

Episode 15 Meagan Duhamel Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Future of Figure Skating. I'm Anna Kellar and my guest today is Meagan Duhamel. Meagan is the 2018 Olympic Bronze medalist in pairs, and gold medalist in the team event. She and partner Eric Radford also won two world titles, and were known for pushing the envelope technically, being the first pair to land a throw quad at the Olympics. Since her retirement, Meagan has focused on coaching and commentary, and is known for being an outspoken advocate for other athletes, including being critical of the ISU and IOC's handling of Russian doping. In this episode, we dive into her thoughts on the state of pairs skating and the need for athlete-centered policies in sport.

Anna

Hi, Meagan, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. How are you?

Meagan

Thanks for having me. I'm great.

Anna

So you're just finishing off the competitive season as a coach. You're doing that work and you're a mom, what have you been up to lately?

Meagan

Yeah, I've been doing like a little bit of everything in the last couple of years. Right after I retired from skating in 2018, I kind of went right into coaching and was really, really busy and COVID hit and I kind of like, started a different side of coaching when COVID happened and everything was locked down. I started doing a lot of off-ice classes, a lot of skaters and clubs were asking me to do classes for them online on Zoom. And from all over the world like I was, I remember being up at four in the morning for classes with skaters in Australia and in Thailand, but it didn't. I was like I have nothing to do but sit at home. So who cares? I'm up at four o'clock. So I did a lot of that and I found like a really big passion for teaching skaters off ice. There are so few coaches, I think, that understand first the importance of off ice and second, like what figure skaters need for off ice because it's such a unique sport and I worked with so many trainers over the years that wanted to build muscle and do you know all sorts of different things in terms of like fitness training, and figure skating is so specific because you need to be strong, but you need to be small and you need to be agile and you need to have power. It's just a big combination of things. So I really enjoy doing off ice and managing a lot of skaters off ice so finding them dance teachers, Pilates teachers, along with with what I do, which is mostly like cardio and strength training and jump classes. So that's been where my life and my work is right now. I also teach a lot of seminars, I'm commentating with CBC for the skating competitions that are on TV in Canada, which unfortunately there's so few but I have been commentating for the

ones that are on and I have two kids that I'm raising and really busy with. So you know, I'm getting here, there and everywhere.

Anna:

Yeah, that's really great. It's really cool to hear about the off ice piece of that. I think during the pandemic, it was interesting to see people trying to translate and having to think about well, what does the movement look like that I'm used to doing on the ice. With some of the ISU keep training videos I tried to do some of the ones for pairs, and it was really interesting trying to see people figuring out like, well, if I lean on a table or if I have a suitcase over my head or like what can I do to try to make that happen.

Meagan

It's such a unique component, and I credit so much of my success on the ice to the off ice training I did and the off ice training I managed for myself. I was in Montreal at the time and I went around to find specialists in every kind of field off ice training that I needed like I had, my coach is like you're not flexible enough. You need to be more flexible. And I was like okay, and he didn't provide me any resources and Skate Canada didn't provide me any resources. So I had to go find all those things myself and I had to find a stretch coach I ended up finding from the Cirque du Soleil and Essentrics classes and cardio and strength training and physio and massage and all these things that skaters in Canada we're left to kind of find by ourselves because our federation and our coaches, at least at that time, were not providing all of that to us. So you know, I really had a lot of fun, you know, finding all these really great trainers and as much as I trained on the ice, I would train off the ice I skated three hours a day, I was doing three hours of off-ice a day in some capacity. And that's why I was able to stay injury free and why I was able to have a long career and I tried to teach that to kids at a younger age now like the importance of - I bring in a Pilates coach and they think it's a little bit boring, but like I know what you need to have a strong core you need to have that hip mobility and flexibility so that you don't get injured and you can stay strong and healthy and you'll improve so much more. That's kind of like my my main focus now is kind of bringing this attention to the younger generation of skaters so that you know they're not going to get injured. We always learn about the importance of off-ice once we're injured, but it would be nice if skaters could learn about the importance of it to avoid injuries.

Anna

Yeah, definitely. When I was younger, I really hated doing warm ups. It just felt so pointless. And then as you get older you start to realize the value of it and why you need it but you need it all the way along. It's just when you're a kid you think you can skip it.

Meagan

Yeah, and you kind of can to some extent, and then it catches up with you. And that's what I love. I love teaching like dynamic warmup dynamic cooldowns to skaters. I asked them like what do you do when you warm up and they're like, Well, I do a couple jumps and that's it. Like okay, but what about the mobility? What about like waking up your body working on your speed, your

acceleration, your balance before you get on the ice, you should have warmed up a little bit of your balance and your core if you want to be ready to go and fire on the ice.

Anna:

And so you're working with skaters at all different ages and levels. There's a few top teams that are training with Bruno at your rink, do you work with the Japanese pair team as well?

Meagan:

Yeah, they were doing a little bit of my off-ice last year and then they got injured. So they kind of like stepped back and worked with more with their, like physical trainers. And when they come back in May they they want to continue the off-ice training with me. And that's yeah, that's where my focus has been. I have private lessons with five and six-year-olds, all the way to the International pair skaters that skate in Oakville. So yeah, it's a wide range. They all have different needs, which is so much fun. You know, like playing around and I know with the older skaters, I understand their bodies and what they need for training a little bit differently than I understand what a five-year-old needs but I'm learning along the way and I really love it.

