

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Georgia Munro-Cook, a research fellow in the Disability and Rehabilitation Research Unit at Griffith University here in Australia, to talk about her work around women, sport and disability. Georgia is also the author of *Building the WNBA: From Dunking Divas to Political Leaders*, and a wheelchair basketball player, member of the Australian Gliders Wheelchair Basketball Team, and captain of Australia's National Wheelchair Basketball Team at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics. So first, I'd like to start with your personal story, if you don't mind, and how that connects to your research.

GMC: So basically, I've played sport all my life. But I played able-bodied sport and able-bodied basketball up until the age of around 18. And around then, my congenital injury got worse, I guess you'd say. And as a result, I couldn't run anymore, I was in a lot of chronic pain. And I obviously couldn't play sport anymore, which was a really big loss for me. And so about two years later, I was introduced to wheelchair basketball. And that really transformed both my thinking about sport and the world and my own body, but also just let me play basketball, which was a really big thing for me. So when I started doing my research, I originally was interested in the WNBA and women's basketball. And that's what I did my PhD on. But I started making these connections between the position of women athletes and also the position of people with disability and in society and thinking about what the stories of women athletes can tell us about what we need to do for disability sport, and especially for women with disabilities.

AT: I freely admit, I am not particularly sporty. So can you help me understand the value of sports participation for women and girls in general, but then specifically for women and girls who also have disabilities?

GMC: So I think when sport is done right, and that is a big if, it offers a lot of benefits for women and girls. There's the leadership qualities. I think there's, some statistics about how most of the CEOs of big companies have played sport. That's obviously a bit of a neoliberal framing of it. But there are other benefits in terms of belonging, community, friendship. Some of my lifelong friends came from playing sport. And also bodily competence, like learning how to use your body in different ways, ways that you might not get just from, what we might think of as just regular exercise. And that's magnified, I think, for women and girls with disability because they are so often told that they can't do things. And there's this protectionist mindset, you can't do this, you can't do that. And when women and girls are put into sport, especially disability, they're then said, "no, actually, you can do this." "I can challenge the limits of what I originally thought I could do." And that's so important. And then also, there's the aspect of community for people with disability. So a lot of the times, if you have a disability, you might be the only person you know with a disability unless you deliberately seek out those forms of community. And they don't have to be sport. There's obviously really great disability arts or music scenes, things like that. But sport is a place of community. And for me, it was a place where I was able to learn how to be disabled in a way, learn the skills that I needed, access my own disability, because that's obviously something that's been hard to come to terms with when it happens to you late in life. But share skills on how to use a wheelchair. What kind of wheelchairs are beneficial? Because often occupational therapists don't have that kind of knowledge and lived experience that people with disability do. And share those ideas between each other and then develop your own voice and your own sense of belonging.

AT: Well, something you've touched on a bit there is that a common issue in the disability sector is abled paternalism, where you have abled people, particularly parents of children with disabilities seems to be a very common one. But these are the people making the decisions often without much input from actual disabled adults. So like you were saying, you might have an occupational therapist who doesn't actually know what it's like to be in a wheelchair. And so they are trying to help. They are experienced and trained in their own way. *But* it's a big but. Or you might have someone like me. So I've got autism and ADHD. And so I'm disabled under the social model of disability, but I have no lived experience of what I would consider a medical disability

that actually impairs my ability to do the things that I want to do. It just gets me fired from jobs. (laughter) But someone like me whose conditions don't really require that much accommodation, I would not feel comfortable, speaking on behalf of the disabled community as a whole. But you might have someone like that who is relatively quite privileged, speaking on behalf of the community. I feel like disability is one of those areas where "nothing about us without us" hasn't really penetrated. So do you see these issues in sports settings that are specifically intended for folks with disabilities?

