

Episode 8 Charlie White Transcript and Resources

Welcome to the Future of Figure Skating. I'm Anna Kellar, and today's guest is the first Olympic champion I've had on the podcast - Charlie White! Charlie and his ice dance partner Meryl Davis are the 2014 Olympic Gold Medalists, as well as the 2010 Olympic silver medalists. They are also two-time World champions and six-time national champions. In 2022, Charlie launched the Michigan Ice Dance Academy with his wife Tanith (herself an Olympic medalist in ice dance), and their friend, junior world champion Greg Zuerlein. They are already off to a strong start with elite dance teams such as Caroline Green and Michael Parsons, and Katarina Wolfkostin and Jeffrey Chen working with them. When announcing MIDA, Charlie talked about the importance of supporting athletes as whole people, and I am eager to learn more about their coaching approach!

—

Unknown 0:00

Hey, Charlie, thank you so much for coming on the podcast really exciting to get to talk with you.

Unknown 0:08

Oh, thank you for having me. This is an honor.

Unknown 0:10

So I wanted to talk to you about your new adventures in full time coaching and how the Michigan Ice Dance Academy came into being.

Unknown 0:20

Yeah, I wish it were sort of a more thrilling tale certainly feels meaningful. Maybe that'll come across in the aftermath of finishing my own skating career. I was really interested in the fundamental components of what made figure skating so attractive to me personally and theoretically legitimate as a sport and as an endeavor. And so I went to the University of Michigan and got a degree in philosophy. I don't know if that helped at all, but it was interesting. It did give me an interesting way of getting a new perspective and getting a new approach on thing that I had done. My whole life had dedicated. Some might say too, many hours to I think part of what I felt as an Olympic champion was a kind of accountability to the sport itself to to not just walk away from it, but rather to somehow meaningfully contribute. I had no real coaching aspirations when I first finished but little by little, I was drawn, you know, into choreography into helping out here and there with other teams and quickly fell in love with the nature of coaching, maybe in the same way that I had fallen in love with skating itself. Which is to say that if I were asked, How do you feel about coaching, I would say passionately, that sort of a weird catch all term that describes highs and lows and your ability to kind of maybe sometimes find the positive when things are hard. I guess I feel strongly that skating is something that's very unique amongst things that people do. The combination of athleticism, devotion, artistry, music, it's just so cool, and I wish that I had a fancier technical term for that, but I think it's a wonderful way for people to learn about themselves to encounter the world. I think one of the greatest things about winning the Olympics is that it's given me like the courage

to talk like this. And second, the ability for people to trust me, people look at me and and they think that I know what I'm talking about. So I try to I want to live up to that expectation. I think one of the great things about coaching skating is the way that you're able to help young, mostly young people as people first and foremost and in doing so help them sort of recognize the ways in which their authenticity plays a significant role in the way that they experience figure skating. I don't know if that tracks at all. Don't edit this part out. It's important for people to know that I'm actually really insecure about the way that my that I explain things. For my skaters, it's always a little bit circuitous when I'm trying to get to my point. At the end of the day, I think it's a lot of the time about effort. Hopefully everyone can tell that I'm really trying my best here, but in the earliest encounters and coaching, I quickly became fascinated by the way in which I could help. I think that's probably the simplest way of putting it.

Anna

So as you and Tanith and Greg, Greg started putting the academy together and figuring out what it would take what was the biggest surprise for you in this process?

Charlie

That's a great question. I don't know if it was the biggest surprise but nicer surprise so far has been the way in which I can appreciate watching Tanith, as my wife and Greg as a longtime friend, do incredible work. Both of them. It's a constant inspiration to me, to not rest on my laurels to not just think that I always have the right answer any answer to trust them to trust that they are more than capable of doing any and everything. I think one of the downsides, maybe necessary lessons of being a sort of type a high achiever is that you don't have to control everything in the moments where you can take a step back and recognize that things are going smoothly and it's not because of you and can appreciate that. It's really something to behold and I think it's probably it's probably been the most important lesson I've learned. Maybe I'm taking too much credit. Maybe I'm still learning. Maybe this just sounds good. But I think that it's true. So yeah, no, I think what runs parallel to that is the faith then that you can put in the skaters as well. And I think the way in which showing that can make them feel like they can believe in themselves as well.

