

Down to the Struts

Episode 4: Let's Play Goalball!

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Guests: Justin Chan and Karla Gilbride

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For more information: www.downtothestruts.com

Introduction

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with hip-hop beats]

QUDSIYA NAQUI: Hi this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to episode 4 of *Down to the Struts*! Today we'll learn about how a sport designed exclusively for blind and visually impaired people can change the way we think about designing the places and spaces around us. We'll listen in on my conversation with Karla Gilbride and Justin Chan, co-founders of the Metro Washington Association of Blind Athletes, affectionately known as MWABA. I am honored and privileged to sit on the board of this fantastic organization. I hope you enjoy this journey into the world of adaptive sports and their power to transform lives.

Okay, let's get down to it!

[nice little jazzy piano pause]

QUDSIYA: Great! So thank you Karla and Justin for joining me on *Down to the Struts* to talk about one of my favorite topics. I personally am a horrible goalball player, as Karla, as evidence, has witnessed.

KARLA: Not true! Disagree!

QUDSIYA: [laughs] -but I love the concept of the sport and I'm excited you guys are here to share all your wisdom about it. So first we can start off with having each of you introduce yourselves and talk about how you got into sports and how you got into goalball in particular.

KARLA: Sure I can start. So, I grew up on Long Island and New York. And I did a fair amount of sports and recreational things when I was in high school. My parents got me into a horseback riding program as a little kid and took me skiing when we went out to Colorado to visit relatives there, which I absolutely fell in love with. And then in high school I was on the track and cross-country teams, but all of those things are fairly like individual sports. You know, you're sort of competing against yourself, then trying to improve your time. And there's camaraderie with other people and I definitely enjoyed *that*. And being part of the team and then going on runs with my classmates.

But I didn't have the experience of doing a team sport, certainly not a team sport with other blind people, until after graduating from Law School in DC. I moved out west and I lived in Berkeley for a while. And there's a group out there called BORP, which stands for Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program. And they have a bunch of adaptive sports, including adaptive cycling and wheelchair basketball. And one of the sport's they have is goalball, so that was where I experienced goalball for the first time. So, I was in my mid-twenties and there was kind of a recreational team. They met once a week and played a couple games and then went out for pizza and beer afterwards. And that's where I really fell in love with the sport.

QUDSIYA: Thanks Karla! And you're the first person that introduced me to the concept of adaptive sports. I remember very vividly having drinks with you, kind of, shortly-- about a year after I moved to D.C. -- and you were trying to recruit me to your tandem cycling group. Which is probably an episode for another day, but um-- I had never thought about the concept of doing a sport in an adaptive way until I met you. So I was really excited to be introduced to all those activities through getting to know you.

Justin could you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into sports and goalball?

JUSTIN: I grew up in Florida and went to the school for the deaf and the blind. And that's kind of how I was introduced to sports. Goalball, track and field, some judo took place there. But-- that's really where I got my start in sports. I mean I've always been a competitive person, whether it's like school or sports or just anything really. If you say I can't do something or you can do something better than me, I'm going to try to prove you wrong. So, it kind of naturally fell into my lap. But I also attend a lot of sports camps. They have a lot of camps, like they call "Camp-Abilities" and they also do different sports there like goalball and cycling, swimming, for example, which I'm terrible at.

But at some point, someone said "Hey did you ever consider joining the Paralympics for swimming?" and I said, "Absolutely not."

So yeah! That's sort of how I got my start in sports I, kind of, grew up with it.

QUDSIYA: That's so cool! Camp-Ability! The name alone is awesome. I wish I had heard of that when I was growing up. And I totally identify with the with the competitive spirit.

So, Karla can you tell us a little bit how and where goalball got started? You shared a little bit of a history with me in the past and I just think it such a fascinating story.

KARLA: Goalball is unique, as far as I'm aware, it's the only sport that was designed from the beginning as a sport to be played by people with disabilities. It's not an adaptation of an existing sport, like you know let's take the game of hockey and modify it to be played wheelchairs or people who are blind, or you have same thing with basketball.

It was a brand-new sport that was invented for blind people and specifically by veterans in Germany and Austria after World War II. So, the game was invented in 1946 and it was part of the rehabilitation of the soldiers, who just recently lost their vision and were trying to learn how to move around in the world, as nearly blind people. So one of the things they were trying to do was develop their ear-hand coordination, and learn how to hear things in motion and kind of track things by sound. So that's one of the elements of the game, is just being able to use your hearing and locating the ball as it's moving based sounds, is really important. So that is how goalball got its start. And then over the next couple decades it was played more and more competitively, by more and more people.

