

# Mental Health of Athletes Takes Center Stage at the Olympics...

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## SPEAKERS

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach, Larry Lauer, Johnny Parks

- J** Johnny Parks 00:05  
Welcome to Compete like a Champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skill specialists with USTA Player Development and coach Johnny parks with IMG Academy. Today, we've got a really exciting episode here we're bringing back, Dr. Kristin Diffenbach, who last time we did an episode, we were together at the US Open, which is pretty exciting. So I'm just gonna quit give a quick bio here, and then I'm gonna hand it over to you. So, alright, so for the listeners that don't know, Dr. Dieffenbach is the Associate Professor of Athletic Coaching Education Director of the Center of Applied Coaching and Sport Science at West Virginia University and President of the United States Center for Coaching Excellence. So, we have a big timer on our hands right here. So, you know, I know very close friend of Larry, which is how I was actually told to intro intro Kristin was just say, close friend of Larry. So. But anyway
- D** Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 01:03  
If you're in the inner circle.
- J** Johnny Parks 01:05  
Exactly. But now we appreciate you coming back on and your time. And I know, we're

going to be discussing some already important topics that you know, are very much mainstream at the minute and taking a deep dive of some extremely important topics. So, you know, mental health of athletes being at the center stage. And so anyway, before we dive in, I want to say thank you for coming on. And, you know, we look forward to getting into this.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 01:30

Oh no. Oh, thank you. And thank you to Larry, I reached out to him, because there's, when things like this, start hitting the news, and we're talking about it, and it's our professional field is really near and dear to my heart. And I was really excited to have an opportunity to talk about this, because there's important pieces that we'll go over that just aren't being talked about enough. So very grateful for the opportunity to, to have a conversation about it.

L

Larry Lauer 01:53

Yeah, I think it's gonna be an interesting conversation for the audience. And you know, we want to talk about mental health and, and well being of athletes, and it's been center stage at the Olympics. But this conversations been going on for a while. But it's really taken off. You know, in the last few months, you and Naomi Osaka, at the French not doing media interviews, and eventually not playing and and that whole media sort of frenzy. And then, you know, sliding into our Olympics where, you know, there's been a lot of talk before the Olympics about mental health and the US OPC has really put a lot of efforts into providing support for athletes. And yet, we get there and conversation really took off even as the Olympics was happening. And, Kristen, are you surprised at just how much his mental health topic has emerged during the Olympics?

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 02:51

I'm actually surprised that it hasn't come up sooner in a lot of ways, right? This is it's high performance, it's stressful, there's so many things going on. And I've always been surprised that the only time they talk about it is sort of as a tangent story. And so in a lot of ways, I'm actually very excited to see that it's a conversation that we're starting to have. And that I'm I'm very excited and grateful that the athletes are starting to feel comfortable and confident to be able to talk about these things, it means that they're getting messages, and they're getting support in the fact that this is a normal part of life and a normal part of the experience and something we can talk about. So I've been very excited about that. It's the direction of the conversation and the information that's coming out about it, that makes me more concerned. And some of the messages that are younger

athletes and broader audiences might be getting, that it's not healthy, or it's problematic to talk about these things, or acknowledge them, it makes me more concerned.

**L** Larry Lauer 03:46

And that that is such a great point. I want to get to that in a moment. But as we open up this subject, right, how important is it that it's coming from the athletes? Because to me, this is athlete driven now, and the media is having to respond to it, and then the high performance world is gonna have to respond as well.

**D** Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 04:07

Oh, I think that's such a great point, Larry, the idea that it is coming from the athletes who are at the center of this experience, and I think, you know, we're we're heading into an unprecedented games. So many of these, you know, athletes have been training on their own in isolation. They're going into this incredibly high pressure situation. And we have a tendency sometimes to turn our athletes into sound bites and stories, and they're really taking ownership of No, this is me as an individual. This is what I'm experiencing. This is not just something for you to watch. And I think that's incredibly powerful and helps us ground back into what this really is all about, you know, celebrating enjoy and joining in to talk about these extreme performances and pushing the envelope and so coming from the athletes, I think it's very, you know, really, really exciting. Yeah, we'd like to acknowledge like you did that. This There's a conversation that's been going on for a while the NCAA has been working on developing resources. The IOC has the US OPC have there have been things that have been happening, but it's still a conversation, that's been something that's behind closed doors or separate from. And I think the opportunity to bring it into the spotlight as part of performing is a really great addition to the conversation.

