

Episode 31 - Christine Brennan

Anna Kellar

Welcome back to the future of figure skating. I'm the host, Anna Kellar, and I'm here today with journalist Christine Brennan. Christine writes for USA Today and is a frequent TV commentator as well. She's a trailblazer as a woman in sports journalism and a real advocate for others in that space. And when it comes to skating, she also is the author of the classic book *Inside Edge*. We were just in Montreal together for the World Championship. So I'm excited to get to debrief a little bit about that experience. Christine, what was your experience like at Worlds?

Christine Brennan

Well, it was great to meet you. There, Anna, and thanks so much for having me on the podcast. I know we've been trying for a while to make this happen. So I'm glad we're finally doing it. I think we can call this a successful turn of events to actually get a chance to talk and to do your podcast. And yeah, you know, I hadn't been at Worlds. In fact, I was trying to remember what I thought it was Boston. But then Phil Hirsch reminded me it was Helsinki, which was the next year, which of course, then I remember that, of course, that it was. It had been a while, of course. But and that Helsinki Worlds was, of course, leading into the world or to the Olympics in 2018. And so, you know, that was a while ago. And things have changed, certainly in skating and in our world since then. And it was great to have the world so close. I could drive and I flew and it was an easy flight from Washington where I live. And the storylines did not, you know, it was a point. And in particular for U.S. audience, clearly the headline is Ilia Malinin and his unbelievable long program, the greatest athletic performance we have ever seen in figure skating with the six clean quads. And what it portends not only for him, but for U.S. fortunes moving towards the next Olympic Games, which are, we're closer to those, the 2026 Olympics in Milan Cortina, then we are to Beijing, which, of course, is in the rearview mirror now more than two years ago. So that always intrigues me, the how everyone starts jockeying for position, you know, how we start to see things set up for the next Olympics, which, of course, is always the key moment in any sport like figure skating. And also, Isabeau, Isabeau Levito and her surprising silver medal. And she kept it together. And she's been very honest about dealing with the Olympics. And she's always brought the nerves and the pressure. And and she was great in her own world and came in second and is certainly now going to be a storyline moving forward the next couple of years as well.

And the but Ilia, I mean, that was just majestic and he really has grown into this role as the a superstar, one of the superstars in his sport, at a time when U.S. figure skating in particular and frankly, worldwide skating desperately needs stars from other than, well, from North America, we'll say. Russia, of course, wasn't there. I believe Russia should not be allowed to compete. The combination of the horrors of the Ukraine war that was started by Putin and Russia, and then also just the state-sponsored systemic doping that you can't believe anything. And the Kamila Valieva story, of course, is clearly, you know,

exhibit A from that. But without the Russians, especially the women's competition, that certainly opens up spaces like for Isabeau. The men, I don't think it's that impactful, if at all. And so therefore, you know, I think there may be asterisks someday that people want to put on these. Now, they won't be put there officially, but without the Russians. But I also think it's the right thing to do for clean sport, much less if we're even just looking at that. But then, of course, as I said, the assault on Ukraine and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and so, but that's our reality in figure skating and throughout the sports world, basically, and in the Olympic world. So that's where we are. And that's what I cover. And I think, again, those stories were terrific and unexpected, because the US figure skating, as I was alluding to a moment ago, needs that jolt. You know, the TV ratings have been going down, down, down since, well, since Tonya Nancy. I mean, there's no way they could have gone up 48.5 rating during that program. And Lillenhammer, 30 years ago, when, Tonya and Nancy hit the ice for the first time in Norway at the Olympics. And, you know, it but it's it's been tough for figure skating. And if Ilia is that potentially that new star and you throw in Isabeau, the I-kids, you know, that's, that's, that's fun. That's interesting, fun. It will be the journey to cover this next couple years, journalistically will be, you know, I think really something that will be fun and worthwhile. And I'm looking forward to that.

Anna Kellar

Yeah, and I want to ask about that sort of the nationalism that goes into covering Olympic sports. And obviously, you write and work for American outlets. And I am an American, but most of my favorite skaters tend to not be American, just by coincidence, I think, but it means that I tend to watch skating with a with a bit of a different eye. And so that's something, again, that I'm curious about when you look at this, and you think about the storylines that you're that you are, wanting to cover what your editors want you to cover what is interesting to your readers, you know, why? I suppose I could answer this myself? But you know, why not? The three time champion of Kaori Sakamoto? Why is she not a you know, someone who's going to pull people into the sport and just, yeah, how do you address that dynamic that only the Americans matter when it comes to covering figure skating?

Christine Brennan

Yeah. And it's a very good question. And I think I just, you know, say that obviously the most time I've spent in covering figure skating the last two years has been on, of course, the Kamila Valieva doping story, which of course, I mean, obviously is Russian, but it's news, and I was able to break that story and break other pieces of the story, including the U.S. getting the gold medal after the cast decision, and I went, of course, to Switzerland in September and covered that cast hearing as the only journalist outside of, you know, basically Switzerland to do that, and so, and I know what you mean, I mean, in terms of what my answer was, but I think in terms of the storylines, really, I've been talking about, as we've discussed and we've talked about in Montreal, the half of the math that the International Skating Union did, and of course, that doesn't involve the U.S., that involves whether third place and the bronze medal goes to the Russians, as the ISU said, I believe completely erroneously. Or, if the bronze goes to Canada, if you do all the math, you've got to take away the two ten points from Camilla Valleeva's score, but then you have to bump up all the other women with one point in the short and one in the long, and if you do that, in other words, do all the math, not half the math, then Canada gets that bronze medal, and of course, again, that has nothing to do with the U.S., obviously, that's Canada and Russia, so I think I try to follow the story and the journalism, and I know you know that, and so the fact that I've written so much more about a Russia, in this case, cheating, than I have about any American skaters over the last couple of years, I think that maybe shows that it truly is the story line and the journalism that guides me, and guides so many of us.

