



Name: Jennifer Martin

College: Lady Margaret Hall

Degree: PPE

Years of Study: 1994-1996



Our next Profile in this series features a conversation with Jennifer Martin, first female to be appointed Club Captain of OUCCC, and blues runner of 1994 and 1995. She was interviewed by Anika Schwarze-Chintapatla, the 2024/5 Club Captain and the 9th woman to hold this position over the last 50 years. It was a joyful exchange featuring their shared passion for OUCCC, and an opportunity to reflect on challenges and progress in the club, including their experiences as female leaders of OUCCC.

“I have my Blues certificate on my wall instead of my medical degree! It wasn’t about having the kit, or having a jumper, or the status of it all. It just felt like an achievement, and I was really proud”.

Early Life

Jennifer, came up to Oxford as a mature student, with a medical degree and several years’ work as a doctor under her belt. Reading PPE as a second degree in Oxford gave Jennifer the opportunity to explore the world of policy and politics. She was already an experienced track runner, racing at national competitions whilst at Otago University, New Zealand.

“I knew how to compete, and I knew how to race. But 3000m was the maximum you could do at the time. Cross country was appealing as you could run further. Initially, it would be 3-4km, but as time went on the distances for women increased to 6km”

New Zealand, however, had had a less established system of sports networks and opportunities for women compared to the UK.

“As a young woman, there weren't many sports options around- mainly hockey, ballet, gymnastics sailing and netball. Running in comparison was a leveller as anyone could get involved. The running scene was starting to grow, as a fun pastime activity for both old and young and women were welcome. However there still weren't many opportunities for competition for women and limited distance options. By comparison, the running at Oxford when I got there was already at a much higher standard, and many more women were engaged”.

University Days: OUCCC in the 90's

Anika asked Jennifer how she found out about OUCCC.

“I heard about OUCCC through word of mouth. I was told to get in touch with Megan Clarke (women's captain at the time) and she told me to come along to the 'Rad Cam' where we would meet for a run. It all went from there. In a similar way, I would meet other people from New Zealand and tell them about OUCCC. News spread - it was all word of mouth at the time.”

By the time Jennifer had become Club Captain, a new medium of communications was developing.

“I received an email from an international (US) athlete who was keen to join the club. I remember being really excited, as I had never received such an email before. It meant that the USA had heard about us, which was really cool. This was probably the advent of internet use to contact athletes and initiate communications in this way.”

How did you find Oxford compared to the New Zealand 'fun running' scene?

“Joining OUCCC was so exciting, I found that Oxford's running scene had some very high calibre people - talented runners from both the UK and Overseas all training and racing in the same club. Renowned talents at the time included Simon Muggleston – who ran 3.58 for the mile and was European Junior 5000m champion, as well as teammates Nnenna Lynch, Devon Martin, Mara Myers, Steph Cook, some of whom went on to become Olympians”. Jennifer enjoyed immersing herself in the club with them.

The 1990s marked an evolution for OUCCC. In 1990 under the Captaincy of Chris Daniels, OUCCC took on a distinct identity from its now sister club OUAC. This development was a reflection of the growth of the club, and its strength that would follow in years to come.

For the women's teams, the 1990s were a purple patch, with a Blues winning streak from 1993-2001 and the Turtles taking just one loss from 1988-2000. For the men however, the period of 1991-1999 was a barren time, with consecutive losses for the Blues from 1992-1995, the Tortoises losing eight matches from 1990-1997 and the Snails with just one win from 1985-1996. Despite having some fantastic athletes, depth on the men's side was limited.

Entering OUCCC in the midst of this, Jennifer reflected on the changes needed to turn around the Club results.

“At the time, the club was undergraduate-dominated, with a tendency for performance to be impacted by 'social priorities'!”

A key experience for Jennifer, which motivated her to transform the club's attitude toward performance running, related to one of her Blues matches. The day before, she attended a wedding in Preston, with the plan to set off early the next morning to ensure she made it to the race. Unfortunately, transport delays meant that Jennifer arrived just as the race was starting, and the reserve runners participated instead.