Anna

That's great. There's been a lot of discussion, I think this year about the state of the pairs field in general because there was such a big change in the field from after the Olympics, a lot of teams retired or split, and kind of just a few teams continuing at the very top and then a lot of space for other teams to come up and I was hearing all season people saying, you know, is pairs dying, what's going on? Why doesn't anybody want to do pairs and I went to cover a lot of competitions as a reporter and I kept hearing that pairs is the least interesting discipline and that would make me mad because it's my favorite discipline. But I'm curious what you think about the big question of what is the state of the pairs discipline and what we can be doing to be growing it in terms of more skaters being interested in pairs, and developing to a higher level and also seeing more countries develop pair teams?

Meagan:

Yeah. I'm always a little bit baffled when people say pairs is the least interesting, because I mean, it's the most dynamic, exciting discipline. And I mean, I love singles too, and I'm maybe I'm biased. I was a pair skater. But when I watch skating, and you get to see the jumps and the throws and the lifts and the twist and the intricate choreography and the emotional connection between two partners that pair skating brings, I mean, I don't think it gets much better than that. But I guess not many people share our opinion our views. You know, I see that a few things can be done to up the interest in skaters doing pair skating. So I remember when I was I was about 11 or 12 years old, and my sister competed at Nationals. And after nationals there was like a big mix-and-match kind of like seminar and somebody had told my mom that I would be a good pair skater I had just learned my Double Axel and I was super small and pretty spunky, kind of that fearless personality that we look for in pair skating. So my mom was like, well, we're already here. Why don't we register her for that? So I went to like this mix-and-match seminar at the end of nationals. And it was run by Louis Stong, who worked for the Canadian figure skating Association back then. This was 1999 Long time ago and it was great. I was exposed. We were

like, maybe 50 or 60 Girls, maybe five or 10 boys. So the guys were working a lot harder than the girls because they just kind of skate with every one of us. But it was a great introduction and they did it every year after nationals. And that's one thing that I'm you know, super disappointed and waiting for Skate Canada to start something like that again, because all the skaters and the coaches are there. This is the place to do something like that, a big mix and match. Also going around the country - and I'm speaking for Canada but I have a sense that the US is kind of like in the same boat as Canada where we can have skaters and coaches go around the country. And do pair seminars, introduced pair skating to skaters at smaller clubs, where they may not see it all the time with younger skaters with older skaters, you get a female pair skater, a male pair skater and you have them go together to do all the seminars where they can skate with all these other skaters too and help instill confidence in the coaches, the singles coaches, that you can start a pair team, you can start pair skaters because I think sometimes coaches are a little bit hesitant because they feel like they don't know pair skating when we're thinking like smaller clubs. And they don't want to lose their skaters to a big center so they just kind of don't bring up the opportunity for them to skate pairs and I think that a lot of coaches could coach pairs at the beginning stage if they were just kind of given a couple of tools in order to do so. So I think it'd be really cool if Skate Canada and the USFS would do this, they would have kind of a traveling pair seminar going around finding skaters. You know, maybe there's a young skater in Saskatchewan and another young skater in PEI, and they will be great together and they just don't know it. And nobody's going around there looking and directing these people. I had done kind of like on Instagram I had done like a little question and answer and somebody had asked me about pair skating and popularity in Canada and I got so many interesting responses, like in DMs for people, parents saying, Oh, no one ever told my kids that they'd be good at pairs. Like I wish that my 11-year-old would have been directed in that way because she would have been really good. She would have loved it, but nobody told us and that's a little bit of an issue too. Whereas if I'm a coach, I'm not working for Skate Canada. I'm like my own independent coach. I can't go to Bob in Toronto and be like, You know what, Bob, you'd be a really good pair skater. If Bob's not my student, that's solicitation. I can't go to them into this. It's Skate Canada's job to go to them and tell them this. Coaches can't do that. It's against our code of ethics. So I was getting a lot of DMs from parents and skaters being like, I wish that somebody would have told me and somebody would have directed me we would I would have loved to do pairs. And we can't, that is Skate Canada's job and I really wish that they were doing something to go and find those people and tell them because there's so many skaters that are really great single skaters, but they could be really excellent pair skaters. And we see that with Lia, who's skating with Trentt we show right now, what an amazingly intelligent decision it was for her a good single skater, but a great pair skater. And there's so many of them and I just don't think that they're being directed and I really wish that there was some way that we were directing these people to pair skating.

Anna

Yeah, so many of the skaters that I talked to who start pairs, especially a little later in their careers, maybe because they've had an injury or they've had some reason that made them feel like they were stalling out as a single skater and therefore they're going to do pairs and that it's sort of a second choice and then when they start doing it, they really like it and think well,

maybe I should have been doing this all along. But there's that sort of, it's the second choice when you haven't done as well as you would like or you're facing some obstacle as a single skater. And I think it's really great to see people. I think you're an example of that, Lia is an example, I'm talking about people who are really strong singles skaters who also then are choosing to do pairs.

Meagan

Yeah, and I think I don't know, like, if it's so much of a stigma, like oh, like, I guess if I'm not good enough for singles, I'll do pairs, or if sometimes singles skaters are training in a center where they're just not exposed to pair skating. You need to have training centers where singles and pair skaters are training together. So the single skaters are exposed to it. And most of the top pair skaters that have come from the Canadian system in recent years, came from centers where it was their singles coach was also a pair coach for me Lee Barkell when I did singles he was also a pair coach. So it was an easy transition. Dylan Moscovitch and Eric Radford had Paul Wurtz as their singles coach who was also a pairs coach, Jessica Dubé and Bryce Davison had singles coaches that were also pairs coaches, and you know, like it goes down more, Jamie and David the same thing. So I think there's a little bit of that in our history. So, you know, creating training centers or single skaters and pair skaters trained together could really help that Yeah.

Anna

And do you see efforts being made to help get more coaches being able to take on pairs or feel comfortable without or that kind of support?