I think that, of course, being an American journalist in USA Today, clearly we don't have to say too much more about that. But in no way, of course, am I a homer. And I think everyone knows that from my criticism and critiques and hopefully fair coverage of so many American skaters and skaters from around the world. And yeah, Kaori, I mean, fantastic. And I certainly will be devoting time to her. If she wins the Olympic gold medal, absolutely. She's leading the short program in the Olympics. Absolutely, of course, for sure. And I would probably have at least one colleague with me at the figure skating at the Olympics, which of course then would allow us to cover even more storylines. So I think for sure, that's it. No way, shape or form do I ignore it. In this case, because I was writing actually, again, another non-US story, the Nikolai Sorensen story, which I'm sure we'll get into, and the awful allegations of sexual assault, rape by a woman who came forward to me from the alleged rape occurred in 2020. I think it was 2012 in Connecticut. And that again, that only involves an American figure skater whose name we will of course not be using. And because that's the USA Today policy and my policy, as I know you understand, and that's the way of course we do it in journalism.

But there's another example that was a Canadian figure skater. And frankly, to be honest, had he not been an Olympian, I still would have reported the story, but the fact that Sorensen was in the Olympic games, if I'm writing for American readers, I realize

the internet goes around the world and others can read it too. But I have to, of course, my editors and I, and our readers, I mean, you have to, that's the lifeblood of journalism. And you have to write about things that you care about and that are newsworthy and important. And I never let clicks or hits or eyeballs guide me ever, but I do write for a US newspaper, obviously, and so. And so I'm a big fan of the stories that called USA Today. So with that in mind, the Sorensen story obviously was important because of over the last five years, as you know, I've done so much coverage of sexual abuse and sexual assault in figure skating. And I'm honored to tell the stories of the survivors and the victims. And I wanna continue doing that. If anyone who's watching has a story to tell me, I'm easy to find, just my website is myname.com and you can email me there, or my DMs are open on X, Twitter, and any number of Facebook, what have you. And, but again, that was a story that involved, a Canadian, obviously, ice dancer, but being with his high profile, it certainly then becomes a story that you can obviously make the case is much more interesting to people potentially. And I think the story is worthwhile, no matter if it's interesting or not, but because he was on the Olympic team in Canada in 2022, and is one of the top ice dancers in the world. So it's certainly, it's, so it's, there's a lot that goes into journalism and decision-making, but news is news. And over the years I've figured out, I think pretty well, hopefully, how to cover that. And if I haven't, I certainly hear from a lot of people, they let me know if I have made a mistake on that, for sure.

Anna Kellar

Well, and it's so interesting for me as someone who is not a professional journalist, but who is so immersed in the skating side to then see sort of how the folks, who come in to the big competitions and are following some of these, what are the big storylines? Cause that also is very informative for me. And I think it's especially valuable, and you mentioned this, that there are journalists who are writing for big outlets, who are actually have the press cards and have the credentials to be in those spaces. And I wanted to talk to you about sort of how you operate. We talked about the press conference or the mix zone, where for the skating journalists, we get told, no, you can't ask questions about anything other than the performance. And if we push back against that, there's a sense that, oh, well, Skate Canada could decide to not let us talk to their athletes or not give us accreditation next time we're not doing any of those things, because they could always just say, well, we don't have space. There's always a, they always could, but we don't have the resources to fall back on that. And so then it becomes a question of, is the answer you're gonna get worth potentially burning that bridge? And so then again, we can feel grateful for having people like you who are able to push harder than we can in those moments. At the same time, I was sitting there kind of going, eek, this is a very uncomfortable, this is a very uncomfortable thing. I tend to think about my part of my, what I'm doing in the mixed zone is trying to make that space

be someplace that's comfortable for athletes to be able to talk. This is a very particular case. But again, I'm just, if you could speak a little bit about how you approached asking questions of Sorenson in this space, and just in general, the breaking through that desire of the skating world to keep silence.

Christine Brennan

Yeah, I mean, you know, and I understand your question is a really good one. And it is probably some people listening and watching this will say, well, how do you not just follow the rules? And, you know, that would be, I can understand them asking that question at first blush, that if they say no questions about anything but his performance, then, you know, why would you be rude and not follow that, right? Well, because I don't see it as being rude. I am there as a journalist and I've always felt, you know, all these years, 40 some years, it's hard to believe, that I'm there representing my news organization and I'm there for the readers or the viewers. I mean, I am able to ask questions. I've been given an incredible opportunity. I'm fortunate, so fortunate. I take, you know, I always take it so seriously and I'm so honored and I feel so fortunate, as I said. And so I am, I'm a journalist. I'm going to do what journalists do.

And when the public relations rep for Skate Canada, this was after the free dance, came into the press conference or the mix zone, which is where we do the interviews, and I'm guessing your viewers and listeners know, but there's, this is like at the Olympics, it's at every international competition, the athletes come through, they're required to come through. Journalists are on one side, the athletes are on the other. There's usually a little bit of a railing or a little half wall or whatever it might be just to kind of keep us separated. Not to, not like, or, you know, it's not security reasons. It's just so that we're on one side of this fence or wall or a little railing and they're on the other side. And then we do the interviews and then they move on. And so that's, that's how this works. And we just go down there and wait, and then they come by and you go closer to them and interview them, what have you. So when this, the PR woman said that, so we're only going to be, only question, I forget the exact wording she said, but something along the lines of only questions about their performance, or we're going to accept only questions about their performance. And I looked at her and I worked with her a little bit in Beijing at the Olympics in 2022. And I just looked at her and I said, oh, there's no way we're going to abide by that. And, you know, we're looking at each other and I respect her and I think she respects me and she's doing her job and I'm doing my job. And other journalists, a couple other journalists that I've known for a long time, at least one Canadian columnist said the same thing. Oh no, we're not, we are not abiding by that. I mean, they just can't make those rules. You just can't do that. That's insane. And frankly, it hurts Nikolai Sorensen. Let him take the questions. Why are you coddling this man? Why are you covering for him? Why are you protecting him? Forget for a moment, which we can't, but forget for a moment, the allegations against him and the