“This outcome was a big deal to me and if I had known it would happen, I wouldn’t have attended that wedding. There was no way I was going to let something like this happen again. It was a big moment personally but I felt that as a club, no-one cared enough to check that the foreigner understood that catching public transport, was a major risk in the UK. Especially for our most important race of the year. This crystallised the realisation that for winning performances, and to have the best teams on the day, we needed an attitude change. We needed to professionalise.”

Becoming the First Female Club Captain

As a busy student working locum doctor shifts on the side of her degree, Jennifer found herself initially unsure if Club Captaincy was the right role for her. However, with a clear vision for the club, Jennifer decided she wanted to make a difference and was encouraged by the previous captains to put herself forwards for election.

“I was encouraged by my peers that I was the right person to make that change even though it would mean addressing the performance of the men’s team. I was probably more confident than some at the time, being a bit older and from my medical experience understanding the link between leadership and performance. Megan and Simon both told me to step up and put my hat in the ring, and I did”.

Importantly for the women’s teams, my agenda went beyond improving club performances. The women were already performing well against their Cambridge counterparts and proud of their achievements but we needed to build depth and succession. There was also a feeling amongst the female OUCCC athletes, that despite their winning streak and their successes at Varsity and beyond, the women’s sport was receiving far less recognition and publicity.

Anika reflects that this is not a phenomenon limited to Oxbridge, or cross country running, but a wider societal phenomenon that still exists on many levels within sport;

“Even today, only 8% of sports media coverage¹ is devoted to women vs. men and the impact of this on female athletes is profound – the inequity starts at a financial level, which in turn inhibits investment in coaching, facilities and ultimately performance. The nature of such sports media coverage, across many sports disciplines, can and often does erode respect for women’s sport.”

With a desire to create more recognition of female achievement in sport, there was collective support from teammates for Jennifer to take on the key leadership position of Club Captain.

“I had to be elected into the position, as is custom. I remember giving my speech - the room went silent when I had finished. I remember being asked:

‘You’re running for the Women’s captain, right?’

‘No no, I’m going for overall captain’.

It was quiet. I think there was shock in the room. For some, I think there were worries about my competence as a woman in this position. But when I announced that I wanted to be the Club Captain the men’s candidate decided to run for the men’s captain instead, and so I ended up being unopposed.”

With a view of shaping the club into one of more disciplined training, Jennifer funnelled her competitive spirit and became a strong leader, setting ambitious goals on both the men and women’s sides for double blues victory.

¹ Women’s Sport Trust; Latest research from Women’s Sport Trust delves into visibility and fandom of women’s sport in 2023 (Feb 2024)

OUCCC Female Club Captains

1995-1996 **Jennifer Martin** (LMH)

2000-2001 **Bethan Hopewell** (Wolfson)

2004-2005 **Alice Beverly** (St Peters)

2013-2014 **Naomi Webber** (Worcester)

2014-2015 **Clair McIlvennie** (Trinity)

2015-2016 **Beth Murray** (Jesus)

2018-2019 **Helene Greenwood** (University)

2020-2021 **Ella Higgs-Sharrocks** (Balliol)

2024-2025 **Anika Schwarze-Chintapatla** (Trinity)

OUCCC's Female Club Captains

Captaincy & 'The Vision'

"I felt a duty to perform for the university, and my main aim was to win as a club. This meant we had to professionalise."

Jennifer identified many aspects of performance racing that could be targeted to improve club performances. One was advocating for good performance diets (*or rather less bad diet and less alcohol*) such that athletes could fuel optimally on race day. She ensured that transport was well organised so athletes would arrive for races fully prepared and in plenty of time. Jennifer also advocated for increased transparency around club finances, prioritising spending which benefited performance over social activities. Whilst she met some resistance, her drive towards success was undoubted.

From a training perspective, Jennifer's captaincy included increased coaching for the women's team, who had ambitions of competing internationally.

"We didn't have formal coaching input previously. The women in the team would support each other but there was no official coaching plan. Instead, the teammates who had home clubs and coaches would bring ideas from home training and share them with the group."

