LTPF Season 3, Episode 4 – Sports

Guest: Haley Daniels, an athlete, pioneer, and advocate. She represented Canada in the Tokyo 2020/2021 Olympics in the sport of Canoe Slalom where these games went down in history. She is a multi-time Canadian Champion where she won a bronze medal at the Toronto 2015 Pan American Games, a gold medal at the 2018 Pan American Championships, and competed in World Cups, and World Championships. Her Sport has gone through a gender equality battle where historically men have represented in a canoe at the Olympic Games, and canoe women have not. On a mission for gender equality in her sport, she and a group of motivated female canoeists globally led the charge to push for the inclusion of women's canoeing at the Olympics. As a result of their tremendous determination women's canoeing was added to the Tokyo 2020/2021 Olympic Games program. Along with pathing a pathway forward Haley's father Kimberly Daniels who is a proud Transgender woman also left a legacy where she was the first openly Transgender judge to ever officiate at the Olympic Games. Both Haley and Kimberly are extremely proud to be a part of this massive leap of diversity and inclusion related to the Olympics. Now retired Haley is a professional speaker sharing her adversity as an opportunity for organizations to use as inspiration. She is an ambassador with KidSport Calgary, Protect Our Winters, Special Olympics, and WaterAid Canada. In her role with WaterAid traveled to Ghana to launch the WASH 4 Public Health program in conjunction with Right To Play.

Full Transcript:

Kadie Philp

I'm Kadie Philp. Sports inspire us with their power to unite, energize, and push boundaries. But what happens when those boundaries include barriers to equity and inclusion? In this episode, I speak with Haley Daniels, an Olympian, a trailblazer in women's canoeing and a fierce advocate for gender equality in sports. From fighting for women's canoeing to become an Olympic sport to navigating the challenges of funding and media representation, Haley shares her journey of resilience, advocacy, and the strides made for pay equity in women's sports. Together, we'll explore how the fight for fairness in sports mirrors broader societal challenges—and victories.

Kadie Philp (00:00)

Haley, it is so wonderful to have you with us because you have been such a strong advocate as women continue this journey in professional sports. And I'd love you to share with our audience your journey into advocating for women's canoeing as an Olympic sport and what brought you there.

Haley Daniels (00:23)

Yeah, so thank you for having me. I'm very happy to be here. So, as a 14-year-old girl, I was getting into kayaking and then an opportunity opened up where I could get into canoeing. And I really started thinking, okay, you know, there's an opportunity for maybe women's canoeing to go to the Olympics. But at that time, there was three categories that were available for men and one for women. And it just became apparent as I started getting onto

the provincial team and then the national team and then going to the world championships and the World Cups that we were allowed to compete at that level, but they weren't really putting it on their agenda to make it into the Olympics. Really what happened was through my passion of paddling and through just really wanting to be able to hopefully call myself an Olympian one day, I band together with a band of female canoeists across the world. And this was before, you know, Facebook was really prevalent and direct messaging, and video calls like this were not a thing and we were calling each other on long distance across the world. I was around 16 years old when that started so my goodness I'd have to...

Kadie Philp (02:45)
What time frame was this? Like what years was this?

Haley Daniels (02:54)
I'd have to think about the actual timeframe of what that is, but years are not something that sticks in my head easily, but it was definitely a time when I was younger and had no idea what I was doing. But what I did know is that, and what I felt so true in my heart and what I knew so deeply is that we had a right to go to the Olympics and we had an opportunity to hopefully push for that. It became so much bigger than me and so much bigger than just my passion for the sport, it became this huge gender equality fight and essentially breaking the glass ceiling.

Kadie Philp (03:28)
Mm-hmm. It's interesting how there's been a consistent fight for gender equality in sports. And you should fight for this. There was actually pushback. You faced resistance in actually getting it included in the Olympics. Can you unpack what some of that pushback actually looked like? And how did you overcome it?