investigation. I mean, by the Canadian SafeSport people, the office of the Sports Integrity Commissioner in Canada, forget that for a moment, which we can. Just as an athlete, he's a grown man. Let him answer the questions. He can say no comment if he wants. And so it just is a terrible way to start. And if any of our friends at Skate Canada would happen to watch this, just don't do that. Just, you know, we're professionals. It's not going to work, so don't do it. And so anyway, then what happens is when he comes in, at that moment, we know we've got a couple of minutes. So French was first, as it was after the, you know, the short program for dance, rhythm dance, whatever they call it. And so I would never want to necessarily blow up or stop questions from other colleagues. I would never want to do that. So I waited. And there were a couple in French, and people were asking about the performance, which is fine, by the way. I mean, that doesn't mean they were following the rules. They just had questions about, you know, how he performed and how they performed, and they finished ninth overall. And so, okay, that, you know, there's a lot, if you want to ask it, of course, and I would never do that. So I waited. And then I think there was a question or two, and then I asked if they had, oh, they're talking about all the great reception they're getting. And so I said, did you see the sign? And it said, we support survivors. You know, valid question. Now, at this point, we're already not talking about the performance. So, because the first question was about how they were, it wasn't even about the performance, so I guess, or the second, whatever it was. So anyway, at that point, I asked that. And they said- It was about their experience on the ice and what had just happened. Right. It's performance related, right. But, you know, but clearly, so anyway, of course, asking about the sign, and of course they said, no, they had not seen it. I mean, that's journalism 101 to ask that question. I mean, that is, any journalist worth his or her salt, it would be like, how on earth could you not ask that question? So again, I felt a hundred percent, not even 99%, a hundred percent great asking that question. And it's exactly what I should do. It's exactly what the readers would want me to do. There's no other way around that. And again, it's not preventing others from asking him about whatever they wanted to. Then that, I forget if it was the next question. No. I think it was another question or two. And then it was, I asked about, what are your plans next? Now I was thinking moving forward, last into next year, but he took it as meaning that they were going to have time with his family and all that, fine, whatever. Then, as I recall, again, there might've been another question, there were only a few questions total, so whatever. But people are getting what they need. At the PR woman then says, last question. And there was a beat or two of silence. Clearly, none of my colleagues were diving in.

And so that's when I asked a question that had to be asked. I was going to break some more news that the lawyer for the woman was filing another count or the woman herself, filing another count of retaliation by Nikolai Sorensen for his comments on March 6th at the media day, which I still can't believe no Canadian journalists wrote about that, at

least that I saw. I happened upon it when I was looking at the video of his interview that day, but it was about a week later where he basically said the intention of the survivor victim was to damage him, damage his reputation, which is just kind of unbelievable that he said that. And the lawyer of course picked up on it and they had the other count. And I wanted to see if he had a comment on that. And at that point, again, journalism 101, if you learned that first day, freshman year, Northwestern, right? And, or any journalism school. And anyway, and so I asked, I said, do you have a comment? And with that, the PR went, oh, that's it, it's over. Press conference is over. And I said, I'm just would like to give you a chance to reply, do you have a comment? And he goes, no. And then he's whisked away by Skate Canada. Again, I don't think Skate Canada is doing him any favors at all, but he did say no comment, which was, then I was able to quote and say he had no comment, which is exactly what I wanted to do as a journalist. So, you know, he could have stood there for 10 more minutes. He decided not to. And that's of course his decision.

Anna Kellar

Yeah, that piece about who can talk, who's encouraged to talk, who isn't encouraged to talk, I find so fascinating. And this is very much building on my conversation that I just had on the podcast with Gymnasts for Change Canada as an organization that is survivors working with survivors pushing for change. And we talked about how one of the problems with the OSIC process is that it often discourages the victim or survivor from speaking out, that there are, depending on how it goes, that that can result in that person feeling, you know, discouraged from speaking out. It also creates a sense that the, there's no question should be asked because the process is happening and yet the process is a black box. For everybody involved, a lot of the time. And so then, you know, I think about, well, what Sorenson would say, but then also it resolved, it means that every other person in that system and all of the institutions also can just say, well, we're just waiting for the process. We don't, you know, we're not going to say anything. And so as I talked to fans there, I think for a lot of people, yes, it was, you know, horrible and shocking to hear this about Sorenson, but the deeper sense of frustration with the sport was watching the ice dance coaches, the school that where the majority of the top ice dancers are all rally around and say, and shut down any discussion, Skate Canada to rally around and shut down any discussion. It's that sense of we've circled around to protect one of our own. That was very frustrating for people, for other survivors, for other people who are hoping for it to be a safe sport. And so I think I continue to be frustrated and struggling to figure out how to approach these institutions, as well as the actual person who's been accused. And I mean, you've been covering this with us figure skating for such a long time, trying to figure out how to, to get them, to, to, to be

answering questions about their processes. So I don't know if you thoughts about that sort of kind of navigate giant institutions that are see their interest is remaining silent.