With more professional input for the athletes, the women were able to put their international ambitions into action – many had never competed internationally before.

"We were told by the coach: If you want to compete with the Europeans, you need to make a commitment to the sport. He offered to put together a programme for the women and he gradually upped our mileage. We improved a lot. We went from winning varsity and Hyde Park Relays to coming 3rd in an international relay competition in Paris. We were training more consistently, and it was making a big difference."

With a strong team of training partners, the results kept improving. It is no pure coincidence that Jennifer's contemporaries included women who went on to be Olympians - Steph Cook (modern pentathlon) and Mara Myers (Marathon), as well as Emma Coleman an exceptional runner and 1993 Blues Varsity Winner.

On the men's side, the trajectory would follow. Following Jennifer's 1995-1996 Captaincy, the Men's Blues broke their losing streak in 1996, and by 1997 Oxford won five of the six races taking place in Shotover. By 1999 there was an 8-0 whitewash win by Oxford, and in the year 2000 the women's team took home the British Universities title; it was a golden era for the club.

In the years after Jennifer's Captaincy, Chris Maxwell furthered the inclusivity of OUCCC, by emphasising the significance of the non-Blues races. This was done by introducing the 'Varsity Cup Challenge', that appreciated the importance of the II-Vs matches. For Jennifer too, it was important that the elitism of the sport was removed and that all club members would be valued.

“During my time we had a great captain of the second's team and so there was always a real team atmosphere. She was a 'no bullshit' kind of person and always made sure everyone was showing up to training, but it meant that they were consistently beating Cambridge, and the team were really close. I remember the seconds team got medals for the first time at the end of their season and I was really pleased about that because I thought they did a heroic job and worked so hard for it.”

In 1998, the Lee Trophy for 'top turtle' was donated to the Club, to be awarded to the first Oxford finisher of the Women's 2nds race. This was donated by Dorchie Lee, winner of the 1997 race and contains some significant names amongst OUCCC's female athletes (including Anika!).

Reflections in Hindsight

Attitudes to the First Female Club Captain

Anika asks Jennifer whether she encountered any adverse attitudes as the first female to hold the position of Club Captain.

“Indirectly, yes - I was assertive and explained my line of thinking, and I would get compliments for being organised, but indirect feedback that I was thought 'bossy'”

They reflected on this particularly gendered put down and Anika asked how these comments affected her.

“I had to work to rise above these comments, and I definitely felt them, but I knew that my values were all directed towards the club and its performance. When the team was doing well and we were getting those wins, I saw that as proving that I was doing my job well.”

Recipients of the Lee Trophy for 'Top Turtle':

- 1998 **K Wilder** Exeter (1st)
- 1999 **L Ward** University (1st)
- 2000- **L Ward** University (1st)
- 2001- **E Crowley** St. Anne's (2nd)
- 2002- **A Beverly** St. Peter's (2nd)
- 2003- **L Bromilow** St. Hugh's (3rd)
- 2004- **E Brathwaite** Mansfield (1st)
- 2005- **S Pemberton** Mansfield (1st)
- 2006- **A Crocker** New College (1st)
- 2007- **C Plateau** Oriel (1st)
- 2008- **C Kane** Christ Church (1st)
- 2009- **B Gardner** St Catherine's (1st)
- 2010- **C Mullarkey** Trinity (1st)
- 2011- **S Saller** St Catherine's (1st)
- 2012- **R Penfold** Green Templeton (1st)
- 2013- **S Paulson** Green Templeton (1st)
- 2014- **H Plaschkes** Jesus (1st)
- 2015- **E Bulstrode** Merton (3rd)
- 2016 **E DeCamp** St. Peter's (3rd)
- 2017- **E Bolton** Keble (1st)
- 2018- **C Shipley** Worcester (2nd)
- 2019- **C Anderson** Magdalen (1st)
- 2020- COVID
- 2021- **L Major** Merton (1st)
- 2022- **M Owen**
- 2023- **C Buckley** Oriel (1st)
- 2024- **A Schwarze-Chintapatla** Trinity (2nd)

Recipients of the Lee Trophy

What was the Club Structure like in the 1990's?

