



▲ Lonneke Bransz helpt jonge topsporters. © Jelle Verhoeks

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Mental Support for Elite Athletes

Former basketball player Lonneke Bransz helps young athletes

The pressure to perform is intense, says former elite basketball player Lonneke Bransz (51). Today, the Utrecht-based coach gives young elite athletes the mental support she herself missed during her sporting career.

Elisabetta Santangelo — Leidsche Rijn

After Bransz had spent a period living in South America with her parents and brothers, the children had to choose a sport. They chose basketball, and she quickly realised it was becoming much more than a hobby.

“There is nothing better than basketball. Give me an orange ball and a court and I’ll run,” she says, laughing.

Basketball also became her safe haven.

“If things weren’t going well at school or somewhere else, I still had this second world I could draw strength from. For me, that really was basketball.”

And she turned out to have talent for it too: she reached the Dutch premier league and later even the national team.

Mentally weak

Although she never lost her love for elite sport, she gradually became more familiar with its harder side: coaches shouting, players being publicly criticised during time-outs, and a culture in which showing vulnerability was far from normal.

After games, players would comfort one another, she says, but real conversations were rare.

“In elite sport at the time, the idea was very much that talking about these things meant you were mentally weak. And what if people judged you for that?”

So she kept up a strong front and stayed silent about what was happening in her mind.

Knee problems

Some moments are still etched in her memory. One was when a coach instructed her to take advantage of an opponent's knee problems.

“He said, ‘Go for her knees.’ But I thought: I don't want to win because I injured her.”

The coach snapped back that this meant she was not an elite athlete. Bransz stood her ground.

“But it stayed in my head.”

Looking back, she realises how much energy it took to constantly appear strong while the pressure inside continued to build.

“You're trying to solve all of it on your own.”

One place left

When she became pregnant with her daughter, Bransz stopped competing in elite sport. Although hearing a basketball bounce still gave her that familiar feeling, for a while she did not want to set foot in a sports hall.

She focused fully on her new work as a child coach, but eventually found her way back into the sporting world.

“A friend was doing a course in systemic work with elite athletes and at the last minute there was one place left,” she says.

She decided to sign up.

“That was when I thought: this allows me to combine my passion with my experience as a child coach.”

Loneliness

Bransz now runs her own practice, Full Focus Athlete, in Leidsche Rijn. Young elite athletes who get stuck under pressure come to her for support, and she also gives workshops at schools and sports clubs.

Through that work, she meets many young people who struggle within the world of elite sport.

One story that has stayed with her is that of a boy who was sitting opposite her in tears within minutes. He felt heavy and empty but did not know why.

Only after several conversations did it become clear that he felt lonely.

“He simply missed being in contact with friends and joking around with them,” she says.



▲ Lonneke Bransz is topbasketbalster geweest. © Jelle Verhoeks

Putting the mind at the centre

“How good is it to know what you need? Ultimately, that can also help you perform better.”

According to Bransz, the sporting world still pays too little attention to what is happening mentally.

“It would be wonderful if sport looked not only at the technical and physical side, but also at the mind.”

She does see things slowly changing. Coaches and clubs are more open to mental support than they used to be.

“It is definitely improving,” she says.

But as far as she is concerned, mental support should become just as normal as nutrition or physiotherapy.

“Everything goes through the mind, so the mind needs to be at the centre.”