

# **The Screaming Eagle**

## **talks to Apollo President and coach Natalie Dawson**



### **Screaming Eagle (SE)**

Hi Natalie, thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I have to tell you that I have done some research, and it seems that you have only been involved at committee level for five minutes, yet here you are President of one of the biggest and more prominent clubs in Apollo. Pretty impressive to say the least! But as I start all my interviews, let's take a walk down memory lane, can you tell you how you first got involved in basketball, did you start as a kid?

### **Natalie Dawson (ND)**

I've played basketball pretty much all my life starting as a seven year old for Greenhills, I played for them for many many years. When I was about 11, I also started playing domestic for Eltham and playing rep ball for them as well.

Just to keep me busy I also played for my school, Greenhills Primary then Monty Secondary College.

### **SE**

I normally ask my interviewees if they also played any other sports but I'm guessing you were too busy.

### **ND**

No really, it's amazing what you can fit in if you want. I started playing netball at about 11 and played at state level competition, and also competed at state final level for swimming and shotput for my school.

### **SE**

That's a fair timetable, how many games did you play a week?

### **ND**

Now that I look back it sounds like a lot, but at the time, it was what I loved so somehow I just managed to find time, with training and games I was playing netball or basketball up to seven games a week.

**SE**

Any titles along the way?

**ND**

I was pretty lucky to go to a school that had several top players, and we had some really good success winning three state titles and making finals nearly every year. It certainly helped to go to school with two people who played for Australia, we rode on their coat tails a fair whack haha.

**SE**

So you kept playing after you left school?

**ND**

I left school at 15 to start a hairdressing apprenticeship and it all ground to a screaming halt for me for several years, all of a sudden I just didn't seem to have the time to play.

**SE**

So you just quit?

**ND**

Yea, for a few years until I was about 20 when I started playing netball again and one night a friend asked me to fill in on her basketball team, and that was it, I was hooked again.

**SE**

So you still play?

**ND**

Up until recently when I did my ankle yea, I was playing three or four times a week, even when the kids came along I just kept playing. It looks like the ankle will be the end of my on court term but I'm hoping to wear more coaching colours on the sideline than the Apollo blue now that I will have free time on my hands!

**SE**

What happened with your ankle?

**ND**

I was playing at Diamond Valley and my ankle just folded underneath me. I was just after half time and I was going in for a layup, I was at the tail end with my knee up and putting up the shot and my ankle just exploded in pain. I don't know if I made the basket or how I got to the ground, all I know is that I was laying there knowing it was bad, very bad.

**SE**

Ouch, what happened next?

**ND**

I went to the hospital in an ambulance, they did an x-ray and a CT scan but nothing showed up. I couldn't touch it on the ground at all but they sent me home saying it was a bad sprain. Two days later the swelling was so horrific I went back. They sedated me and I was flat on my back for four or five days. Two weeks later I could start to touch it on the ground but couldn't put any weight on it.

**SE**

So what's the future of your playing career?

**ND**

The doctor said I will always have a bad ankle but should make a good recovery without surgery. As far as playing again is concerned, I started to think and prioritise, I haven't been able to drive for five weeks and that's just the start of it. I've lost confidence in my body and with the pain I'm feeling can't see me playing anytime soon which kinda devastated me. Recovery will see me out for at least a year and my husband is adamant that I give up.



**SE**

So will that free up time for more coaching?

**ND**

The reality is that I just can't see myself without basketball in my life so I started to think about coaching, I've always wanted to coach and a level higher than domestic, so now it seems I have some extra time.

**SE**

So tell me about the kids, do they play?

**ND**

Yea, I've got three, Maverick who is 8 and the 6 year old twins Axel and Roxie. They go to Apollo Primary and all play for Apollo. I coach my son but won't do either of the twins until they are a bit older, I don't do 8's, I feel it's like herding cats haha!!

**SE**

You were coaching before you injured your ankle, how did you get into that?

**ND**

In my son Maverick's first season, I found myself as team manager and the late Apollo legend Andrew Meikle asked me why I wasn't coaching. I told him that I couldn't commit the time every week because of my work commitments, as it turned out I turned up to every training and every game and started coaching the next season. It just seemed like a natural progression to me.

