

# TortsCenter | Episode 4

## “The Bold and the Branded”

[00:00:00] **Courtney Dunn:** A quick note before we get into our episode, the content provided in the Tort Center podcast is for informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice. The information presented in each episode is based on general principles of law and may not apply to your specific legal situation.

[00:00:27] **Courtney Dunn:** Listening to the Tort Center Podcast does not create an attorney client relationship between the hosts, guests, or listeners. If you require legal advice or representation, please consult with a qualified attorney licensed to practice law in your jurisdiction. We disclaim any liability for any loss or damage, including without limitation, indirect or consequential loss or damage, or any loss or damage whatsoever, arising from the use of information presented in the Tort Center Podcast.

[00:00:56] **Courtney Dunn:** By accessing and listening to the Tort Center podcast, [00:01:00] you agree to these terms and conditions.

[00:01:04] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the latest episode of Tort Center. Today we have a very special guest. She is the jewel in the crown of Columbia University's sports management program. It's part of the School of Professional Studies.

[00:01:22] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Please welcome Laura Jean Holmgren. She is a lecturer. And Deputy Academic Director in the Sports Management Program. Welcome, LJ.

[00:01:32] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Thank you, Carla. Thank you, Courtney. Excited to be here.

[00:01:35] **Courtney Dunn:** We're excited to have you.

[00:01:36] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Yeah, terrific. Before we get started, why don't you tell us a little bit about your background in education and sports, because you have had some unique experiences working for the NFL.

[00:01:49] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** The New York Jets, the New York, New Jersey Super Bowl host committee. Tell us a little bit about that.

[00:01:55] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Sure. Yeah. I'm so happy where I sit in my career right now. [00:02:00] I don't think it was a linear path like most people's were. And I had this course as my senior year in high school on sports marketing and that was it.

[00:02:08] **Laurajean Holmgren:** I knew it was going to be sports. I was deciding between the sports science side or the management side. And, Not so smart, maybe applied to schools based on kinesiology or sports management programs and where I ended up had both Switched from kinesiology to sports management. I went to SUNY Cortland in upstate, New York and Loved it loved every aspect of it quickly fell in love with operations I think I'm a very process oriented and organized person and Was able to run events and thought it was the best Just the best.

[00:02:42] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So I continued with that at Harvard and Boston College where I had operations, facilities, and administration internships. oversaw some amazing achievements for both of those universities. And with Boston College, the, the soccer was top notch, the hockey team won the [00:03:00] national championship. So that was it.

[00:03:01] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It solidified that this is what my future was going to be. I could see myself in this. Took a position at St. John's University, where I was the assistant athletic director for facilities and events, where I started dipping my toe into capital planning and what that looked like on a larger scale. And I think I just became the person that was never going to accept no for a facility and.

[00:03:21] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Learned how to drag a baseball field and if the lacrosse field wasn't plowed, I was going to jump in the tractor and learn how to drive a tractor to plow the field without damage, which we successfully did. Lots of stories. And my current colleague, Danny Hagenlocher, him, myself, and another person, we just really did everything.

[00:03:39] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Renovated a locker room on our own, bought new power tools whenever we could, and, and tried to fix anything that needed to improve for the athletes. I loved my job in athletics, but just knew that I needed a change and wound up coming to Columbia University. I was teaching at the time at St. John's University and just fell in love [00:04:00] with supporting the students just like I did on the athletes, but with more of a personal connection here.

[00:04:04] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** So it's this nice bridge of having some experience in the industry and started understanding what the word pedagogy was and how I could bring together or design courses. My first time designing an online course at St. John's University, they gave me this. Matrix like this is what I love breaking down a course into what students will see what they'll learn.

[00:04:28] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** So breaking it down from what the end goal is, but then what each class goal is in mind. And that describes a lot about me as I like to think long term. I like to think future with plans. But then how do I get to the details that make it magic or make it happen? And that's largely what I do at Columbia.

[00:04:43] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** I work with industry leaders who are coming in and going to teach. We break down what they do and what the course topic will be, and then we get them to think, well, what do we want them to learn at the end of this class? And I always, probably annoyed, what should they be able to do at the end of this class?

[00:04:58] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** What do you want them to be able to say to [00:05:00] other people? And it's different than what you'll teach them. So how do we have these takeaways and work with our faculty, who are all amazing, Carla and Courtney are part of our, our team here. And how do we get them to pull that power out of the students, but translate what they do at the highest level into something that makes sense when they're in the classroom.