**J** Johnny Parks 05:23

Why do you think we haven't had these discussions haven't started earlier?

**D** Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 05:28

Well, I think a well you know, sport is tough, right? sport is man up sport is get over it and get on with it. We have a culture in sport that says that weakness is, you know, anything that that deviates from just game face, and performance is a weakness as opposed to a strength to be able to acknowledge it, and grow from it and get stronger from it. And I think that that shuts down a lot of conversations. Everything from I have an injury to this is

very stressful, and I'm not sure how to keep moving on to the acknowledgement of who am I as a person, and who am I as an athlete. And so, you know, we have a culture, we don't want to get too much into the the deep part of that, because we could spend hours talking about the, the hegemonic masculinity that we like to talk about, you know, use the academic term, but just the sort of the culture of being tough, that somehow has been thought to be inconsistent with high performance. And we know it's not it's very consistent.



Larry Lauer 06:24

You know, Kristen, this pressure. And this has been one of the arguments that people who are pushing back or making this pressure has always existed. Is it the same for the athletes? Has it changed? And if so, what's different?



Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 06:38

Oh, that's another really great question. Yeah, well, sport is about pressure, right? If you didn't have pressure, you wouldn't get your adrenaline running, and you wouldn't have the explosion of the line. If there wasn't something on the line. It's not fun to compete, right? That otherwise, you're just going out and recreating, right? So there's a important power to the adrenaline rush and the challenge and the pressure, I think what's different is that we're moving into it, you know, we've long been moving towards a place where sport is a is a commodity, right? sport is an entertainment element, it's an entertainment place. And our athletes get commodified, they become almost public ownership of the athletes, because I'm consuming it. And it creates a really different space for athletes to operate into, there's a high expectation on them to be perfect to live up to the ideals to perform so that we can watch. And that changes things a lot as that continues. And then we also have this 24 seven news cycle of social media, where people you know, we have plenty of information and research about how people react on social media that they wouldn't do in person. And that puts a tremendously high pressure on people, they you know, at the end of the day, are athletes or people, while they might be performing in a superhuman way with their bodies, that doesn't mean that they are somehow immune to the fact that, you know, people will take potshots and say things and do all kinds of things in social media that they used to be able to go home and would be quiet.



Larry Lauer 08:11

You know it was much easier to control the distractions, generations ago, even even five years ago, 10 years ago, I believe, and much easier to control the distractions, because in have sort of this constant inundation, of information of, and not just information, but

personal information, where people are responding to your performance. And that that is something that I think has is really taking the pressure that people have always felt and just grown it tenfold 100 fold, I don't know what it is. Because when you start them on social media, or talking about social comparison, and and then you Christian, you point out how like there are there are no filters, people are going to say and do what they want. And so if point 5% of people are just meeting miserable people, or they were gambling, and they lost, and they want to say something nasty, there's nothing to stop them. And before you would have been, you know, wouldn't have any idea you'd be your own little world around the people around you and would have been very limited. The worst that could happen is you know, on the network news, you would have got slammed or something, receiving your mistake or your error over and over again. But it's gotten really personal.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 09:34

Well, it lives in perpetuity like you said, you get a YouTube video that gets put up, you make a comment out of frustration, you make a face out of frustration. And we've seen that I mean the stuff that keeps coming back up of that moment of disappointment on your face when it's not what you were shooting for, and it's human to feel those things. But we are somehow creating an environment in which it's so easy to take that moment and define it person as who they are or what they're doing by that moment in time, or that slip of the tongue or that thing that they did. And I think that that's really, that's, I mean, you try to focus on your performance and what you're doing. And now you've either got to be thinking about those things, or you're not thinking about those things. And one way or the other, you're going to get in trouble. Either your performance is going to suffer, or your image is going to suffer, which will then affect, potentially your performance. That's a lot to put on. And let's not forget, I think this is something that's easy to forget that peak performance typically comes when people are in their late teens and early 20s. I know we have outliers, I know we have some 30s and 40s. And, and, you know, more adult folks in the games, but a lot of our performers are very young. And from a human development perspective, the skills of managing those things you develop over time. And so just because again, their performance is astounding, doesn't always mean they've developed those skills, even with people working with them, like you doesn't mean that they've perfected those skills, and social comparison matters a different way to teenagers than it does to full blown adult and all those things. And I think we lose sight of that sometimes in one thing of our athletes.