Meagan

I'd like to see more efforts being made if there is I don't think it's enough. I think that more can be done to encourage that. But then again, I'm traveling to Halifax next week to coach a little pair of two little pair teams, one that competed pre novice last year and one that was juvenile. They're both making their way up. They're being coached by a singles coach who's learning pairs along with them. She hires me to work with them a lot. On zoom, and a couple of times where I've gone out to Halifax and helped them. So you know, kudos to the coaches like this that are trying and are directing their skaters down this path and there are some of them, but I feel like there can be so much more if you know there was a position in place like I said, where there was like those traveling seminars that go around, and they just help coaches get on the way of developing these young pair teams.

Anna

But it's really cool to see when you do have teams that are training together like that, and that pairs becomes part of a pathway that people can be on. It does change the dynamic and I think it's much easier in some ways than when it's only one team trying to come together someplace. So I think it makes a lot of sense that coaches that are trying to start programs, even if not all of those skaters will stick with it for a long time or maybe they'll just try it out for a little while but it creates a nice team feeling

Meagan

And it also like, lets skaters know that there's other opportunities in the sport. And it's so great. And that's what we see in skating. Like you can do pairs. You can do dance, you can do Synchro, there's so many avenues you can take your skating on, it doesn't have to be about landing that triple loop or triple flip. Like there's so many avenues that you go down and the more clubs and the more coaches that are comfortable in each of these avenues and directing skaters to the avenue that they see is best suited to the skater is the best. And I remember as an 11-year-old being directed to pair skating, and I didn't do it at the time because I thought I was going to be too good at singles. And that's honestly how I was at 11, 12 years old, which is fine. It was a little bit young anyways. But to have more coaches that are competent enough to direct their skaters down the right path would be a wonderful thing.

Anna

You've had some things to say about the technical side of pairs and how much we want to keep pushing technical difficulty. There aren't teams right now that are working on quad throws, or as much quad twist those kinds of high-value technical elements. They're not worth as much. Do you see a pathway toward training those kinds of elements safely and does it take having them be worth more in the points to make that happen?

Meagan

Yes, it will take having them be more worth more points for that to happen because it's just like it's logic when we were trying to throw triple axel in the short program, and we landed at Skate Canada in 2016. The effort of a throw triple axel versus a throw triple Lutz was like enormously more. But when we landed it compared to our best throw triple Lutz. It was like one point more it just doesn't justify the amount of work it's taking, the mental load, the physical load, the time and training to do the throw triple Axel so it just it didn't balance out it didn't make it worth it. So we took out the throw triple axel and just went back to the throw triple Lutz. So I think if we want skaters to push the envelope, they do need to up the base value of those elements. The base value of the jumps is still the same and that's why we're seeing all these really awesome and interesting combinations. I love the teams that I was seeing doing that triple toe-double toe-Double Axel, like Leah and Trennt and the Japanese. And also we saw double salchow-double AxL-double-Axel from Spencer and Emily. All these really awesome creative jump combinations because the jumps are worth a lot more so it was worth it to do all that and I think that it would be advantageous for the ISU to continue to put those base values back up where they belong. The throw quad Salchow was worth eight points when I did it. And single skaters doing a quad Salchow would get 11 to 13. It was still so much less than a single skater and I remember having a conversation with Javier Fernandez and explaining that to him and he was like it doesn't make sense. Why is your quad worth so much less than my quads are? And he was baffled by it and I was like just the way the system is. But for us mathematically it still made sense because our throw triple Sal wasn't going to get those plus threes back then when it was only plus three. So it made sense to do a zero throw quad Sal, we still got more points for it. But I think that the ISU for the sports sake or the audience's excitement, there's a lot of things that like changes that need to be done. Not even just technically but I think why are we putting a cap on these things? Can you imagine somebody telling Usain Bolt you you can't run that fast. You

can't run that fast. We're not going to like value it the way that we value other things in your sport. Know these the fastest sees the fastest you can do the most you can do the most and I think it should be up to the skaters to decide if an element is dangerous for them and not up to the ISU to decide that it's too dangerous. These girls are doing quad Lutz's and quad flips and the ISU has no issue with valuing those at a really high level. But they've decided that for pairs to do quads it was more dangerous and I just think it was wrong and the ISU said that they were lowering the values because of the risk factor. But nobody they didn't have any doctors or medical team or anybody can ask Eric and I who were the only team to consistently land a clean quad Sal without injury ever. Nobody came and asked us to do medical studies or ask us about the risk factor and how much we were injured and study our process to the throw quad they just decided it was too dangerous. Yet here we were doing it with no danger at all and seeing what the team's doing quad twist, Tarasova/Morosov with a great quad twist it wasn't dangerous for them to do that. It'd be dangerous for me to do that. But for them it wasn't they picked their own avenues to go down and their own way to get points where they could and I just I think the ISU needs to rethink that.

Anna

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I talked to Matteo Guarise and Lucrezia Beccari at Europeans and they're, you know, they're a new team they're already talking about how they want to do throw quads next season, but Matteo was saying that they were actually watching what you and Eric did and saying that that's what they wanted to copy in their technique because they thought Lucrezia could rotate very quickly so that they could land a throw that didn't have to be huge. It could be safer and controlled and be able to still complete the rotations. And it was very interesting thinking about how to do it, do it safely and use the strength of these skaters to push where they could.