Christine Brennan

Well, it's appalling. It's absolutely appalling. Let's say what it is. It is that is it. And OSIC in particular, I was shocked when I was told by the attorney, Nancy Hogshead is the attorney Olympic gold medalist and someone I've known incredible title nine attorney. When she said that the victim could not speak, the alleged victim, the survivor could not speak. And like, wait a minute, she can't tell her own story. So if you'll, as you'll notice and anyone who wants to go back and look the January 4th story, the breaking news that I had on Sorenson, that story is based on the report, which I obtained it's not quoting the alleged victim. And I think it's important. I haven't said it all throughout our conversation, but I ever anyone who said, Oh, well, how do you know, look at the number of uses of the word, the times I use the word alleged in every story, every story lawyers have read it. Are you kidding me? We are so serious about this. This is people's lives, both sides that are involved. And there is no way on earth that a publication like USA today would take anything like this without the most serious, serious scrutiny, lawyers, I'm talking to lawyers. We're dealing with lawyers. They're reading, they're double checking. I'm double, triple, quadruple checking everything.

And the word alleged and allegations, you know, are throughout the story. And so, you know, when, when you, you know, think of it that way and then, but it, but going again, to the, to the alleged, you know, victim survivor, and that, and that's when you start to look at your story. She's been muzzled. So I went to someone in OSIC and I said, after having covered so many of these stories in the U S where everyone speaks freely, Ashley Wagner is a perfect example. She could have, you know, it turns out she did not go to safe sport with her story, but she could have done it after she was on a one of the

USA today and the video that got about a million hits in the first, you know, 24, 36 hours. I worked on with her for several months. And then we published. So there's no muzzling of the, I know a lot of people are not thrilled with SafeSport, but there's one, there's a perfect example. There is no muzzling of the victim. There is no telling the victim that she or he cannot tell his story. So Canada is doing that. That's unconscionable. And I cannot believe that someone hasn't tried through legal remedies to address that. And so I have made my voice known clearly and as much as I can with someone inside of OSIC of how, or what are we called, the OSIC, whatever, however we refer to it. I made that so clear how shocking that was to me as someone who's covered these stories now for five years, basically five, six years, in USA Gymnastics before that, actually, that,

that, you know, that this is going on. And so I think it's terrible. I think it should have ended

yesterday. It should have ended a couple of months ago. I cannot believe OSIC is not out there saying yes to any victim, any survivor, alleged victim or survivor. You can speak and literally sending out a press release saying, oh, we understand there might be confusion. We want you to know, it's appalling. It's absolutely appalling. And it is so in favor of the alleged process. And so I'm going to send this report to the perpetrator. And is that the message you want to send Skate Canada? Because that is the message you're sending right now, big time. And I don't mind saying all this. And you know me, I'll say anything that in terms of my coverage of this story, it's just stunning to me. And so because of the strength and the heroism of the alleged victim, deciding that she was going to send this report and people, I'm sure they're out there saying, well, wait a minute. 2012, it allegedly happened, the rape in Connecticut. Why now? Right? Oh, because he's now going to national, I saw some stuff on, you know, going to nationals. I didn't even know when Canadian nationals were, you know, I hadn't even focused on the world's get in January, if it was going to go, you know what I'm saying? So your, your, your, your minds are working really, really fast to come up with some kind of conspiracy theory that just does not exist. And as anyone knows, who's read this, it's a conspiracy theory. And it's a conspiracy theory. And it's a conspiracy theory. And it's a story in the report, which is where I got a copy of the report, because the victim, the alleged victim was muzzled, and could not tell her story. She respected that, has still respected it, except in answering Sorensen's comments the other day. But other than that, she has never told the story. It's the report that I have based my reporting on. And she said, and anyone can read it, that she is going on with her life. Obviously, it's never easy. But she was reading a quote in an online story, where Sorensen was talking about, we must keep or, you know, the sport of skating must keep women safe.

Anna Kellar

I read that story when it came out, and thought it was remarkable, because Sorensen was saying some of the things that we that we would like more men in skating to say about the extra privilege that men in partnerships have and all of these things. And so I remember when that story came out, and was more, it was a story on the ISU website, they were promoting it. So I was soon as I heard that, I thought, oh, I could see the pain of that, you know, that irony being so so painful for somebody who had had that experience or knew that, that side of him to then see him being held up as the example of someone who is working for good things in the sport. So as soon as you mentioned, as soon as that article was mentioned, I remember that I know exactly what it was.

Christine Brennan

Well, I'm so glad you saw it. I did not see it.

And obviously then was alerted to it when I read the report and what triggered her going, you know, and, and sending the report not only to the OSIC, but also to US Center for Safe Sport. And by the way, you know, that's if he ever wants to coach in the United States, he would then be investigated by Safe Sport. So, you know, there's there's a lot yet to go. And, and, you know, **I think the the real message and Skate Canada sent this message, and we'll have to live with that. Forever, that they sent a message to every victim, alleged or otherwise, survivor out there in Canada and really around the world, that it is, they were fine with putting Nikolai Sorensen on that stage representing Canada, you know, the maple leaf and, you know, you're, you're, you know, draped in the flag. And there he is, knowing that he is under under investigation for something that is allegedly absolutely horrible. And it is horrible, if it's true. And it's, and of course, I wasn't there, you weren't there. And, of course, I believe women and I believe this victim, she is so detailed and the detail is extraordinary in the report. But I wasn't there. So but the thought that even if it's 5050, right, even if it's 5050, right, even if it's 5050, right, even if it's 5050, right.**

Okay, he said, she said that Canada was so comfortable letting him represent the nation and the message that they have sent. They're going to live with that for a very, very long time, Escape Canada, as an organization.

And of course, the complete contradiction, January, story breaks, and within a few days, he is not going to nationals because he didn't want to be a distraction.

So, now, two months later, with the investigation still going on, he's now at Worlds, and I even asked, what's different? You said you were a distraction. That was after the rhythm dance.

You said you were a distraction, and now you're here. What has changed? And he said, well, it's because it's kind of died down, which, oh, again, just what a slap in the face to any,

not just the alleged victim. In this case, but any victims or survivors.

