

Written by Amanda Turner
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British coach Nick Ruddock, who branched out on his own after successful coaching stints at the national and club level, talks to IG about his life as an international coaching consultant and speaker.

British gymnastics coach **Nick Ruddock**, who branched out on his own in 2015 after successful coaching stints at the national and club level, talks to IG about his life as an international coaching consultant and speaker.

A native of Woking, Surrey, England, Ruddock was active in recreational gymnastics from age 5 to 15. He began coaching at a young age, but decided to take coaching seriously after the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. From 2011-13, he was part of the third class of UK Sport's Elite Coaching Apprenticeship Programme. Ruddock was one of only 12 emerging high-performance coaches in various sports who train alongside masters of coaching; in Ruddock's case, Canadian-born Olympic gymnastics coach **Carol-Angela Orchard** and mentor **Dennis**

Edwards

who works with Performance Impact for UK Sport, served as his mentors.

Ruddock served as junior national coach for the British women's team from 2010-14. In the team competition at the Junior European championships, the British women rose from fifth in 2010, to fourth in 2012 and then to second in 2014, placing behind gold medalist Russia and ahead of Romania. The team also won five more individual medals that year in historic success: the all-around bronze and vault gold for **Ellie Downie**, floor exercise gold for **Catherine Lyons**, floor silver and vault bronze for

Amy Tinkler

He then spent a year as personal coach to Durham's Amy Tinkler, the 2015 British national champion who helped Britain win a team bronze medal at the 2015 World Championships and then captured the bronze medal on floor at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio.

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In 2015, he saw an opportunity to go out on his own and begin consulting as a coach and speaker. He has since consulted with more than 15 international gymnastics federations including Australia, Germany, Japan, Italy and most recently, Romania, where he has been brought in as a much-needed expert on uneven bars. He has also launched an annual symposium, which he recently rebranded GymCon, that is scheduled for its third edition in June.

In this IG Online interview, Ruddock shares his observations on online coaching advice, why he chose to broaden his coaching career outside Britain, what he believes is an overemphasis on technique, building a healthier gymnastics community, and more.



Ruddock with British Olympian Amy Tinkler, whom he coached in 2015

IG: British Gymnastics is booming right now, but instead of working at a club, you became an independent consultant. Why did you decide to go out on your own and do something different?

NR: After my national coaching position I spent some club-based time with Amy Tinkler before moving into my current consultancy role which I absolutely love. The learning opportunities in my nature of work are enormous, and I enjoy being able to help the gymnastics community get closer to their goals. In recent months, I've really felt the responsibility that I have to help coaches improve best practice and knowledge, in order to improve the lives and results of the gymnasts they are coaching. It's a lot of fun and takes me all over the world. Regarding returning to club coaching, watch this space, it's not too far away.

IG: You've said that most coaches focus too much on the technical side, instead of what you have called the big picture of "happy/healthy/hungry to learn." How did this idea come to you?

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NR: Having had access to 17 national teams and thousands of coaches and clubs, I've been able to get a really good idea of patterns which emerge at federation, club and personal coaching level. I too have been magnetised as a coach to the technical side of the sport, for obvious reasons. It's the fun part, and I'm certainly not disregarding its importance. But after time you realise that technical and methodological knowledge can only take you and your athletes so far. It is mastering the art of coaching that really propels results.

Coaches now have access to every single drill and exercise ever used, so these no longer form part of a competitive advantage for people. It's now the application of this knowledge, the standards and crucially; the delivery of the content that is the "difference that makes the difference."

Soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence and relationship management should be at the core of a coach's skill set, but I don't know too many coaches who sign up for online courses or workshops in these areas. They're not as glamorous, but will have a far greater effect on their performance.

IG: Congratulations on your course in Romania. You may be the first non-Romanian/Hungarian expert to instruct coaches in Romania. How many coaches attended and will you be going back again? How do you evaluate the current gymnastics situation in Romania — besides lack of funding, what other issues do you think are affecting them right now?

NR: I've got my third trip to Deva next week, where the national team is currently located. At this point, I have eight short trips planned this year, with the initial primary focus being the development of bars, but I've already branched into other areas too. As a centralised system, it is running like a club, therefore the work is directly with the national team and their coaches.

There are a few main challenges for them at the moment, one of which as you mentioned is funding. Like many federations, coach education is also a key factor of results, and with so few high-performance coaches being active within Romania at the moment, it's always going to be difficult to sustain results at the level they previously were. That's certainly going to be a long-term project for them and not something that can change overnight.

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IG: You've also been in Australia recently, which has undergone some coaching changes with **Mihai Brestyan** taking over. What do you think Australia needs to get back into the top group of women's teams?

NR: Yes, I've spent some time consulting for Gymnastics Australia over the last few years, mostly prior to Mihai's arrival/position. I always enjoy my time there.

At federation level, it's important to differentiate between "tactics" and "strategy." Tactics can improve performance within the gym, but without a strategic backbone on a much larger scale, these results can only go so far. I was happy to advise Gymnastics Australia in some of these areas and I'm sure they'll go from strength to strength with fresh leadership at managerial level.

IG: You've launched probably the first "GymCon" — an independent symposium not associated with any federation. How did you come up with this idea, and where do you see this going in the future?

NR: This year will be my third national conference, but I've recently rebranded the event as GymCon. I'm extremely passionate about my own personal development and love creating opportunities for other coaches to have access to a high standard of education also. I'm really proud of the event which is growing fast. We're expecting our highest attendance figures this year and over 200 coaches from nine countries have already secured tickets, including those travelling as far as Australia and Hong Kong for the one-day event.