**SE**

Andrew Meikle, yes, one of my great regrets is that I never got the opportunity to interview him and you're right, he is an Apollo legend! So coaching is one thing, putting your hand up to help at committee level is another, how did that come about?

**ND**

It was a couple of seasons after Maverick started playing, I was coaching his Apollo team and I noticed the different grading levels that we had within various teams and it just didn't seem right. At that time Andrew was pretty ill and he was the one that drove the grading and did it very well, and without his involvement, it had dropped a bit. So I offered my services in grading under 8's and 10's. From there I was invited to an Apollo committee meeting and over the next 12 months had a hand in helping mainly with the junior boy's co-ordination.



**SE**

OK, helping out is one thing, being President is another, how did that come about?

**ND**

Norm Arthur was President at the time and decided it was time to move on, and to me, at least, it seemed like there weren't any takers and I was silly enough to ask what was involved. I actually wasn't asking for myself, but so I could try and get someone else interested. I found out the hard way that once you express interest, it means you've got the gig haha!! So after thinking about it, I thought I'd put my hand up knowing that the rest of the Apollo committee was strong and very supportive in their various roles. Since joining the committee I've been able to rope a few extra people in, some of them replacing longer serving committee members who felt it was time to move on.

**SE**

Funny you mention that, I generally ask domestic people I interview, how hard is it to get people to help out? Seems you've got it nailed!

**ND**

I find that most people are willing to help as long as you know what their time constraints are, it's really just a matter of asking the right questions, and then making sure the role we give them fits in to their schedule. One thing that's most important is to make sure you have a great network of people around you.

**SE**

So name three things on your wish list as President?

**ND**

Tough question without notice! Firstly I'd like to see our coaches get more opportunities to develop so that the level of our coaching expands and all kids are given the chance to rise to their full potential. I'd also like to see healthier girl's numbers across all age group levels and finally, I think that the club should support Diamond Valley in any way we can, because the way I see it, supporting them is just another way of supporting ourselves. It's a two way street and we are nothing without each other.

**SE**

They are some seriously good answers for a question without notice, and probably could be the same answer from every domestic club. You've got some other roles in the club as well as President, what are they?

**ND**

Yea, I grade the under 10 boy's at Diamond Valley, don't tell my husband that, he thinks I just do the Apollo grading for the 8's to 12's boys teams and that I'm 'just the President' haha. A fellow committee member Serone Thomas and I do both those jobs together.

**SE**

Speaking of your husband, with all the time you spend on basketball business, how does that work?

**ND**

He doesn't mind basketball but doesn't live for it like the kids and I do. Although he does like watching the Big V senior championship games.

**SE**

You've certainly been seen as a family at a number of senior championship games, you obviously like it?

**ND**

Absolutely, we love it, you'll find all of us at games pretty much every weekend, we love it.

**SE**

Sooooo, tell me your favourites?

**ND**

I think we like the senior men's team the most, and the favourite player is Matt Fennell, we can't believe his brother Brett moved clubs but my daughter Roxie certainly worships the ground Matt walks on. She helps out the team manager with towels and tops at the games and loves being involved with the guys. As a family we're glad the season has started again, it seemed forever since last season finished!

**SE**

In all that time in all those games you would have seen some pretty good players, can you name the three that you have loved watching play the most and why?

**ND**

Kyle Adnam who played in the Kilsyth Youth League men's team last season and Adelaide in the NBL stands out. He really surprised me, he's young, short and looks like he belongs on a surfboard rather than a basketball court. He can really shoot, inside, outside, pressure, no pressure. We couldn't stop him last year in the finals.

Matt Fennell is an absolute tank of a player who uses his body so well; he is really strong at both ends of the court, allowing him to out play taller players.

Mr Snowball, as my family calls him, from Ringwood. He looks like he'd go for a beer and a ciggy at half time!!! But he's bang on!

I think these have been my fav players to watch of late as they come as a bit of a surprise. Although maybe not so much Matt, but with the other two, standing court side you wouldn't pick them as a mainthreat, game changing players but they are!

**SE**

Are you a follower of the NBL or NBA?