And Justin mentioned earlier, the Paralympic Games, which is the equivalent of the Olympics for people with physical disabilities. So, goalball was first played as a demonstration sport in the 1972 Summer Paralympic Games. And then it became an official medal sport, where people can compete for medals, for men in 1976 in the Toronto games. And became women's Paralympic sport in 1982, I believe. And has been played in the Paralympics ever since. There's now 81 nations who has competitive goalball teams as of 2017, according to an article that I just read. So it's played all over the world at the elite level, as well as you know sort of more recreational leagues that, you know, that that local communities have going.

QUDSIYA: That's really really interesting and I think it's interesting how it was both designed as a way for people who are sort of nearly blind to continue or to participate in a sporting event. But also had this sort of rehabilitative purpose. So, do veterans still play goalball? Is it still used for that for the therapeutic purpose today?

KARLA: Yeah, I mean I definitely have played the game with veterans. And I know that the VA here in the US has an active program where they're working with the US Association of Blind Athletes to introduced veterans of all ages to people who recently lost their vision. [Introduce] older veterans, you know, to the game of goalball. And the last several national championships here in the US have included a team that made up entirely of veterans. So it's definitely still— I

can't talk about other countries as much because I'm not familiar, but here in the US there's definitely an emphasis on introducing the sport to veterans.

QUDSIYA: That's so interesting and that's really cool that it continues to serve that purpose in addition to being, now, a competitive sports.

So Justin, the million-dollar question: how is the game actually played? Can you tell us a little bit about what a goalball game is like?

JUSTIN: As Karla said, the sport was designed specifically for the blind, and it leverages their hearing and communication skills with each other.

So the sport is played between two teams comprised of up to six people. Three people are on the court, at one time. Two people on wing positions which are the side position. And then one person in the middle, which is the center position.

The court is laid out with tactile lines with wire or string tape on the ground and depending on the different lengths and directions of the line, they use it for spatial awareness and also just for positioning. And so the ball is also played with a ball with bells inside, so that the players can hear it. And all the players are blindfolded.

So the players can hear the ball and what they do is they roll it to each other, almost kind of like a bowling style motion. And some people do fancy things, like spin them, and what have you, and the ball can move pretty fast. And recent days players have even started developing a kind of bounce-throw, so that the ball is actually hitting you in weird angles, and the top of your body and things like that.

So to defend the ball the players kind of lay on their side to create a wall. So imagine a game of pong, where there's a little slider at the bottom trying to prevent the ball from hitting their goal, that essentially what the players are. Except three little paddles, instead of just one. Additional rules are the ball basically has to hit certain spot of the court, so that the bell rings and it's not just flying through the air, and the other the opposing team has a fair shot of hearing it.

KARLA: You can pass to your teammates.

JUSTIN: Yeah, you can pass to your teammates. It evolves every year as the game kind of grows and players develop different skills so—

KARLA: It's also a fast-paced game, which people don't necessarily realize. There's a shock clock, when you have possession of the ball you only have 10 seconds to get rid of it and to reach the midpoint of the court. So any passing that you're going to do, any moving around to set up your shot, you know, it all has to be done within that 10-second clock.

QUDSIYA: Are there any other rules, for the audience for example? Because— How does everyone, in all the noise I mean, how do you track and hear the ball, if you're relying on the bell?

JUSTIN: Right. So the referees, actually, before every— before the ball goes in the play every time before they blow the whistle, they asked the audience to quiet please. And then they blow the whistle and the ball goes in to play, so they remind the audience consistently to keep the noise down, preferably complete silence.

QUDSIYA: I imagine if I was watching the two of you playing goalball, I would want to be cheering the whole time. So that seems hard to contain yourself when someone is winning.

KARLA: [laughs] The most difficult time to comply with that rule is when the ball crosses the goal line. And again, as Justin was saying all of the important lines on the court are marked down with tape, and so as a blind spectator if you're listening to the game you can sometimes hear the ball cross that tape. And hit the back of the net, maybe it's right on the line, and so until the referee blows the whistle and indicates goal, you're supposed to keep quiet and not start cheering. But that's very hard especially if it's an exciting game and, you know, that's like the game-winning point that gets scored. It's kind of amazing to see people like jumping up and down silently trying not to yell, you know, until they're allowed to make noise...

JUSTIN: Or sometimes the ball hits the goal, but not go in, or it would hit the top bar and go over. And people are cheering and all because they thought it scored. So yeah that's definitely very hard.