Haley Daniels (03:55)
Yeah, I think for me it was that there's always going to be these opportunities that we can open up and always look at how there can be that equality. But I think the pushback comes from a lot of different areas. For us specifically within women's canoeing, we were told that there just wasn't enough women competing and that there just wasn't enough depth in the sport. And we were like, well, yeah, because you haven't provided us equal funding opportunities, equal competing opportunities. I mean once your sport makes the Olympics, Sport Canada or different sport organizations across the world recognize you as an Olympic sport, then there's a huge funding pathway that opens up for you. But if you're not an Olympic sport, it's almost impossible to get funding other than finding your own sponsors and doing fundraisers. And then if you go into the more professional side of things like mountain biking or anything like that, it really comes down to you need to be able to give that opportunity and know that it's going to take time to build. I mean, we had totally crazy outlandish things like women's places in a kitchen and it could hinder your ability to have children. These were people that were saying this at a high level in Canoe Solemn, not in Canoe Solemn, but in Q-Sprint more, but it was women's canoeing in general. And we were just like, holy Toledo, like this is not something that should be said at this time or age.

there's science that it just proves that that doesn't happen. It just became us having to put that truth forward and show that we are ready and that there is depth, and you just have to put a chance on there being gender equality.

Kadie Philp (05:43)
Just as you hit a bit on the funding, which is obviously really important to us at the Pay Equity Commission. And the issue of access to funding, number one, as you raise, but then also pay equity and female athletes. So what do you see today as the biggest hurdles for female athletes striving for pay equity in their sports?

Haley Daniels (06:18)
I think that, you know, I think about my journey and how I had to basically raise anywhere from $60,000 to $100,000 a year. And I actually mentor a lot of athletes now that are in similar positions. And I think that what we are seeing is that women's soccer, women's basketball, these more professional league sports are selling out, which is amazing. We have these, and the fact that we have these leagues, that they're sponsorable properties, that we have not only the ability for someone to go watch them in an arena, but young girls to go watch these girls in arenas and dream of being one of those people one day. And I think that that's the biggest thing is that they don't have to see men in these arenas and think about, like I'd love to be an NHL player. Well, you can't because there's no league for you, right? But I think what we, the biggest hurdle that we have is that there's still more opportunity in men's sport than there is in women's sport. We just had in mountain biking, rampage, which is a huge Red Bull rampage, which is desert mountain biking for the first time women competed ever. And it wasn't because they didn't want to compete, it wasn't because they weren't ready, it's because Red Bull didn't give them a category until this year. And so, you know, it still comes down to just because there is something awesome out there doesn't mean that there's always going to be a women's category. So I think that everything we do, every sport opportunity, we need to create that category and then the funding will come with it and the sponsorship opportunities.

Kadie Philp (07:40)
Wow. That's a really great point you made earlier about saying, know, it becomes down like a supply and demand question, basically, right? Because critics often say that well, women's sports generate less revenue. So pay disparities are justified or not even offering a woman's category is justified because it's just not supply and demand. Now, how do you counter that argument? surely, and we've seen, as you've pointed out, at women's NBA, women's hockey, soccer, we've seen that there's a demand to watch women's sports. So how do you counter this argument?

Haley Daniels (08:47)
You know, it's funny, even hearing you say that, I just realized that we said MBA and it's actually WMBA. It's a WHL and you know, it's ingrained in our brains. Yeah. So the NBA is the basketball league, men's league, right? And it's, I think that what we need to continue to do is, well, there's the statistic that I think one in four females

Kadie Philp (08:53)
WNBA. my God. See, it's just in our brains. It's in our brains. Men's league, yeah.

Haley Daniels (09:16)
at the age of 14 leave sport and there's so many reasons it's not it's something that's feminine or there's eating things going on there. There's a lot of stuff there. But I think a big thing that's still encouraged is that it's not encouraged for females to do sport. And it's not something that, know, when a young boy is athletic, they're like, wow, he's going to be a great athlete. When a young girl is athletic, that's not usually the narrative that's coming. I think that closing this gap comes down to that grassroots level of how we speak about sport. But I think coming back to the specific side of pay, like you just have to create the opportunity and people will come. And the NBA was not built overnight. And we can't expect that the WNBA is going to be the same. So we have to give it a little bit of time and give it a little bit of time to build, but know that it is a huge, responsible property and a very competitive game and very exciting to watch. I know in my sport, canoe solemn, are the greatest of all time. Her name is Jessica Fox and she is the most winning athlete. She's often beating the men on the water with her times and that's just you just have to support that and then and then the money eventually follows it in my opinion.

Kadie Philp (10:34)
Okay. You started to talk a little bit about sort of how young women drop out of sports because of the perception of, you know, female bodies and femininity, maybe a strong body is not ideal for a woman to have. You know, what would you say about societal perceptions and media representations of women's sports? Like, how does the perception you're seeing that the media represent or we just talk about women in sport, how does that affect opportunities for equal pay or sponsorship for women?