Meagan

Yeah, and I think that skaters should decide this, and Eric and I had a really like methodical approach to all of our skating but really to the throw quad where Eric always said it was no more effort for him to do a throw triple or throw quad. He just had to be a little bit more accurate on the throw quad. If he was a little off on the take of a throw triple it didn't matter. I could still do it. But if he was a little off on the takeoff throw quad I wouldn't be able to land it as easily or at all. But when we went from learning the throw triple Sal to learning the quad Sal it wasn't that we needed a bigger throw to do four rotations. I had plenty of room in the height that I had on the triple I just needed to be a little bit quicker, a little bit sharper on the landing and it was also a big thing for us was the safety of training it. Our coach rarely let us do more than three a day ever. And even when I was like I feel good, I can still do more. Let me do more. They were always holding me back and saying no, that's it. That's the limit. No more today. And when we were learning the throw quad which was you know, an adventure to learn it. If I popped two or three of them in a row. That's it. We weren't allowed to try any more that day because that showed that I was mentally not in a place to execute it or try it safely. So we were not reckless learning it. And I think that that was a big thing. When I heard stories and talk to other skaters who've learned throw quads and I've talked to the Chinese who have told me you know, like we just do dozens and dozens of them every day. Well, that could potentially be why it was creating an injury.

Anna

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, about how you train as much as what you're training.

Meagan

Yeah, if we ever like a problem where I wasn't able to land it and I wanted to do more. Our coaches always made sure that we went back and we corrected it with a triple we could make the correction on the triple and the next day, the quad would be there and be better.

Anna

You didn't find that it was difficult to go back to doing the solid triple after working on the quad?

Meagan

Eventually. Not at first, I remember I kind of like lost my throw triples out after doing a quad but then eventually like after so many years I was able to easily. Yeah.

Anna

Another technical question. Would you like to see there be a choreographic lift or spin in pairs, something that didn't have levels?

Meagan

Yes. I mean, we have seen the sport of ice dance, you know, grow so rapidly and so beautifully and amazingly, with all of their creativity and creative elements. And you know, it's because it Ice Dance has its own technical committee within the ISU. So they're able to make these decisions and allow them to move forward a little bit faster. But I remember, like 2000 to 2003, pairs had a requirement to do a carry lift. That was one of their lifts. It had to be a carry lift, and it allowed skaters to be more creative without worrying about rotating or changing positions. A carry lift could have a more unique position, because the man was not rotating or you didn't have to change positions or go to one arm and that was a really, really cool thing. I don't know why they ever took it out. But I'd love to see creative lift creative spin. There's a lot of really cool spins that we're now seeing the dancers do but we pair skaters are able to do in shows Eric and I always did a lot of really cool spins and shows that would just be useless to our competition programs because they weren't worth a level or a feature. They weren't in a camel spin, a sit spin or an upright position and it just wasn't worth it and it would be really cool to see some of those moves in pair skating. And I personally just find pair spins a little bit boring. I think that we can make do with a more creative approach to it and have a creative spin instead of a pair combination spin and just open the doors for skaters to find different ways to express themselves without following a guideline of grab my foot go on one arm rotate the other way do a difficult entry do a difficult exit. It'll be a little bit less like cookie-cutter and skaters could express a little bit differently if we opened up that door.

Anna

Yeah, I think it makes sense, especially in the short program where you see everyone do just about the same pair spin or their side-by-side spin. They start to look very similar. And you

know, sometimes it's nice to be able to compare apples to apples, but it does get boring after a while.

Meagan:

Yeah, like maybe there should be like some component of the footwork in the short program where there has to be a creative lift within the footwork. That would be really cool. Some teams already do it. Maybe a small lift but like what if a creative lift was part of your footwork sequence, or a creative spin was part of your footwork sequence? What if that was a requirement to get a level four? That'd be a really cool, kind of like process to more creativity within the short program.

Anna:

That would be cool. What do you think about Skate Canada's decision to allow there to be pairs and dance teams of any gender?

Meagan:

I think it's a very progressive movement, and I'm all for everybody being included and diversity. I think honestly, we're more apt to see more of it within ice dance. Just because I think the risk factor on pair elements, if people are more similar in size, is going to be a little bit more risky. I don't know if I foresee too many people or I've heard very many people within pair skating saying that that's something that they would try but we have heard a lot of ice dancers vocal about it and I think it'll be a more seamless transition to begin that with ice dance than with pairs, maybe eventually into pair skating I just, I'm not quite sure I like envision a triple twist being done by two men or two females right now at this moment.

Anna:

It's interesting to see there are definitely physical requirements to having a pair be successful and be safe. And then how much of that maybe can be generalized that that's going to apply to gender but it doesn't always and so there may be individual skaters that it may make sense for. You know, this is something that I think a lot about because I'm an adult pair skater and I am the lifting partner in our pair because I'm almost six feet tall and my partner is five six and we're like that's what works for us.

Meagan

Like I always think about it like a risk factor and I am the first one to always I don't want to deter people from pair skating to say that it's it's unsafe or it's too risky because I'm living proof that it's not but you know, at some point, it's like okay, what is going to be safe to do and what won't, I guess like more at a high level, but I can envision Shawn Sawyer doing overhead lifts and doing a triple twist and doing throws and doing death spiral and being really great at it if the right partner and right size was with him. So who knows what the future holds? I think, you know, it's great that more people can be included and I love it. I just see this, at this moment being a little bit more popularized with an ice dance to begin.

Anna

In some ways it takes people seeing whether it's possible to then want to change the rules.

Meagan

Maybe you need to submit a video, to somebody at USFSA like to get the ball rolling. To be like, I'm an example of what's possible. Maybe that's what skating in the US will need is to see it with their own eyes and see what's actually possible

Anna

Like I said, we've gotten to train in Canada a couple of times, in Winnipeg and in Halifax and it's been fun to be in that environment where people are a little like less...Not that anyone in the US hasn't been like welcoming of us but there was a little bit more interest or you know, the kids in the rink, kind of seeing like, oh somebody is doing that. That's interesting. And having a little more of a concept.

