW: Neither can I actually but there you go. Obviously when you were an international player you were within a team, in UK Sport you’re within a team, actually you’re heading the team from which obviously the team take its leadership role or your leadership role. Do you find that your experiences in netball as a team player have actually contributed to you in both the England Netball job directorship as well as running UK Sport?

LN: Well I think being in any leadership role you need to be a team player so clearly if you’ve had a lot of experience at that when you’re younger it’s going to come a bit more naturally to you so I hadn’t thought of it in that way but now that you’ve posed the question like that I guess it must have helped but it is absolutely critical, we’ve got a team of 115 people and you know half of those people are working on the performance agenda and it’s really important that we’re all lined up behind a mission to succeed and to keep that formation you’ve got to keep the team together and you keep the team together by having that clarity of who’s responsible for what, who’s got to do what by when and actually that clarity of delegated responsibility but also real clarity of accountability for the work that each of us is responsible for. So I think the one thing I’d say about leading the team here at UK Sport, trust is at the heart of it and we’ve got to be successful as a team, like a netball team you’ve got to trust each other and you’ve got to know each other and all those things apply as they apply on the court, they apply in any organisation. So you know we’ve got three values here at UK Sport which I would say should be common place in any team and the first is commitment to excellence, you’ve got to be the best you can be. The second is working together and the third is openness and transparency so people know what you’re thinking and what you’re doing and why you’re doing it and I think all those three things apply in this organisation which is why they’re our values as much as they would apply in any team sport.

BW: Okay, it’s anticipated that quite a few young netballers will be listening to these interviews during the course of time. What advice would you give them on how to reach their potential in netball rather than perhaps in their career?

LN: I would say in both netball and a career, I would always say just don’t hold yourself back go for things you think are just beyond your reach. I went to a Welsh Netball trial I thought was just beyond my reach and actually I was successful and that played a significant part then in my future career. So go for things you think are just beyond your reach, don’t hold yourself back and the other thing I always say if somebody you respect thinks you can do it, you probably can so I think those are really important lessons in life that I’ve learnt and so in netball I would say just commit to being the best you can be and think about every aspect of what you do that is going to improve your performance and you can apply that to life as well, it’s what all the Olympic and Paralympic athletes do, they’re not satisfied with how good they are now, they’re always striving to be better because they can always see no matter how successful they are they can always see the potential to be even better and the more you learn about how you succeeded the more you realise actually there’s more in the tank and more that can be achieved and I’d say that to every netballer and young netballer, but also in a team sport you’ve got to know each other, you’ve got to know your team mates, you’ve got to respect them, you’ve got to support them so it’s not all about you in a team sport, it’s also about the others that are working around you so whatever you apply to yourself it’s that support, encouragement and respect for everybody else’s role that is critically important I think.

BW: Okay that’s very interesting. What would Liz Nicholl today say that to the young Liz Nicholl all those years ago? Would you change anything from what you just said?

LN: I would say that, I wouldn’t change anything of what I’ve just said. I really believe in that. Whether a young Liz Nicholl wouldn’t have recognised that but I was always wanting to be better, I was always always wanting to be better. I’ve learnt a lot in this job obviously about how you can break down and analyse how you might be better in various aspects of your performance whereas I wouldn’t have been so clear about the need for attention to detail, when I was playing netball I would have just been enjoying it.

BW: Okay, I guess we’re coming to the end little bit so you might consider this to be a bit of a fast ball but do you have any anecdotes or moments or stories that you might want to share with us during your career?

LN: Well the one thing that I do want to share is that I mentioned earlier that I, when I left school I went to university and I went to university in Nottingham and I went to study chemistry. I knew they had a fantastic campus, I knew they had a fantastic sports hall, I guessed I was going to have the opportunity to do quite a bit of sport and activity when I was there and I joined nearly every club I could in that first week as a lot of fresher’s do as they say. I’d played for university and I played for English universities but what was fortuitous at that point in time is a young Sue Campbell lived in Nottingham and a young Sue Campbell was a coach to the English Universities netball team so my paths crossed with Sue in my first year at university and during those university years, she’s an excellent coach whereas I’d been coached in South Wales and when I was selected for Wales being coached by the Welsh netball coach, I was absolutely being further coached by Sue as I was playing for English universities and British Universities and captained British Universities and so she had a significant impact on my netball career but also in terms of actually the advice about how I move from chemistry to working in sport and the advice from Sue was you know there’s a postgraduate certificate in education sport and chemistry you can do which gives you a bit of a qualification in that and then she pointed me towards the master’s degree at Loughborough in recreation management so those two things of playing netball for Wales and actually having a degree and very few sporting degrees around at that point in time a master’s in recreation management and then enabled me to be chosen for the inter university role that I had and that enabled me to be well positioned for the England Netball role. So all these things I’ve been very lucky on that journey to stumble across Sue and then to be guided in terms of opportunities to give me the qualifications that would enable me to eventually get to where I am now here.

BW: I didn’t know that you’d crossed paths with Sue Campbell all those years ago, I really just didn’t know that. That’s wonderful. Okay well unless you have anything else to add that’s it really Liz and again thank you very much for your time.

End of interview