GMC: Yeah, definitely. To your first point about like the paternalism, I would say most coaches don't have disability and don't have any kind of experience really with disability. And especially, most of them are men. So, with women and girls, that's a big problem. And I do think they have this very much protectionist mindset. I've had experiences where the men's team are allowed to go out to a city that we travel to, but we aren't allowed to do that and things like that based on, as far as I can tell, nothing except our gender. I guess the one thing I've always found with disability is people always expect you to be able to do more than you can do, but also at the same time underestimate you. So they expect you to be able to work all day without a rest, which I can't do. I have chronic pain. I need to rest. But they also then don't expect you to be able to go out and live your life and be a functional adult. So there's this weird tension. And that is what I've found a lot with coaches and with administrators within disability sport, which is still very much, the disability sport community just hasn't really embraced disability leadership, which is a massive problem. And yeah, as to your second point about different degrees of disability and who gets a voice and who doesn't. Within elite Paralympic sport, that is a major problem because most of the sports to be able to participate, you are automatically some level of privilege, some level of being able to use your body in certain ways. There's people with what we consider higher classifications. So that means less disabled in terms in the context of the sport, they tend to be more privileged within the Paralympic movement. There tends to be more events for people with higher classifications, things like that. And it's just really hard to find athletes with high support needs. So again, that's a huge problem. As you said, I with a mobility injury and chronic pain would find it, I can't talk for the experience of someone with an intellectual disability. So there's tension in the disability community, I think, in terms of who gets a voice, especially for people with intellectual impairments who maybe struggle to speak for themselves. And we need to look to different ways of engaging with those communities to make sure that their voices is heard.

AT: And you did note this, but there is a lot of debate over functionality classifications. And I know particularly in autism spaces, that can be really problematic. But the simple fact is, like I said, my autism is not disabling. And particularly when we're talking about a sports context, my husband's a runner, he plays rugby, he got kind of pushed into playing football because we live in Victoria and it's a requirement, apparently. But his autism has nothing to do with his ability physically. And so there are a lot of issues with classification. But when it comes down to it, different disabilities impact people in different ways and different degrees of disability. Like there's a lot of autistic folks who are nonverbal. And that's a much higher impact than, I am very verbal, thank you very much. (laughter) And so I'm curious in terms of, as someone who, I believe you're an ambulatory wheelchair user, and something like chronic pain can be very invisible, and particularly if it fluctuates. How does that impact both how you perform as an athlete, like your experience as an athlete, but also how others maybe treat you as an athlete who identifies as disabled?

GMC: It's very interesting when you're with a team of people who maybe two-thirds use wheelchairs full-time and the other third either only use wheelchairs to play sport or just occasionally use wheelchairs, is that that dynamic is reversed, where my friend was telling a story of they were all out to a bar and they're in their wheelchairs and the one walker with the group was like, "oh, hang on a second, I can't hear anything you're saying." And she was like, "yeah, that's what it was like for us all the time." So it's kind of that reverse idea of who's, not necessarily privileged, but who becomes part of the community. And it just challenges a different way of thinking. And as someone with chronic pain and an invisible disability, I do find it hard because in one

sense, I am very privileged. I can walk, I can do things that other people can't do and I can hide my disability. But on the other hand, being able to hide your disability means that you maybe don't get the things that you need. I find I can't take public transport because people won't stand up for me and things like that just because they're like, "oh, a young girl. Why would she need that seat?"

And then in terms of sport, it is hard with chronic pain because sport is so based on getting the most out of your body and to win games. But you can't necessarily do that in the same way when you have chronic pain. And pain is such a personal thing that I think people find it really hard to understand why one day you can be in so much pain, you can't get out of bed and another day you look totally fine. It took my parents even a really long time to understand that, I wasn't just being lazy on the days that I couldn't get out of bed, I actually needed that help. Like they were very supportive, but it's just something not to be able to get your head around. And then in a team environment, there's 12 of you, you've all got different fluctuating conditions. That makes it really hard. And then again, in terms of classification, it's obviously so essential to Paralympic sport, but you have a situation where you're classified as if you have a stable disability. But most people's disabilities aren't stable, they will fluctuate over time and they will fluctuate from day to day. So, yeah, you're put in a situation where they do the best they can, but there are issues.

AT: And something that comes up with invisible disabilities, and I actually refer to at least my brand of autism and ADHD as an ultra-invisible disability, because a lot of us don't even know we have it until well into adulthood. But one of the things that comes up is that people know that in the case of neurodivergence, you can mask, you can act neurotypical, you can hide your presentations. And so it creates this expectation that you *should*. And if you're not, then why aren't you? Like you have this obligation to hide whatever is actually going on with you. And so I don't know if that's combined with, it seems like there's a very strong mindset in sports, particularly the level of elite sports you're competing at, like you are in a proper league and competing at the Paralympics. And there does seem to be this larger issue with toxic coaches and organizations and sponsors telling you to just push through whatever you're going through. I feel like there is an overlap there.