Meagan

That's where I see Skate Canada's decision. And you just mentioned kids in the rink. This is exactly what I think is going to help encourage skaters to follow these disciplines more because you can be in a super small town and there's no boys that skate in your town and you want to do dance, or you want to skate pairs. And you know what, at the beginning level juvenile pairs or dances are pretty much the same anyways, they are the same skills that you learn, right? So it could be a way to get your skaters to that path if they don't have the option of somebody from the other sex to skate with.

Anna

Yeah, I was always told when I was skating as a kid that I was too tall to be a skater. Because I was already at age nine or 10 like the tallest person in my rank, but I think that if I'd had the get the idea that they're doing pairs or doing dance was an option. I think it would have motivated me in a different way as a kid instead of just feeling like oh, well, I'll keep doing it because I like it, but I'm never gonna compete at a local or regional whatever level as having that sense that oh, because of because of the shape of my body, therefore, I can't do it as opposed to saying, well, you're just not trying to go after the right order.

Meagan

Yes, yeah, it needs to be directed down but at the time, it wasn't there anyways, but being directed down this path, that this could be an avenue for you.

Anna

Speaking of sort of the absence of male partners, that's something that I've talked to a number of skaters about how the sort of relative scarcity of men in the sport can lead to there being extra pressure on the women in a team to be perfect. Not to be disposable - as the most extreme way of saying that - but I'm wondering if that's something that you ever encountered or have seen in other teams and just sort of how you deal with some of the pressures that can

come with being judged, you know, as a judged sport and some of the pressures that can come with that.

Meagan

Yeah, I think that's really interesting. And I totally agree with you about the pressure that the female partner can be under, although my experience skating in Canada is that we actually have more men skaters and less females. That's always been the issue in Canada, at least, is that finding females to do pairs has been extremely difficult. And there's been some really great guys that either just quit or wait for years to try to find somebody. And I think that's because of a couple of things. Sometimes it's because the male partner is on the smaller side. I say that in quotations of pair skating, so they are looking for a very specific type of female partner and these super small skaters that land triples and want to do pairs few and far between. And I think that that's what can cast like that, like you you're talking about that pressure on the female partners. Through my experience. Now looking back, maybe I should have felt that disposable option. But I never did feel like that. When I was skating. I was always like, super focused on the task at hand and doing my job the best that I could. When I was skating, I had supportive partners. And coaches around me. Yeah, we do see that a little bit and a little bit of, I don't I don't want to say this to sound rude, but sometimes the egos of male partners that they might have a really good partner and think that they can find somebody better. And we have a saying that they want to break up with their partner to find somebody better. And we always have this thing like, Are you trading a loonie for four quarters? Are you just going to trade a loonie and get four quarters for it and stay with what you have? And I've heard coaches and as a coach bring up when when male partners are looking at, you know, kind of getting rid of one partner and going on to another one. It's like the benefits have to be so much more of the opportunities have to be so much more if you're going to make that decision. You know, it's a tricky thing. I had three partners. I ended my first partnership because I thought that I wanted to just do singles and didn't want to do pairs anymore. My second one ended because my partner retired, and my third one ended because we literally retired. together so I was never in a position as a competitive skater where I was kind of pushed aside for somebody else, so it's super hard for me to understand how that feels. Even though I have seen it from the outside. It's different to see from the outside than it is to live it personally. But I think that female pair skaters are the toughest breed mentally, physically, emotionally, and they're often the ones managing and carrying the team and carrying the burden of whatever's happening within the team. And they are definitely not disposable and female pair skaters can come in all shapes and forms and be amazing at what they do and bring different things to the table. I just wish there was more of them.

Anna

Yeah, one of the things that we've seen this year is a number of - I'm thinking both of Trent and Lia, and Danny and Ellie in the US and I mentioned Matteo in Italy. Obviously these three teams with very experienced male partners, the female partner wanted to retire and move on to the next thing and then they came in with a new partner, I think each of these cases you know is coming from singles and was much younger. And so it's been interesting watching those three teams in their development this year. And being able to see how much having one experienced

partner can help a team take off like that. And I think there's also been a lot of scrutiny on those teams as well because of the potential for a power imbalance that could come from a situation like that with like one young woman and one older guy who has a lot more experience in it. I don't think... potential does not equal there being a problem in any of those cases. And I don't say that, but it's something that we've looked at with those age differences and then thinking about some of the junior teams that have also had big age gaps and then get structurally caught in with the gap between junior and senior. So do you have thoughts about like putting together teams that have a big age gap? What needs to happen to make those partnerships work?

Meagan

I think it's about emotional maturity. And I'll think that we can look at a number because there can be two 15-year-olds that have a completely different emotional maturity and capacity. So I think that it's really hard to put a limit on on those type of numbers. You know, I remember being in a situation similar to the teams that you were talking about when I started skating with Craig Bunton, where he had been to the Olympics. He had been a national champion and I was like, these are all the things I dream of doing. Oh my gosh, like I can't believe it. This person picked me of all people and that was a difficult position to be in and I put a lot of pressure on myself in that the beginning stages of that. But as far as age gap, I don't really see a big issue in it. I know sometimes like, you know, you're at the point where it can look a little bit silly. If somebody looks like super old and super young and their skating to this romantic type of music and telling these emotional stories like that could be a little bit tricky. But you know, I think it all depends on the emotional maturity of the skaters, the understanding of the male partner who is usually the older one. I don't want to stereotype that it's just usually the case and the examples that you gave, and having the right people around them and I don't I don't see an issue with it as long as everybody is being taken care of everybody's needs are being taken care of and that the older partner is a partner and not a coach. That's the most important thing and that's where you get trouble is when one partner and it usually comes when you have those experience gaps or age gaps, where the older partner becomes subconsciously becomes more of a coach. And that's a big no, no, you have to be a partner, not a coach. Let the coach do the coaching.

