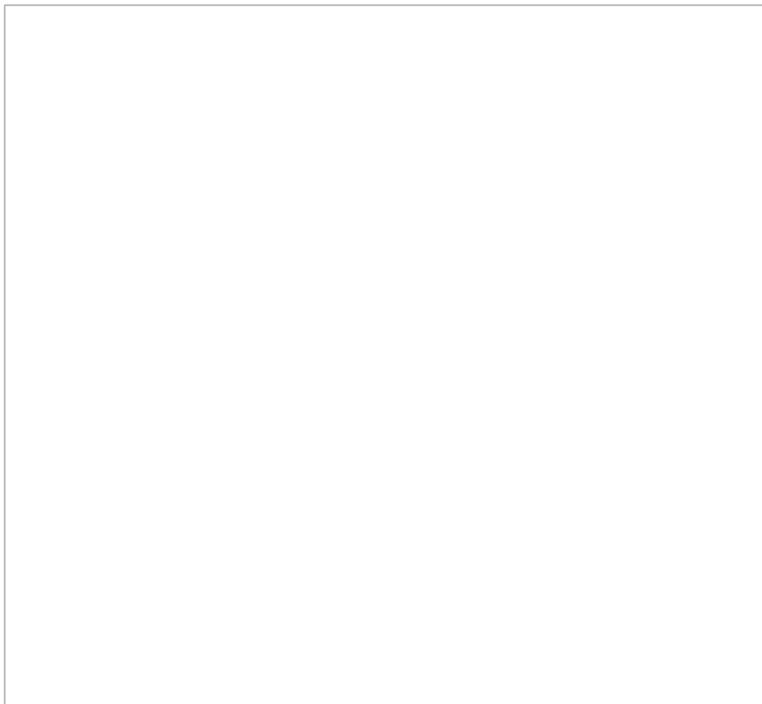


## Advice you can Trust: What makes a good mentor?

Published 19/12/18 by [Blake Richardson](#)



### A conversation with Michelle Griffith-Robinson – former Olympic triple jumper turned lead mentor for the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust.

Michelle has a medley of inspirational anecdotes to draw on to help her engage with young people who feel detached from society, hail from disadvantaged backgrounds or view their lives as being stuck in limbo.

The stories she tells – of resilience, of building confidence and self-esteem, of her own challenge to overcome her insecurities, and of the benefits of sheer hard work – have had a hugely positive impact on those she has supported through her work as a coach and mentor.

‘We’ve had some amazing results and it’s all come about from using sport as a vehicle to engage these young people,’ she says.

But Michelle is an inspiration in so many other ways too, far beyond reciting motivational stories from her experiences as an international athlete competing for Great Britain at **World and European Athletics Championships and the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta**.

Michelle has been a key part of the [Dame Kelly Holmes Trust’s](#) multiple transformational mentoring programmes since joining the charity in 2013.

She fervently believes in the **‘power of sport, coaching and mentoring to help young people get their lives back on track’**.

‘I think there are a lot of young people who are lost and I am passionate about helping them, whether through coaching, mentoring or just talking to them about the impact that sport has had on me,’ said Michelle.

She has a deep understanding of each of these **three mechanisms for effecting transformational change, that can serve as a triple tonic for today’s youth**. A fitting description, given the athletics discipline she excelled in, while getting people’s lives on track is an appropriate motto too given the names of two of the Trust’s principal programmes: On Track to Achieve and Get on Track.

It may also explain the link-up with train operators as key funding partners. When Michelle was lead mentor in the Kent region, South Eastern Trains gave its financial backing. In January, she will lead the programme in the west country – having recently moved to Devon with her husband and three children – where she is hoping to negotiate a similar link-up with Great Western Railways (GWR).

### Programmes for change

Michelle set up her own personal training business after retiring from athletics and coached for three years but now dedicates most of her time to her main area of interest, which is **mentoring around well-being**. She explains, ‘it ticks a lot more boxes for me’.