QUDSIYA: I can imagine, I'm a very rowdy spectator, see Justin you talked about the lying on your side and blocking the ball. I remember when I played, during blind sports day the one time I played at the rec center with you all. It's sort of terrifying in a way, because the ball is, as Justin described, it's quite— its I guess— it's bigger than the basketball and it's kind of heavy and it's coming at you. So what is that experience? And what skills do you need to have to, kind of, effectively block the ball?

JUSTIN: I would say that it definitely takes time to get used to tracking the ball with just your ears. And positioning your body the right way, for example of if you're leaning backwards, you're basically just the ramp and the ball is just going to go over. And if you're leaning too far forward, it's kind of just like you're just a speed bump. So there's like a happy medium—

[Qudsiya and Karla laughing]

JUSTIN: —you have to lay down, almost kind of like leaning in, but not completely. It takes time to get used to body positioning. But definitely tracking the ball with your ears is something that a lot of people need time to get used to as well. But the key thing is really communication with your teammates because you can do a lot. You can cut off a lot of angles, you can tell somebody like that they need to cover certain amount of space. Just by communicating to your teammates. So I would say that communication is key, in that respect.

KARLA: That and geometry and physics to the game of goalball because the width of the court that you're defending is 30 feet across. So unless you have three 10-foot tall people there's going to be a little bit of a gap between the three players. But you can position yourselves, as Justin was saying, in such a way that the person on the other side of you has to make the perfect shot right down the line to get in between where the people's bodies are positioned. Or it's just going to be very difficult for them to get the right angle to get it in the goal.

When I first started playing, oh gosh like more than 10 years ago now I guess, or around 10 years ago now. You know it was pretty unsophisticated, we would just kind of all lay down on our sides, usually the person in the center is a little bit in front of the people on the wings, so that it makes a triangle, and you're less likely to collide with each other. And as I started playing more and playing with different people, I learned a lot more sophisticated angled of how people can position their bodies to be more effective with the defense.

QUDSIYA: Well, I imagine you need a lot of isometric strength right? Cuz you're holding yourself up in your position. You must be sore afterwards.

KARLA: It's a lot of core strength especially, you were talking about the ball comes at you hard which is true, and especially like as these bounce shots have gotten more common, they can take these tricky hops over you. That's means to defend it, to have a better chance of defending it, you have to want to hit it in between its bounces. So that you're getting it before it hops over you. So that's also ear training and kind of training, you know, your sense of timing. And then yeah, being able to move explosively when the when the moment is right. So yeah it's a work

out. It's a full body workout. And you're crouching and then you're popping back up to throw. And then you're getting back down to the ground and popping back up.

JUSTIN: It's like doing squats for an hour!

QUDSIYA: Oh my god, [chuckles] That sounds rough, you guys are tough!

I wanted to go back to something you were saying earlier, because I think it's really interesting. So, you mentioned the communication piece, that a lot of the game— So, Karla mentioned strength and sort of the agility, and then it's also about communicating with your teammates. So how does that happen? Do you guys do a lot of— Does the team do a lot of planning ahead of time? How does communication happen before and during a game and during a practice?

JUSTIN: Well, so, some of it happens before the game. For example, like you come up with a game plan you say "Hey if I tell you to do this, this is how," you know. "This is what I want" or like "I want you to move to the left" or something. And then also just in the game, for example if you're passing to your teammates you just called her name and they respond, that way you know where to pass the ball. But then also a lot of communication is telling your players where the ball is or what you're observing on the other end. So for example, a lot of players will move around in the court. So they'll start from the left side, move to the right side and throw it over there. And if one player hears it, they should— they usually tell their other teammates. So that everybody can read the ball better and better position themselves to make a defending play. And with that respect that player who was moving from left to right is also probably communicating with his players, so that he's not running over them.

There's a lot of communication on both sides of the ball really.

KARLA: And sometimes it's talking, like "it's on the right," "it's on the left." But sometimes it's tapping, you know, people will— Justin mentioned avoiding collisions, if someone is moving across the court their center player the person who's they're most likely to collide with, will make some noise, tap the ground. It's like "oh that's where that person is. I know I can avoid them." So sometimes it's very subtle things like that.

The other thing that is important is, if I'm on the defensive side of the ball, if it's loose, you know, letting people know where the ball is. Because you have those 10 seconds to get control of it and throw it. So people are often saying "it's loose" or "it's forward." So counting down the 10 seconds usually there's one person who's responsible for kind of having a clock in their head. And then they'll say, you know, "you have six seconds left," "you have five seconds left to get rid of it." And those are the sorts of in game communication that people will do.