[00:05:20] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** What can we look forward to in terms of teaching and research from you coming up this fall?

[00:05:27] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** Yeah, that's a great question. In the past, I've taught courses in something we call a supervised research project where we partner with brands and research anything they're looking to do to solve a business problem.

[00:05:39] **Laurajeau Holmgren:** We then provide the academic framework, the industry research around it. and present our findings back to them. I'm switching over with one of our colleagues, Professor Sun, and I will be helping him as the course associate for sports marketing in the fall. So that'll be where I'm spending my time. We're talking about lots of Harvard case studies at the moment on [00:06:00] branding, sponsorship, and marketing, some of which where how are athletes marketing themselves is all part of our plan for the fall at the moment.

[00:06:09] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Your Olympians as Brands class is one of the most popular classes that students talk about. Can you tell us a little bit about what that class entails and what was the inspiration for it?

[00:06:23] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Sure. Yeah. We've had some wonderful connections and we're very lucky to be in New York City. We wound up running into Dave Minji and at the time.

[00:06:33] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Owned a company called Glide Slope, and we took their data, brought it into the classroom. It really became this, how do we use information of what's out there to bring an athlete together with a brand and tell that story. We know that activations are more important than ever. If you go to a sporting event, there are always brands there, but it's not just their logo slapped somewhere.

[00:06:57] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It is really what they're bringing. Is it a booth? Is it an [00:07:00] interactive locker that someone is sitting in? Is it an autograph signing? What does this look like? And so we were able to take some of the activations that go on during the Olympics and look and see how would there be a good brand fit from a strategic perspective.

[00:07:13] **Laurajean Holmgren:** That's really where I started to think about this athlete as a brand and has become part of what I have built my research on. And when we look at these athletes as brands, how are we helping them transition, but also prepare because it's two jobs in one by being your own brand. We know this, you have to manage and maintain your image, but then they also need to compete at the highest level.

[00:07:34] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So that course came about and we started talking about in 2015. We taught it post Rio for the first time. And how would we have partnered a brand with an athlete? A bit of a look back. And it evolved over time to projects. It became a supervised research project. We partnered with the United States Olympic and Paralympic properties for a joint commercial venture between LA 28 and USOPC.

[00:07:59] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So [00:08:00] we created this course. Where we looked at different topics such as disability inclusion and how brands could activate from a more inclusive perspective, provide more support using some of their already existing platforms, internal platforms, and looked at a wide variety of topics over the years in different spaces.

[00:08:18] **Laurajean Holmgren:** From disability awareness and inclusion in Paralympics to looking at branding on a sponsorship side for the Olympics as well.

[00:08:26] **Courtney Dunn:** How does an athlete become a brand? We're saying Olympians as a brand, athletes as a brand. What does it mean?

[00:08:33] **Laurajean Holmgren:** I think the term influencer is not well received lately, but we think about the ability for people to use social media, use their online presence to express themselves.

[00:08:44] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And then there are content themes that come about. So now we might call them content creators, less so brands or, or less uh, influencers themselves, but I think it organically starts that people sign on for social media and they start [00:09:00] posting things. Are they the person that posts memes? Are they taking part in viral challenges?

[00:09:04] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Are they sharing parts of their life? Are they sharing some of their passions, maybe some of their side projects? And so it just evolves a bit organically. And as you see major stars in the game, they're not running their social media, their image anymore. It becomes a little bit more of a brand. And so when we think about athletes organically turning into that, that's the stars and the superstars who may have agents or marketing teams helping them.

[00:09:28] **Laurajean Holmgren:** But the beauty of something like the Olympics or the Paralympics, you're seeing athletes that are content creators. You're seeing athletes that are doing this themselves, maybe with the help of some friends or some family. And they're really building themselves up for themselves. And as they become more well known, they're starting to see more sponsorship opportunities.

[00:09:47] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And how do we take some of the themes? So there's something called a content analysis in academia. How do we look at someone's account to say, are these your themes? So if you're posting things over and over, We might come up with a list of themes that [00:10:00] we're seeing and then methodically go through those to say here are five themes we're picking up.

[00:10:04] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Is this what you want it to be? So when I talk to an athlete, I'm like, here's how you're presenting online. There might be two or three dimensions. Do you want more? Is that what truly represents you? And

they think about it. The strategy then becomes, Oh, well maybe I should share this part of me. And how do I share that part of me?