Anna

What is typical training day for you like how many hours are you on the ice? How are you dividing up work among different teams?

Charlie:

It's a little bit different every day. We've only been open for a little while. So we've had a lot of fluctuation and things are starting to settle now as we approach the US championships. But I would say, you know each team gets about somewhere between two to two and a half hours of lessons. And we basically divide that up evenly amongst the coaches, sort of the focus or the the ways that we have the skaters time when they're not in a lesson is really it's pretty highly dependent on time of the season. It is so right now we're in kind of an intense period. They take their time in the lessons, but otherwise they can pretty much chill out. You know in the offseason, when you're doing choreography they wouldn't be on the ice longer. But the majority

of the work is done between A and two. What's great is that we have ice time available from six to four that we're able to use if for some reason. God forbid we'd have to go along. And then within the facility we have a workout area and a ballet room. Erin Stickle is the head of the workout program, and he actually trained me and Tanis when we were coming up and so it's been easy to just like send our skaters to him and be like make them strong. And for ballet. We have brought in a professor of dance from the University of Michigan. Her name is Amy West. She has just been absolutely indispensable. She has so much familiarity with the process with young people that we really leaned on her quite a bit and have been able to actually bring her onto the ice in some in some capacities, watching programs and helping us fine tune our own vision and the vision of the programs and helping the skaters sometimes verbalize their programs, their concerns, probably covers.

Unknown 7:32

That's great. Are all of your teams Americans at this point?

Unknown 7:36

Yeah, yes, they are. Yeah, which I guess kind of makes sense. Quite a few local skaters that we had ties with and kind of came in are the founding teams of mighta. For now, it is American teams, but we're open to inviting teams from all over the world.

Unknown 7:58

So nationals coming up must feel very intense for you with so many of your teams going there.

Unknown 8:05

The Yes, yeah, the US championships is it's always been a big deal. I was fortunate as an athlete myself, and I'm sure that Kenneth and Greg would feel this way to be able to make the most of the opportunity, which isn't to say that we always skated our best but I think what's nice is all of our skaters have found a pretty good rhythm at this point within their training and with us. I mean, you know, they're still new to us. We're still new to them. I think that they've got a pretty good hold of what to expect day in and day out, and how they can use their resources. That are available on us mostly, to help them prepare. It's been an up and down season for a lot of the teams, some highs and some lows. And ultimately, I think everyone because of it is better off but that could just be that's my own internal athlete.

Unknown 8:57

It's always something to learn from from every competition, certainly

Unknown 9:02

100% Yes, yes. As cliché as it is, I think I think I really believe that. Yeah.

Unknown 9:08

Whether their lessons you wanted, you know or not, you know, I

Unknown 9:11

tell them sometimes like you can just believe me, but you're probably just going to learn the hard way. And that's probably just me projecting because I think I learned all of my lessons, just the hardest way you possibly could.

Unknown 9:24

Do you feel like you've been able to communicate from your own experience in terms of things like getting in the right mindset for competitions or dealing with nerves and that that aspect of the competition?

Unknown 9:35

Yeah, I, I had a pretty straightforward approach. It's not easy, but it's effective. I usually felt, especially as I gained in wisdom, progressing through my own competitive career that if I got to a competition and I could, more or less, let's say 98% say you know, I trained with good habits. I slept when I should be asleep by I ate the foods that I knew were going to help fuel me. I created an environment where my partner and I could, you know, be open and do the work that we needed to. I trusted my coaches if I could tell myself those things. Before I went and competed. I usually felt secure. You know, there is some component where it's a little bit like chance, sometimes no matter how well prepared I was mistakes happen. It's just that you know, if you get off the ice and you made a mistake, and you're looking back on the last six months, and you think well, I could have you know, there's so many things I could have done better. That's the most frustrating thing. It's not just wanting to go back on the ice and try again, really, that's a pain in the butt. It's wishing that you had not missed out on all of the time and opportunities when they presented themselves when you were preparing. I can't say that I ever was like a big fan of competing. It was more of a sense of being content with the job done. But you know, not everybody is the same and I think to the skaters, they don't all have my philosophy on being a competitor, what their role in ice dance is. And I think that's great. You know, I think that the degree that you know, my experiences, and Tanis and Greg's and you know, all of us had very different experiences to the extent that they can pull from those, along with all the other sort of lessons that we learned along the way and I think that they take a lot of confidence. In that. At the end of the day, so much of the work is really just done. It's just on the ice. They're doing what they need to do. And so I think for that they should feel pretty good.