QUDSIYA: That's really cool. And I'm sure after a while you would all developed kind of a language with each other. Especially if it's a team you're playing with regularly. So much of what you're describing is about the goalball court and being inside of the game itself. It feels to me as someone— as a blind person being in this world for a little while for an hour or so that's totally designed for your use and has been created for you to participate.

So Karla I'm curious if you could share a little bit about things about the goalball court that you wish there was more of in the world. Things about the way the goalball court was designed that actually could make life easier outside of it.

KARLA: Yeah that's a great question. So one of the things is the tactile lines we were talking about. You can definitely feel those with your hands when you're on the ground and you're crouching down to defend your position. But you can also feel them with your feet. And so a lot of times people if they're standing up to throw— to see kind of where they are and in space they will scuff their toe or their foot along the ground and you can pick up that tactile marker of the string that's taped down. And I would love for there to be more of those kind of just subtle bumps, but bumped up tactile lines. There are some, I mean definitely the truncated domes on the edges of subway platforms, is one example of a tactile feature that you could feel with your foot or with your cane to indicate you know "oh this is the edge of the platform" or similarly "this is the **crosswalk**" you see those at a lot of intersections.

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But I've heard, I haven't really experience this, but I've heard there are places where those sorts of — either truncated domes or just something that's a little more lower profile or like the taped down string on the goal ball court — is used to just indicate a pass. Like on a hiking path or something. Where if it curves to the left or the path is veering off you can follow this sort of tack tile marking with your foot to indicate which way the path is going, and I think there could definitely be more use of that outside of goalball, in just the environment.

The other thing that— talking about sound cues, I just noticed— I don't know if this was probably after I got into playing goalball... And so I had gotten in the habit of tracing moving sound. That is if I'm in airport, let's say, or somewhere where I'm not familiar, I haven't been there before and so I may not know already, I don't have to be holding on to somebody and sometimes. Especially right now when people are trying to keep social distance, it's better if you can follow someone without holding on to them. And sometimes if that person has like keys in their pocket that are jingling or sort of scuff-ier shoes not rubber soled shoes but that make more sound as they're walking, I can just follow their footsteps of the noise that they're making and kind of track that sound, the same way you would track the ball in the goalball game. So I think that's another kind of handy strategy that I've picked up, and that I think they're probably more ways that that could be used like deliberately to make you know other aspects of life more accessible.

QUDSIYA: I just recently— I was talking with a friend who's a blind parent, and she wants her kid to be able to play freely on the playground without her being a hovering helicopter mom. And so she tied a bell to her kid's shoes so she can track. So yeah I think that's— also especially now when you kind of live in this post-pandemic world, it's not as safe or acceptable to get really close and touch someone. Using sound as a tracker can be really important when you need to keep distance from someone, and you still need them to guide you somewhere.

KARLA: Yeah need to know where they are! Yeah kids is a great example. There's a goalball player who Justin and I both know, who has a kid who's older now. But had like a toddler and we would actually hear the toddler running around with his like squeaky shoes at goalball tournaments.

JUSTIN: Oh right!

[Qudsiya and Karla both chuckles together]

KARLA: Case and point!

QUDSIYA: Yeah it helps! It's amazing, I think often times being the sort of sighted world, I feel like people don't quite always remember the power of sound. And how sound can be used effectively in all sorts of situations, and even by sighted people themselves! You know, I think it can be beneficial, say for example your eyes need to be somewhere else, but you want to hear whatever is going on elsewhere. You can, kind of, used with your both your senses at the same time. But yeah I think that's really cool and I feel like I have you two were kind of painting then picture of what a goalball court is like, I was thinking to myself "this is the world I want to live in all the time!" You know—

KARLA: [Laughs] And like different textures! This isn't so much a case in goalball, but it occurs to me another way that things can be communicated is like: smooth means *this*, and rough means *this*, and like bumps mean *that*. You know, just kind of a code and you could use tactile surfaces to communicate meaning, the same way that you would use a color-coded signs communicate meaning.

There is like a certain type of bumpiness, you know, that means the trail curves to the right or whatever, you know.

