

Kiri Wills - Northern Stars



Stars coach Kiri Wills never had high aspirations to be a coach, but once she started, she never looked back.

Wills was working as a sports administrator at Baradene College, when they noticed a lack of coaches, so asked Wills to coach a Year 9 team.

She was still playing, with the Auckland Diamonds, but immediately fell in love with coaching.

“I just loved the response that you got from a group of players if you worked on something, and it came to fruition. Just that whole bit about working on something together and executing it, no matter what level - everybody feels good about achieving those things, it got me hooked.”

The Stars are the newest New Zealand netball franchise, created in 2017 with the establishment of the ANZ Premiership, representing South Auckland.

“I came in in year two and prior to me being in here, Julie Hoornweg, a very established coach from Australia was in the group and I think I just came in and tried to get a feel for what had gone before,” Wills explains.

“It was actually a pretty clean slate, the canvas was pretty bare in terms of what we could do as a franchise in terms of culture and connections with the community,” Wills explains.

When Wills came onboard, she wanted to really connect the Stars with their community and build a team culture.

“She [Hoornweg] built a really great performance culture and I think that I overlaid that with a culture that resonates with our community,” says Wills.

“We’re quite multicultural, we play in an area of Auckland that is very multicultural and so trying to bring that all together was something that myself and the playing group at the time really wanted to do.

“So while I say me, it actually was driven by the players within the group as well, we were just highly conscious of who we represented.”

Wills is also a firm believer in being true to herself, and being authentic with her team.

“I’ve never been anything but myself, so that definitely builds that authenticity as well,” she says.

“The players absolutely know when you’re not being authentic, and that can lead to poor decisions from both sides.”

She encourages that authenticity in her players too, knowing how important team culture and unity is for any team.

“It helps to build trust, it brings forth personal authenticity because you can belong to a group and you can operate within the group’s norms, but the group really does need to know who you are,” she explains.

“The whole connection to our community and who we are as a team, it’s all about being authentic with our connections, and to do that, you have to be quite vulnerable. So these girls on almost a daily basis are very open and honest with what’s happening for them and what’s going on, so when you go out on court, you can lean into that.

“There’s a really high trust within the group, if things aren’t going well, they come together, they don’t rip each other apart, that’s never happened in our team. There’s definitely confronting conversations to be had all the time on and off the court but because they have that high level of trust and honesty off the court, it translates on the court as well.”

Wills coached the New Zealand U21 team to a gold medal at the Netball World Youth Cup in 2017, and says it’s so rewarding to watch so many of those players grow, and one of her favourite parts of being a coach.

“It’s actually amazing, and they’ve all grown up to be such outstanding young women. They’re great, great people and we still have great relationships even though they’re in the opposition and we try go out to smash each other when we can,” she laughs.