[00:10:22] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** What I think resonates the most with people is that organic growth and that organic connection of seeing themselves can backfire sometimes. But definitely worth it for many of the athletes. My big question is always how do we provide support for those that are stars in their own right, but don't have the superstar resources?

[00:10:40] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** How do they get those connections to build with brands to be able to train and continue to train since we know that, especially in the U. S., our Olympians and Paralympians, Team USA is not supported by the government. So how do they have enough funds to train, prepare, and truly focus on sport? How do they get that support?

[00:10:59] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** [00:11:00] I mean, it is through a lot of local brands. I mean, well, I know we'll touch on this later, but there are rules that are challenging for them, but it's a lot of the local support that helps our athletes really make it to the podium. It is a lot of smaller brands. It's the big sponsors matter in the movement.

[00:11:15] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** But we also need athletes to have some of these smaller, local, or even national sponsors to truly be able to train and prepare.

[00:11:22] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** When we think of an athlete as a brand, does it ever apply, let's say, to a high school athlete, a star high school athlete of any sort?

[00:11:32] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** Think about social media. If you go back on someone's page that has had it for 10 years, you see grainy pictures, a picture of their meal.

[00:11:39] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** LeBron James is a great example of, this man's a megastar. And you look back on his old social media account. I have these slides in my course, and he's got pictures down of his shoes, right? The first few photos from family pictures, a picture of food, grainy, but you look at how things have changed and even a high [00:12:00] school athlete speed could be these beautiful, high quality photos that they're starting to craft.

[00:12:06] **Laurajeane Holmgren:** So there's this savviness that comes into play. That starts organically. I said, and it's not a strategic, but they're becoming

more strategic than ever because they've grown up with social media. They know it's a crafted. This is my online presence. This is maybe not who I am. And you hear the phrase more than and that's what we want to get to the heart of with athletes.

[00:12:24] **Laurajean Holmgren:** What are you? What describes you? What do you feel that people don't know about you? And what are you comfortable sharing? Because not everyone wants to be on social media. But how do we get them to connect? I love this aspect of high school, college, and Olympics and Paralympics because we could tell their stories in the next few weeks.

[00:12:42] **Laurajean Holmgren:** You go on a social followers and they're in the thousands. They're not in the millions. I'm like, why, how this person's story is amazing, right? But that's the part where it's not curated only on what NBC does in their beautiful way of storytelling, but we can start to see some of their stories emerge during this time of year.

[00:12:59] **Laurajean Holmgren:** [00:13:00] And we're hooked. They might've been in our feed and we're naturally wanting to find them. So high school athletes that are starting to come up with their brand, it used to be more of. When I was at Boston College, they were very hesitant to let athletes have it. This was in the 06 to 08 range as employees were we allowed to have accounts.

[00:13:17] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And now that's changed. It's just part of it all. And so there's this growth strategy and dimension to it that has certainly changed.

[00:13:27] **Courtney Dunn:** So you started teaching the course in 2015. Designing, yes. Designing it. And since then, we've had a lot of changes on social media. Does that make it easier for an athlete to develop a brand or is it harder?

[00:13:38] **Courtney Dunn:** Because now everybody kind of has this technique and this way of. Posting beautiful pictures and becoming popular.

[00:13:46] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Yeah, you could see that it's probably puts more pressure on the athletes now to balance both. And as I mentioned, it's this not just posting something. And sometimes you think of like posting a picture and a caption to Instagram.

[00:13:59] **Laurajean Holmgren:** There's a lot of [00:14:00] noise out there, just like you said, it's cluttered, right? And so how are they starting to



differentiate themselves and what platforms are they on? There are some great examples of. We look at some of the athletes that are in the Olympics. They may have their own YouTube channels with hundreds of thousands of followers.

[00:14:15] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So when we look at how they're diversifying their content, it doesn't just take a picture and post it anymore. And it used to be write your thoughts in 140 characters on X or Twitter when it was. And now it is, how are we looking at the messaging across platforms? We can think this about social media, any brand right now, non athlete brands, but brands, how are they posting their message to the target audiences that are on those accounts?

[00:14:44] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So on TikTok, what are you doing on TikTok that is different than Instagram? You're not just pushing something out and think about the time that takes, right? I'm on LinkedIn. I'll do a post once every two years, not an active social media user as much as I follow and research it. It takes a long time. A [00:15:00] lot of AI to write some of those captions, right?