QUDSIYA: Yeah, I've used that— you know, not so much that it was designed to communicate information, but I kind of figured it out. So Karla I know, I think maybe you as well Justin, I've spent a fair amount of time in Penn Station, in New York City. And I would often figure out my way around because the texture of the floor underneath my feet would change depending on where I was in the station. I don't know if you ever picked up on this. So that would help me signal, "Okay now I'm in the area where the platforms are, the stairs the platforms are, because the ground texture has changed." So that is very help information. I think there are so many ways that we can communicate that are either non-verbal or non-visual that often we don't think about. That people that don't rely on them think about on a regular basis.

KARLA: Yeah I agree. There are all sorts of way in which a non-visual information can be used. And I know that there is a blind architect named Chris Downey, who I used to know when I lived out in the Bay Area, he designed some of the buildings and maybe some of the trails as well at camp, that is used for multiple sessions. Both for blind kids and blind adults use this area out in the wine country, kind of, in the Napa Valley area in California called "Enchanted Hills Camp." And I know that he kind of design the space with the blind users in mind. So I've always wanted to go back. This was after I moved back east, so I guess I haven't gotten to see the stuff that he built, but I'm interested to see how those features or textures and other things were kind of built into the space there. Cuz I imagine all sorts of cool things that you could do if you thought about it more intentionally.

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QUDSIYA: Yeah and think that's a really good testament to why it's important for people who experience the world in different ways to be in their professions. Like architecture or engineering, because they're thinking about design elements that probably someone who doesn't have that experience wouldn't think of otherwise.

KARLA: [hums in agreement]

QUDSIYA: Cool, uh...

KARLA: My other Berkley experience or Bay Area experience like that, is a building called The Ed Roberts Campus, that's right across the street from the Ashby BART station. And it was named after Ed Roberts, who's a champion of the Disability Rights Movement and Independent Living Movement. And most of the organizations that have their offices there are disability organizations that are made up of and advocate for, people with disabilities. There's all sorts of interesting design features in that building but one was very striking to me, is there a no stairs in that building. But there's a central ramp that gets you from the first to the second floor and it spirals around. It's just kind of like this design like focal point of the building when you walk in

there. Like this big sweeping ramp that you take to get where you're going in the building and then just really, kind of, makes a statement and it's also functional at the same time.

QUDSIYA: And it sounds really cool looking too!

KARLA: Yeah it's very neat! Very— you know, it's very like modern. Yeah it's like an early 21st century building, I think it went up when I was living out there probably around like 2009- 2010. So definitely had this kind of sleek modern design.

QUDSIYA: That's really cool! So hanging it back to goalball for second, and we had a nice awesome detour into architecture which I think is so interesting and has so many parallels with the way goalball was designed originally. Could you guys talk a little bit about how— you know, I know a little bit about the story of how you two connected, and I'd love to learn more about how you started the Goalball League here in D.C., and how that transformed into other things, including the Metro-Washington Association of Blind Athletes.

KARLA: Sure! I can start. So I actually moved back to D.C. from the Bay Area in 2011. And for the first few years that I was here, I had thought about wanting to continue playing goalball. And I actually did continue, I actually would go up to Philadelphia where there was a goalball program. So about a 2-hour Amtrak trip, to go up to Philly to play with the goalball team up there which shows how addicted I had gotten to the sport—

[Qudsiya and Karla laughs lightly]

KARLA: —So I could keep playing. But you know, I didn't have the same community of being able to sort of play every week and hang out afterwards, that I had gotten used to when I was out west. And also just felt that there so many blind people in the DC area would really— there should be a program in DC and there should be that opportunity for lots of people to get involved and experience the sport. So I was kind of poking around and try to figure out if anyone wanted to partner with me on developing a program, and then luckily Justin moved into the area. Where were you coming from Justin? Alabama?

JUSTIN: I was actually coming from Alabama in 2014 I was kind of on the same search poking around seeing the how I could play goalball again and get involved. And I was really surprised that I— You know, there were no existing programs in DC, given that the volume of blind people we have in this area. I went to good old Facebook—

[giggling in background]

—and asked one of the forms, you know, “Hey how do I find people to play goalball with?” or “What’s the closest thing?” And to Washington DC and someone mentioned get a hold of Karla. So that’s pretty much how we got to know each other. Right. I reached out to her, we met up and started talking about plans to get goalball started here, and for a while I also went to Philadelphia with Carla and practiced with guys there.

KARLA: We found a venue, finally, that was willing to host a clinic so it was— We didn’t have like a standing practice there, but it was a it was a one-time clinic it was at Trinity University in Brookland, the Brookland area of Northeast DC. And we put the word out on a bunch of lists of like the local blindness groups and put it out on Facebook.

QUDSIYA: Wow!