Anna

Yeah, that's really interesting. And I could see how that would that could start to get in the way of developing the right kind of working relationship.

Meagan

Yeah, because the the partner that you're working with, they need to feel like they are one with you. You're on the same level. Neither one is above each other. You're working to care and the coach is the one calling the shots and when one partner starts to become or act like the coach, it really leaves the other one.

Anna

So switching topics a little bit. I wanted to ask you because you've been very outspoken about the need to maintain the ban on Russian skaters and the issues around doping. And so what do you think should be done next, or I guess what would you like to see the ISU doing both

immediately, but also, how do we have an anti doping system that works in skating when we're seeing that it may be possible for people to evade it for a long time? You know, it's it's something that I don't think we really have a great grasp on necessarily like the even what the extent of the problem is.

Meagan

This problem has been ongoing for a long time. It just all exploded and the whole world found out proof that it's been going on, you know, I used to tell a story. Like I remember being at Skate America when you're at dinner with a Chinese skater and they left a pill bottle on the dinner table and then left. And my partner Craig was like, I'm taking this and I'm gonna bring it to a chemist and see what these pills are, they ended up being weight loss pills, who knows that they were his or his partners that the person who left them with us. We just we know these things are happening. We've known them all along. I've had skaters tell me that their age is not the age that that they are presented to be, one skater was telling me about her birthday and she was like, Well, I'm not actually turning 19 I'm just turning 18 and proceeded to tell me why her age was changed when she was only 13 years old. And you know like we've known about these things in skating, we know about them. We know about the drugs we know about the age and I mean, I guess like looking back I'm like, Why did I just like allow people to tell me this and not do anything but I was still competing. Like it's kind of in an awkward position but no, I think the ISU in the IOC is a long overdue to give some Olympic medals to the Team USA and team Japan athletes to start with they I don't care give them the silver and the bronze. Give them what they won. And if it needs to be changed, it needs to be changed that this is this is absolutely ridiculous that we have gone this long. We are over a year and they are still without their medals without their moment with their teammates on the Olympic podium. The time has passed, the moment is gone, but they still deserve these medals. And that's on the ISU and the IOC like That's enough is enough with that. I think that we need to remove any sort of doping agency that doping control that's happening within Russia and if Russian skaters or athletes not even skaters athletes are ever to return they have to go and do all their doping in other countries. They cannot be doing any sort of doping within Rusada. anymore. Russia's WADA system they need to go elsewhere and be more accountable. And I think that we need to have the ISU mandate an international safe sport program. Coaches doing interviews saying that they don't allow their skaters to drink water and they you know they've made their skaters train while they have a broken bone. And you know, belittle their athletes. They do this publicly the ISU should be you know, suspending them and they are not allowed to be able to coach anymore within ISU competitions. I think that so much more can be done about this and everybody is scared to do anything to the Russians. That's it. That's the end of the day and I've been told that. I've been told that when I have asked questions. Why is this not being done? Why is this not being done? We don't want to upset the Russians. We don't want to upset the Russians. That's what I've been told. Throughout my entire career. I remember questioning the Sochi Olympics and the team event and when very suspicious doping was happening to us at the Olympics and and questioning that and people telling me very high up, people telling me, you know, don't worry about it. We just don't want to upset them. So, you know, nothing's gonna get done unless somebody wants to put their foot forward and upset the Russians. And we need to be more aggressive with that. The skaters that competed compete at international competitions.

They deserve a fair playing field. They deserve, the skaters in Russia, and anywhere not even just in Russia, the skaters all over the world. They deserve coaches that are supportive and understanding of them and want the best for them as human beings, not just metals. And this goes you know, all over the skating world and I think that the ISU can mandate a lot more.

Anna

Yeah. As I start to understand more about the structure of it, it really does seem like there is a passing of the buck of federations saying, well, we can't do anything, this is the ISU, and the ISU saying we can't do anything because the federations need to act, and it's like, well, who has actual power in this situation, but I would think that there would be an opportunity here with the Russians sort of not in the room to have more of those discussions, but maybe that thought of the war ban that that's far enough and we're not gonna go any further. I have been surprised to not see more coming up in session across this year given what seems like an opportunity.

Meagan

And you know why that's happening is because, well, the ISU is holding all their meetings at the World Championships who's in the meetings, all the members of the Russian skating Federation, they were all there. They were all invited guests of the ISU. So, they're sitting at those meetings. They're there, the ISU is inviting them to come to events. Alexander Lakernik was the former vice president of the ISU was invited by the ISU to attend events this year. Why are they doing this? Oh, I get so angry. It's about what's right. What's fair. It's about giving the athletes what they deserve. The sport is nothing without the athletes. It should be athletes first every sport because there is no sport without the athletes. They are the core. So if you are not taking care of the athletes and prioritizing the athletes, you're doing a disservice and a disrespect to the sport.

Anna

Yeah. So what can be done to make the athletes you know have a stronger voice in the system? I mean, I look at other sports where there are I mean, not only in sort of professional sports where you have players unions and players associations and you know, much more structural power but even at some other Olympic sports, we've seen athletes across countries, you know, competitors really joined together to push first particular changes in the sport and that's not happening and in skating, whether it's cultural, structural, or whatever, but since you're so outspoken, but you're sure it's easier not being you know, in the competitive system, but?