[00:15:02] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Uh, no. Days to think about what I'm going to say. Is it right? And so, is that me to even post anymore? And think about all the feelings that go with that for an athlete that then is trying to do multi channel approach. So I, I think you're right. It's become a lot of noise. You're hoping that this algorithm and they change over time.

[00:15:21] **Laurajean Holmgren:** How is your content getting to new people? How are new people seeing it? And you can see. Sometimes it is for the likes and for the growth. Please interact with this. Click down, click read the caption for more. Forward to a friend. It used to be more social media contests that you'd see like a giveaway or tag two people.

[00:15:38] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Alright, still see it. Now you want the expanse on the caption. You want save this for later. Mick Ultra did this campaign for women's sports where they wanted you to press the save button because that's a very powerful interaction on a social media channel. And if you think about the Ultra label, it's the same as the Instagram little flag.

[00:15:57] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And so they did that for women's sports, like save [00:16:00] women's sports because it's going

[00:16:00] **Laurajean Holmgren:** to boost the power in the algorithm there.



[00:16:03] **Courtney Dunn:** That's very interesting. I didn't know the save button was that big of a, of a boost for your posts.

[00:16:08] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It used to be like, like, like and subscribe, right?

[00:16:12] **Courtney Dunn:** When athletes are branding, what have you seen in terms of a trend where a brand is either looking to partner with an athlete because they're popular, because of their fan base as compared to what their morals are, what they stand for, what they kind of speak up about, and if that aligns with their brand.

[00:16:31] **Laurajean Holmgren:** I want to take it from the company's, the brand's perspective here for a moment. Thanks. When we look at why a brand would connect with someone with their following, there are different levels and it's the new word of mouth, which is the most powerful way to connect for a brand, to get someone to make an, take an action purchase or do something with a company.

[00:16:50] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And the athletes now, regardless of your following, you are fitting who your audience is. So on the backend, there are powerful companies, but one of [00:17:00] my favorites in the industry is Zoof right now. And They're measuring this on the back end. What's the demographic profile of the athlete of this brand? So then if I'm a brand and I'm asking you to partner with me, I'm tapping into that demographic and they're going to see my information through you.

[00:17:17] **Laurajean Holmgren:** We've seen some of these examples over time. We look at organically, you can see MLB with the rise of Libby Dune and she happens to be, uh, in a relationship with a baseball player, how there's now a new market that's being tapped. And over time, some of those things happen. We see, I think Taylor Swift has been mentioned in all of your podcasts now.

[00:17:38] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So I wanted to keep that going. I didn't realize the Taylor Swift effect that you see Taylor bringing into the NFL. Yeah. So, but those things are organic. But when we look at how you can use that influencer word, what is their influence? Is it 10, 000? Is it 1, 000? Sometimes a brand will look to connect with someone that doesn't have millions of followers [00:18:00] because they may be more interactive with their fans.

[00:18:02] **Courtney Dunn:** Right.

[00:18:02] **Laurajean Holmgren:** They may have more of a voice and more power there. Also, how do you catch people now? You don't catch them on a TV or an ad on a radio. How do you get to them? And so working with athletes of all different levels matter because it's part of your segmentation plan.

[00:18:16] **Courtney Dunn:** So LJ, can you tell us about athlete branding as it relates to Olympians?

[00:18:21] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Well, I'll take it to the Olympics and Paralympics right now. We're seeing a shift in NBC's coverage of the games for the opening ceremony. You could watch it in IMAX theaters, you can stream, you could watch it on digital platforms. But in addition, NBC hired on a team of content creators and those are inside and out of sports to cover the games.

[00:18:43] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And so you're looking at this as part of their strategy and it goes well beyond what I mentioned, podcasts, other things. So they have this. omni channel approach to distributing the games. And you need to be everywhere to get to as many as you want to get. And when we [00:19:00] look at now what Team USA is doing, Team USA is also taking this as Athletes will give you the insider look because they all have phones that are in their hands at the moment.

[00:19:10] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So things like unboxing their gear, unboxing Reese's recently, you'll see a, hopefully you'll see a bunch of posts on the Olympic medal, Reese's chocolate. And they send out this box to athletes now. And so the athletes are opening it. There's a flag, there's a crossbody fanny pack or crossbody bag that's in there.

[00:19:29] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And so they're all taking a unique approach to it. Now, that's the type of content that the athletes are delivering to us, but the brands are putting it out there. And they may have set some rules. Athletes get to control what goes out there. And when we look at Team USA, they just recently announced that they are bringing in Team USA creators.