Unknown 11:34

What do you feel like you learned from your own coaches about how to be a coach and what things that you wanted to bring from that experience and or to do differently? Yeah, that's

Unknown 11:46

really interesting. Well, Marina Zhu Eva is, you know, she's basically a genius. So it's like, one of the things I learned is like be a genius, which is not not really a thing you can do. So it's funny, I catch myself a lot of the times when I'm making decisions, small or big, you know, sort of wondering what her opinion would be on that which is, I think, good she had a she had a great intuition. What Marina really taught me was to appreciate the artistic side of skating when when I came in, I was almost more hockey player than figure skater. And I played hockey until I was 18. And so you know, the athleticism, the speed and when I went to ice dancing, like the lifts

and you know sort of pushing the boundaries in terms of athleticism was really like my jam. I love doing that. It was harder for me for no reason, really, other than ignorance to get into the storytelling component. To appreciate what program could represent as a work of art, the way that it can affect you know, whether it be the judges or the audience. That's really the greatest thing that I that I've taken from Marina is looking at the sport when I towards you know, what are we offering the world here? You can't ask that question all the time. Sometimes you just need to get like a level four and like a really good GOE and it has absolutely nothing to do with any artistic merit or creativity. And I find that a little bit frustrating sometimes, but I think that comes with the territory. I think constantly asking important questions and not taking for granted that a good skating program should stand on its own because it's just good skating or it's just good music. And also I mean because I love philosophy. Maybe too I like to go a little bit deeper. And I think that's helped the students when they take the ice there are just fewer questions in their heads. They have a sense of what they're trying to accomplish and hopefully why.

Anna:

I remember that you had tweeted back in February that you'd like to have your skaters write essays about the Olympic free dances since they skaters don't often have a chance to engage with the artistic theory of things. Have you followed through on that?

Charlie:

You know, unfortunately, I didn't have them write essays. I have had them over the course of the season sort of in the spirit of that tweet. I have challenged their preconceived notions on why things are and are not successful in a way that would, I think, please my philosophy professors, it can be so straightforward a lot of the time but if you assume that it's straightforward, you have a chance to miss a lot of what makes things magical or why something that at face value seems like it should work sometimes is just missing something and so challenging my skaters to look at their own past programs or programs from last year or sometimes I'll just use myself as a guinea pig, you know, like what's not working here, you know, and not letting them get away with their gut reaction, but rather to be a little bit more critical, but I'm glad you reminded me certainly moving forward. I hereby solemnly swear that I will make my skaters write some kind of an essay and punctuation will factor into the grade.

Anna:

There is that endless search for those few programs that rise above can't just say, Oh, it's because of this music or this element. It's that combination. And then often, it seems like we end up with so much copying year after year, because people say well, oh, if that music worked for this person, maybe it'll give me that same impact, but it's much harder than it looks on the surface I think to actually find what that is.

Charlie:

It is it is I mean, I think we can use Gabi and Guillaume as a good example because so many teams I think over the last however many years now it's been a while, have found themselves

veering in the direction of their programs. Obviously Gabi and Guillaume were rewarded for the programs that they did, but it's like you don't want to say that they were rewarded for the program. You want to say that they were rewarded for the way that they did what they did. They're unique. I mean, they stand amongst the best of the best all time, and are different in some ways, too. I think. I've always had a hard time sort of describing what it is exactly that makes that makes and made them so special. Certainly there's something poetic about their skating and when I say poetic, I really mean like, maybe it's like just a cheap way of saying like, you can't describe it. It's sort of between the words. It's it's not that they did a lift with speed. It's the nature of how they would do a lift to some music, the way that they do it makes you feel something and like when you see someone do it like them, mostly what you think is they look like they're trying to do something that Gabi and Guillaume would do. Which isn't necessarily the wrong thing for any given team to be doing. Because most teams just aren't Gabi and Guillaume and like, I think that's okay. We shouldn't say like, oh, well, you're not Gabi and Guillaume. So like, pack it up, you know, hit the road. It's not worth your time or your effort.