JUSTIN: We had about 40 people come out on our clinic day.

KARLA: And that I really showed us how much demand or desire and appetite, there was in the community for this kind of a program. Eventually that year formed what’s now called the Metro-Washington Association of Blind Athletes, or MWABA, affectionately. And our website is gomwaba.org. Goalball was really the first standings program that we had through MWABA, we eventually got more permanent gym space. For a while we were at the Jewish Community Center over in Dupont and then couple years after that, we wound up with a space through the Department of Parks and Rec in DC at the Columbia Heights Rec center. And that became, kind of our goalball home for the last few years.

Then kind of expanded from there into some other things, like we had yoga classes couple times a month a lot of our members are doing judo couple different dojos around the area. And then as you mentioned, Qudsiya, three years ago we started the tandem cycling program. And we have tandem bike lockers around DC. So altogether we’ve got about eight or nine tandem bikes that either we bought or many people has generously donated to us. And so through having those bikes we’re able to organized rides for either group rides or during the pandemic it’s been more individual rides with just you know one blind person with the sighted captain getting out and biking around the area.

QUDSIYA: That’s really cool! So for that first goalball clinic, you mention 40 or 50 people showed up. So was that— were those 40 and 50 people all of them sort of seasoned goalball

players who were looking for a team? Or did you also get people who barely heard of it or just showed up out of curiosity?

JUSTIN: Yeah, we definitely got all sort of different folks, people who never played sports before in their lives, people who recently lost their vision or are/were losing their visions, and people of different ages too. We had kids that were 14 15, we also had adults were, I don't know upwards of 50 plus or middle-aged folks you know. It was kind of all across the board, which was nice because then we broke those people up into groups and they got to work together and kind of had like a little mini tournament after we taught them the basics and the foundations of the game.

QUDSIYA: Yeah I think it's really neat. And for the two of you who seem— you have been involved in sports, adaptive sports since young childhood or early adulthood but you know for someone like myself, I lost vision, a dramatic amount of vision kind of later in life. In my teenage years, I was doing non-adaptive sports, I guess in a sense trying to adjust to whatever the mainstream sporting community I was in. I played field hockey briefly, I ran track and it never occurred to me to have a running guide, or to ride a tandem bike. When I couldn't ride a single bike anymore, I thought to myself “Okay I guess I'm done with cycling for the rest of my life, because I can't do it solo.”

So I think sports have a really incredible power to show you what you are still capable of, particularly, for someone who has lost the ability to do something over time. Whether that's walking or seeing or hearing or what have you. So I think that's why I was curious about it, and so fascinated that so many people who were newly lost their vision or had no experience with sports, showed up. And I'm curious if you've followed any of those people over time, and what you've seen in terms of their development. Or how active participating in sporting activities has impacted other aspects of their lives.

KARLA: Some members who came out to that first event— not, obviously not everyone who came out to that first event stayed involved and became big goalball players. But some of them did! And it became a big part of their lives. I've heard from folks of all ages that, especially, if you're losing your vision and you're- you're just seeing all the things that you can't do anymore, you know, like I can't do that, you know, that can be very depressing and difficult adjustment.

And so having goalball and not only the sport itself, but also the community of people. And kind of being introduced to the community of other blind people, who are of all ages and doing all sorts of different things with their lives. Who kind of have already made that adjustment, that you might be in an earlier stage of going through that that was a really important community to become a part of, you know. Just to see a little bit of that future. Like “Oh I can see myself fitting into this and having these new possibilities open up to me.” It's not just doors that are closing, it's doors that are opening. And that's actually one of the coolest things for me about

starting MWABA is like having a conversation to the people, and see that we've created a— kind of made a place available for people that to get introduced to that and to become part of, you know, a new community and get introduced to some new sports, some new things that they can do.

JUSTIN: Another big thing that I've heard from some of our members— it's been definitely a big confidence builder. It's given them the sense that, like any other athlete, if they work hard at something, they can get better at it. They can become competitive, and that there are opportunities out there regardless of whether or not they're blind, or losing their vision, or what have you.

KARLA: Yeah and I think the competitiveness— it's not for everybody, obviously some people just want to hangout with their friends and have fun, and the nice thing about goalball is that that opportunity is there. But I think for some folks who are maybe more like— Justin said he's super competitive, I think seeing that the sport is played at an elite level for people who may have— whether they were blind their whole lives or not— I think then one of the things that they are sometimes surprised by when they see goalball played at a high-level. Like “Oo this is hard. That ball is moving fast!” You know, like people kind of think that like “Oh cuz it's blind people, its just kind of this cute thing that you do, and it's not as strenuous.”