[00:19:47] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And these athletes will be covering the games as part of an official part of the games. So you're getting these, you know, Authentic voices through a major platform and movement, and that's wonderful to see now. We've [00:20:00] now figured out a way to tap into them, use those resources and bring them into the strategy.

[00:20:05] **Courtney Dunn:** Definitely. And it's a kind of a different perspective. They're not just sitting there watching. It's kind of probably more interactive with your audience, I would think.

[00:20:13] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Absolutely. I mean, you think about the power of how we may have watched the Olympics years ago in front of the TV and at night you get some of the athletes stories.

[00:20:21] **Laurajean Holmgren:** They're so powerful. I think the challenge of covering the games are how do you tell more? And through content creators and through athletes telling their own story, you have a lot more of that.

[00:20:32] **Courtney Dunn:** How does a brand go about sponsoring an Olympic athlete? I think there are some pretty strict rules that may have changed, but tell us more about it.

[00:20:40] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Yes.

[00:20:41] **Laurajean Holmgren:** There is something known in the Olympic Charter. The Paralympic also has the same level of rules. They're very consistent. Two different organizations, the International Paralympic Committee and then the International Olympic Committee. So IPC and IOC, acronym soup in the movement, they have a rule called Rule 40 out of the Olympic [00:21:00] Charter, and it is to protect the sponsors and the movement from being too commercial, and the goal with Rule 40 was to Only the sponsors have rights to the marks, the rings, the use of words like gold, road to the games, movement, games, the actual host city, so Paris 24, LA 28, the sponsors have rights to the Olympic marks.

[00:21:25] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And then on the national level, when you're hosting your rights to LA 28 and your national level sponsors. So it's all about using how you can use the rings or the aguitos in the Paralympic space. What they've done with Rule 40 to protect it, it really started that people noticed it in London 2012. So the rule prevented, if you think about the time, what was different?

[00:21:47] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Twitter. Twitter was the first time athletes were using it. You're writing 100 word characters, no real pictures, limited use, but it really started, you could start to see where it's coming into play. It mattered in Rio because people were sharing things [00:22:00] and you saw it out of the running community where they have maybe off brands of the major brands that are sponsoring athletes.

[00:22:07] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And they have to go dark for a certain period of time. So during Rio, you couldn't post about any brand, thank anyone for support during the games window. And it was before and immediately after the games. So you couldn't thank your sponsor who may have been paying you or you when wearing that gear and part of their family, you couldn't thank them.

[00:22:25] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It restricted you from using your image in that way. So we saw a ruling more recently. That came out of Germany. They started it to relax rule 40 and there's been pressure on it to relax rule 40. The first change came for Tokyo 2020. So in 2021, those athletes were able to thank a sponsor. Now, yes, there is still protection of the IP and the brand.

[00:22:50] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So a brand cannot post. An athlete on the podium and say, we were with you till you win gold, right? Cause they're infringing on the rights [00:23:00] of the sponsors and the actual IOC or IPC. So now what you're seeing are you are able to thank your sponsor. You're able to use your brand and likeness to thank people, to thank your sponsors along the way.

[00:23:13] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It cannot be your gear. It cannot be your games look, but it is, you are allowed to do it now. So when we think about this relaxed rule. We were preventing athletes from using their own name, image, and likeness. And it was, it was happening in the Olympic movement as NIL became the buzzword in college athletics as well.

[00:23:33] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Some of the rules around the games have changed. You can see now in gymnastics, this is important. Some of the athletes have now gone from this amateurism look and approach that it was to you can now compete in the Olympics and then go to college and compete at an NCAA level. And we saw that with some fast, fantastic gymnastics between the last two games.

[00:23:55] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** What about the role of ambush marketing and did that influence any of [00:24:00] the rule changes?

[00:24:01] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Yeah, I mean, The Olympic Charter covers a lot of this. Rule 40 is specific to athletes and their sponsors. Ambush marketing, as we know, there are some major examples in the games. I think to Rio, where there was a takeover of Copacabana Beach, a brand came in and they had all the fitness equipment relabeled and rebranded.

[00:24:19] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Consumers don't know. So that is the hard part. It creates some of that confusion there. They may not be using the, they followed all the rules, but they're there. There's a presence to an extent that's going to happen with any major event. People are going to be there. There's going to be a presence. And that's what makes it interesting and fun from my perspective to, to view and follow this from an academic and research perspective.