GMC: Yeah, definitely. I think people don't understand the idea of fluctuation and they don't understand, that you can, in your case, mask or you can push through chronic pain for a certain amount of time. But that's not something you can do forever. And I think sport in general, like not even disability sport, just has this weird culture around injury, like it's your fault. Actually, I think that might be something that's society-wide. I think we've seen with COVID this idea that if you get sick, it's your fault. And I think as someone with a disability, well, actually it's not. I can spend hours every day, doing strength work, doing all this stuff, and there's still going to be days where it's just not happening for me. I think ableism has come back in style a little bit in a way, unfortunately, the growth of like slurs on the internet and things like that. And I think a large part of that is this kind of blame game about, you're getting sick and it's your fault.

AT: Something that we're also getting into here is on a very human level, like this isn't specific to disability, but people don't like taking responsibility for things. And particularly if you're an elected official, if you're someone in power, there's very much this drive to put the responsibility on individuals so that the society does not have to take that responsibility. And so if I make it your fault that you got sick, that you are not having a good pain day, which even the phrase "good pain day" just sounds so messed up. (GMC: Yeah.) But that idea that if I frame it so that it's your fault, then I don't have to take any responsibility for my actions. I don't have to push my government and the people in power to do what they arguably should be doing.

GMC: Yeah, exactly. And I think sport has been used a little bit in that way. The Paralympics, I think, has been used as, "look, these disabled people are doing this, so why can't you go get a job or you go do whatever," which I think Paralympians have to challenge that narrative very much. And part of that is making sure they get the voice, not the able-bodied people in charge who maybe want to promote more of an empowering narrative

than maybe actually exists.

AT: Yeah, for anyone who's not familiar with the "inspiration porn" narrative, go Google it, but it's basically, "oh, look how inspiring, they've overcome things." And it's often told through an abled lens and how the abled people around them are changed by this experience. Like they're not even the protagonist if you're inspiration porn. So that makes me think of the performative aspect, though, of sports, because you are going out and performing, often in front of very large crowds, possibly televised. And there's this great YouTuber, Jessica Kellgren-Fozard, and she has, I believe, a couple different disabilities. But one of the things that she's talked about is how when you see her, her hair is perfect, her makeup is perfect. She's in a lovely outfit, often a vintage outfit because she likes doing fashion videos and she does modeling and this sort of thing. But what she says is, "you don't see everything that came before that and everything that comes after that." And so when you're talking about, pushing yourself, people aren't seeing the toll that that is taking on you, which may be invisible anyway, but they're not seeing how, I assume, wrecked you likely are after a lot of these games.

GMC: Yes, for sure. They don't see the getting up at 6 a.m. for training and then having to work after that. They don't see all that sort of stuff, which I think is probably true for all sport, but maybe just magnified with disability sport. And what is different, I think, with disability sport is they don't see, every time you turn up to a gym and there's no ramp or there's a step to get in or the \$15,000 I had to spend on a wheelchair, things like that, that I do think is magnified with disability sport and that kind of inspiring lens that the Paralympics puts forward obscures that a bit. And I think that has changed. Like in Paris, I did notice a lot more focus on accessibility and pushing that lens. But yeah, still a way to go.

AT: I'm also curious, because obviously mental health is also a disability issue a lot of the time and something that particularly female athletes have been more outspoken about. So specifically, I'm thinking of Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles have been very outspoken about things like, "I am not going to be competing in these events because I am not in a psychological place where it is safe for me to do this." And they've gotten attacked so much for that. And it's curious because, this could just be my perception, but it does seem like apart from the fact that both of these are Black women, and there's all sorts of crap that comes along with that. But I do wonder how much of that is, people who are elite athletes, you are meant to be physical perfection, or as close as we're going to get. And how dare you talk about being vulnerable? And how dare you talk about things that are going on with you that aren't perfect?