AnnaL

And in searching for that feeling, maybe they'll find their own thing that is going to work them.

Charlie:

Yeah, and I remember when I was young and tired of doing fast programs, I wanted to try to do a slow program and you know, we tried it out. We tried it on and it just didn't suit us. Like if we wouldn't have known and I think that's the case for a lot of teams and and it's right and good that they should look up to Gabi and Guillaume and that they should be inspired by the way that they approach or approached the sport, whatever, whatever they choose to do, to try it on, you know, to try that on themselves. And it might be that there's something adjacent to it or it might be the case that they need to go into like literally the opposite direction. But I think that's what the leaders of the pack do. And so often the leader is a unique combination of like luck and skill. I mean, not to say I mean, I guess I won the Olympics, so I'm allowed to say that it does take some luck, not saying that Gabi and Guillaume were lucky. I just there is some luck involved.

Anna:

Yeah, I mean, you can see one really great performance in the right moment sets off or trajectory or one mistake can take seasons to come back from there is certainly the piece of the sport that you couldn't just predict how it would go from watching people in practice.

Charlie:

Exactly. Totally so true.

Anna:

One of the things that I was really interested in reading about how you were approaching coaching was the idea of developing skaters as a whole person and not just as an athlete. Could you talk a little bit more about that part of your approach?

Charlie:

It really it stems from my experience at the school that I went to from kindergarten through 12th grade, which was called the Roper school, it's here in Michigan. It was started by two refugees from Nazi Germany who came to the States and were essentially child psychologists interested in the gifted movement, the movement of gifted children, they more or less recognized that like the military industrial complex was taking too many of the bright young minds and wanted to make an effort to help young gifted people find their greatest sense of self and at the same time, the way in which they were an important and contributing member of their community. And so of all of the institutions and schools and like anything that I've ever seen or been affiliated with the absolute standout in terms of putting your money where your mouth is, which is kind of the worst turn of phrase to apply here. But there's an overarching philosophy that guides the Roper school and it is instilled every step of the way between the students within the community, between the teachers between the rest of the staff, the way that the school works is unique. **And for me, it's the ideal way of education which is as you said, you know, to teach the entire person rather than just like some component of them. There are practically beneficial purposes for skating in that I think that a level of introspection and critical thinking lends itself to better art. It feels weird to say that, but I think it's true. I also think that it allows skaters a kind of guide to self sufficiency, which is important for training. For me, it's like I want people to be okay. And a lot of the times I don't think that a lot of people are okay. I think that the best way for me to make an impact is through a skating school, because I have my experience and I have the passion that I do.** It's a really healthy calling. For me personally. To be able to have a kind of trust that is necessitated within a skating school. There's a lot of time. It's a lot of energy. And I think the skaters deserve it. I think the skating community deserves it. I definitely deserve it. I also feel strongly like that's just what I would like to see everything be like but I can't do everything. So I'll just do this for now.

Anna:

It's really interesting. I think connecting what does it mean to be successful as an athlete but also an artist? Sometimes there's this concept of well, artists are made out of suffering, but that's not really true. It's if you're able to be in a stable enough place that you can be introspective and be productive as an artist does not come from, you know, from being in an unstable place. So there's a lot of the wider art world and how it talks about those things and that's kind of an interesting connection.

Charlie:

For sure. And I'm not enough of an artist to be able to say with any kind of definitive explanation that being tortured doesn't itself lead to creativity. That might be the case but like, I want free range art, you know, like I don't, I don't want my art coming from people that have just twisted themselves up into knots. Like I would rather someone like be okay, most of the time, then create something that's like, I go, Wow, that's good art and then walk to the next painting.