So I think sometimes when people realize that there are higher levels you can aspire to compete at, and that then the expectations are there, that blind people can compete at the high-level, that's really exciting to folks who want that. You know, and to know that like people have higher expectations of us, and that can kind of contradicts some more negative stereotypes assumptions that are out there in society, that there's kind of a limit to what you can accomplish in general or specifically in terms of physical activity, as a person with a disability.

QUDSIYA: Yeah I think there's a lot of truth to that. And I think it's great to know it feels less like this is a second-class citizen sport, cuz that's not true! It's played at the Paralympic, the highest level of athleticism that you can be at. And it's competitive, fierce and hard! Frankly, as someone who has tried it themselves and found it really, really challenging! Going back to your point about— Justin's point earlier, just about pushing yourself, I certainly felt that way when I first started tandem biking. I remember talking about it with you, Karla, that day over drinks, and thinking there's no way I can ride a bike. You know, I haven't ridden on a bike in 15 years, and that had been a single bike and I couldn't even fathom the thought. And, you know, I got on the bike and turned out, it was like riding a bike! I- I really enjoyed it and I remember feeling so accomplished that first day, when we rode like what was it, 8 miles or something.

[Qudsiya and Karla laughs in delight]

It was so great! And went on to do many many miles of riding, some of it with you. And it's important to kind of confront your fears, and you don't realize what you are capable of until you actually push yourself to do it. So I think there's a lot of value in that as well, as Justin was saying. So what are your favorite, for each of you, what are your favorite aspect of goalball? You've said so many things about it, but I'm curious what your favorite aspect of the game or the experience of the process?

JUSTIN: So for me, my favorite goalball is, again, the competitiveness. Also just the camaraderie that you build with your teammates, and even other people in the league. And then also just getting to know new people, seeing new places. Cuz- Since goalball is played nationally and it's not like a mainstream sport, sometimes have to travel to different parts of the country to play it against other people. Those are the different types of things, it allows you to— it's allowed me over my years of playing, to become more independent and experience things that I may or may not have experienced just staying in my hometown.

QUDSIYA: How about you Karla?

KARLA: I- There are dynamics of being in a team, the camaraderie with friends is part of it, but just within the game itself, the dynamics of figuring out how your team works well, and what each player needs to succeed, and how to help you maximize each person's potential. I guess kind of partially as a player, partially as a coach at which, as I've gotten older and transition into being more of a coach. I really enjoy that, and I think it has definite applications outside of the sport. Just being a good player in other sorts of teams, professionally. And so I really enjoyed that aspect and I feel like I've grown a lot from doing it over the last few years.

QUDSIYA: Yeah I remember you telling me once that organizing a goalball tournament was a really helpful exercise, because you use some of the things you learn from that process in organizing other types of events and things like that.

KARLA: Yeah definitely. Like it's project management, man! Like we've run a tournament in DC, I think three years now. And figuring out like the venue, and the hotel, and the food, and—

[Justin chimes in]

JUSTIN: how much do we charge people, you know, things like that.

KARLA: We are athlete led, more so than many groups that put on goalball tournaments, and have been around a lot longer than we have. And so I think it's neat that we can kind of do the organizing of it, as well. And not that we're doing it [by ourselves], we have volunteers that help out all sorts of ways. But that it's really led by you know me and Justin and other people on our board, who are mostly goalball athletes themselves. And I think that's kind of a cool— "nothing about us without us" thing that we are able to show the community that we are able to— not just play the sport but also do all the behind-the-scenes stuff.

JUSTIN: To piggyback off what Karla just said. It's also given us the opportunity to kind of get the community involved and kind of educated them on what blind people can do. We partnered with different sororities in the area, different programs like the master's program of Physiology Georgetown. We regularly get volunteers from different organizations. And a lot of them have never met a blind person or interact with a blind person and then this gives them an opportunity to grow individually, and also experienced different things or a different kind of sport, or a different way of looking at a competition, or what have you.

QUDSIYA: Yeah, I've definitely worked with other sighted athletes, both in the context of running and cycling and I think it's really a two way street in terms of education. Then the community grows and there's more opportunity for partnership. And so I totally resonate with what you're saying Justin, with being open and having these volunteers come in and know nothing about blindness or the blind experience, and being educated and also having fun and making new friends. I think there's a lot of value to that.