Meagan

Oh, I was always told to be quiet when I was a competitive athlete. Oh my god like, Meagan, would you stop tweeting? Meagan, would you stop saying this in the media? Meagan, would you stop saying this like just be quiet all the time? All the time! I think my best guess is because skating is a judged sport. We've just always grown up in the sport like a little bit afraid of being judged for our actions off the ice or what we say off the ice. I really think that it stems maybe from that. Most of the other sports versus athletes are a little bit more aggressively focused. They're not coming from judged sports. I think that's a little bit of it. And when I talk to other

skaters and other coaches 90% of them I talk to are as passionate about this and on the same page I am but they just don't vocalize it the same way that I tried to and I myself have a hard time understanding why as well. We do have athlete representatives within the ISU, the athlete representative was at the Olympics. When this whole thing happened. I don't understand why they weren't able to put their foot down more and take more of a stance for the athletes because that's their job. That's their position that they're hired for. But yeah, my best guess is growing up being judged your whole life. You're just a little bit worried to speak up I think that that's where it comes from.

Anna

It makes sense. But it does. Yeah, that culture leads to just so many so many of the problems. I mean, I think like you're saying what does it take to make it the athlete centered is at the root of just about all of the litany of things that you could point out that are wrong in skating right now.

Meagan

And I think that a little bit of like, figure skating. I don't know how to say this, like in the right way and I'm probably going to say it and it's gonna sound offensive. And I don't mean to sound offensive when I say it. But it's like, figure skating is like a little bit of like an old man's club like it's being run by a lot of older men, who they don't have the same vision as the younger generation. They're set in their ways, a little bit more. I don't know. That's, that's how it seems to me from from where I see it.

Anna

You know, I mean, there's so many of these institutions where you have to work your way up slowly through many, many ranks, not rocking the boat as you go. It's hard for someone to then get to a position of leadership with any kind of, you know, vision for anything other than maintaining the status quo. I mean, I think about that with having talked to a number of judges and how the entire process of judging is to make sure that your judging is not how you're trained is to make sure that you don't judge differently than the judges that are already in place. And that the whole process of accountability is to assume make it so that everyone is around the same mark. And it's like well but what if that mark is wrong? Like what if? What if the norms that we're all that we're everyone is being trained to are not correct? There's very little space to push against that.

Meagan

Yeah. And it's like to make change, you have to rock the boat. To make change. You have to like stand up for something that nobody else has standing up for. There needs to be one, then there's more than there's more. It trickles down and you will rock the boat and you will upset people and you will, you know, create a little bit of havoc, but along the way, that's what's gonna happen along the way for change to happen. I know that there's been a couple of American skaters that are pretty vocal in the US Olympic Committee also repeatedly requesting for their skaters to have their Olympic medal. I'm not sure why not more of those skaters are more vocal about it from from Japan and the US and like, theoretically, from Canada to who would be inserted into that bronze medal position. Should Russia be completely eliminated. I mean, if I

was one of those skaters, I would be like going out there with a bunch of everybody that works in skating at the higher level would hate it, but I would be going after it because nothing will be done if somebody doesn't.

Anna

Yeah, well, and I think that that's I've seen a little bit of press conference with the empty medal box and that kind of thing, but it does also, I think, in some ways surprised me that there isn't more kind of active use of the of the media in this and to try to athletes and coaches and even the national federations to try to use the media to push on the ISU and the IOC to do more. It's it seems like there's not a lot of sense of like whether there can be kind of that external pressure on these institutions. And they're so insulated in a lot of ways, but they also do depend on advertisers and the overall image that the sport has in the public at the end of the day and so you know, if the athletes are publicly unhappy, that does have power in that broader world as well.

Meagan

I agree with you. Absolutely. Yeah. I don't know when I don't even have any insight into when something is going to happen into change that's coming into anything. I talked to skaters and coaches that like I said that feel the same way but I don't know what's happening in that, you know, small inner circle of workings of the ISU and the IOC. I think that they're playing a little bit of it's not me, it's you. It's not me, it's you. We need to wait for WADA and now I just saw that court date for Valieva's trial is now like pushed back and has no date. So everything's bearing on this court trial that's just not even out.

Anna

Yeah. Athletes I think understandably have not wanted to stand out on their own and talk about this and I think it's been interesting to see even in the competitions like for a lot of good reasons. there are, A. there are very few actual journalists who go to skating competitions. And I say this as a non-journalist pretending to be a journalist, you know, at skating competitions. It's not my profession, but you know, I'm a, I'm a fan and as an amateur I enjoy doing it. But, you know, I've just not been trained to do so. You know, a there aren't that many actual journalists. You know, B. the idea is well, this person has just skated. They're here to think about their skating, we're not going to ask them about like, systemic political issues in this moment. And so the few times that people were being asked it was by Russian journalists, which was then I think, understandably felt like a trap, and it was often the Russian-speaking skaters for other federations who are being asked those questions in a hostile way. And so there wasn't the issue being raised in the this limited interaction that you know, one place that athletes potentially do have to speak out where they have a microphone literally in front of them. That's not happening, but I did very much enjoy the one of the press conferences that Europeans when Matteo Rizzo, was asked, actually the top three after the short program that were all being asked, you know, do you want the Russians back and they all kind of looked at each other and nobody said anything for a minute. And finally, Matteo was like, I think we're all really happy with like, how things are right now, which was sort of a could have been interpreted as a non answer of just a like, we're happy to be on the podium, like don't, you know, don't talk to us, but I think it also had

some implications of what I think the actual opinion of most of the skaters is that they are pretty happy to not have the Russian is there right now while things are the way they are.

Meagan

For the athletes and on the official site to I think that they feel like things are more fair, the way it is right now, as they're not there. And if they are to be returned, if they do return and when they do return we have to find a way to keep things fair, in skating for fair sport, clean sport, and that's for the skaters and the officials.