L

Larry Lauer 11:15

I think we do and we expect what we shouldn't expect perfection. Over time, you know,

being the same way always we know that human behavior is imperfect and inconsistent. And then you polarize it and you have different opinions about what people believe is right? You know what is right and what is wrong, and it becomes very extreme. And I think it creates this sort of vile negative, I'm going to call a cesspool of opinions. And you can get a lot of take Simone Biles, who a lot of people are supporting her, as I think we should. But then there's that small group of people who were are still leaning on that mental toughness. Like you got to push through everything, you can't show weakness, you can't stop you, you'd let down the US you let down your country, your teammates. And that group is not changing their opinion, by the way. Yeah, you're not gonna change them, necessarily, because they're pretty cemented in their beliefs. So even though you you can be doing all the right things, you're going to get some harsh pushback if you're in the public eye.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 12:29

Well, I think for you know, that's a, that's a great point, too, is that our job, the work that you do, and the work that I do with athletes, is, you know, we're not going to change that the environment in which they have to compete is going to be the environment in which they have to compete. And so how do we then help support them and insulate them and help them create the skills to figure out what to pay attention to and what not to pay attention to? And figure out where to value input and where not to because like you mentioned a few minutes ago, sometimes, you know, somebody points out a mistake you made? Well, there's value sometimes in somebody from the outside saying that you know, that really what you meant to say? Or is that really the best comment? Do you grow from that? But who it comes from and how it said and all that matters, and helping someone pick and choose where to listen is incredibly, a big part, I think of preparing elite athletes these days, and I think you could probably speak to that even better is what are the things you know, how are we best preparing athletes? And does it start when they hit the game? So does it start far before that?

J

Johnny Parks 13:34

I think was it's not good to see, I guess, well, maybe it is but you see these great champions like Simone who's absolutely, you know, done so well in the past Olympic Games. You've seen Novak, Djokovic whose just won his 20th Grand Slam at Wimbledon. You know, Naomi Osaka, who who, you know, is hardly lost a match in the past, you know, two, three years. These people come forward, they they're showing that they they do have these struggles with anxiety with the pressure in that and I think there's a public perception out there and you certainly see it within the comments that just because they've you know, reached you know, the top of the mountain and what they do that they

don't they don't they don't suffer from anxiety and stress and pressure and you know, at the end of that and you know, you see it okay Simone with Drew she was really struggling out there. Novak did the same, right. I mean, in his in one of his matches, he you know, he cracked a couple rackets, he let it go Naomi Osaka had to withdraw from a couple tournament's from struggling with some of these, you know, mental health issues. And I think we need to let people know that this exists for everyone, not just younger people coming into into their sport or the high levels of their sport. I mean, this happens across the whole chain from our greatest champions, down to our emerging high performance juniors and I think normalizing the fact that it's out there and exists isn't really important thing to, to take account of that everybody needs help everyone needs support. And we can't just judge people because of their achievements, we don't define them by their achievements, we, you know that everyone needs that level of support to get them through no matter what the situation is. So, you know, I think that's an important topic here because I think a high level athletes at the top of their sports get judged in a, you know, at a different level, you know, then say like Emma Raducanu, who struggled with with you know, she she admits he struggled with anxiety in her fourth round, Master Wimbledon had to go off the court, and then she never came back on, she just really, you know, really took its toll on her. So it doesn't just happen with these younger emerging stars that all of a sudden cast into the limelight. So I think it's important to, you know, certainly for me, I think it's important to show everybody that this exists all the way up the chain, and not just a certain level.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 15:57

JP, I think that's a really beautiful point. Because, you know, master athletes, young athletes, the whole gamut, this is such an important conversation that I really like that you pull that back out that this idea that you can be at the top of your game. And then for some reason, something would throw you off, whether that be just like our physical something might all of a sudden pull the muscle, you can all of a sudden have something that throws you off where your mental game is. And there's, you know, there's all kinds of things. And I think the key message here is it isn't terminal, it doesn't have to be terminal, if you get the right support. And you know, I've argue this with a lot of masters athletes, go get physical therapy, because you pull the muscle and yeah, I know you're 50. But it's still worth getting PT and doing the work because you want to get back in the game. It's sort of the same here, you reach out for support, there's something to be done. This isn't just a terminal flaw that you are done. But it's going to take some work and time and like you both have said it's going to take support and figuring out what that looks like for you. And I think that's just if we can get a message across that, you know, the folks that are out there training and competing, the recognition that it's not, you know, it's not a linear upward climb, that you just go up, up, up, up, up. It's a bumpy road. I mean, any training

log of any athlete will tell you, on any given week, something's up and something's down, right, you've got something going on.