What a slap in the face, and again, totally sanctioned, completely sanctioned by Escape Canada and by the ISU,

the International Skating Union, and I asked the president, as you know, in that press conference, how comfortable they were allowing a man with this investigation going on, and what met onto their world stage, and what message they were sending. And, oh, he went on and on about, you know, we're going to, we're going to have to do this investigation, because the investigation is still going on, and so we're, you know, respecting the investigation, but, of course, we believe survivors.

I mean, the double speak was extraordinary, and I'm glad that a few of us, and I'll speak for myself,

but there were other journalists on this as well, and I know you care about this, and, you know, it's very important to you. And some Canadian journalists were definitely covering the story, and that's the positive. That's the positive.

A light was put on him. This story that otherwise would not have been, were it not for the fact that the victim, the alleged victim came forward, and there's a report, and I was able to get that report. And that, that is the victory. And that is the heroism of this incredible woman who decided to come forward because she's so concerned about others in the sport with him and others, and how they potentially, what could possibly happen to people in the future. And that's where the ISU dropped the ball. And just was horrible and didn't get it. And people might be saying, okay, what should they have done?

And there are temporary measures, at least US Figure Skating has them. They gave a temporary measure. They do it a lot. And one was to John Coughlin. And, of course, tragically, sadly, horribly, he then took his own life. That is horrible. And it was it's just unbelievable that John Coughlin did that. But so sad, so tragic. The temporary measures are the US Figure Skating. measure, though, was the right thing to do because there was a potential victim of John Coughlin that was going to be at the event where he was going to be. So SafeSport, which gets a lot of criticism, made that call.

What we don't know is, obviously, if Sorensen is, in fact, an abuser or a rapist, if he is. I don't know that. We won't know that. You know, we know what the investigation and the allegation is. So now you've got him on display, not only representing Canada, but also all around

all these people. And I would say just for the, for, to be safe, you literally needed to suspend him or put some kind of measure, temporary measure, so that he was not there. And that, that's my take on what happens. It is not a right to be at the World Championships. It's not a right to, to be a figure skater. It is an honor. It is a privilege. And that can get taken away. And somewhere in this whole process, and by the way, if they'd done it, let's say they suspended him, and then his lawyers wanted to come back and fight, okay, do that. And have it go to court.

Anna Kellar

I could imagine that that's what we were sort of assuming that Skate Canada was afraid of being sued if they, you know, told them to, you know, if they actually said, don't come. But why, you know, why be so afraid of that? If they had to go through that, they could go through that at least. They have sent the right message to all of the other people out there in the world, all of the other survivors and victims of what they're saying. And when you say the 50-50, you know, what is the, who gets the benefit of the doubt? I have also been covering as you have so many cases about doping recently and thinking about how the burden of proof on the athlete is to prove that they were not doping or they were not intentionally doping as an incredibly high burden of proof. They're very much, you know, the, the, you know, the guilty, you know, guilty until proven innocent.

When it comes to talking about abuse cases, it's the, you know, where does the benefit of the doubt or not lie? But it does strike me that we are willing in the case of somebody who took the wrong medicine to completely ban them right away and then let them explain afterwards. And so these are not equally applied standards at all. And then it also makes very clear just their doping is bad enough when it comes to disparate standards in different countries. But at least there is some global code and there's no global code when it comes to safeguarding athletes in abuse cases. I've been looking into what the ISU was attempting to point to. And I think they are belatedly trying to catch up to creating some of these structures. As it is, it's hard to imagine an athlete would feel comfortable or supported, you know, coming forward to the ISU and if they were to report to a safeguarding officer or something like that. And so, you know, we see all of these pieces. And then to the press conference question, I think this was my first time coming to a press conference with the head of the ISU, this kind of a space like that, that wasn't just with the medalists or the athletes, but was actually with the institution. And I was shocked at how absolutely nothing it was. They didn't answer a single question that was asked without pivoting to some non-answer. And it was clumsily, you know, it wasn't even good pivoting. It was clumsily done. Is that normal for sports organizations? Is that normal as you've covered figure skating? I do politics. I feel like I'm used to people wiggling out of answering questions. And I was shocked. I was shocked at how they felt complete impunity to not say anything.

Christine Brennan

Yeah, a real dog and pony show. Yes. I haven't covered the Olympics since 84 in Los Angeles and covered a lot of IOC meetings and briefings. I mean, sometimes there's some meat on the bone, of course, and sometimes there's some very significant things happening. Ben Johnson testing positive in Seoul in 1988, for sure. You know, that press conference was as historic as it comes when the men's 100 meters champion is literally, you know, kicked out of the sport and his medal stripped and off he goes, you know, on a plane back to Canada. So, yeah, there's there certainly are. But in general, no, it's the dog and pony show. It's the ridiculousness, the pomposity, just the arrogance. And I was surprised that the ISU even had a press conference. Good for them for that. And, you know, because I hadn't I can't even tell you the last time I would have seen an ISU press conference. I've missed a lot of worlds, certainly. But yeah, I mean, it's they take the same page out of the book. The playbook of the IOC. And in fact, the president of the ISU is also a member of the IOC. There's a lot of, you know, intersecting circles for sure.

And the same basically the same kind of people that are running the actual international federations that are also on the IOC or hoping to be on the IOC. That's that's that's that group royalty and near royalty. And they think they're royalty. And and it's you know, it's just it's just a foofer and ridiculousness.

