

SOCCER



ELSA/GETTY

Jill Ellis will coach her final U.S. women's national team match Sunday in Chicago after becoming the first coach to win two Women's World Cup titles.

Grit and grace

Jill Ellis is content as she closes a USWNT coaching career marked by unprecedented success, challenges

BY ALICIA DELGALLO | Pro Soccer USA

PALMETTO BAY — People gawked every time teenage Jillian Anne Ellis opened her mouth. Her thick British accent was hard to understand. Even simply stating her name became a chore.

“Huh? Julian?” they’d say. She began going by Jill.

Before moving to the United States in July 1981, Ellis was more outgoing. She soon became painfully shy. She wouldn’t speak very much and let friends order for her at restaurants to avoid the “I’m sorry, what?”

Now 53, Ellis is still an introvert, but her life is a far departure from that withdrawn younger self she remembers. For the past 5 1/2 years, she’s been in the spotlight as head coach of the United States women’s national team — a team bigger, better and more outspoken than ever before.



Media attention, public interest and scrutiny peaked when the U.S. won the World Cup in 2015 and again this past summer, when Ellis became the first coach to win two Women’s World Cup titles.

Do you support equal pay? What do you think about President Trump’s tweet calling out Megan Rapinoe? Did your staff scout England’s hotel? Do you identify as English or American? Are your players too arrogant? Why did your players celebrate all 13 goals against Thailand? Can you beat France?

During World Cup news conferences, Ellis responded to all the questions while maintaining the same mild demeanor for which she’s known, a half-smile always on her face.

“I can go talk in front of groups and those sorts of things, but I’m most content to go sit in the corner of a room,” Ellis said during a wide-ranging, exclusive interview with Pro Soccer USA. “I struggle to make conversations.”

It’s like a stage persona, she explained. Off stage, she’s a lifelong learner who loves people and teaching. She’s a wife, pet lover, peacock caretaker and gamer — her daughter revealed Ellis likes fantasy role-

playing game “The Elder Scrolls,” then laughed and said, “Oh, she’s going to kill me.”

Ellis is the goofy mom who loudly sings Tina Turner’s “Proud Mary” in the car, turning the wheel slightly to roll with the lyrics. And she often starts a sentence with “My dad said” to help explain her way of thinking.

On stage, Ellis has been one of the world’s most successful coaches.

FIFA named her its 2019 Coach of the Year. She handled a lot of criticism along the way from those who doubted her tactical knowledge and roster-building moves when she took over in 2014 and began revamping the U.S. team. She also balanced being an employee of the U.S. Soccer Federation with supporting her players’ fight with the organization for equitable pay.

Sunday afternoon will be her last time on that stage. Ellis will step down as head coach following the Americans’ final Victory Tour match against Korea Republic at Soldier Field in Chicago. She enters the match with a 106-7-18 record with the U.S. national team. Thursday’s 2-0 victory over Korea Republic made her the winningest coach in program history.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



ALICIA DELGALLO/PRO SOCCER USA

United States women’s national team coach Jill Ellis, left, with her daughter, Lily, and wife, Betsy, following a Q&A session at Lily’s school in Palmetto Bay.

“After 2015, a lot of changes came and she had a tough job ahead of her,” U.S. veteran Crystal Dunn said. “We did well, the team came together and it was great.”

“I think it’s really important as a female coach that she has that under her belt, and I think it’s empowered a lot of people to want to stay in soccer. She’s paved the way for women.”

Ellis was born in Cowplain, England, a suburb of Portsmouth she says isn’t as rural as it sounds. She described her childhood as happy and sports-centric.

The family wasn’t poor but couldn’t afford everything it wanted either. She and her brother, Paul, often satisfied soccer yearnings by playing “mini football” in the backyard with a tennis ball.

Her father, John, was an adventurer and traveled a lot as a Royal Marines com-

mando who served for 21 years. He’d plan family vacations to be lifelong memories.

Every summer, the family took an eight-hour drive to Edinburgh, Scotland, to visit grandparents. To this day, it’s Ellis’ favorite city. Her mother, Margaret, worked in food service and took care of the children when John was away.

When her parents were in their mid-40s, they decided to pick up and move to the United States for a new adventure building Soccer Academy, a family business focused on providing young players opportunities in the sport.

Growing up in England in the 1970s, Ellis couldn’t name a single female soccer player. The English Football Association didn’t lift its 50-year ban on women’s teams until five years after Ellis was born.

Turn to **Ellis, Next Page**