She still coaches general fitness, sprints and jumping to a group of young people once a week, including her own children, but working for the Trust allows her to spend more time engaging with young people on a personal, social and emotional level, supporting them and empowering them to enhance the life skills and attitudes that they need to make positive, sustained changes in their lives.

As an athlete mentor supporting people on a one-to-one basis, Michelle works on the following programmes:

- **Unlocking Potential:** aimed at increasing the confidence, self-belief and motivation of 11 to 19-year-olds and helping them set life goals or realise their educational aspirations.
- **Get on Track:** helping world class athletes lead successful lives beyond sport.
- **On Track to Achieve:** based in schools and involving athlete mentors working with groups of young people aged 14 to 19.

And she has *some* track record, having engaged hundreds of people, from young offenders, the homeless, long-term unemployed and hard to reach young people, to those simply struggling to adapt to the transitional phase from adolescent to young adult.

‘I will go out myself and recruit young people from the NEET population [not in employment, education or training] which is the criteria we use for recruitment,’ she explains.

‘It doesn’t matter what background they come from. They might even have degrees but if they are not in education, employment or training we will take them on the course. Just because you have a degree does not mean it’s a given you are going to go straight into a job.’

‘We use the power of sport but sometimes these young people don’t want to take part in sport and some even hate it. But by me talking about my sporting experience and how impactful it has been for me personally, they have given sport a try – boxing, parkour, ice skating, rounders, climbing.’

‘You must remember that it’s not just the traditional sports that people are necessarily interested in. It’s still activity at the end of the day and what is important is getting them exposed to different activities so they might think: “Actually I wouldn’t mind going trampolining every Saturday”.’

‘And that then brings in the social aspect too and they invariably have a really good laugh doing it.’

### **Transformational impact of physical activity**

Michelle has a particular interest in mentoring women and girls who are beset by insecurities and have low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

As a mentor, she knows that these two factors can lead directly to sport and physical activity being traded out of their lives.

She deals with **emotional, physiological, social and physical issues that include** body image confidence (feeling compelled to fit to an ideal shape by a society obsessed with size) and lack of self-esteem (often exacerbated by the addictive nature of social media and FOMO, fear of missing out).

‘Physical activity can have a massive impact on people’s lives,’ says Michelle. ‘It makes them feel so much better, physically and psychologically.’

‘It’s not to say any of them have to perform at elite level. Just being active provides such a boost to your confidence and self-esteem.’

‘We mustn’t put off our children just because they don’t make it to county level or school team level and make them feel they are not good enough. No! We want sports participation in every form.’

‘I can see the difference straight away. As soon as the session is finished I can see in people’s faces the lift it has given them, and their body language is upbeat, with shoulders back. You can tell they feel a lot more inspired.’

### **Closest thing to a wonder drug**

Exercise can be as effective as medication, stimulating the release of feel-good brain chemicals. It is being prescribed by more and more GPs as a ‘treatment’ for mental illness.

Michelle can testify to the effects that a dopamine and serotonin boost can give to mind and body, having experienced it for herself at both ends of the sporting spectrum.

‘England Netball’s [Back to Netball campaign](#) is a fantastic initiative [aimed at attracting more women of different ages and abilities back into the game]. I went last year and it’s the best thing I’ve done in years. It was truly inspirational. There were all shapes and sizes but we could all sweat together and we had commonality in that we were all women who were on a level playing field, who would talk about how good we were when we were kids. And that led to me going out socially with them.’

‘I think there’s a lot to be said to revisiting sport again at an older age.’

As a wife and working mother of three young children, Michelle knows how hard it is to maintain control and balance in her life and is committed to helping other young mums manage that juggling act.

Mothers, she says, create a mental to-do list, with numerous tasks vying for their time and attention. And the last thing they put on that list is themselves.

‘You are going to rush your kids to ballet, football, swimming or whatever, you are going to rush to get the shopping done but you are not going to rush to do what’s important to you. Mothers have to start putting themselves on that list.’