J

Johnny Parks 17:19

I think we've all got examples of where you know, we have our routines in life in whatever we do whatever profession we're in, but there are always things in our lives outside of our profession that could potentially affect the way in which we then go about from one week to the next one day to the next, you may have the same process. But you may have a couple things that really do take their toll on you some external things might be family things or whatever. And those, you know, sometimes can affect you and then what you're doing in life, right? So it's no different for professional athletes. Yes, okay. There's there's high levels of pressure when you get to these tournament's. But we need to understand, like you said up here with these are human beings that are also dealing with their own lives outside of what we're seeing on TV.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 18:07

I was just thinking about something you said, because we do the same thing to other people in the public eye, we do the same thing to actors, we do the same thing to a lot of people in the public eye. I think one of the big differences here is that with actors when we see them perform, and actresses, we, you know, they're playing a character. And there's a little bit an easier way for us to remember to separate those two things out. And one of them, we have to remember whether they're not playing a character, when they're in their performance element, that's who they are, they are, they are doing their job. And that makes it even more important to keep that human element in mind. And I think it makes it even harder sometimes. Because we do put them in that same space of TV personalities, movie stars, all that kind of, you know, the way that we treat our star athletes these days.

L

Larry Lauer 18:53

It's interesting. That's why I think maybe athletes are closer to musicians. Because you often you know, your music is a part of you. You hear music, just talk about that. I think one of the things that we have to overcome is this categorization of, she's tough. He's not. He's tough. She's not whatever it is to look, this is what we're talking about. All this exists on some continuum that we slide up and down. And that's what you're saying, like what the training week and in different times in your life. At times, you could be doing really well you're thriving, you're resilient, and you're really adapting well to your environment. And you really are happy and in other times you can be not thriving, not as resilient, not as adaptive to your environment, or you're not functioning very well, right. And I think if you



look at it that way, everybody that's listening, can can connect with that. But if we say well, there's this whole group of people, you know, or who are good, like we're in a good group, the mentally healthy group and there's this other group that are ill and they have problems. And everybody thinks about, you know, like the person who's walking down the street yelling at themselves. Like, they got serious problems, you know, and they want to categorize this thing versus No, we all experience mental health, just like we're talking about our physical health. And if we can open the door to that understanding that everybody deals with this, and everybody personally knows, there's times where you struggle, and then you work through it, and then you, you get back to a better place. And I think if we can have more of those open conversations, instead of labeling people as soft, as whatever, you know, weak, not mentally tough, a mental midget, as you hear, you know, getting more into the other nasty terms. And if we can get away from that, and focus more on the experience that we all have, and knowing that our elite athletes are doing it under a microscope, and that's where the lack of empathy online really gets me because people can do live their lives, they're not being criticized 24/7, there needs to be a level of empathy that, you know, especially when it comes to a sport like gymnastics, that one little slip up, and that changes the whole performance, you play tennis, you can make 50 unforced errors and when the match in two sets has happened, right, like you can make a lot of mistakes in tennis. And when gymnastics at that level, you can't, this is what the reality, and I think people miss that. And unfortunately, they lack the empathy, because they can't understand. They haven't lived it. So now I think people need to maybe open their minds to other people's experiences, and try to understand that, you know, I'm not them. And they're not mean, we're all we're all going through stuff. And we're in different places at different times. And we need we need to be, I think, respectful of that.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 21:54

