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Don: We are excited to talk to you about your athletic experience, but first, I would love to talk to you about the reason that you and I first connected! The Ernst & Young study that we mention in our podcast introduction was conducted under your leadership! You were able to get a strong sense that female executives, like you, had developed themselves on athletic fields in addition to classrooms. Where did the idea to do this study begin?

Laura: There's a few of us at Ernst and Young. Brooks, for one, and myself, who were very much touched and molded by our athletic experience. We had gone on to have pretty ambitious business and executive careers. So once we met, we started talking about these great commonalities between what you learn playing and competing on a team, setting goals, and trying to make your dreams come true. With what happens in the business world day to day, we just felt like we really wanted to modify and quantify it for people because we knew in our hearts that it was true. But obviously, you need hard data to prove your points. That really set us in motion to understand and see what the numbers were; literally, over 90% of women in the C suite had played sports. It's an astounding number. It wasn't surprising to us, but I think that number, 94%, was surprising because it was so high. It's such a strong indication.

Don: The result was eye-popping to many people—I mean, it was the statistic that made me want to do this podcast! When I share the results with others, it makes people pay attention. 94% is a huge number, were you shocked?

Laura: Yes, it just confirmed a lot of what we spoke and were thinking about, along with what we had experienced. But the number beneath that, which I think really surprised me and confirmed our convictions, was that 51% had played at a university level. This was a global

study. So the university level is akin to our NCAA. Yes, you can become an Olympian, but university and college level for many sports is as high as you can. To think that 50% of the C suite women did that-- again, it just reaffirms the fact that you learn invaluable lessons as an athlete and as a competitor.

Don: You went to Sachem High School in New York and played three sports, field hockey, basketball, and softball. Which one was your favorite?

Laura: Softball probably came the most natural to me. I love hitting. I really love being a shortstop. I could catch brown balls, at that time, all day long. So I just always felt at home on a softball field. I felt in charge. I just had so many close teams and a two-year juncture. My dad coached us in the summer, so it was super fun and felt really natural.

Don: In 1992, your team at Duke was the first-ever field hockey team to advance into the NCAA Tournament, and your coach there was Jacki Silar. To this day, she remains the winningest coach in Duke's field hockey history. What lessons did you learn from Coach Silar that you still think about all these years later?

Laura: She was an incredible recruiter. She really brought us all together. It was her goal. But I think our level of ownership of that goal was different. It was deeper. It was really our quest as much as it was hers. It comes down to chemistry and culture. When I think about it, everything we achieved at Duke was really because we had a special chemistry. We loved each other. We had this interesting collection of women who were different, quirky, funny, and worked hard. We just knew each other inside and out. I've learned in the business world that chemistry and culture are pretty much everything. The chemistry of your team, if you truly support each other, if you're truly aligned behind goals, if you truly enjoy each other's company, it leads to incredible results and a greater likelihood of incredible results. Culture is paramount.

Don: In your 17 years at ESPN, I know you've seen a lot of resumes. When hiring team members, does whether or not someone has participated in sports catch your attention? How would you describe the importance of having that athletic experience to others?

Laura: If they've been an athlete and they've competed at a high level. It's demanding, and it's challenging, you know, they've had to make sacrifices. If they happen to have been a leader, or captain, it speaks volumes to me. I definitely give that person a first, second, and third look.

Don: Many people refer to their corporate organizations as "Teams." You know what it means to be part of a team. The truth is that some of these people are actually just a group of individuals wearing the same jersey or carrying the same business card. How do YOU distinguish between a true team atmosphere and a collection of individuals who are cashing checks signed by the same company?

Laura: I think it's the commitment, passion, and energy you have for each other. I oversee the ESPN marketing department right now. I've tried to replicate the team that I know via athletics as much as possible. We have people in different roles. We have people running the brand, focused on research, focused on event marketing, and people on the media front. Again, like a team, we all have different roles; we all have strengths and different weaknesses. We've become this collective that leans on each other, supports each other, and respects each other. They're different roles that I may not be as good at creatively, but I understand the strategy or understand the data. So, when it does function well, and I've been lucky enough to experience it in the business world, it does feel like a team. It literally feels like you have a quarterback or a center forward, goalie, and a midfielder. There are just different titles for it, but we're all kind of jelling in that way while having distinct responsibilities. To your point, I think frequently, people's unique strengths and weaknesses aren't cultivated, we don't assemble the team with chemistry in mind, or we don't push people to develop certain facets of themselves—you kind of put them in a box and just let them stay in the box.

Don: You've had nearly two decades at ESPN. You've seen unbelievable growth, shifts in viewership, and you've even watched some of the shifts where things had strong opinions on whether or not athletes could weigh in their individual opinions. What has been the most pronounced change in those two decades for you?

Laura: It's mostly around the technology and the delivery of all of this. Sports are sports, right? The drama, the athletes, the achievements, the reality show that it is. That's a constant, and you love it. You get up for it. I think the way we deliver it to fans obviously has changed radically. It's not just about putting ESPN on your T.V. and tuning in to get your news. Our app, the ESPN app, is world-class, and we're continuing to fine-tune it, make it more intuitive, and make it even stronger. The fact that most of us get a large majority of our news via social media obviously is totally transformational. So the amount of time I spend on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest is just different. It's just radically different in terms of how we get our news and information, but I think the fundamental of what we love about sports hasn't changed. We've just continued to try to innovate, try to be ahead of the curve, and serve it up for fans of all ages and fans of all types.

Don: What do you think the next 20 years look like for the worldwide leader in sports?

Laura: We'll continue to be more and more personalized and intimate. Everything you want to know about your team is going to be increasingly easy to follow and get at your fingertips. We live day by day with our phone as it is. I think it's ultimately going to be all here. You'll always want a big screen for the big events. It's always enjoyable to sit in the chair or couch and watch a game, but I just think it's going to be more and more on the go, exactly how you want it to be;

the exact teams and athletes that you want to enjoy whenever you want to enjoy it. It's less about when we will give it to you and more about when you want it?

Don: As a leader at ESPN, I'm sure you get the opportunity to speak to many young women who aspire to grow into roles of leadership. Based on what you've learned through this, what is your advice to young women?

Laura: I don't think I've ever given this advice, but I'm going to give this advice moving forward. But it's about the fact that leadership is earned. You don't wake up one day and become a leader. In people overall, you get better with age. I hate to say that, but elite leadership is earned. You have more life experiences, more perspective, more maturity, and greater context to process things and understand why things are happening or where they may lead. So over time, you naturally become more confident and able to articulate your beliefs and thoughts. Over time, people start looking to you and respecting you and actually wanting you to lead because you'll take the pressure off of them. If you aspire to be a leader, and have more significant leadership roles, try to carry yourself that way. Try to pick up cues and try to learn from people that you admire. Start piecing together your leadership style. But it just doesn't happen. I'm a much better leader now than I was as a captain at Duke University. I didn't speak up enough then. I didn't challenge my teammates enough then. When teammates are goofing around, I didn't call them out the way I would certainly do today. So it takes time. It's a process.