‘It doesn’t matter **where** you are on the list but it has to be on the list for that day. Then you will find you start feeling better about yourself and that you are able to cope much more with everything else you have to do. Women are multi-taskers. I learned that myself.’

### **Dream it. See it. Be it.**

I ask Michelle how important it is for girls and women to have role models, whether they be parents, Olympic legends like Jessica Ennis-Hill and Laura Kenny, rising young stars like Dina

Asher-Smith or 'real women', as depicted in Sport England's This Girl Can #FitGotReal campaign: 'Those women of all backgrounds and ethnicities who feel left behind by traditional exercise, who are doing their thing no matter how they look, how well they do it or how sweaty they get.'

The 'if you can see it, you can be it' principle is thankfully gaining greater traction with every month that passes.

'Role models are incredibly important,' agrees Michelle. 'When I have given talks, I have shown that I am just a normal individual who, just like them, has had her ups and downs, ins and outs. I've had a journey as well. It doesn't mean that because I competed at the Olympics I didn't have to endure certain unpleasant experiences in my life, because I have.'

'I tell them that when I was their age, I was equally as vulnerable. I had body issues, self-esteem issues and felt very insecure about my body for a long time. But I came through that and succeeded.'



### **Mentoring top tips**

So, what is the best approach to take when engaging with young people who exhibit insecurities and vulnerability?

Michelle believe the answer lies with encouraging people to look at their life through a different lens.

'It is important as a mentor to share your stories and explain where you felt that vulnerability. And then you try to make them see where they have an amazing skill-set and to look at things from a different perspective.'

'I'd say to them: "Ignore the negative comment that one person said and focus on all the positive things other people have said about you."' The more you keep saying this to somebody, the more chance that the penny will drop.'

Michelle cites her mum as her biggest role model, biggest fan and best friend.

But, for a multitude of reasons, not all parents and guardians fulfil that role. It is a big responsibility to shoulder for coaches and mentors to step in and fill that void and develop a relationship founded on mutual trust and respect, where you convince the athlete or mentee that you genuinely care about them and their personal development.

'It is a huge responsibility. If people don't have a figure in their lives, like my mum, to turn to and look up to and be openly honest with them, it is for you to make them feel safe and to be comfortable sharing as much information as they choose to in a safe environment.'

'And if this isn't something you are able to do as a coach then to at least be able to signpost them on to someone who will be able to support them on whatever their journey may be.'

And yet when you only have an hour or two a week with them, it must be difficult to cultivate that strong bond?

'Yes, but persistence and consistency I think is a really important facet. There was a young girl who I hadn't physically coached for maybe two and a half years but I was mentoring her because she was going through an eating disorder. The physical coach-athlete relationship may have stopped but I was still on the end of a phone and I facilitated a lot over 18 months.'

'It was probably a completely different sort of support than what her mum was giving her. So, whereas she may have been frustrated at her mum telling her to "just eat", I was asking her questions like, "what's stopping you, do you think?" "Could somebody else help you?". These questions were perhaps not as challenging for her and she felt more comfortable responding.'

### **Star quality**

Michelle is an adept active listener, understanding that young people value being heard. And she is equally proficient at dispensing sage advice when her opinion is sought.

Talking of sages, there are lots of references to wise men at this particular time of the year.

Well, this article recognises the journey undertaken by a wise woman. Michelle has been a guiding light who young people look up to and have chosen to follow. And to many she has been their saviour by providing a leg-up to help them scale some of life's barriers, giving them an advantage when they have only known disadvantage.

### **Further reading:**

[No exit! The secrets to keeping today's youth actively engaged in sport](#)

[A pregnant pause: Returning to sport after giving birth](#)

[Juggling act: The challenges of managing a coaching career around motherhood](#)

[The vehicle to success: CAR can transport coach and athlete on a journey of fulfilment](#)

tags : confidence, mentor, mentoring, disadvantaged, self-esteem