There's a lot of noise online these days, much of which is poor advice or misleading for new coaches. It's really important to me that I provide a platform for coaches to learn accurate and credible information in areas which have an impact on the lives of both athletes and coaches. As I said before, that's not always the technical side of the sport.

IG: Who have been the most influential coaches in your career as an athlete and gymnastics coach, and what did you learn from each of them?

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NR: There are just so many. Due to the nature of my work, I'm blessed to have been able to rub shoulders with some of the greatest coaches in the world. I sought the very best mentors early on in my coaching whom I owe an awful lot to, notably **Al Fong** and **Armine Barutyan-Fong**, and **Valeri Liukin**

, who all took me under their wing, and continue to guide me. The Fongs have created a truly remarkable environment, one which I have never seen emulated elsewhere, and amongst many other things, Valeri taught me all-things-technique at the purest level. I'd like to think that combining those two aspects of the sport has served me well and will continue to do so.

More recently, I've learnt a lot from working directly with many head coaches including Germany's **Ulla Koch** and Netherlands' **Gerben Wiersma**, both fantastic leaders whose values and philosophies have helped shape a great team of gymnasts and coaches.

But there really are too many individuals to mention. I owe an awful lot to others and like to reciprocate this by offering multiple education opportunities for the community, irrespective of people's location, budget and experience. The vast majority of my education has been overseas, so I feel no problem assisting coaches from all over the world, irrespective of nationality, giving back what many foreign coaches have given me.



Ruddock in Germany with sisters Helene Schäfer and Pauline Schäfer, 2017 world champion on beam

IG: Egotism seems to plague a lot of coaches. Some seem overly concerned with how their gymnasts' performance reflects on them, and they don't make appropriate adjustments in their own approach to coaching when things don't go well. Would you agree, and if so, how do you think should be addressed?

NR: Any competitive sport or activity will always breed egotism. Many coaches (including

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myself) grew out of it as they gained more experience but it's unfortunately not always the case. Some coaches can go for years and years without self-reflection or awareness about themselves, resulting in them repeating the same mistakes time and time again. Addressing this is tough as it's evident on such a mammoth scale, but in principle, if all coaches could further their understanding of themselves through reflection, self-awareness and emotional intelligence work then the community would be in a better place. Fear is the underlying reason which causes egotistic behaviour, so breaking that down is critical as a catalyst for change.

IG: The mental health of gymnasts is, of course, a huge topic right now, considering various abuse allegations of the Karolyi system in USA Gymnastics that has created a major controversy. Yet, I've heard coaches say that regretfully, being psychologically abusive is the only way you "get results" at the elite level, and that's why they prefer *not* to coach the elite level. What do you have to say about that?

NR: I would challenge any coach who says that the only way of producing elite athletes is by being abusive, and I'm sure many other coaches would too. If that was the case, I wouldn't be involved in the sport at the level I am. I've been exposed to many great coaches who work with passion, amazing values and methods and are producing athletes at the highest level of our sport, whilst simultaneously putting the welfare of the athlete first. In our current climate, there is a lot of attention on negative experiences and situations, but we shouldn't forget the army of phenomenal coaches out there doing a fantastic job.

IG: The FIG is implementing new policies to prevent sexual abuse and other misconduct in gymnastics, and many prominent American gymnasts have called for a complete culture change. What do you hope that coaches and national federations learn from the tragedy in USA Gymnastics?

NR: Well like many others, I hope that robust measures, systems and policies are put in place to mitigate the risk of anything like the recent events ever occurring again. I would like to think that the FIG and USAG can filter these lessons through to other federations around the world to ensure they are all aware of potential risks and are also adopting similar measures, irrespective of culture, previous events etc. Everybody has got to come together.

IG: UCLA head coach **Val Kondos Field** is joining your seminar this year. She's a legend in American gymnastics because of her positive approach. How did you get to know Miss Val? Any idea what she is going to talk about?

NR: Miss Val was an obvious choice as she epitomises the theme of this year's event, *Happy, Healthy and Hungry*

. We met for the first time in London at the Olympics when we had dinner along with my former national coaching partner Carol-Angela Orchard. I'm incredibly excited to welcome her to GymCon and know she'll add tremendous value to the audience, where she'll be sharing her knowledge and expertise on creating the right climate within the gym, and balancing "getting the work done" with enjoying the process. We also have Dr.

Dave Tilley

and Olympian

Nile Wilson

on stage at the event, and of course myself. It's going to be a great event which really serves the audience well.

IG: Any other thoughts on the state of gymnastics today?

NR: Most nations are actually in the same kind of position. Limited funding, resources, high-level coaches etc. British Gymnastics has done a fantastic job at creating a self-sustaining system, with an abundance of education opportunity, plus facilities etc. This is the only way to ensure long-term results irrespective of the climate, and I'm sure will serve BG well for many years. Other federations should endeavour to do the same (easier to say than do!) and focus on "war planning," not just "battle planning." That means looking at the long-term strategic plan and not just cycle to cycle.

There are some great minds in the sport sharing a very important message of athlete welfare and prioritising both their physical and mental health. We quite rightly will see a greater emphasis on this area in the future and I think we have some catching up to do within the world of sports science and medicine in comparison to many other sports.

I'm optimistic that with collaboration, we can all move the sport forward positively, and I'm happy to be part of that journey.

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