Haley Daniels (11:12)
Like, if you have more opportunities to be in front of the public eye, that is when you have more opportunity to sell that to sponsors and to tell your story. And how the media represents females is still different. There's, and I'm sure you've seen some of the different videos out there where a broadcaster is asking a male athlete, man, how did you feel out there? Like, you looked awesome. Like, that was such a play and he's like you know I put it all out there or whatever and it's a great question and he's asking you did a backhand hit like this what does that mean and a lot of people are really trying to change it but there are still broadcasters out there going so you're wearing Adidas right now can you give us a twirl or you've chosen to braid your hair today why did you do that

Kadie Philp (12:01)
Right. Yeah. Less serious questions.

Haley Daniels (12:07)

Like, still asking, yeah, less serious questions, still asking about appearances and still asking and not taking women seriously. Like, we are ready and we are here to do our job, which is sports, and we're not there to be representing ourselves in how we look. We're there to represent our sport and do our sport well. And, you know, in your job, Katie, like, you're not getting asked about why you did your hair that day or you know it's a legitimate profession and it needs to be treated that way and it's still not being treated that way and that's part of part of the gap.

Kadie Philp (12:37)
Mm-hmm. Yeah, there's definitely work to be done. I know this is sort of ubiquitous for women. I mean, women political leaders will talk about the suits they're wearing, how tired they look, or how do you balance, never hear political leaders or business leaders, male business leaders asking how do you manage a family with your career versus women. So I think there's still a problem in general about the way we talk about women in lots of spaces in terms of media. So it's a double edged sword in terms of getting media attention for women's sports, but then also having to deal with all of the stuff you're talking about that sort of feed these stereotypes and inequalities. Now we have seen some progress in especially pay equity in women's sports recently with soccer. This was an issue talked about at the Olympics this year as well. There's been sort of an uptake in the conversation, which is great news I think for athletes, it's great news for women. I think it's great news for sports in general if you take gender out of it. In your view, and I'm sure you're following the conversation, what has been the most significant milestone for pay equity in women's sports that you've seen globally or in Canada where you've seen that as a great model that we can look at and maybe emulate in other sports?

Haley Daniels (14:09)
I think that it's a hard conversation. I think if I look at things like soccer or more professional leagues, they're already getting a lot of funding and so they're already able to access that where a sport, amateur sport, which is more what I did, and on the Olympic side, somewhere like in Canada, there's just a lack of funding in general. So, it's like you're fighting for pennies essentially. And so I think that a model that is really well done and somewhere that's really pushing for it is Australia. Australia has just done such an excellent job of elevating women's sports and creating opportunities for younger athletes and young women to look up to role models and not just make them iconic beauty symbols, but also, you know, business leaders and really integrating them into the community. So, I think I don't specifically know a model that I can think of right now, but what I do know is that it thing because sport is the most polarizing, we're the most gendered, not gendered, that's not the right word, the gendered, yeah, we're the most gendered thing out there. There's male and female, there's not a grey area, it is you are this or you are that, right? When you're working in the corporate world, your gender should not matter based on your role. But in sport, your gender matters based on your role, right? So that's where it becomes very difficult because it's the male league and the female league. And the male league is managed by a different manager. It's got a different funding model. It's got a different contract with a different broadcaster, it's got different social media handles and different

ethos. it's, it's, yeah, I don't know. I wouldn't say I know the answer here, but I do know that Sport Canada does a great job of supporting athletes equitably and they will continue to do that. And there are some amazing sponsors here in Canada that do not only equitably fund, female sport, but really lift female sport up and are creating that opportunity for all athletes.

Kadie Philp (16:59)
Excellent. There's been conversation around how male athletes and sports organizations can play a critical role in addressing disparities. Have you seen any examples of meaningful allyship in this space? Have you seen male athletes or organizations actually step up to support funding for women or pay equity for women in sports?

Haley Daniels (17:24)
Yeah, I mean, in my example, my coach and many men that I worked with were 100 % behind us. And not only were they behind us, but they were advocating for us and pushing for women's canoeing to be in the Olympics. And we would not have been there without their advocacy. I think when you have someone who is a white male, essentially, who is going out and advocating for you. It really creates that opportunity. And it is unfortunate, but it is the way that we need to go and we need to have role models in all shapes and sizes and those people putting that forward. I can think of another Canadian athlete. He's a, I believe he's a heptathlete. His name is Damien. His last name right now I'd have to look it up and put it in the show notes but he is a dad and he has a young daughter and like his narrative is continuous I want to support my daughter to be an athlete I want to support her to be a great person and continuing to advocate for women in sport and I think that that's such an amazing narrative that he's pushing forward.

