

## **S4 E20: Fighting For Gender Equity**

(AJ II & Elana Meyers Taylor)

*Previously recorded on Sunday, May, 19 2019*

0:00 AJ: This week on *Max Out Time*: three-time Olympic medalist, two-time world champion and President of Women's Sports Foundation, Elana Meyers Taylor of Team USA Bobsledding.

0:12 [Audio of Elana]: My major goal is to keep serving, not only serving elite athletes and offering more grants and opportunities that way. But, also continue to serve the younger athletes and continue to get more women involved in sports.

0:24 Intro Song: 'For the City'

1:00 AJ: Elana, how are you today, what's going on?

1:03 Elana: I'm good, how are you doing?

1:04 AJ: I'm doing fine. Thank you so much for coming on the show today. I really wanted you to come and share your story with everyone out there. Three-time Olympic medalist, two-time world champion, in the sport of bobsled. Can you just give the listeners something about yourself and when you started playing sports? Your fondest memories as a child, your inspirations and who you looked up to?

1:30 Elana: Yeah, well thanks for having me on, um it's a pleasure to be here. I was always pretty athletic, always doing stuff outside but I didn't really get in organized sports until the age of nine. At that point I saw the Olympics and my father was actually running back in the NFL, for the Atlanta Falcons so I have been exposed to it pretty early –

1:52 AJ: Hold on, hold on...what year did your dad play in the NFL? I clearly didn't do enough of my research.

1:57 Elana: [laughs] '82 to '87. Right before the collective bargaining agreement, that's when he stopped playing –

2:05 AJ: And right before Prime Time was drafted by the falcons too.

2:09 Elana: Yep, yeah! [laughs].

2:11 AJ: Gotcha, okay, alright, keep going –

2:15 Elana: Yeah Prime Time, actually, he is one of my favorite athletes of all time, because what he has been able to do in two sports has been incredible. There is actually a really good 30 for 30 about him –

2:26 AJ: I haven't seen it yet, I haven't had a chance to see it but he is in my opinion, the best athlete of all time. Like you said, playing in the World Series and in the NFL game within the same weekend, I don't know how anyone can do it.

2:42 Elana: Yeah it is just incredible and and being in Atlanta during the time, being able to see him at this prime was pretty cool. But also I think it goes back and forth between him and Bo Jackson, between who was the best athlete of all time. I think Bo without some of his injuries, maybe he would make an argument –

3:03 AJ: He would make a pretty good argument for sure.

3:05 Elana: But anyways, so growing up I was always in sports, always into athletics and started playing softball at the age of nine, but also played basketball, ran track, played soccer. You name it, I played it, but with all the intentions of getting to the Olympics someday.

3:23 AJ: Really? That's always been your goal?

3:25 Elana: Always, since the age of nine and I had a chance growing up in Atlanta to see the Olympics first hand and see what it was all about and I was like, whoa this is so cool! I have to figure out a way to do this! I come from a military family so being able to represent your country, we have a lot of pride in that. I wanted to represent my country, but the military wasn't for me and I thought I could be an athlete and do that as well. Fortunately, I have been able to live that dream.

3:51 AJ: You're clearly doing it. An Olympic athlete in two different sports, both rugby and bobsledding?

3:57 Elana: Oh! Not an Olympic in rugby. –

4:02 AJ: I jumped the gun there!

4:06 Elana: Yeah, but rugby was pretty funny because I was training for the 2014 Olympics for bobsled. In bobsled during the summers, we just run and lift. There's no ice anywhere in the world so we're not actually on ice, we just skiing strong and faster. We can train anywhere we want and the summer leading up to the 2014 games, I was actually in Chula Vista, California. We have an Olympic training centre training there, and the US rugby 7's team was out there as well. Coach saw me training and was like, "well, why don't you come out for rugby?" and I was like, I'm kind of busy right now –

4:39 AJ: [laughs] Just being an Olympic athlete!

4:42 Elana: Yeah, I'll give you a call after the Olympics. A week after the Olympics, lo and behold I was headed out to Chula Vista and started playing rugby.

4:50 AJ: Amazing, what was the transition like?

4:52 Elana: [laughs] Very humbling!

4:57 AJ: Football and rugby are the same. Football and rugby are similar, I mean you got it in your genes!

5:03 Elana: They are similar and I can run very hard but football actually has stoppages in the games, rugby does not. It's a big difference.

5:11 AJ: That is difficult, that is difficult water breaks and half time are vital [laughs].