[00:24:40] **Courtney Dunn:** Now, brands are not allowed on the fields at the Olympics, right? So do they now really depend on that social media presence, that coverage through what the athlete is doing more outside of the area?

[00:24:53] **Laurajean Holmgren:** You can see it in many other ways. So on broadcast, you'll see it. You'll see Delta's presence and not just about [00:25:00] their airline, but they're sponsoring a portion of it.

[00:25:01] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So, different aspects of the games. Xfinity had the road to the Olympic Games coming up for Team USA and we look at their presence and they are at a national level. It was a map of all of the Olympians who qualified for which states. I was just talking to someone the other day. How great from a brand perspective that you can click on your state or a state that you may want to use and see the list of athletes somewhere.

[00:25:26] **Laurajean Holmgren:** You used to have to dig through rosters and different lists. They've always listed Team USA in one place, but now it's an interactive map. We're very visual and you're starting to see brands along the way. You see activations leading up to the games and many sponsors will use it internally as well.

[00:25:41] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Whether it's an activation that's coming to the 30 Rock where you get to see it. All of a sudden there's a takeover and there's an Olympic presence or the road to the games. What we've seen a better job of in integration, I think NBC has done a good job, leading into this year, you knew the Olympics were coming.

[00:25:57] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And it didn't just start a week or two before the games. [00:26:00] You saw them on across all NBC channels, whether it was on appearing on a talk show or being part of the Today Show in the morning. They were bringing them in more and earlier. So this road to the games, The qualifiers, we saw swimming, gymnastics, and track have become bigger events.

[00:26:18] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So we're embracing Team USA and not just for the weeks that the Olympics and Paralympics are going. And now that they are together as one team and Team USA, I think we're able to really look at them, not just every four years or every two years between winter and summer games, but we can start to think of them more.

[00:26:36] **Laurajean Holmgren:** We're trying to extend the timeframe that Team USA is relevant.

[00:26:40] **Courtney Dunn:** Have you seen any changes in your research and your knowledge of this field as to whether athletes now are more interested in, or if it's more beneficial to have this connection with a brand that will make you a role model, or? A quote unquote influencer as compared to [00:27:00] monetary endorsements.

[00:27:01] **Courtney Dunn:** Is there a change in which one is more coveted or more beneficial?

[00:27:05] **Laurajean Holmgren:** That's a good question. I think athletes are looking at this from an exposure perspective, so it's helping them monetarily build their brand or, or train to compete. Maybe it provides them with additional revenue resources to have help, to have someone help run their social media or their strategy.

[00:27:20] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Then when you're looking from the other perspective, there's a lot of ego in sports too, so who doesn't want to be associated, but there's more authentic connections. I think we've seen that over time, you know, we know we all have it. We know when we see it and it is not. We're like, no, they're just getting paid to do this, versus this is part of who they are.

[00:27:42] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It may feel that way. It's Brandon. That's okay. But the authenticity is something that you truly, you have to see it to know it.

[00:27:49] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** LJ, tell us a little bit about the research project that you've undertaken for the National Center for Sports Spectator Safety. This is a topic [00:28:00] near and dear to our hearts.

[00:28:02] **Laurajean Holmgren:** It takes me back to my time in college athletics when I think about facilities, operations, security, and I love that aspect of my role.



[00:28:11] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So working with NCS4, still new to it, been with them for about a year and a half, and trying to carve out what's next in my research agenda. So as much as I have passions in the marketing, branding, and Olympic and Paralympic space, keeping this NCS4 close by is something very personal and close to my heart.

[00:28:31] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Um, of course, Bill Squires is my big connection there and I always thank him for his unwavering support. So having the opportunity to do research with them is incredible. We're laying out what it looks like for their survey as they look to publish in peer reviewed journals and take the output of that survey and use it in different publications.

[00:28:51] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So just getting my feet wet there with them and it's something that I'm really looking forward to dig in more.

[00:28:57] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** So important to look at [00:29:00] different ways and best practices to keep sports and entertainment venues safe for patrons. So the good work on that. Thank you. Can you talk to us a little bit about where athletes get in trouble with branding and sponsorship?

[00:29:17] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** What are some of the pitfalls and problems you see?