Anna Kellar

Protect their own power. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Christine Brennan

And it's and it's been this way. So that was not unusual that they even had. It was kind of unusual to me with the other question. And, you know, thanks to the PR woman there, who I know I've known for a while. You know, she knew that I've been all over the valley of a story in the math and getting the math wrong. And so but they did call on me first. And that's, you know, that's OK. I mean, again, I whatever. First, second, third doesn't matter to me. But but, you know, they could have also tried to shut someone like me down and they didn't. That's good. But as you recall, he said he couldn't talk anymore about the math. But I wanted to make sure of it. I've never done this before. I don't think in any press conference all these years where I literally said I started out with one thing, but I didn't want to give up my question. Right. So I'm kind of laughing at myself because it was kind of like I was on the fly. So I said, you're really not going to be speaking about doing half the math. So I did get that line in there. And and he said, no, no, I can't. Because of, you know, the appeals to the court of arbitration. For sport, what two from Russia, two, maybe three and the one from Canada. So I said, well, in that case, I'll pivot. And then I pivoted to Sorenson. And as we talked about a few minutes ago. So, no, that's the way this world is. They think they're basically untouchable. They do feel that their royalty are close to royalty. I'm not being fair to everybody. I think there's more.

They understand with social media and with just the way we can all interact, emails and things that we never had before. You had to call people, you know, 30 years ago. And hoping to leave a message in Switzerland and hope maybe get a call back on your landline. You know, there was no email back then or whatever, 35 years ago. So they get I think they understand that a little bit. No, they'd rather they would rather not have it. Well, I shouldn't say this. They want the coverage for the positive. I know that who who does want people asking questions about negative. But you're you're an entity putting on an event and you're going to get questions. And if I would never be on the PR side. But if I were on the PR side, I would take all these people and put them in the put them in the same room and say, welcome to the 21st century. Welcome to 2024. Answer the questions. Don't say no comment. Know what's coming. You're a public figure. Sorensen, you're a public figure. You know, Nikolai Sorensen could be selling insurance. He's not selling insurance. He has decided to put himself in the most public and visible place. Possible. He is then, of course, going to be asked questions by people like me. I mean, that's just a no brainer. And he knows it. He could have retired. He could have not shown up at Worlds. So these are all choices they make that lead to

the moments that we've been discussing. And 100 times out of 100, I would do the exact same thing.

Anna Kellar

Yeah. And it's been interesting, you know, talking to the ISU media people, talking to various people within the institution, because, of course, giant institutions. Yeah. I mean, the institutions are complex organisms full of many different competing viewpoints and people with their different objectives. And I think that there are some people within there, and I'm trying to encourage this behavior in them who would like to be a little bit more transparent, at least with things like actually publish your proposals in a timely way. Let the people who are making decisions, you know, share their information with the media. That's different from saying, well. They answer hard questions, but I'm trying to, you know, let's start with baby steps. Will they answer any questions? And so that's, you know, and I and I have seen, you know, a little bit more willingness. But I've also seen from the vast majority of the journalists who cover skating all the time that they don't even bother to ask because they don't even think that there's any chance that they'll get any answer directly from the ISU. I found sometimes, well, I might as well ask, you know, what we're still doing is just not respond or they'll say no. And sometimes I do get an answer. And so I'm trying to, you know, I'm thinking. You know, it's like the good cop, bad cop of this situation, you know, trying to encourage the positive behavior of little bits of transparency where it can. But, you know, it's it was really quite laughable to me watching that press conference.

Christine Brennan

Oh, well, it totally was. And yeah, that's that is very much in keeping with most of these international sports press conferences. And I would say this, too. You asked earlier when we were talking, I started out about how it's, you know, someone like me can ask those questions because I come from a major news organization and they're not going to what we presume they're not going to, you know, ban me, kick me out, grab my credential, take it off my neck. But there are so many others, especially in these sports like skating, where there are websites and there are, you know, podcasts like yours and there are bloggers and and that it is totally understandable that one question and all of a sudden there goes the credential. Right. And I get that. And that is a real fear. And I guess I would stand. And sit here and say to you and say to anyone who's watching or listening that if ever any of you, you or any of your colleagues from let's call that that other world, not the not the main major news organization world. Right. If you ever get hassled, harassed, told that you're not going to get a credential anymore, you know, call me, email me. I'll write about it. I'll talk about it. That's I mean, if you want me to, if you don't, that's OK, too. It's absolutely unacceptable. That is silencing a voice that's

important, but also it's bullying because they know they they could do that. And let's hope it never doesn't happen. Right. But I've certainly seen it happen in other sports and someone gets mad and all of a sudden there goes their credential. You know, the organization says that's it. And in golf, I know it happened at least once. And those are the kind of things that are should be every one of journalists like me who have been so lucky, so fortunate to have the platform that we have. I've worked hard for it, but you've got to be lucky. And I appreciate it every single second of my of the day, every single second of my life that I get to do this, I would be the first one there fighting for you and fighting for everyone else. So make sure that everyone, you know, they get my email address or cell number easy to find, get in touch, because that's just unacceptable. And there should be no bullying by these organizations for someone doing their job and asking a question.

Anna Kellar

Thank you. No, that's very much. I appreciate that. I want to ask you a last question before I let you go here and sort of circling back to where we started this. You know, you've been covering figure skating for a long time and you're one of the very few journalists who does continue to keep that eye on the sport when a lot of mainstream coverage has declined over the years. What keeps you coming back and what do you hope for from figure skating in the future?

Christine Brennan

By the way, a great question. I answered in a second. You know, when when you were talking about the difference between how the world looks at doping violations versus versus allegations of sexual assault, abuse, et cetera. That's a great point, because you're right. Doping, you've got to prove your innocence. And but everyone's bending over backwards in the case of the sexual abuse, and that was clearly on display. As you said, that's a great point. And I don't know that. I. I had thought of it that way. So thank you for mentioning it. And I will use that as a guide moving forward because.

Anna Kellar

It helps that I recorded back-to-back episodes on doping and on abuse because hearing people in those two worlds talk about this and thinking about, well, what is the, you know, if our center line here is, you know, what is creating the best power and strength and respect for athletes who are core to sport? They've got rights as, you know, whether they're in either side of the sort of defendant or accuser space, but they're treated so differently across those two things. Right.