Anna

It's really founded in a lot of ways and more interesting season to follow, not feeling like there was as much predictability and that's, you know, says as much about how the skaters were treated by judges in the past as it does about the skaters themselves, but it was great to be able to watch worlds and think any one of you know, a group of seven or eight skaters could have been on the podium and almost any you know, maybe any discipline except dance. You had a sudden variability and makes it much more interesting to follow. Yeah, I just uh, two more questions for you. One is just about nutrition because I know that's something that you're really interested in and I'm curious how your process for finding nutrition plans that work for you as an athlete and what advice you would give for someone who's competitive trying to figure out you know, how to navigate that world of so much conflicting information and good and bad messages.

Meagan

Yeah, well, I mean, step number one is eat and listen to your body. When your body wants to wants fuel, give it fuel and find the right types of fuel. I mean, I think that that's really important is that we need to fuel our bodies in all the right ways at the right times. And that's something I learned I have two like different certifications within holistic nutrition. I studied for six years nutrition, so a wide wide range, but it was about fueling our body for sport anyways, at the right time. So eating my proteins post-performance and eating fats and carbs before performing and having, you know, a good breakfast and all these things that aligned together with my training and making sure that I was very consistent with my diet, so it didn't if I had a day off on Saturday what I ate didn't change it was just the same and it didn't mean that I didn't eat and I didn't measure serving sizes or anything like that. Like if I was really hungry I had two bowls of oatmeal in the morning instead of one, it didn't matter. I learned to be confident as I listened to my body and what my body needed and what it wanted and never denying myself anything because that's one thing when we deny ourselves something we want it more and so I always had like cookies or cupcakes or muffins or like cakes and like treats. And every single morning I would have a treat with my breakfast. And then it would satisfy me and sometimes at night and have another treat and sometimes I would just leave it and I never like frowned upon that I never felt guilty about that I was listening to my body and what it wanted and I was working hard all day long. So I didn't feel the need to sacrifice what I ate. I also was surrounded by a team and my coaches were not weighing me and who didn't really speak about weight. You know, like, I can remember a couple times in my career when my coaches like maybe when I was younger or my coaches were like, how's your off-ice training going? That was their way to tell

me like maybe you should be doing more off ice training you're getting out of shape. I think that was like their their way to message it. So I never had coaches that really put too much pressure on that and I'm very grateful for that. But being any athlete you need, your body is your greatest tool. It's your greatest asset. You need to take care of it on every level and that goes from mentally it goes from nutrition and what you're putting in your body. Your recovery, for your training. So everything you do is so important. If you want your body to give you the best you need to give it the best and you know, that was always a big focus of mine. So eating really well and eating healthy was you know what I needed to do if I wanted my body to give me what I wanted it to do you know it went to recovery and going to every single day, whether it was acupuncture or osteo or chiropractor or massage or whatever it was every single day I needed to take care of my body so I could help it recover. And I think that we see now more skaters and coaches speaking about working with nutritionists and prioritizing that kind of went through the kind of like slipped through the cracks a little bit for a while. But I do see more of a priority on that and a priority of coaches saying how are you fueling your body instead of what are you eating or what are you not eating? It's about fueling your body and I think that's a really great way to word it. And bring about that angle.

Anna

There's that idea of really learning how to listen to what you need as well. I mean that it goes beyond food, the self confidence that goes with understanding and being able to take care of yourself, you know, it's a really great way instead of trying to find you know, what is the perfect source of like, you know, if I just follow the right plan, I will be good and then the right external advice but learning for yourself as well.

Meagan

Well, yeah, it's like trial and error with anything right? You need to trial and error. Listen to yourself, listen to your gut, listen to your body. How does your body feel when you do this? How does your body feel when you do this? Okay, it's better when I do this. I do that again and again and again. But yeah, that usually only comes with experience and age as well.

Anna

I always like to finish with the question the broad question of the podcast, which is how can we make skating be healthier and more inclusive? And that's a very broad question. And we've touched on a number of parts of it, but are there things that we haven't talked about or that you'd want to emphasize?

Meagan

I think we can like this question kind of come back to what I was talking about with athlete focused and athlete centered. It's not about the coach's glory, it's not about the ISU political games. It's about the athletes. It's not about the money. It's about the athletes. If you want people to watch skating, you need good athletes. That's that's the core and without good athletes. We don't have a sport. I would really like more focus to be on the athletes on the athletes well being on the athletes development on the prioritizing everything athlete. That's what sport should be about right now. And that's how skating is going to be healthier and be a

better version of what it is and how we will be able to put more people in the stands and more fans that want to watch the sport more reporters at events because people are more interested in learning about the sport and you know that all will happen. More sponsors. That will all happen if we focus on the athletes and giving the athletes what they need, and creating a sport that allows the athletes to thrive.

Anna

Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much, Meagan. It's been great to talk with you.

Meagan

Yeah, thank you. I can talk forever about skating.

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I hope you enjoyed that conversation with Meagan Duhamel! You can look at the show notes for the transcript and links to other resources.

You can follow Meagan on Twitter @mhjd_85 and on Instagram @Meaganduhamel . You can also learn more about her nutrition work through her blog and instagram @lutzofgreens

You can reach me with comments or suggestions for topics and people I should talk to, by email at fsfuturepodcast@gmail.com or on Instagram and Twitter @futurefspodcast

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Resources

Lutz of Greens (Meagan's Wellness Blog)

"Creating Long-Lasting Healthy Habits for Figure Skaters"

<https://www.lutzofgreens.com/2022/11/23/creating-long-lasting-healthy-habits-for-figure-skaters/>

ISU "Keep Training" series "Pair Specific Drills

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_ZJzXvfEtM