For Atlanta Dream Head Coach, Nicki Collen, nothing is a given. Collen was an assistant coach from 2001 until 2018 when she finally got her opportunity to be the face of a team. In her first season after initial struggles, the Dream took the WNBA by storm and finished 23-9 as the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference.

“We walked into my first season and really changed the roster over to some degree,” Collen said. “[The team] had something to prove to me, I had something to prove to them, and I think we played with a chip on our shoulder.”

The next season was not so successful. The team couldn’t get out of the midseason lull and missed the playoffs entirely. There’s a whole new outlook for this upcoming year for both Collen and the team. She wants to reset the mentality of her players.

“I think [last year] we got a little comfortable because our roster was almost the same from one year to the next,” Collen said. “I learned more about leadership in a year of losing than I did in a year when we were winning. Nothing is given. You earn everything, day by day, possession by possession.”

Collen isn’t looking to bounce from this new coaching job very quickly. After losing her sister to a battle with cancer five years ago, she is focused on the here and now.

The game is what Collen truly loves. Coming from an engineering background in college, she loves the way basketball can be a chess match. Trying to take down an opponent and manipulate their weakness is what she obsesses over. Realistically, Collen wants to follow trendsetters like Becky Hampton, an assistant coach of the San Antonio Spurs.

“I’ve been around the NBA enough now through the [Atlanta Hawks] to know that [coaching in the NBA] might be more of a long-term goal of mine than I would’ve ever thought,” Collen said. “There was a time when women didn’t coach in the NBA, so you don’t think it’s a possibility. What I do is the same as what Lloyd Pierce (Atlanta Hawks Head Coach) does. He just does it a little bit different, and he has more resources, coaches, facilities and all these things. But when you talk about basketball or breaking the game down, we’re all coaching the same thing.”

Although coaching jobs were originally given to men, women are finally getting their shot as the WNBA has been at the forefront of the women’s rights movement. But she still has goals for the women that follow behind her in the WNBA.

“What I would love to see is us, as a league and society, finding ways to continue to push women, former players who have played at the highest level, who then have the opportunity to get in at the ground level and work their way up,” Collen said. “I think there has to be a bit of a grassroots movement to continue to empower women in coaching to stay in the coaching profession.”

Collen wants to see women take advantage of all the opportunities that are given to them. She loves being a part of a movement and working towards a better future for women as a collective.

“I just would love to see continued growth,” Collen said. “I’m someone that worked my way up in the college game, who coached at a lot of different levels. I truly believe in outworking and outperforming people for opportunity and not being given opportunity that’s not deserved, but I think it’s finding ways to continue to give people opportunities so that they can get that experience, they can get to the point where they’re going to outperform, outthink, outwork their opposition.”