

## BUILDING INTEGRITY

William Maniotis'05G\*  
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**Kelly O'Connell, women's basketball coach**

Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

With under a minute left and her team up by 30 points, women's basketball coach Kelly O'Connell is waving her hands frantically on the sidelines, calling several players' attention to something crucial she saw them do—or not do—on the court.

With victory well in tow, you would think she'd relax a bit, enjoy the moment as the last few seconds tick away. But not Kelly. She's still teaching. "I owe it to them. Every one of them. It doesn't stop—whether we're ahead by 30 points or down by 30."

The notion that coaching ever stops seems silly to O'Connell. Her professional and personal life, her players' academic lives, their lives on the basketball court—all are inextricably bound together. From the moment she arrives on campus each day, her office buzzes with activity, whether she is putting a practice plan together, watching film, making a recruiting call, or having a heart-to-heart chat with one of her players. In a short time, she has assembled a team prepared not only to win together—they went into the semester break with an 8-2 record after posting only three wins for the previous season—but to stick together, weathering the inevitable storms that assault teams on and off the court.

Kelly had to learn to weather life's inevitable storms earlier than most. At 16, she lost her mother in a car accident involving a drunk driver. "I was lost," she says. "My coaches—in both high school and college—and my teammates saved me." While the shock of losing a parent at such a young age is something with which nobody is prepared to cope, Kelly's deepest coaching convictions emerged from learning to forge ahead despite heartache and suffering.

"Failure and success, heartache and joy—my players need to be prepared to deal with whatever comes their way. Focusing on the moment, playing with intensity throughout the game—there's no other way. I constantly tell my players that it is the 'hard' that makes it fun," she says.

A demanding task master in practice and a relentless, emotional presence on the sideline during games, O'Connell believes her players reflect her attitude. The fire in her voice when her players are at work on a basketball court motivates her team. She expects them to perform to the best of their abilities, both physically and mentally, on every play, without excuses. When she makes a mistake, she will call herself out—even if it's in the middle of a game. "How can I expect them to respect me, to listen to my criticism, to take ownership for their mistakes, if I am not willing to do so myself?"

That is not to say that O'Connell uses praise sparingly; often, a subtle play that goes unnoticed by a casual observer draws her praise. Her brand of "old school" discipline might seem odd to players who she feels may have been coddled before they came to her. Part of her job is to toughen her charges up. "Life won't let them off the hook. It would be irresponsible of me to treat them with kid gloves all the time," she says.

But even the demanding coach routine takes a back seat sometimes. Last year, her first with the team, she accompanied most of the team to the Dion Center for a late night meal after a particularly grueling day on the court. She found herself suddenly involved in a "chair" fight with the whole team. "It was some harmless fun," she says. "I think several of them looked at me kind of funny, realized that there was this goofy person inside of this coach of theirs, too."



Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

There's nothing goofy about what O'Connell has built in less than 16 months at Rivier, after a brief stint as head basketball and softball coach at Becker College and assistant coaching positions at Westfield State College and Elms College (her alma mater). Her colleagues agree that the integrity she brings to her job will help her players become perennial contenders—not only in the Great Northeast Athletic Conference, but in their lives. ■

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