5:16 Elana: Yes, especially, bobsled, we are pushing, granted our sleds are 400 pounds, we push a sled for five seconds and then hop in. I'm driving down the track of course, but I'm not running, so it's not the same kind of exhaustion, there's mentally a lot of things going on. But in rugby, I was running for 7 minutes straight, I was dying! It was crazy.

5:39 AJ: How did you train your body for conditioning like that?

5:43 Elana: You know, to go from bobsled to rugby, they just kind of threw me in, I just started playing right off the bat. I'm a person who's just like has a never say die attitude. I get

in there and go after it and die a horrible death every day, just try and keep up. Some of the greatest players in the world and greatest players in the US and rugby, um so it's kind of crazy, but they threw me to the wolves and I at least have a good story to tell now from it.

6:14 AJ: Well clearly, you're just doing it for the love of the game and the love of sports. Congratulations to your college team, the George Washington softball team. Their first Atlantic 10 title. That was your primary sport growing up.

6:29 Elana: Yes, so I am totally over the moon to see that. I was part of the first softball team at GW back in 2002. I was thinking about that the other day, man it's been 17 years and we finally won an A-10 title, I'm so excited about that –

6:47 AJ: Some teams probably have zero A-10 titles, you definitely should be proud of that.

6:51 Elana: That's true. That's true. So um a pretty cool accomplishment. So yeah, that was the sport I focused on growing up. That's the sport I tried to go Olympic at first but unfortunately, or fortunately, it worked out, I didn't make the Olympic softball team but found my path in another Olympic sport.

7:09 AJ: Well you broke barriers in other ways, you were on a softball team and now you're one of the only women competing in a men's sport, correct?

7:19 Elana: Yes, so women's bobsled got into the Olympics in 2002. In those Olympics, we only had one disciplines which was the two people in a sled, two person, two man discipline. Women were banned from doing what the men do which was the four person in addition to two person sled. I wanted to drive a four person sled and I pushed the international governing body and eventually they let us. I was the first US woman to make the men's national team as a four man pilot.

7:52 AJ: Amazing, amazing! So talking about your athletic achievements, they are medallists, you're a world champion, a multi-faceted. What has been your greatest achievement within athletics?

8:09 Elana: My greatest achievement in athletics has actually been competing in the four man discipline. To get out there and test myself, to see if I could actually compete with the men, and actually be able to do it was an incredible accomplishment of a lifetime. To win medal on that level, it's been incredible, and also to show not only can women compete with men, to show younger women what's actually possible. As cool as winning Olympic medals are and everything like that, just being able to set that kind of standard, that yes, we're just as strong as any man. Maybe not always physically in some sense but we can go toe to toe with men. It was a pretty cool thing that I was able to do.

8:52 AJ: That's excellent and that we are really here to talk about is your advocacy for women in sports. You are now the President of Women's Sports Foundation, do you believe that that's your calling?

9:10 Elana: I think it's a very amazing and humbling opportunity. I fought for gender equity my entire life, I tried to play to play baseball in high school, unfortunately, I got hurt at that point. [AJ: Oh no!] That's okay. Growing up, there weren't barriers put in place for me because of my gender even though it was my father who played professional sports and stuff. There weren't a lot of professional women's leagues while I was growing up. My father never told me it wasn't possible, he always encouraged me, my mother as well. They always encouraged me that I could always accomplish my goals and that gender wasn't a limitation. I made it my mission to make sure that other young girls know that, and other young girls are allowed to be strong both physically and mentally, and allowed to have those opportunities that we give so easily to little boys.

10:02 AJ: And your parents were vital in instilling this mind set in you at an early age, you say?

10:08 Elana: Yes, super vital. My mom is the strongest woman I know by far –

10:15 AJ: Shout out to the mothers there, right after mother's day. This this this this podcast will be released a few weeks after mother's day, but happy mother's day to every mother out there.

10:27 Elana: Yeah and happy mother's day I'll echo that but I really think a lot of times it is the example of mom's that tells a girl that she can be whatever she wants to be. My mom was a housewife so I'm not saying they have to be a lawyer or a doctor or anything like that. But my mom just being there and being the presence of a strong woman, and strong and confident and seeing what they looks like, told me that I can achieve whatever I want to achieve. Having that role model growing up was just incredible. My mom actually coached me in softball for some period of time. Having that interaction on the field, having her involved directly in my dreams and goals was a pretty cool experience.

11:10 AJ: Well shout out to momma Meyers. Basically, I wanted to ask you, in your role as President of Women's Sports Foundation, what issues and what concerns do you have? What are you really trying to tackle with gender disparities?

