

## Inside the BCL: Life as an Assistant Coach with Anna Montañana

FUENLABRADA (Spain) - "Two roads diverged in the woods and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Reads the final line of Robert Frost's often quoted poem. More often people use those words as a passing phrase or colloquialism, with the intent just to describe doing things differently.

For Anna Montañana, those words describe a genuine life choice to blaze a trail less trodden. Or more precisely a path untrodden - as on the 8th of February 2017 Anna Montañana became Coach Montañana, and also became the first female coach to hold a position on the technical staff of Spain's top Basketball league.



*Coach Montañana is growing as a coach under Head Coach Nestor Garcia*

Whilst Montañana recognizes the achievement of becoming the first female coach in the ACB, she also feels that more female coaches should be given the same opportunity.

"When I started in Montakit Fuenlabrada last season, it was all over the media here in Spain. It was something exceptional. We need to get to the point where this isn't a new phenomenon anymore and basketball society sees it as something every day. Definitely more women should approach and work to get into these jobs. As women, we need to go for it and we also need the GMs or coaches to give us an opportunity."

The decision to coach men at the professional level was more than a snap decision. As with many people that achieve extraordinary things, for Montañana it was a long-standing ambition that required more than a little determination to achieve. But at the same time, she is equally determined that coaching men and women are not mutually exclusive career paths.

"It had always been in my mind that I wanted to coach men but I also thought it was tough for a woman to coach at a professional level. I wasn't going to quit just because it was going to be hard or because there weren't female coaches in Spain. Of course, I would also love to coach women, I've been working in the youth National Teams (NT's) with Spain during the last few summers, enjoying and growing as a coach with the experience. I picture myself being a coach, for women or men, either way."

Before the coaching career, was also an outstanding playing career. After starting in Spain's top league -the Liga Femenina de Baloncesto - at the tender age of 14, Montañana's career followed a slightly more well-trodden, but no less exceptional path. An education at George Washington University and a very successful NCAA career - where she averaged 16.7 Points in her senior year - then lead to a professional career in Europe and the WNBA with the Minnesota Lynx. Highlights of that career included multiple Spanish cups, league titles and a Euroleague winners medal in 2011 with a Perfumerias Avenida. That Avenida team boasted the likes of Alba Torrens, Marta Xargay and Laura Gil - all of whom went on to become important pieces in of one of Spain's strongest NT generations.



*Anna Montañana wore the #12 for Spain, gaining 129 caps over 7 years*

In fact, it was on international duty with Spain that Montañana's achieved many of her own personal career highlights.

"It's kind of hard to find a single highlight in so many years. Fortunately, I lived great moments but I can choose the top 3 which were winning the bronze medal with the Spanish NT in 2010 at the World Championship, winning the Euroleague in 2011 with Perfumerias Avenida and playing for the Minnesota Lynx in the WNBA."



*Spain celebrated a Bronze at the FIBA World Championships in 2010*

Even during that playing career, Montañana knew that coaching was always on the horizon.

"Yes, I feel like I always did know, basketball has been my life. I started the classes for coaching in 2008 while I was still playing. My ex-teammates and coaches had been telling me that they saw in my a future coaching career - maybe because I have such a passion for the game."

One of those ex-teammates was none other than Becky Hammon, who is one of the few similarly minded women's players to follow a similar road less traveled, as she became the first full-time female Assistant Coach in the NBA, with the San Antonio Spurs.



*Becky Hammon (Russia #5), was a teammate for Montañana in Valencia*

"I played with Becky in Valencia in 2010. She was a great player and you could see then that she could be a great coach. Definitely, if someone like Greg Popovich hires her, it isn't because she is a woman, it's because he found talent and wanted to add it to his staff. It is very simple. He was a Pioneer, as are Montakit Fuenlabrada."

Of course, Montañana isn't the first female Assistant Coach in the BCL. Lauriane Dolt is now in her second season with SIG Strasbourg and Montañana was also keen to acknowledge her role in making it possible for more female coaches to work in men's professional leagues in Europe.

"We need people to stop prejudging us just because we are women and find equal opportunities at the workplace. SIG Strasbourg also needs to be considered pioneers. I would love to meet Lauriane Dolt one day."



*Lauriane Dolt is another trailblazer with SIG Strasbourg*

With the ambition of transitioning from playing to a coaching career, Montañana not only values the variety of experience she gained during her playing career, but went on to confirm that it was conscious decision to take in as many different basketball cultures and coaching styles as she could.

"After I decided to leave Spain, I played in USK Prague, Turkey, and France, three of the top European country basketball-wise. I wanted to learn different basketball styles and ways to see basketball. I thought it was really important to build my future as a coach. I had the need to see other coaches, practices, players on a daily bases."

When you watch the men's and women's game, the differences between the way the sport is played can be stark, but with such a wealth of experience behind her, Montañana has always felt at home working in the men's game.

"There are differences between men and women because men can play above the ring, are faster and bigger, therefore, the spacing is not the same for men and women. But in my opinion, it's important to deal with them normally and adjust depending on where and who you are coaching. I feel like I find the same kind of personalities and basketball styles in women and men, the way you coach men and women is a bit different mostly because of the psychology you use."

The understanding of the technical and tactical differences between the men's and women's game is something that is a daily part of Montañana's working life and role with Fuenlabrada. When describing her role with the team, it's clear that the ability to see the similarities between her own experiences and what the players are experiencing is also vital to the work she performs with the team.

"I love the individual work, It's very innate in me to be close to the players. I feel what they feel because I was in every situation they may be during my career. I'm a competitor, so I try to help them individually to help the team in many ways and to help them to read the game. I also do the opponent individual scouting trying to help our players to stop their tendencies."

Montañana is also very keen to credit Coach Nestor Garcia for her accelerated development this season.

"Nestor Garcia is a coach that allows Assistant Coaches to develop and be an active part of his decisions. He delegates and creates a great atmosphere to work in. I'm super lucky to start my professional career with him because he's allowing me to grow at a higher speed as a coach."



*Coach Nestor Garcia has developed Montañana this season*

So with this accelerated development what does the future hold for Spain's first female ACB Assistant Coach? Montañana herself is keen to stress the priority to turn the season around for Fuenlabrada.

"Last year we had one of the best seasons in the Clubs history that allowed us to play in the Basketball Champions League. Both the ACB and BCL are very competitive leagues and at some moments we struggled to keep the level. Our first goal is to maintain the level in ACB and be able to keep growing as a Club."

On a personal note, Montañana doesn't hide her ambition to perhaps one day become the first female Head Coach in any men's professional league, but for now, her focus is on the things she can control and enjoying the journey.

"In this profession, you never know what's next. I want to be a coach, I feel like I'm in a great place but I also know how volatile this job is. I'm enjoying being an Assistant Coach and I'm also a very ambitious woman. I'm always seeking challenges, so we will see what the future holds for me. This is my passion and I only know one way to get to my dreams, working."

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## **Diccon Lloyd-Smeath**

Diccon is a basketball coach and analyst living in London. Constantly digging in the crates of box scores and clicking through hours of game footage. Diccon is on the hunt for the stories within the stories. If you like to get a closer look at what's going in the Basketball Champions League, you have found it.

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