**ND**

Not really, we don't seem to watch it that much, personally I find it almost scripted and I much prefer to be court side which you can do at senior championship games, although the BO at times can be a bit ordinary ha ha.

**SE**

Ok, so if I had to sum all this up in one little sentence, I'd just say, so you're a basketball head. Pretty close?

**ND**

I love being involved in basketball, I love the idea of my children growing up with basketball, I love the sense of community and I love helping where it is needed and if I can make a positive contribution.

One of the things I love is coming across a lot of people from my past or other coaches that I might have played with when I was younger or maybe my siblings may have played with and sometimes even people I went to school with. Some of these people now coach or form part of committees from other clubs. For example the current Hurstbridge President coached me for a season or two at Greenhills.

And then there are all the newer faces of boys I coach, their parents, teams mates of my children and of course my own children and nephews.

**SE**

I heard a rumour that you have also been also involved in advertising which also involved kids at Apollo, what was that about?

**ND**

Last year I was involved in the filming of two advertisements, one for Ford and the other for Baker's Delight. I used most of the team I was coaching for the Ford ad and two older boys for the Baker's Delight ad. The lady who organized the Ford ad rang me because she knew I had access to a whole club of tall sporty boys!!

**SE**

OK, time for the tough questions! Who are the three best players you have ever coached and why?

**ND**

I find this question hard as I don't have that many coaching years to pull from. All of them have been my best at some point in time. Their achievements however big or small have been my achievements and I take personal pride in every one of them. Boys at this age are very competitive and 'the best' player changes every 2 to 3 weeks, depending on how hard they work.

One player that I do have to mention is Zak Kassem. He is my smallest player but he is a gun. He never complains, always trains hard and if I teach him something new that week I see it on court the next Saturday. He stretches me as a coach to keep up with things to teach him.

**SE**

It's great to hear that a coach recognized that sometimes the player helps coach the coach! In all the time you have coached, which was your all time favourite team and why?

**ND**

It would always be the team that I'm coaching at the time! I'm yet to coach a kid that I haven't really, really liked! Even kids that I have coached in the past I keep an eye on their development. I take personal interest in every one of them.

**SE**

When I interviewed Trevor Lee he said the same thing, the team he was coaching at the time was his favourite. The questions start getting tougher. If you had absolute complete and total control of Diamond Valley for one week, what are the three things you address first?

**ND**

I would install cameras on every court. It would make everyone more accountable. Refs, coaches, players and spectators. Knowing that you could be reviewed at anytime I think would help with refining standards especially.

Secondly I'd give the girls equal court time! 18 minute halves when you have 8 girls is not enough, especially when refs don't blow whistles till 16 minutes in. So in effect they get 32 minute games as opposed to 40 minutes, yes I know that court space is an issue, but you did ask.

Finally I would start the biggest fundraising drive ever!! Get those plans to council!! Bugger the snags we want egg and bacon rolls at 8 am!

**SE**

I have to say that they are three answers I haven't had from any of my interviews, but nonetheless, they are great thought provokers. And now for what is always my final question, if you could magically click your fingers and have something done, changed, fixed and absolutely in place at Diamond Valley right now, what would it be (don't be afraid to dream big)?

**ND**

My 'pie in the sky' wish would be to have a massive show court, but I don't see us getting one anytime soon, I am a realist! But imagine something Greensborough shopping centre size but for all sports!!! Right down to medical, recovery and rehab, shopping, health and all facilities for all different sports.

Realistically I would flip court 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 around so that they run the other way and punch out the sides for seating and I would put a bar court side! I would put in a friendlier more welcome after game space so that spectators would go in and use the facilities including the bar thus adding to the fundraising coffers of the DVBA.

**SE**

Again, a very different answer, normally I just get the standard show court or to be a SEABL club, along those lines, what you have suggested is very different, but could easily work. Although Mr Eagle is a pretty big fan of the show court idea.

Thanks Natalie for allowing me to talk to you. It would seem that Apollo is in good hands.

Yet another interview done with another who gives her time so freely so that our kids can have a safe and healthy environment in which to play the sport we all love.

Natalie, the Screaming Eagle salutes you.