Anna:

As you said so many people come out of skating and aren't okay

Charlie:

And it's not skating. I mean, skating does have its specific pitfalls, for sure. And like as a coach and as an Olympic champion. My responsibility is to at first mitigate and then eliminate these pitfalls, but people are making pretty significant mistakes everywhere, all the time. My whole life a very significant part of my life has revolved around skating, and I've grown up at a time where the communal awareness of what's going on has grown exponentially. I've seen the growth which means it started in a terrible place. Okay, in this way, maybe I'm a glass half full kind of person. I'm not like burn it down. Because it's not structural. It's not like the Zamboni fumes that are causing problems. Although I do sometimes wonder when I wouldn't be like with fewer Zamboni fumes. It's people it's people being people. It's the way in which people mishandle authority. And that's not just coaches, although a lot of it is coaches. Some of it is like parents mishandling their authority. Some of it is like the ways the natural imbalances in partnerships like but that's not like that's not skating. That's the way that power imbalances have always worked. I try not to be too reactionary when it comes to making improvements, because I think there's a lot of room to improve and everything and as a person that has made a lot of internal approved improvements. I like to think that it's an issue of ignorance and bad habits. Those are really fixable things. We need people who are willing to like fight the good fight to make a difference. They're children, like children lives are at stake. You know, so it's important to consider the ways in which this is really worth our time and energy, which I don't have to explain to you.

Anna:

In my day job, I do voting rights activism and so I'm constantly thinking about issues about equity and access and all of this and skating, that was my kind of escape from thinking about it. The more I started getting into skating, the more I started just having to confront, okay, all of the problems of the world are also here. But rather than thinking how do you then fix all of the problems of isms and oppressions in the wider world? Well, what could you do to make skating better in that regard is still a huge task. And I do believe that it's important for things like art and sports to be you know, places where we have those conversations too, that those should also be safe accepting spaces, even if it seems at first glance like it's something that's a little bit you know, not a necessity. But joy and fun and all of these things are also necessities in life.

Charlie:

I think about it all the time, because as a neurotic overthinker, I'm constantly aware of the ways in which figure skating is not strictly necessary, but I think if you follow that line of thinking you'll find there isn't much that is anywhere in anything that is somehow strictly necessary. And I think if we wanted everything to be clean, we just replace ourselves with robots, but somehow that doesn't sound so appealing. I mean, it doesn't to me. It's really sucky that the human condition lends itself to imbalances of power and strife and suffering, and we should definitely do everything we can to stop those. I think most often they're found in systems to sense of power, but like set like the act of skating like an individual skating, while it's always going to be set against the backdrop of the skating system, and every other system, is itself like singing or dancing. I think in that the act of doing it is worth it for itself. And not for any other reason. I'm a highly competitive person, like I can't even like go to the gym, because like, I'll hurt myself trying to lift more weight than the random person that's been working out every day for their entire life.

That's part of it. And I like that there's a competitive element which gives rise to a kind of striving and improvement because so often, without it, we don't hold ourselves accountable enough with without certain components of a competitive environment. I think sometimes competition goes way too far. And dominates everything. But that's not to say that competition itself, just like skating itself, isn't inherently bad. It can produce amazing things. And so the combination of this really unique, special feeling that we get that I think is the foundation of anyone saying like I'm passionate about skating, it's an experience and it can be properly translated in the way that you can't properly translate the experience of like riding a bicycle like you can explain to someone like how you ride a bicycle. Like I felt joy while riding a bicycle. But the internal lived experience of doing that thing is unique, and some things are better than other things. I don't like running very much. If this was a podcast on running you know, we will be having a very different conversation. Take that initial experience that isn't weighed by everything else, maybe just everything else, period. Because I think there are so many things as you become like a rational person that recognizes like what's at stake in being a person. It can feel very heavy, and I think that you can find a lightness and like it is it's not just worth it, but like a gratitude for being alive when you experience something akin to you if not exactly like skating. And I think dancing and singing are the two other things that I would most often use as examples. And so like how do I as a person that kind of understands the systems within which skating has to operate? Like how do I set up a place that allows for what's special about it while keeping away injustice, basically, because there has to be hardship there has to be falling down there. Has to be a struggle, but we don't want it to be because of injustice reasons. Like that's not good.