I think that's a really powerful message of, you know, you've used empathy a few times. And I think there's an extension of that around the concept of forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of yourself. And, you know, finding that self care place of, you know, peak performance is not a formula. We know this, what the talent development is, and JP said something a minute ago that's rattling in my head, that's, you know, concerning to me that people look at these elite athletes and expect that this is what it's going to take to be perfect. And if I don't have this, or the child doesn't have this, or the person that I'm looking at, doesn't have it, they're not going to get there. And that understanding of peak performance of it's this interesting mosaic of so many factors coming together at just the right time, and just the right way, for someone to really nail it, especially when we're talking about, you know, hundreds of a second, or you know, those just tiny moments in time. And all of those things have to line up and being forgiving of the fact that that's really hard. I mean, getting everything into that, that makes the Olympic corporate so

much more exciting, but also so much more human that that's a really complex equation, and so much more than that 30 seconds that you see on TV, and you don't know, all the things that went into the prep for it, all the things that went into that moment. There's just so much to it that can we join in, you know, being excited about the joy of the moment, but then collectively sharing in that agony of defeat as a human experience. It was old, Howard Cosell used to say that right? That it was a burn in my head somewhere from that childhood, JP, maybe you're too young for this. But he used to talk before his news broadcasts are the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. And you can hear his very distinctive voice. And it's a collective shared human experience that we do with the athletes not voyeuristic that we're looking at the athletes, and how do we make that part of our human conversation and allow people that opportunity, because it's going to take that to get there, you don't get peak performance. without all of this. You don't get the and I often wonder when we shut people out. Because it's not a neat, tidy linear road. I often wonder how many amazing peak performances have we missed, because we cut somebody out too early and didn't give them opportunities? Because we labeled them as weak or not worthy or couldn't do it. And how many people shut themselves out? Because they were told that moment of weakness or that day of weakness or that year of weakness was terminal. And that that's what really starts to bother me about those trolls and that conversation that people will buy into that and believe that, and I don't want that to be the loudest voice in this conversation.

J

Johnny Parks 24:36

Well, that's an important point. And this is why I think, you know, Larry said at the beginning, right, a lot of these conversations coming out of being athlete led, you know, the athletes or who the younger people look up to and who the parents are, you know, the parents that may be really involved in their, in their kids development in their sport. You know, these are the messages that need to be most powerful, right? Like, these are issues that we deal with. We need to help learn these skills no different than they go into their sports skills and learning how to hit a forehand back and how to tactical situations physical preparedness in the gym, or whatever it may be, like, it's time to recognize that there are skills to be learned, you know, from the mental development sides. There's also the side of it that, like you just said, from a talent identification development standpoint, as you know, we label a person too early, we don't know the level, the true level of development and maturation in their brain, right?

L

Larry Lauer 25:34

It's more like Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, where Kristen is.

J

Johnny Parks 25:34

So you're looking at the exterior side, the pure physical side, and because of that, we're labeling them as opposed to looking at like, Well, clearly, on the physical side, they may not need as much work as a, you know, later developer, but mentally, that's where we might need to double down some of the work with the skill development. And I'm completely with you there. I mean, as Larry knows, you know, we working together my philosophy when I was there, under player ID development was always to have the base as wide as possible for as long as possible. Because by that, I mean, there's people that are going to emerge that you haven't seen from a very young age. And there's so much beauty in that, because they're coming to the table with skills that they may have learned, and they're only just coming into fruition. It's not a linear path, this journey is winding, it's, some people just take the junction off, and then they get back on it further up the road. And, you know, it looks like spaghetti junction out there. It doesn't look like just well, America has just those one roads up and down on one road, side to side, right. But it's like I would say Yeah, all over the place. And that that's where we've got to recognize that these skills need to be and they need to be done at an early age to, it's not like they go through the rigors of a sport from as far as a junior athlete. And that these skills become automatic as they emerge onto the professional scene. The work just like everything else gets hopefully is getting done at younger stage, younger ages, younger, earliest stages, and is built through and in it just like you know, we talk about long term athletic development, and from a physical standpoint being developmentally appropriate and getting the right progressions in place was the same with the mental skills, what do they What do they have the capacity to be able to take in right now and work on? And how do we layer that, as they get more mature, unable to process more, and the stuff that's in the working memory gets put into the long term memory and then you put something else into the working memory in it. It's just this this this beautiful cycle that needs to happen through maturation. But anyway, you get me on this how to ID side.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 27:46

But I think that that's part of the thing, right, is that this mental health conversation, isn't other, it isn't just problem, Oh, we got to deal with this issue. It should be a part of our integrated conversation around supporting peak human development, which is supporting the opportunity for peak performance, because you can't have one without the other. And when we do one without the other ice would submit that we are not really doing peak performance, we're doing survival of the fittest, which is an entirely different animal, when you're really seeking to maximize potential here. And you raise a really great point, right? The skill sets served you well in elementary school will not be the study skills and habits, it'll serve you well, by the time you get high school, and are not the same skills that serve you at college. And we saw this with our three on three basketball team.