“The club was structured as a committee of 3-4 plus an honorary patron, John De’Ath. In addition, a council of Alumni seemed to hold influence over the club – they didn’t interfere with our day to day running activities, but sometimes overturned decisions of our committee, and we never knew how or why – communication was fairly non-existent. I recall they would give us access to fancy dinners and important places and organised the Annual Dinner in London which someone recalled the Beatles once attended! I tended to focus on my job and leave them to it.”

How do you reflect on the experience of women as a whole at OUCCC during your time?

“We were never made to feel like second class citizens but in hindsight it’s clear to me that we were. Priority in terms of funding, training and even seats on the bus were given to the men. Despite the men’s long losing streak and women doing so well, the focus was always on the men, for example magazine and newspaper articles about the Varsity match often disregarded the women’s race or added it as a footnote in the results.

It was irritating that the women’s team were doing so well, but no-one took any notice – particularly after winning BUCS in 2000. Perhaps that also reflects the fact the media which took an interest in the club at the time was also very ‘white-male’ and conformed to the Oxbridge stereotype.

From my perspective, the women were an interesting and more internationally diverse group than the men and had some great stories about their journeys into running. We were smaller in number (about 15% of the club) and stuck together, training as a team.

We felt privileged to be in Oxford and attending the University at all, especially being part of a high performing running scene. It wasn’t an opportunity our mothers would have had. I remember being absurdly grateful to be ‘allowed’ to run the 5000m when rules changed in my last year.”

What was OUCCC like socially?

“Socially, activities focussed on the places (often pubs) that the men liked to gather. Women regularly organised it all, but the men tended to dominate with a kind of banter that left women on the sidelines, which meant women often left early.”

Anika explains that the club now has dedicated men’s and women’s social secs on the committee, whose role is to organise socials that cater for all members of the club. *“Our social secs make an effort to ensure everyone feels welcome and included, whilst having a good time! I was social sec in my second year and I loved the range of things we got up to, whether it was a night out or something more wholesome”.*

What are you most proud of and what would you change if you did it again?

“At the time I was very competitive, always striving to give my best in training and competition. I can see now that maybe I over-did it and didn’t provide so well for those who only want to run for enjoyment.

I focussed on people who were already engaged with the running scene rather than encouraging allcomers into the sport. Now I see the importance of wider engagement - for wellbeing, wider connections, friendships – so many ways it benefits a community.

It’s something I want to encourage when I have more space from full time work. It’s a joy to run now without the competitive pressures, which has its potentially destructive side. I am finding there is so much more to it than chasing times (and beating Cambridge!).”

They discuss the vision that OUCCC now strives to fulfil - catering for all levels of running, from beginner, to social, improver and elite- and its aim to be a 'community for life' which connects and supports its members on their running journey through university and rest of life.

What about the kit? How much has that changed?

"I recall that the men had singlets, and we wanted our own distinctive identity, so we trialled leotards. We thought they would look really stylish on the track but, looking back, I don't think they did us any favours".

Jennifer recollected the white shorts that were worn at Varsity matches and the struggle of trying to navigate the 'see through' factor that came with them. Anika was pleased to share with Jennifer that the white shorts have since been replaced with navy or black shorts, as part of a global sports movement to tackle period insecurity.

'I love that. About time!' remarks Jennifer.

Where is Jennifer now?

Jennifer concludes by talking medicine with Anika – (also a doctor in training). She is based in Newcastle, Australia working in the world of policy and the pharmaceutical industry.

Still an active runner, she has enjoyed staying connected with some of her former teammates, whilst recently reconnecting with more contemporaries via the OUCCC LinkedIn Page! She is always thrilled to hear from others, and hopes that other alumni too are able to use OUCCC platforms to find each other again! (*please reach out on LinkedIn via the OUCCC page*)

As a Rhodes Scholar she has regular invitations to reunions in Oxford, and very much hopes to join us at the 50th Anniversary of Women's Varsity Cross Country in December. We are looking forward to hosting a large alumni reunion for the occasion.

Written by

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