11:29 Elana: One of the main things we're definitely trying to tackle is just working on grassroots levels of projects. We have a lot of grassroots projects, but we want to make sure that every single girl across the country has an opportunity to play sports. We're working on a variety of things to make sure that girls especially in underserved populations have the opportunities out there, and have the same kind of opportunities as little boys have. We work very hard to have different athlete ambassador programs or give grants to youth programs to really encourage the opportunities sport has. Sport has the opportunity to encourage confidence, promote team work, hard work, discipline, all those great benefits that we want to make sure that every child is able to take advantage of those benefits, regardless of their gender. That's our main priority, we worked on every single level making sure women have equal rights as men in the world of athletics. Whether it is grassroots, elite, high school...we

are working across all levels to provide advocacy, but also provide different opportunities to help them grow.

12:45 AJ: Well I know when I was growing up at least, I started out playing soccer and t-ball and those were all co-ed sports. Even as I got older, track and field and swimming, the um practices were at least co-ed, competitions weren't. Now, so you're saying at the grassroots level and and on up, are you trying to implement where women can play in quote on quote men's sports at all of these levels?

13:17 Elana: Oh, I would love to see that. I would absolutely love to see women have the same opportunities has men do. I don't necessarily think that it is mandatory for women to play men's sports but having the opportunity means a lot. I think this is going to come up more and more frequently now as we start to think about things like transgendered athletes, intersex athletes and where they belong within the realms of male vs female sport and those types of things. I think it's a question we're going to continue to have and a conversation we're going to continue to have. But definitely for youth sports, I'm a big proponent of girls and boys competing on the same teams. I think you learn a lot, I think you learn how to interact with people regardless of gender at that young level. Before it really gets competitive, I know that people are looking for scholarships and looking to go onto the next level and go to the Olympics like I was at a young age. At the same time, we need to use sports as a vehicle to help people have successful lives and the majority of people who go play sports, we want everyone to have an opportunity to play a sport. Majority of people who go on to play sports won't go to the Olympics, or or may not even play collegiately but we want them to have the benefits of growing up and being active and playing a variety of sport.

14:40 AJ: I still bring up the stat, I believe it is either 2 or 3% of all NCAA college athletes male or female go professional in the sport that they do. Like you you noted, sport has been a vehicle for so many to achieve higher. Especially you and I are testaments to that, I played football all throughout college, and you played all throughout college and are playing sports

at the Olympic level. So, [as] a male and a female, we have both been impacted through sports. I wanted ask you a few question about gender disparities in sports right now. How are women being uh treated in the world of athletics and just the world in general? Because if you think about uh what is it the women's hockey leagues and 200 players went on strike and they're not playing, until they see equality and have a league of their own, after the other one was disbanded. You think about Caster Semenya, who is a woman but has what is called Hyperandrogenism which means she has an increased level of testosterone. There are so many instances out there where they are trying to limit women's abilities in sports. And and what do you say to some of those issues right now?

16:04 Elana: [laughs] I think you've opened up a whole can of worms with that question right there. There are so many things --

16:09 AJ [laughs] And we have limited but I know that you know as as much about this as anyone, so please, you have the floor.

16:17 Elana: Yeah there's so many issues facing women's sports these days. I think the women's hockey is a great example. US women hockey boycotted a year ago right before the Olympics asking for equal pay and equal treatment to the men's hockey team. And at that point of time and still to this day, the women's hockey team was much more successful than the men's hockey team but they were getting paid much less, they weren't able to make a living wage and things like that. We have the same exact situation in women's soccer, the women's soccer team, national team, regardless of their games selling out and them being so successful, winning world cups, they're being paid less than the men's team who hasn't even able to qualify for the last World Cup. We are continually fighting for equality in that level and in those two examples it's not an equal revenue kind of thing, women's soccer team brings more revenue than the men's team. I guarantee you if you walk down the street, you could meet a lot more people who know more of a women's hockey player or a women's soccer player than a men's soccer player at this point in time --



17:33 AJ: Well it's also mind boggling to me the WNBA also, the pay checks that they receive versus these multimillion dollar athletes in the NBA.

17:44 Elana: Right, and you have a lot of WNBA players going overseas to try and make up those wages. For the WNBA, they're not necessarily looking for the same level of pay as an NBA player because WNBA versus the NBA, yes there's more viewership in the NBA, there's more sponsors. They're looking for the equal percentage of the pay, so NBA players receive 50% of all revenue, WNBA, the latest number I saw was 25% of the revenue. The WNBA players would like to see their share of their revenue on par with the NBA players and I think that that's a very reasonable request. They're not asking for billions, they're just asking to be on par with men.