Anna:

The things that are supporting people being their best selves rather than things that are getting in the way of them being able to do their best.

Charlie:

Exactly. And a lot of that has to do with the nature of how skaters relate to competition to their competition, what it is to be a person that is competing against other people. And you know, when I was at the Olympics, and I won, like it was really strange. First of all, that's just boilerplate maybe but like standing on the podium I was I was acutely aware like I'm not better than these people. There's nothing about winning the Olympics that makes me somehow inherently better, which is really good at skating, you know, like, and I did, I did what I needed to do when I needed to do it, along with, well, a slew of other things. And I experienced this definitely and I think a lot of people do, it seems like competition or lend itself to some sort of Epiphany if you can conquer the highest hill. I didn't have any of the kind of critical thinking skills that I do now. It was much easier to say therefore that like the ends, always justify the means, but you don't have a really good understanding of what the ends are when you're young and inexperienced. And I think sometimes that's part of a necessary difficult process. I wasn't going to gain insight into what success is until I had become an Olympic champion and realize that like when I woke up the next day, I would have the same bad habits that I had the day before. Like I wasn't going to become enlightened, just because like I did four minutes on whatever that certain day you know, and didn't fall down. But like that's part of the carrot that I think people

chase and I think always will, I think there is a component of like being human that is like, "I have to believe."

Anna:

That external goal and motivation to chase but then you're also having some enough of an internal sense of why you're doing it for yourself. And beyond that not having your whole self so defined by that one goal that if you don't achieve it, you wake up the next day or even if you do and think What else am I what else is out there?

Charlie:

Absolutely. Yeah, I think the older you get, the more you realize things are just not straightforward. Not as straightforward as you thought they were. And I can't imagine, you know, today at 35 that, you know, I'll wake up tomorrow and be like, no, no, they were exactly as straightforward as I thought they were yesterday. You know, it is it is an ever evolving process.

Anna:

Absolutely. What do you think about some of the direction of ice dance that's happening now in terms of things like removing the pattern from the rhythm dance and some of the new elements like where do you see that, you know, in that balance of sport and art and creativity and technical, where the sport is going at this point?

Charlie:

That's a great question. I mean, if anyone has been listening to the conversation up to this point, it should be clear that I'm if not anti traditionalist, that at least very sharply in that direction. Having said that, I do have a soft spot for the pattern dances and I'm not interested in bringing back pattern dances as a third part of ice dance because like I experienced where we when we dropped that off, and I was grateful. I'm not gonna lie. I was glad I didn't have to do that. It was it really didn't feel fair. But from a coaching perspective, what's interesting is the way that pattern dances make you think about partnering, musicality, and how you're using the ice and lobes. I really worry that with without having to consider in some capacity pattern dances, we're going to be losing a lot of what has made this era of transition interesting, which is skaters that are used to doing pattern dances, having freedom because what you'll get is skaters who are not used to have doing pattern dances having freedom, which will water down the technical proficiency of the skaters in terms of their partnering abilities, probably in terms of their musicality, and definitely in terms of their understanding of how to use the ice surface. I couldn't be wrong to I say that so skeptically which is how I always said, I almost hope I'm wrong, because I don't think that they're just like coming back. It's like I'm worrying about something that's already well beyond our control. I'm just a rookie coach, you know, trying to get my teams ready, but I do worry about that. I do worry about what the younger teams you know what ice dance will represent to them in sort of the way that I was talking about it earlier, like the act of doing ice dancing is going to really has already begun to but is going to systematically change more and more, which I mean, that's just like life, man, but I guess sometimes they just have to throw my hands up in the air and say that's the way of things but it's also I don't know, it's part of what

makes ice dance so unique and special that I want to cross my arms hard and say like, No, I don't want to change.