And we've seen this with a few other sports where just because you competed at a high level here, it's not the same over here. And so there's this constant adjustment of skills that need to happen. Because even though you've played on the world stage for, you know, Wimbledon, that may not be the same experience and the skill, exact dialing of your skills that you need for the Olympic stage. And so this idea that talent development is somehow a start and finish, as opposed to this constantly evolving, readjusting circular process of problem solving, I think is problematic. And so again, this mental health pieces, if we can start the conversation as an integrated part of the process, as opposed to Ooh, there's a problem. Flaw. I think we'll be moving in the right direction.



Larry Lauer 29:24

Well, this is such a good conversation. When you look at a lot of the literature, you look at athlete talent development, and then you get to the cognitive or the social, emotional, psychological. Much of the talk is about how children can't focus for very long, and they're very emotional, and that's about as far as a conversation goes. So we haven't done a very good job of sort of mapping out the development psychologically of young athletes or young people. Obviously there's models and theories in psychology that don't really, you can't retrofit those on the sport very well, a high performing young athletes. So I think we've, we've left a void there, to be honest, where we need to sport scientists in this field sports psychology provide more real world, yet science based information for coaches, for managers for talent, talent or player development people to understand, here's what it can look like, in the psychological space. So I do think that we missed the boat on that. And that's something certainly that we got to improve upon. But I wanted to bring this conversation back to something, Kristen, that you were fired up about when we were texting. And that was this conversation that's happening in the media is so focused on the decision that the athlete is making, should I push myself or should I not push myself? Right? Maybe it's too unhealthy. And in that conversation gets lost. What we're talking about here is the whole system surrounding the athlete, the environment surrounding the athlete. Right. And, you know, we've we've got many different people in our listeners, some who are coaches, parents, probably people who run facilities, managers, other psychologists and mental coaches, and we got a wide I would say, listenership what what does that environment need to start to look like if we're going to support athletes in their well being their mental health, we talked about developing their coping skills, which is hugely important, I think you need to ethically do that. Well, what kind of environment? Do the adults in the room, in the gym, in the rink and on the field need to create, to allow athletes to be healthy to provide that opportunity?



Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 31:58

Now you're getting me all wound up again, right? Because this is how this conversation started and my reaching out to you to, you know, just vent and talk about it with somebody else who I know, you know, we share a lot of these conversations over time. And so I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk about a little bit and bring some of my ideas up. But also hear some of yours is that the environment or on the athlete is crucial, right? peak performance doesn't happen in a vacuum, you've got a whole host of people that are a part of and you often hear, you know, athletes will very often talk about the people that supported them, and you need folks that are unconditional, in terms of how they care about the athlete and the support they're giving them. I was really touched to see the one message that Simone Biles put out around the recognition that she realized that people if she finally was realized that people valued her for more than her gymnastics skill on her her tweets that went quite viral. And I think that that's crucial that from day one, it's one of the things I talk about with youth sport parents all the time is make sure that we are, you know, encouraging a supporting effort, we are encouraging and supporting ownership of the activity, not, you know, the positive push as opposed to the parental shove. And we're really looking at ways to make sure that we value them as a person. And then their activities are sort of the icing on the cake. I think you're an amazing person, and I'm proud of what you're accomplishing. But the amazing person is first and foremost. And thinking about ways in which we are all a part of that talent development pathway for everyone else. Right? And whether I'm talking about other adults I know or kids, I know, we all have that opportunity. Going back to something you said earlier about having empathy. We're all like rings of a tree, right? Some of us are farther out, some of us are closer together. And when you're in that inner circle, and closer, that responsibility gets even stronger. What are you doing to be as supportive as possible of those athletes, but also, if any of those people in the circle to support performance building up over tearing down? And there's a way you know, people will push back on that and be like, oh, but you got to give criticism, you got to critique? Yeah, you do, because that's how people get better. But I would submit that how you do that, and the way that you challenge. Are you doing it truly to support development? Are you doing it to prove that you know something and to tear down? Take a good hard look at how you're doing it and think about is it being grounded in the best interest of the other person in a way that's going to support and so there's there's a lot of things that coaches and parents can do to start thinking about how they support and the way in which they support the way in which they support performance, but doing it in a way that's actually going to support performance if that sort of doesn't get too circular on the logic there.