Kadie Philp (18:40)
Mm-hmm. Yeah, that is excellent. What would be your vision for equity in sports going forward? If we could fast forward 10 years, what would your ideal vision for equity in women's sports look like, whether it be in terms of pay equity, opportunities, representation?

Haley Daniels (19:01)
Have the same share of media space for women and men. There is still more male leagues that are being watched. I go to my gym at work and I love being able to go there at lunch, but every time I turn on the TV, it's men's baseball, men's hockey. And I would like to be able to turn on TSN and see women's hockey and women's soccer and there be an equal share of that. And I think that there should also be an opportunity that there's scouting and those young girls are thinking about how they can be professional soccer players or professional hockey players and not think about how they're going to work a full-time job on top of being an athlete. Because being an athlete is a full-time job and then some and you should not have to work at the same time as that. So my vision and goal and hope is that there's not only equal funding opportunities for male and female, but more support for amateur sport because it is an emblem in the community and we as Olympians do as much in the

community as NHL players, but we do not make as much as NHL players. it's that just creating that investment in sport and investment in female sport.

Kadie Philp (20:15)
Right. Excellent. And final question, because I know you have worked so hard to make your sport canoeing an Olympic sport and there's a price you pay for being a trailblazer, right? It's a lot of work and you are absolutely a trailblazer and in your process you've had to overcome a lot of significant hurdles. So how do you balance the responsibility of, you know, paving the way for others while actually staying focused on your own athletic performance?

Haley Daniels (21:00)
Hmm, there is no algorithm for that one. There is no algorithm or, you know, I think it fueled me for a long time and it really made me hungry to get up early or to push more on the water because I knew that it was so much bigger than me and it was so much bigger than my sport. But being a trailblazer, is a toll and there is a burden that definitely sits on you, but it's also something that can give you energy. I think that if you can finish the end of the day and know that you made a difference in someone's life or that you pushed for something, then it's totally worth that. And you can look back on your journey and be like, okay, I did something versus just continuously going through the mundanity and going through the motions. When I was competing, I went to the Olympic test event in Tokyo and I remember we were sitting on the conveyor belts and there was a young female athlete who I had actually ended up competing with the Olympic spot with for. And she was almost 10 years younger than I was. And she kept saying to me, you know, Haley, I don't remember, since my time here, I don't remember there being treated unfairly or other athletes running me over on the water or, you know, I've always had equal pain opportunities. I've always had funding. I've always had coaches really treat me well. And I remember looking at my arms and being like, like I had chills and I was like, we did it. You know, our fight, our toll, our burden 100 % worth it because she didn't have to see it anymore. She now did her sport and was able to have that equal opportunity. So I think any advice for anyone who's been a trailblazer and pushing for their sport or their job or their organization or anything like that for there to be equality, it's 100 % worth it because those people who are in the future, that legacy that you've paved is going to make a difference and whether you see it or not is huge. So yeah, it just made it worth it.

Kadie Philp (23:22)
Right. Yeah. Well, I'm so glad to hear that. Thank you for sharing your story and your experience. And thank you for everything you've done for the next generation of athletes coming up behind you.

Haley Daniels (23:44)
Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for doing what you're doing. Having a voice and knowing that someone in a very powerful position can make a difference for us is very important.

Kadie Philp (23:55)
Thank you.

After this episode, Haley Daniels has me thinking about these three things:

1. Opportunity Must Come First: Women's sports can thrive, but only if given equal opportunities for funding, competition, and visibility. Growth follows access.
2. Representation Matters: The way women athletes are portrayed in the media shapes public perception and future opportunities. It's time to shift the focus from appearance to performance.
3. Allyship Drives Change: Male advocates play a critical role in advancing equity in sports. True progress happens when everyone works together.

Thank you for joining us on today's journey. Whether it's through art, sports, music, or media, every conversation brings us closer to understanding and addressing the inequities that persist in our world. Don't forget to follow or subscribe and share this podcast with others who care about making a difference. Until next time, let's keep asking questions, challenging norms, and working toward a more equitable future. Goodbye!