Anna:

I took my first ice dance classes in the last year and there's is certainly something in terms of going to some of the social dance type classes and seeing skaters have a wide variety of different ages and levels be able to kind of come back to some of the same vocabulary and partner and have that as part of the shared experience. That for community building, you know, even at a very recreational level is that aspect of the patterns that give everyone something to come back to and build off of even though if it was only that it would get very boring,

Charlie:

agreed 100% Yes, no, I agree.

Anna:

One of the things that I've been following on the podcast and talking to people about is the change that skate Canada made recently to allow pairs or dance teams to be skaters of any gender. Do you think that that's something that the US is ever going to follow? And would you train teams that were gender diverse?

Charlie:

Like I can't even imagine a good reason why not. As a philosophy student making and crafting arguments, sometimes even that run counter to your held beliefs as part of what you do. I think that there are only a few minutes. "That's not the way that it's been." Is that ever been a good enough argument to keep from changing anything? I don't think so. I don't think that's ever been good enough. I would look forward to I mean, I think to what new avenues, what interesting ways to explore that artistically. I mean, I think that there's so much to be said for what it would offer not to mention like individuals, you know, who are just trying to like enjoy skating. It's trying to make the most of an opportunity. No, it's just it seems like useless gatekeeping at this point to deny that movement, and have you and now I'm putting it out there, have you ever heard any kind of argument besides, that's not the way that it's been that you felt like oh, okay, I can understand why people would get behind that because I haven't looked into it. I haven't looked into the arguments per se because I'm just like, come on, duh. But maybe you maybe you're -

Anna:

I think that most people fall on the side of either, "I have never considered that it could be different", which is a lot of people in the skating world, or "that's so weird that it's gendered like that. Wow. Is it like that", which is most of the people not in the skating world. You know, I'm doing an adult pair team where I'm the lifting partner and my partner is a cis woman. And you know, we're not currently allowed to compete even in adult bronze but if we were in Canada, we would.

Charlie:

But here's like, who's going to sweep into the into this interview and be like, Good. You shouldn't. Unless they're like cartoonishly villainous. You know, like, what, how do they go like no no, that was a good point. I've just made you know, like, I don't know. I don't see it. I don't see it. Yeah,

Anna:

I mean, I think I've seen it come up more with pairs than with dance that there's this idea that you have to have these two diametrically opposed body types in order to do the elements. Okay, and I think even if that was true, which I think it's less true than people kind of shortcut to it. But even if that is true, you're still using gender as as a shorthand for height difference, which also does not -

Charlie

- as a man who's 5'8" and maybe five eight and a half, you know, it just it doesn't it doesn't hold water. Yeah, it's just it doesn't make sense.

Anna:

I think there's a lot of ways that that skating and it does not, you know, these messages start way before you reach the elite level that there's a lot of people who are told that for whatever reason they don't belong in the sport. There isn't really a place for them. And you know, as someone who started and was already 5'11" by the time I was 10, it was like, Yeah, you're not going to be a figure skater. And I did it anyway because I loved it. But that you know, that definitely sunk in so now finding that I could do pairs and feel like there was a space for me, and it in that way was very motivating. But it took a very different part of my life in a very different skating environment to make that a possibility. And there are a lot of other people I think out there in various different ways, who sell them explicitly, but often very much implicitly or given that message that they don't belong in the sport.

Charlie:

Yeah, I think for me, when I look at the sport of skating, and the entrance to it is often through a skating club. And I don't think that the term Club is a mistake, you know? If you look at the history of what a club is, you see, the power of a club is in the power of othering, and like making something insular. And I think that's one of the biggest problems facing... Gosh, I'm sure it faces like tennis too not a tennis player myself, but like there's like a tennis club. To me when I think of like golf clubs, I think of like problematic areas where justice is not a priority, or at least it's misapplied thoroughly. And so that for me is the main thing is that is a club mentality. The things that go into the sustenance is something that needs to probably to be reckoned with. Because again, like when I was talking about my school, we're talking about kids, you know, like we're talking about children. I don't know who's benefiting from excluding children from doing what like they want to try. And again, unless someone's going to come in and twirl their moustache, it just seems like there isn't. There aren't a lot of good reasons.