18:32 AJ: They don't even get one hundred thousand. I -- believe there's a Mystics player who makes ten thousand and she's an assistant coach for the Wizards and she's not even allowed to be paid by the NBA while she's playing in the WNBA.

18:49 Elana: Right, a lot of the professional - quote on quote professional athletes across the country whether it's in the NWSL which is the National Women's Soccer League or the NPF which is the National Pro Fastpitch, they have to work other jobs in addition to being quote on quote professional athlete. I say quote on quote because they can't make a living wage just being an athlete that is very rarely seen on the men's side. You have semi pro football, you have arena football and maybe some of those athletes or in minor league baseball, some of those athletes have to hold outside jobs. But, we're talking about professional women athletes, we're talking about the top women athletes in our country and they're not able to –

19:33 AJ: They're world champions too like you said.

19:36 Elana: Yep, yep!

19:37 AJ: These WNBA players and these soccer players. They're competing on the world stage, making pennies.

19:44 Elana: And unfortunately, that was my experience too. Um I played a year of professional softball before getting into bobsled, and I actually think playing professional softball for that one year cost me more than I made. I spent more in training and um getting to different locations and things like that, than I made in salary. Not to say that's why I left softball or anything like that, but it is a significant barrier to having the types of players that you want in the league because you do a lot of times have to have another job. Which is crazy to think of, a professional athlete having another job [AJ: Having two jobs].

20:25 AJ: So how is this going to change and how quickly do you see some of these changes being implemented?

20:32 Elana: I think that part of it is the work that us the Women's Sports Foundation are doing, providing grants to elite athletes, providing assistance when elite athletes have these different issues, giving them a ground to hear their airs and to help them figure out which pathways they want to go and pursuing equality and things like that. As female athletes we have to continue to fight, yes but we also need people to get on board with us. I think the biggest thing is that we've seen the strengthening of male athlete allies, male athletes who are making millions and are doing great things in sport. Also, recognizing how great some of the female athletes are. You see that a lot in the NBA, these athletes recognizing how great female athletes are and taking their backs on social media, which has been great to see, and I think it's going to take all of that. It's not just a female only issue, it's a collective issue and in sports it echoes the greater society, we need to put women on the same level as men, in the boardroom, in pay skills and and things like that. If we're able to do it in sports, I know we can do it in society as well.

21:49 AJ: Well, I hope that we can be successful in doing that and promote equality within sports because these are some of the greatest games and frankly life lessons you can learn bar none. So at one point in time whenever we get to it, hopefully we are all alive to see it. I hope that there is equality in the sports realm. I just wanted to ask you one last question,

someone as successful as you are, what defines success for you? Is it your athletic feats, is it your advocacy for women or is it something else?

22:31 Elana: What defines success for me is essentially that legacy that I'll be able to leave. My goal as bobsledder is to leave bobsled better than what I found it. My goal as the president of the Women's sport foundation is once I do leave, to leave the foundation better than what I found it. I want to make a lasting impact, whatever realm I'm in, so that's my definition of success. It's not winning medals, or winning races or what have you, it's about that legacy you're leaving. Just one other thing to close, I will mention that surfing, the international body for surfing and skiing, there are a couple of federations. They're doing a lot of good work to make sure that women are being paid on par with men. I think this year, Mikaela Shiffrin, she made over, she made seven figures in skiing as far as prize winning from races, and I think she made more than any single male skier which was pretty cool to see. They are making ground and there are federations doing really good things to make sure that women are on par with men, um and we just have to continue fighting that work. My regard to success would be continuing to help that kind of legacy, continue to help women be on par with the men and have equal pay.

23:58 AJ: I'm glad we are making uh some amount of small progress in this area and you certainly are making a lasting impact in your field and now as the President of Women's Sport Foundation. As always, my special guest three-time Olympic medalist and President of Women's Sports Foundation, Elana Meyer Taylor, thank you so much for coming on today.

24:21 Elana: Oh, thanks for having me!

24:22 AJ: Please continue subscribing at *Max Out Time* with AJ II on iTunes. Add @eamslider24 on social media. Like me on Facebook, follow on IG and Twitter and rate and review this podcast on all podcast streaming services today, AJ out!

24:40 Outro Song: 'For The City'

25:08 –End–

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