Larry Lauer 34:43

Yeah, and I think that you bring up this idea challenge in the in the resilience literature, they talk about an environment that provides support and challenge this optimal

environment and athletes need to be challenged achievers need to be challenged, they need to be pushed, they need to be given real, honest, critical feedback at the right times in the right ways. And that's not always easy to figure out. But I do think you create somewhat of a, dare I say, some credit in the bank, when you take a strength approach. And you know, I always think back to our good friend, Tom Martin, and back at UNC Greensboro, always focusing on the strengths. And when you do that, like you're capable of these things. And let's figure out how to use them in the best possible way. And now when I come in with that criticism, I'm not attacking your whole identity. I'm just saying there's a part that you need to work on. And we want to improve that all these other things are awesome. And I think there's certainly a philosophy that exists that, well, you know, if you if you tell them that they're doing well, then they're going to get complacent, which, I mean, I think JP and I just talked about this, you know, a recent episode about Daniel Canaan, and the whole idea of, you know, regression and regression to the mean that, honestly, a lot of what happens is, performance just naturally fluctuates. And we start to think that, you know, punishing people works, because after a bad performance, they do better if we punish them, hey, guess what, they probably were going to do better anyway. Because they weren't always going to perform that bad. So it was just, it was just chance. And so I think that a big part of this conversation is understanding this optimal environment where there's got to be a whole lot of support. As you challenge the athletes.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 36:41

I think they're really hits that idea of how do you uplift performance? And there this goes back to JP something, I think you said early on, we have you asked about this, and we have that culture of, well, it's sports. So it better be tough. If I don't yell if I don't scream. And I always get pushback on that. from folks. It's like, well, you're gonna raise your voice because you can't be hurt if you don't yell on talking about the derogatory, negative screaming kind of an approach. And certainly, Yeah, that'll motivate somebody, especially if they're younger, because they're afraid. And we know that fear at the end of the day does put a cap on performance. So it will only take you so far. And I'll have people push back and say, Yeah, but they do it at the pro level, well, there's a good chance that those guys from the very get go that's the only model they learned. And if that's the only model you learn, that's what you're going to respond to. But I again, would submit, if we change the model of how much farther Can we go, and I really think the research is starting to show that and the experiences are starting to show that when you have a lift people up environment and lift people up leadership approach and teaching approach, it sets people up to maximize that does not mean there aren't times like you said that you challenge and push. But it's a measured push, as opposed to working with a stick kind of approach, for lack of better terms. And I'm going to use an example here of because I think it ties into the mental health conversation, and to just the whole style, if anyone saw

the German, I believe was martial arts athlete at the Games, whose coach shook her and slapped her before her event. And it hit the media quite hard, and people had to fit. And you know, of course, we're seeing this tiny little snapshot of that coach athlete relationship. And she made jokes afterwards about how, maybe if he'd hit me harder, I would have won a medal. And, you know, I'm not going to make any comments about their relationship, because it's completely plausible that in that sport environment, there is a level of intensity and pump up. And I know that, you know, sometimes there's that conversation, and that works for people. And so we don't know, the conversations, my challenge. And my problem is that too many people are going to see that and think that that's what it has to look like in martial arts, and aren't going to understand the intricacies of the conversation that went on in an adult-adult coaching relationship. And so all of a sudden, again, we're going to perpetuate, if we're not careful if we don't talk about it, not that they should do anything different if that is what is adult-adult working in their coach athlete relationship. But whenever we're perpetuating those problems, and that toxic potential approach to sport, and so we as harbinger's of youth sport and youth sport development and talent development all the way up the chain, need to do exactly what we're doing now is conversations around why we're doing what we're doing. What are the implications of what we're doing and how do we support what's best for the individual athlete. And that only happens with thought and intention. Not mimicry and assumption.