JUSTIN: I would say the most interesting volunteer we've ever had was a random Uber driver, who was driving or one of our volunteers to practice and he decided to stay and check it out. And then he continued to come back!

KARLA: [laughs heartily] I forgot about him!

QUDSIYA: That's awesome! [laughs with Karla]

JUSTIN: It just shows how much of an impact that you can have you can have on given person at any given point in time.

QUDSIYA: Yeah and it comes with the opportunity for blind people to be out there in the world and do things, you know. If that and goalball athlete wasn't traveling to that goalball practice, that Uber driver would never have had that experience.

JUSTIN: Right!

QUDSIYA: So yeah and I think there's a value to disabled people of all sorts being out in the world and contributing, in the same way as anybody else, really!

KARLA: I feel like I'm a goalball ambassador whenever, especially whenever I'm going to a goalball tournament, at the airport or I'm on the train, and someone asked me what it is, I'm always telling people, you know, "Go to YouTube check it out!"

[Qudsiya and Justin chuckle]

It is really is a fun sport. And a lot of people don't know about it and then when they do— Actually I have somebody who I met on the Amtrak train, we were going to the tournament outside Philadelphia, and she said " Oh I live near there, I'm going to check it out!" And then in the middle of the tournament, I come off the court from playing a game, and I walk into the hallway and this woman was like "Hey, I was the person on your train!"

[Qudsiya laughs happily]

"I came and checked it out!"

QUDSIYA: Oh mean that's so great! Those sorts of things happen in the most unexpected places. So I wanted to close by asking you guys if you could share— What advice would you have for a blind person or someone, with another type of disability, who wants to get into sports or goalball in particular, or just sports in general?

JUSTIN: I would say that the best advice I can give a person, just looking to get involved in anything or sports or learning new things, in general. Is just don't be afraid to ask, even though there's nothing, no ready resource currently. There's always someone who's willing to help, and possibly even have the same interests as you. It's always good to ask and the worst thing that can happen is, you can start a whole new organization— [Karla laughs] and get a bunch of people together!

KARLA: The internet is definitely a tool, google around see if something exists in your community already. And if it doesn't, then.... yeah find a friend, see if you can put something together. Resources: if, you know, there are several nationwide organizations, like [Disabled Sports USA](#). And they run different camps sometimes there are scholarships to attend the

campus, if, you know, finances are a barrier. For blind athletes, [The United States Association of Blind Athletes \(USABA\)](#), is another clearing house, they'll have a list of some of the local groups, like ours, around the country that you can get plugged into.

And this sound cheesy, but it might be scary at first to try something you've never done before, but I have never regretted anything that I did, that I was initially afraid to do. The only regrets that I have are things where I had an opportunity, and I didn't do it. And then I'm like "Man I wish I had tried that!" So be willing to step outside of your comfort zone and maybe try something that sounds hard, or that sounds weird, or you just don't know what it's going to feel like, because you might turn out to love it, like I turned out to love goalball when I tried it for the first time as a twenty-five-year-old.

QUDSIYA: Yeah that's great, I think those are all really, really helpful pieces of advice. And things that I have had to talk myself into, many a time, myself. So I'd I'm sure many people who are listening can relate to that. And I will share the links to those organizations in the show notes, as well. As to [gomwaba.org](#). So that folks are in the DC area can check out our activities and get plugged in. We're on a little bit of a hiatus right now with a pandemic, and trying to see how we can do things safely. But hopefully soon we'll be back on the goalball court and the tandem bike, and back in our community doing things together. But I just want to thank you both so much for joining me on the podcast, and this has been such a fun conversation. And I personally learn a lot about goalball that I didn't know before, so thank you so much!

JUSTIN: Ahh thanks for having us!

KARLA: Yeah it was great talking to you. Thanks a lot!

[soothing jazz piano, hip-hop beat pause]

Outro:

QUDSIYA: Thank you for listening to episode 4 of *Down to the Struts*. On Thursday people across the United States will celebrate Thanksgiving, I wanted to take this moment to thank each and everyone of you for listening, subscribing, rating, reviewing, and sharing *Down to the Struts*.

I hope this podcast is an opportunity to create community, learn about our differences, and uncover the unexpected commonalities that bring us together as human beings, despite the things that may seem to divide us.

This podcast would also not be possible without the energy and creativity of Anna Wu, Adriane Kong, Ilana Nevins, Avery Anapol and Claire Shanley.

Thanks again for listening and stay tuned for episode 5, coming to your feeds on December 8th so we can get back down to it!

[ends with the soothing jazz piano, hip-hop beat]