GMC: Yeah, for sure. I think part of it is also women, Black women especially, but also disabled women are expected to be grateful, grateful that they've got this spot in a man's space supposedly. And I think when you're in that position, Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka have got to that spot where they can afford really to speak out. And if something goes wrong, they have money to fall back on. Their career is not going to be destroyed, which isn't to take away from the brave thing that they have both done, which I don't want to diminish. But with amateur elite sport, you just don't have that ability to take that stand for your mental health. You can't really stand up against poor coaching or poor administrating, all those sorts of things. And I think that can have a really big impact on people's mental health. I've just recently finished a series of interviews with elite Paralympians from Australia, and I heard lots of stories about what I would call emotional abuse, particularly around body weight and things like that. And I just think people with disabilities are expected to be grateful that they're there. And as a result, they can't challenge any of that sort of thing. And that's something I found in my research on the WNBA is that recently they've really challenged that framework and they've said, "no, that's enough. We're not grateful to be here. We deserve better. We deserve professionalism." And I think that's really changed the league and set the stage for this growth of women's sport in America and women's basketball specifically. And that's something I really learned from doing my PhD and something I've taken forward in my research that, I'm not grateful that we have a women's wheelchair basketball team. We should

have this. And, what's the next step? How can we make it better? How can we make it safe for everyone to be involved?

AT: I think what you're touching on, is who is entitled to what? Because we talk a lot about toxic masculinity and men's entitlement. But the flip side of that is that there is this idea that women and other marginalized groups, so we've mentioned women of color, women with disabilities, or just people of color and people with disabilities. If you are marginalized, there's this idea that you are not entitled to X, Y, and Z. (GMC: Yep.) But you are.

GMC: Yeah, definitely. Women have been playing sport really since the beginning, but they're still seen as space invaders, as not belonging there. And that needs to change.

AT: Now we've sort of touched on a couple different types of privilege, right? And how even as a woman with disability, I, and I would guess you, have a lot of other privileges that help offset the disability. So when we're talking about what people have which kinds of opportunities, I feel like when I see things about sports and disability, it's typically for adults. So is there much in the way of opportunity for kids?

GMC: Yeah, there is. It's kind of complicated, with disability sport because people like you think of able-bodied sport, you come in as a kid, you progress through the pathway, you're an adult. If you're good enough, you compete at a high level. But with disability sport, people are coming in at really different times. So, I started playing wheelchair basketball when I was like 20, which is not the time you would normally start playing a sport. I already had the basketball skills, so that helps. But it complicates the pathway is what I would say. So there does tend to be sport available for kids. It's again complicated by the fact that for lots of these sports, you need a wheelchair and a kid is growing and wheelchairs cost a lot of money. And the other problem I found is that because there are smaller numbers, you always see men and women, boys and girls competing together, often go to tournaments and you see like a 15-year-old girl competing with a 50-year-old man. And that's fine. But I just don't think that has that same sense of belonging and community that you would get with able-bodied sport. I would say yes, there are opportunities for kids, but it's sporadic. It's in certain pockets. It depends who's been willing to run a tournament, things like that. So it's quite complicated.

AT: One of the most complicated topics in disability, generally speaking, I would say is born versus acquired disability. So someone who is born with a condition where they would have always needed a wheelchair, for example, as opposed to someone like you who was physically able to play abled sports until you were essentially an adult. And I believe there's been research done around how children are treated differently when they are known to be disabled, as opposed to someone like me who, we didn't know. (laughter) There was stuff going on. We didn't know. But the different ways that people treat you and how that shapes your worldview and what you're capable of. Whereas a kid who grows up abled isn't facing those barriers. So it does seem like that that lack of options for younger people who were born or acquired their disability quite young would be compounding that almost.

GMC: Yeah, I definitely think so. I was talking to some of my teammates who were born with their disabilities and they would say like, at school, people didn't want to be my friends, that sort of thing because of their disability. The disability sport community becomes even more important as a source of friendship and things like that. But yeah, that's obviously very different to my experience of not having a disability that I knew about until I was an adult. But then I guess there's the flip side of the coin in that, if you have an accident or something late in life, there is a lot of learning and trauma and all that sort of thing happening surrounding that, which. that that makes it hard too. So there's probably not one that's better than the other.