Johnny Parks 39:35

I think that's an incredible point. And I think that's the kids with thought and intention. Because when you get to those high levels, that the relationship comes that you know, the relationship with no one knows what that relationship truly is like, so we cannot judge that right. Like the athlete came out and said she actually asked her coach to do that what I asked him to do so there's a level of relationship here that they've got that the coach right recognizes he's able to do that because of the relationship. But also, let's just look at the athlete, every athlete has a different personality. Right? You see this in college sports. So you know, I've seen a lot in college tennis, you have some athletes that sit there and want to coach in the middle of the match to tell them to pick it up, it's not good enough, we need you know, you've got to, you know, just going at them. And people respond to that really well. But again, if the relationships there, but then you've got those that just really don't respond, even if the relationship is there don't respond to that really well. And they need that softer tone, a little bit more empathy. Hey, come on, you know, what's going on, talk to me. Okay, great was the solution, you know, that a little bit more of that, that level of conversation? So I think in these examples, again, like you're saying is, there's been many examples in the tennis world, where a champion has been produced from a background that people have gotten a snapshot of, and now everyone's trying to emulate that. And you would say, is that a good thing for the sport? Or is it doing more harm than



good? Because I'd say for every one in God knows how many millions of examples that may have sprouted out of that, think of the many millions that tried to emulate that, and actually did more harm for the athlete and more harm for the sport than that. And you often don't see that, right, you only see it, when they the cameras around, and they're at the high levels. So I think like you're saying, it's, it's not mimicry, we're not trying to mimic what we see, we have to focus on what we feel, you know, a lot of the time, as coaches, we, you know, and I'm one of them, as I like to do things based off field and that field changes as the relationship gets deeper and more meaningful, you have to adapt and change according to what's best for that athlete. And it doesn't look the same from day one, as it might look into two years into the relationship. So, you know, we have to, we have to be open to that our eyes have to be open and aware that that is not the route to take and just copy pasting, it will do a lot more harm than good.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 42:02

Well, and when we pull it into this mental health conversation, I think that just starts to highlight the importance of having the conversations, spending time talking about these things with your athletes, recognizing that each individual athlete is going to deal with these things differently, and need a different approaches different strategy. And again, it comes back to are we trying to champion individuals to reach their peak performance, then, you know, there's a, there's a really important piece here of getting to the heart of the why and then doing it from that perspective, as opposed to trying to lump this all into one singular conversation as a good or bad right or wrong. This or that kind of an approach.

L

Larry Lauer 42:41

Right? Because that only adds to the polarization of the topic.

D

Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 42:44

Right.

L

Larry Lauer 42:45

Which is a good way to circle back here as we begin to wrap up that, you know, when we start to think of it as good and bad, awful or amazing, we start to label again, and we start to say tougher, soft. And and start to put that label down. And you talked about terminal, often talking about permanency that this is the permanency of what we're dealing with. So So yeah, it's important that we have this topic, but great stuff today, JP.



You want to wrap us up?



Johnny Parks 43:17

Yeah, well Kristen we can't thank you enough for joining. You know, we haven't had many double guests. Repeat guests so far with us. But I think you may be the second one. Yeah, no, we really, I really enjoyed our chat last time we met at the US Open and it was fun to do that live there. But no, really appreciate your time. And, you know, happy that we're able to talk about this more, more openly and raise more awareness to it, as you mentioned, is just it's just extremely important that we keep the conversation going and it doesn't just die down and you know, raises again at the next Olympic cycle. Right? So really good stuff. So thank you for your time.



Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 43:52

Thank you. And thank you for the opportunity to have just a really stimulating conversation and hopefully one that gets other people talking.



Johnny Parks 43:59

Awesome. All right, well, that's a wrap for this week's episode of Compete like a Champion, a great episode dive into some important topics. If you have any comments, you can reach Larry and I on Twitter, it's at Larry Lauer or at Johnny Parks One. I think you can also Kristen, you have social media following



Dr. Kristen Diffenbach 44:16

Yeah, I'm on Twitter at DrDCoachScience, and that's probably the easiest way to reach me.



Johnny Parks 44:21

Great. Thank you. And if you want to ask any questions or have any comments on the episode, please reach out to any one of us. We'd be happy to keep the conversation going. For more information regarding anything all things USTA Player and Coach Development, you can go to [playerdevelopment.usta.com](http://playerdevelopment.usta.com) for resources and more information, plenty of resources up there. Larry's put a bunch of stuff up there too. So check that out. But until next time, Kristen, Lazur. and I are checking out.