Christine Brennan

And I guess part of it too is, is understandable. You've got a positive drug test. That is actually something that has been, that's quantifiable, right? And it is, it's recorded and it is a, a fact. I mean, lawyers might dispute it, but there it is. There's the positive drug test. And they test the. Sample and make sure that the B sample is the same as the A sample. No one has the, the equivalent record of something that happened in 2012. Right now, a police report. Yes. A rape kick. Of course. Yes.

In this case, back in 2012, well before me too, the alleged victim survivor, you know, was, as I've, as is in the report that, as I had in my story on January 4th. You know, who, who is she going to turn to, where do you go? It is so different now, 12 years later, thank goodness it is. And I think we need to keep that in mind too, but there is, you can make that case. There is certainly a difference in the sense of if there is something that's quantifiable, but it doesn't. It's explain or excuse all of it because it does seem that we are, again, what we saw was Skate Canada, Skate Canada and the ISU and their absolute willingness. It is fine. They were fine with Nikolai Sorensen being on that ice. They were fine with that. That was fine. And they would have loved to never have me or anyone else ask questions. And they really were fine with it. And what a statement that is. In 2024, as we are so in the heart of Me Too, that these organizations felt that way. So anyway, thanks again, though, on that huge point.

And then to get to your question, which is kind of more fun, the skating. Yeah, you know, I kind of stumbled into skating, covering it. When you cover the Olympics, as I've been so honored and lucky to do, starting with the Miami Herald in 84, then moving to the Washington Post, which, of course, started then with the 88 Olympics and all the way through Atlanta in 96. And now every Olympics since for USA Today and CNN and ABC and others. You know, my, again, hopefully, a little bit soup of my life, that, you know, you get to, there's sports you focus on. And kind of going back to your original comments and questions about, you know, an American-centric, a U.S.-centric view, being a U.S. reporter, you focus on sports that Americans care about or, even more important, that Americans are good at. So you're going to be writing about these people. That just makes sense, right? There's no surprise there to anyone listening, I'm sure. So gymnastics, of course. Mary Lou Retton and, you know, Bart Conner and that, all of them. And swimming, tons of medals for the U.S. And also, of course, I write about the Australians or others that win as well, or controversies that come out of swimming. Track and field, that big second week. And that's just not the U.S. either. But the U.S. is such a part of those storylines. Okay. So, and then Winter Olympics, which my first for Calgary in 88. Well, I covered a lot of skiing and hockey, especially men's hockey. Coming not long after the U.S. Miracle on Ice in 1980. I was in college then, but didn't cover that. But 88, 90, you know, so there's stories.

Women's hockey comes in Nagano in 98. You know, that's a big deal. But the sport that people seem to care so much about, and that I loved watching as a girl growing up, was figure skating. And so it wasn't that I'm almost six feet tall. So, I mean, I can skate because our family, you know, I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, on the suburbs, and we would freeze the patio when you could do that, when there wasn't, it was cold. It was cold enough in the winter, and I skated. I can skate backwards, but I could never jump. I could never do a, you know, a waltz jump or anything like that. I'm not a skater. I played every other sport but skating. But as a journalist, now I'm covering the Olympics, and figure skating is so important. I have to cover it. I have, you know, I want to cover it. I have to cover it. And the stories are so fascinating. And all the stuff, you know, all the controversies, all the interesting characters, the judging controversies, you know, Katerina and Debbie Thomas and Liz Mann. The family sneaks in there, you know, and the rattle of the Bryans. And, you know, on and on and on. And every Olympic cycle, and the stories, and, of course, the emergence of Michelle Kwan. Michelle and Tara was like, you know, Chrissy and Martina, just two of the greats of all times going at it. Michelle, you know, Tara goes to the pros. Michelle stays on and keeps going and becomes, you know, the greatest skater of her generation and at the most competitive time in the history of the sport. She just stayed on top for so long, which was amazing. And obviously. All the stories that have come after. So it just is it's it's riveting. It's interesting. It's fun. It's fun for me. I did write *Inside Edge*, which became a bestseller. And I kind of that was after Tonya Nancy. And I had a connection with a book editor, Lisa Drew, and she wanted that book. And so Scribner published it. And and I kind of thought other journalists would colleagues and friends might write a book after that incredible, you know, interest in the sport in the wake of that, the Tonya Nancy saga. And no one else did. And it was really, you know, the first journalistic look at figure skating.

And it did so well, still sells, you know, in the digital version and everything is still out there. And so very proud of that. And I also got to know so many judges. You know, I had a whole chapter on judges. No one had ever talked to a judge before. So as far as I knew, you know, how did you how do you talk to them? Where are they? Who are they? And I was able to break down a lot of barriers personally, spend a lot of time in people's kitchens. Uh, the white. Michael Weiss, his family had me over a lot. Linda Lever, Brian Boitano's coach. I was at her house spending time with her. Brian and I spent a day together, tape recorders rolling the whole time.

So you get to know people. Well, I have sources. I have, I know folks. I, I, some are our friends. Some are friendly, you know, as a journalist with, with someone, whatever the case, the knowledge is there. The trust is there. And so I've been able to break stories. Uh, 2002, uh, the French judge, I got a phone call from someone I knew through the books and, uh, because then edge of glory, of course, after *inside edge*.