AT: Oh, yeah, it's like the functionality and classifications where it's like, we're not saying anybody has it easy in

this space. It's just that things are complicated in different ways. (GMC: Yeah, exactly.) So as you were saying that, wheelchairs are expensive. And I'm curious, do you need a, again, not being a sporty person and not being a wheelchair user, are there like sport wheelchairs? Like there are there sport shoes?

GMC: Yeah, for sure. So, for example, a wheelchair basketball wheelchair, it has casters, the little wheels at the front and at the back that stop you tipping backwards. And it's also has the wheels are on a 45-degree angle like sticking out. And then it turns a lot faster than a day chair. And similar, the racing chairs are quite different as well. They're very different. So you need a day chair and you need this sports chair.

AT: And so how big of a barrier do you think that is to participating in sports? Because I assume these chairs are not cheap.

GMC: No, they are very, very expensive and just getting more expensive. I would say it is a huge barrier because you need more than one chair basically, in that your first chair will never be perfect for you. You're going to need another chair as you progress in the sport in the same way that you need shoes - they run out, they break, all that sort of stuff. So, quite often you see people get involved in the sport. They're in a chair that doesn't fit them properly, like one they borrowed. And obviously that's going to put them off the sport because it might cause pressure sores or it might just be really uncomfortable, really hard to push or things like that. So there's both the cost and that embodied aspect of it being fun to play. And obviously not every parasport needs a wheelchair, but a lot of them do.

AT: But even if it's not a chair, there's other support needs. So, for example, I'm thinking of blind runners who need a guide and that's someone that is running alongside you. And I believe they usually have a ribbon or something like that so they can sense where that person is. But just having another elite athlete available to you is a huge barrier, I would guess, for a lot of people.

GMC: Yeah, I'm sure. A lot of them are Olympic-level athletes that are these guys. And yeah, to be able to build that relationship with another person as well, it must be very tricky.

AT: It does seem like there are certain disabilities that there are no realistic accommodations that can be made. So watching something like the Paralympics, you do see all of these ways that accommodations have been made. But something like, you were talking about how you have chronic pain. A lot of folks have chronic pain or fatigue conditions that mean this is not an option for them. Or maybe you have a condition where you simply cannot build the strength and stamina to participate. So I'm just wondering, even in the most supportive, perfect world without any of these issues that we're talking about, can we really say that sports are inclusive when, yes, they've been adapted for certain disabilities, but there are others that seemingly can't be adapted for?

GMC: Yeah, for sure. It's a huge problem in Paralympic sport in that it was developed out of World War Two and spinal cord injuries, and it's expanded over time to include things like cerebral palsy or blind athletes. But it's not that inclusive of disabilities, for example, especially disabilities that women have. So things like complex regional pain syndrome, things like pain disorders, they're not classifiable. So you can't be a Paralympian if that is your major disability. So that is obviously a huge problem for sport and inclusion in sport. And it also means that maybe we aren't developing the kinds of sports that people like that maybe could play. Like thinking about, there is things like powerchair football, which is for people with cerebral palsy, like quite high support needs, which I think that could be adapted for people with chronic pain. I think it would just be the same. Whether they would want to do that. I don't know how to develop sports personally, but I definitely agree with you that the Paralympics and disability sport is not particularly inclusive when it comes to lots of different

disabilities. And I think that's a massive problem.

AT: It's also interesting when we're talking about equipment-based adaptations and when you look at what abled athletes have in terms of like a certain kind of swimsuit or certain kinds of shoes and equipment that they may use for training. And this idea that the Olympics are actually an accurate reflection of potential rather than privilege. Again, not saying that any of these athletes are not working their butts off and deserve to be there and everything. But I have seen different pieces about, "this American athlete compared to, say, this Ugandan athlete. And what do they have access to in terms of resources that helped enable them to get to that level?"

GMC: Yeah, for sure. Paralympic sport even more so is dominated by the Global North and countries that can afford these equipment barriers. And you even see it when we go to some of our tournaments and we've all got quite nice chairs, although I think ours could even be improved. But you see some countries and you're like, "none of those chairs fit you properly", like they're all secondhand, like things like that. So it's the equipment concerns of Paralympic sport means that those kind of disparities are even more prevalent. It's not just the people at the top that are experiencing these barriers. It would be the whole sporting ecosystem. Just thinking of who is able to participate in Paralympic sport, even in Australia, it's obviously people that have money. It's people that are more privileged, people that are living in cities rather than like regional areas.