[00:29:22] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Brands are taking risks when they're signing anyone on, right? Their personality, you have all of your amazing attributes with you. You also have some of your flaws or potential flaws. So we sometimes make missteps and athletes do that often. Maybe not always, they know better now, but signing on an athlete in an influencer plan, they're a representation of you.

[00:29:42] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And when we look at the branding principles, the personification of a brand, It is a brand we expect as consumers now that brands have perspectives and opinions on things. So when you're signing on an athlete, whether it can be a different view than where they wanted to take their brand and it went wildly out of [00:30:00] control.

[00:30:00] **Laurajean Holmgren:** We've seen that with a few brands this year, or we could look back to Rio and there were some major cases in swimming where. Behavior was not up to par for anyone's standards, maybe even personal standards. And it led to a lot of complications, which brands were going to support you, which ones were going to back away.

[00:30:16] **Laurajean Holmgren:** We saw last year in track and field and failed drug testing policies and brands decided to back some backed away. So when I look at the athletes, some missteps are, Oh my gosh, they're head shakers. You can't, why would you do that? What were you thinking? But they're people. They're young, they're at the peak of their careers, and these things are going to happen.

[00:30:37] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So it is a brand risk to us that they need to assume when they're going into these contracts. And they are contracts, even if it's just a social media post, it has to happen. There is a contract in exchange. So brands taking this on, they need to know the risks, but they also may want some of the athletes that come with it.

[00:30:53] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Athletes are complex, but they connect with people and they'll surprise you. I mean, we look at the redemption story in track and field this year. [00:31:00] We've had some athletes heartbreaking that they didn't make the games. Yeah. And others, you're just, fists are in the air, this is their time. So, that's the Olympics.

[00:31:09] **Laurajean Holmgren:** That's the beauty of the Olympics and the Paralympics. This movement is to be able to bring people together, to celebrate wins, to learn stories you never could have imagined, and tugs on our heartstrings and gets us all rallying behind our teams.

[00:31:23] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** In closing, do you have any suggestions for athletes who are interested in building his, her, or their brand?

[00:31:34] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Things to be mindful of?

[00:31:36] **Laurajean Holmgren:** When I sit down with an athlete, I talk to them and I say, what are your pillars? What do you want to have behind you? Is it You're most passionate about your training. What are you most passionate about outside of your sport? What do people not know about you that you want them to know?

[00:31:51] **Laurajean Holmgren:** And what are some connections you want to be in the future? This helps them come up with their pillars. And I brought LeBron James up earlier, [00:32:00] because if you go across all of his channels and his website is one of them, you can look and he has these themes of the philanthropist, the man. The businessman and you look at the themes and then you can see how he's built out these connections there and it's um, maybe

someone did a full strategic plan for his brand, but you can start to look at that across his social media channels.

[00:32:22] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So I break his brand down over time, whether people love him or hate him. You cannot take away that his brand is very interconnected. So if I was to ask each of us, what are our themes? What are we most passionate about? What do people know or not know about you? We talked in CS4 before. That's part of me, right?

[00:32:39] **Laurajean Holmgren:** That's part of my brand. And so as athletes, when I meet with them, how do we look at your pillars of importance? And then from there, it's doing a quick social audit. Usually Instagram or TikTok is even great. You pull it up, you look at it visually. What's coming through? How is it coming through? In what format?

[00:32:53] **Laurajean Holmgren:** What medium? I don't say medium to them, but what medium is it coming through? Do you love the video aspect? Do you love the picture [00:33:00] aspect? How do you like to share things with them? Do you want to use it to educate? Do you want to use it for fun? And so we can use that outlet as to here's the input, this is their pillars, and then the output needs to come through in these formats.

[00:33:11] **Laurajean Holmgren:** So being a little more strategic, writing that down loosely, coming up with three slides of a PowerPoint for them and helping them own and hone their brand.

[00:33:21] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** I love that. Yeah. That's a fantastic bit of wisdom for people who want to build your brand. Actually, I was thinking to myself, not just athletes, but lawyers.

[00:33:30] **Carla Varriale-Barker:** Yeah.

[00:33:30] **Courtney Dunn:** Right. It applies to everyone. LJ makes it sound so comprehensive that I want to build our brand, right?

[00:33:36] **Laurajean Holmgren:** Happy to help both of you.

[00:33:38] **Courtney Dunn:** I will. Thank you, LJ. And thank you to our listeners. Please remember to rate, review, and subscribe, and you can listen to us on Podbean and Apple Podcasts. Thanks. Thank [00:34:00] you.