Anna:

There is a lot of inertia behind certain ideas of gender roles, the ways that you expect pairs and dance teams to play out very heteronormative romantic storylines, even though that doesn't fit. You know, already that doesn't fit many teams necessarily, and there's so many other stories out there, but still, there's a lot of defaulting to that and discomfort when it breaks outside of that. I mean, like you said, this is not a skating problem. This is a society problems showing up in skating, but it's also something that within skating, my hope is certainly that with Canadian teams that there will start to be some pairs that compete at a level that they get seen and people can start to understand what the possibilities are. And that that can be can be motivating because I think for a lot of people just until they see it, they won't really understand whether it's possible.

Charlie:

It's just it's weird to build up a system on the concept of meritocracy, but then not hold to that when it is something that you're unfamiliar with.

Anna:

I wanted to ask you, my overall big picture question of the podcast is how to make skating healthier and more inclusive, and we've definitely touched on a bunch of the pieces of that but wanted to give you an opportunity for a last word on that topic. If there's things that we haven't touched on that you feel are important.

Charlie:

It's hard for me to be succinct. It's hard for me to feel like I can make a point worth making without going on forever. I want to be giving one word answers to this interview. I feel strongly that justice is a human right, and that regardless of what endeavor one might be considering one should strongly consider the ways in which they have the power to influence bending institutions towards being more just. **I feel especially strongly about the ways in which we as adults wield our power and influence when it comes to children because they are the best. And they deserve to have every opportunity to experience joy and lightness and love unconditionally because they exist. And I think that applies to skating. I think it applies to parenting and skating and podcasting, and no one anywhere is exempt. And as soon as you start finding exemptions you start, you know, you start hurting people and probably specifically children, and like, you shouldn't do that.** I think that the act of skating is something that ought to be broadly experienced. It isn't for everyone in terms of like, not everyone is going to have fun doing it. I stepped on a skateboard once and I fell and I hurt my elbow and I never wanted to do it again. But I bet like we should fight for justice for people stepping on skateboards to you know, like, they anyone should be able to do that. And actually, I think they probably can. So maybe we're a step behind in that department. Sometimes I feel like it's so bland and simplistic that it's not worth saying out loud, but I mean, it can't hurt right?

Anna:

I mean, the most simple things are often the most radical things when it comes to it, think about how complex systems become, in order to get away from the simple truth.

Charlie:

My guess is, as I'm saying, if people want to dress up the competitive elements, and specifically historic institutions like the Olympics, and you know, I think as an Olympic champion, I've earned the right I've earned the right to say, you're not exempt. Be introspective, be critical and like do the right thing. That's that's a that's all there is to it. And it's I know it's not simple. I know it isn't because I'm constantly holding myself accountable every day I you know, every day and it's hard and sometimes we make mistakes, but like we have to do the best that we can.

Anna:

I'm really excited to keep following your your coaching career and to see how all of this keeps developing for you.

Charlie:

I hope it goes well. I mean, the kids aren't too sick of it yet. So that's good, I guess if they haven't told me to shut up.

Anna:

You've got a great group of skaters and for sure, it's gonna be really exciting to see that you know, you have so much of the next generation of usl stands with you and they're very different from each other. And it's really cool to see how they develop.

Charlie:

They really are. Yeah, that could be an entirely different podcast, but no, thank you so much. This has been great.

—

Thank you again to Charlie for a thoughtful conversation! You can look at the show notes for a transcript of this episode, as well as links to many of the resources and projects we discussed.

You can follow Charlie at @ CharlieAWhite on Instagram and Twitter, and MIDA @ michiganicedanceacademy on Instagram. You 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

Remember to subscribe to The Future of Figure Skating podcast on whatever platform you use and share it with your friends!

<https://www.michiganicedanceacademy.com/>

“Michigan Ice Dance Academy to Open in 2022”

<https://www.usfigureskating.org/news/article/michigan-ice-dance-academy-open-2022>

Charlie's tweets about making his students write essays on ice dance

https://twitter.com/charlieawhite/status/1493058958617108483?s=46&t=_IVdmlHKhXmCA8l-mxBecw

The Roeper School [philosophy](https://www.roeper.org/about/mission--philosophy) <https://www.roeper.org/about/mission--philosophy>