And I got this call two in the morning that Marie Renn Lagoon had just broken down in the lobby of the hotel and was crying and saying that she was forced to vote for the, uh, the, uh, Russians over the Canadians. And I know I didn't get any sleep that night and got up, went on GMA good morning America the next morning and, and, and reported that. And, you know, so, but that's because of the books and, and the knowledge and the, cause it was when you're doing a book, it's very different kind of reporting than doing newspaper reporting. Uh, not to say you don't get in depth in newspapers, but you just don't have the time. I had a full year with both books. So you're really spending time with people and the trust and the, and the knowledge both ways. So for me, it's just kind of natural to just keep covering. It, I know it so well, the sources, the people that are willing to call me and tell me things, or I can check in with them and of course then the Olympics. Well, obviously as someone who knows so much about this, uh, realizing I also, there's so much, I of course will never know. And, and we always have to know and be very honest about what we know as journalists and what we don't know, whether it's tiger woods or figure skating or what have you. And, um, of course covering tons of other sports as well. But when the Olympics come winter Olympics, of course, that's, that's figure skating. And then nationals, I've always wanted to go even drop in for a few days, just as a streak, you know, doing them all, except for the COVID year that, uh, we couldn't go. So that's, and I, I see friends, I see people. I know it's, I enjoy it. I enjoy being around skating. Um, you know, it's just, it's, it's fun. Uh, the skating itself again, someone like Ilia, they, I mean, that's a once in a lifetime moment to see that sitting next to my colleague and pal, Phil Hirsch, you were right near us and just watching that happen. I'm not cheering. I'm a journalist, but in, you know, you just know you're watching something special that you might never see again. That's wonderful as a human being. And also as a journal journalist, uh, we are human most of the time, as well as being a tough old journalists. And, um, yeah, so gearing up for 2026 and gosh, 2030 and who knows what I hope to keep covering it, but figure skating is a delight to cover so many wonderful people.

And the last thought I know I'm filibustering here and rambling on.

One of the things that I've realized over the years, Anna, about the skating community and why it's just so much fun to see Brian Boitano so much fun to see Lori Nichol, Michelle Kwan, if, I mean, she's too busy being an ambassador now and serving our nation, um, you know, seeing coaches, Linda Lever, uh, Audrey Weiseger, you know, on and on and I've named great people, Joe Inman, the figure skating judge, you know, so many people, Gail Tanger, uh, wonderful, wonderful people in this sport, Paul George, uh, you know, a lot of great people. It's been involved with us figure skating forever on and on and on. It goes choreographers, coaches, skaters, um, Katarina, Peggy, Dorothy. I mean, I, I know them all and how lucky, what would, what would 14 year old me think of that? You know, that I, I, I know Peggy Fleming well enough to have her cell number and talk to her, you know, just so cool.

Paul Wylie, so many others, the thing that is so interesting to me and what makes them so interesting and to so many people. And I don't know if it was, I think it was Brian. And it said, this at one point, but many of them have said this kind of this same kind of, um, conversation, the idea being that they learned early on as young people, as competitors, as athletes, but if they were still kids, that life isn't always fair.

Now they might've skated a perfect performance or they thought it was great. And the judges might not have liked their outfit or they got dinged for something else. So the music wasn't what people thought they were judged in an early age.

Now we can have a whole nother podcast on that. And the mental health aspect.

I mean, I don't know if it's the mental health aspect of that for young people, but especially for people say my age or somewhere in the, the, you know, boomer to the, you know, moving down to the next cohort, you know, the idea of, of having to deal with, with disappointment that is not even of your own doing, uh, learning that life is not fair. It makes them fascinating adults. They're cynical. They love to laugh. They are very much like journalists, right? Cause we can be very. Cynical. You were kind of hung around with us. Right. And you're, you're part of us and, you know, we can have some fun and laughs and, and have some nice, uh, you know, fun, cynical remarks. And again, you know, obviously be totally in awe of what we're watching as well and respectful. And so I think for me, when I'm talking to Brian Boitano, we pick up right where we left off and, you know, Brian gets it, you know, he understands and he has a fun sense of humor and so many people do in skating and so many do not take themselves.

Yeah. Seriously. And so that is just so appealing, uh, and, and just fun and it's judges, it's coaches, choreographers, it's, you know, the Frank Carols of the world who could always crack a joke about himself or roll his eyes or whatever moves going on.

Um, and that is a delight. So it's the storylines are incredible. There's great interest. So that means my editors are interested. The readers are interested. You know, if it goes crazy on Twitter X or whatever. That's great. If it doesn't, that's fine too, but there's still so much interest in this sport, especially key moments like a world's and nationals and an Olympics and the stories that can be controversial or the issues that can come out. And it's also just the people. They're just so much fun and knowing them so well and the trust and the friendship or even the working relationship that we've had over the years. It's an absolute delight. So I think you'll see me at a few more skating events, uh, hopefully many more over the years.

Anna Kellar

Hey, hopefully, hopefully I will see you at worlds in Boston. Yeah.

Next year, if not before, because it should be, should be a lot of fun and I'm going to look forward to, um, continue, you know, continuing to follow your stories as they come out. And thank you for the reporting that you do.

I mean, as I said, as a journalist, but also as someone who's a figure skating fan and a skater myself, it's been, uh, I think it's very important, the work that you're doing. Well, thank you.

Christine Brennan

And, you know, I, I have been lucky to be given a voice and over the last five, six years, as I said, with, with, uh, the Morgan Cipréd story with Ashley Wagner, uh, you know, with others coming forward, um, they're the heroes, they're the superstars, and I'm honored to take that call and to work with them. And sometimes it can take a year, you know, six months, a year before that story is published. And sometimes it never is published because, you know, I'd like that's up to the person who gets in touch with me, but it is one of the great honors of my career at this point in my career, Anna, to be able to tell those stories and the trust. That those wonderful people have in me, I, I am, uh, I never take that for granted and I'm so honored and I mean it, and I'm here for, you know, for the journalism, of course, uh, but also to respect them. And so again, if anyone's out there listening to us, please feel free to reach out. Um, and if it takes a year and you want to reach out, then that's fine too. I'll be around. So thank you for the time and thanks for all that you do and to, to bring, uh, you know, shine a spotlight on these issues as well. And it was so great to meet you. And. And, uh, and I'm glad we finally did this and thanks for all you do as well.