AT: We haven't even really touched on women that have other barriers, like, they might have carer responsibilities, for example, or they might require carers. Even just travel is so much more complicated, depending on the kind of disability that you have. And as you've been talking about wheelchairs, all I can think about is these horror stories that you hear where wheelchairs have been broken in transit and the airlines are just like, "oh, sucks to be you." And especially for something a specialized piece of equipment, like a racing chair or a sports chair. It just seems like there's already so many barriers to women in sport that, apart from actually being an athlete, because plenty of folks like me are like, "I don't do sport." (laughter) But all of all of the difficulties of doing the sport, but then there's all these other barriers around the practical aspects of being an athlete and training and competing.

GMC: Yeah, for sure. I've talked to, for example, people like swimmers with high support needs that need help from a carer to get in the pool and do all those sorts of things. When they travel, they might need longer time to recover, things like that, that really have to be factored into. And probably, if you don't have that funding for having a carer, you might not then be able to participate in sport. And the airline thing is a massive pain in the neck. I've had my chair has been broken. Luckily, just the wheel. But yeah, the airlines just take forever to repay you and things like that, which, luckily I could afford it. But lots of people couldn't afford \$1000 to get a new wheel just because the airline broke it. And again, lucky it's just my sports chair. But if you break if they break your day chair and you can't walk like they're a bit like, "what are we going to do?"

AT: But also if they break your sport chair on the way to a competition, are you just out of luck? Like, do you have to repair it yourself?

GMC: So we normally travel with spare wheels. So luckily my wheel broke, so it was okay. I just replaced it. But yeah, otherwise you're scrambling to try and find someone who can weld titanium to try and fix your chair, essentially. Which, not ideal when you're in a country that you don't know anyone. I can't speak the language.

AT: Just add that to the travel team roster: "and we need someone who can weld titanium, who can also travel with the equipment that you need to weld titanium." (laughter)

GMC: Yeah, exactly. So it's definitely, can be a logistical nightmare.

AT: Do you find that they're less sympathetic in situations like that because you're ambulatory? Like, "you don't really need this. You're fine."

GMC: I don't know. From what I can tell, they're not particularly sympathetic for people that are not ambulatory either.

AT: They're just dicks all around. Equal opportunity dicks.

GMC: Yeah, or they just don't get it. They don't get that these are specialised pieces of equipment that cost a lot of money and that, not that they should be chucking anyone's luggage around, but you can't just throw a wheelchair off a plane.

AT: Going back to the various issues that we've discussed in sports, whether that's the abled people are the ones running things and the financial barriers and the other barriers that you mentioned like rurality. So if you live in a city, you're much more likely to be able to find activities to participate in. What would you like to see, if you had no limits in terms of time and human power and money? What would you want to see in disability sports, particularly for women?

GMC: It's a very big question, but for me, it's about having opportunities for women to play, not women-only, but like women and gender-diverse communities. I think it's super important. A lot of the time we have to play with men, and I think that puts women off sport. I think having those defined pathways would be super important in terms of not having people show up the first day and be put into the elite pathway. People need to be able to play at the level that they want whether that's that grassroots level, or it's the elite level. There's a lot of pressure to be an elite athlete, I think, in disability sport. I would like to expand disability sport at the grassroots level for now, but to include people who aren't necessarily classifiable for Paralympic sport. I think making sport inclusive and welcoming for all people is one of my highest priorities. I think sport can turn a lot of people off, like yourself that said, "I don't do sport." And I totally understand that because for lots of people, it's not welcoming and it's not enjoyable because if you're getting yelled at or anything like that, you're not going to want to come back. I would get more women involved in coaching, women with disabilities specifically. I think that's something that really needs to happen, and shed that protectionist mindset. So much of it is logistical challenges in terms of, if you have one person with a disability in a rural town, how are we going to facilitate that? And I think there are definitely options, but it involves a joined-up sport system that we don't have at the moment. So at the moment, we have little pockets of people doing really great stuff, but we haven't joined them up. We haven't learned from those things. We're kind of just reinventing the wheel every time.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.