

PROTECTING YOUR POSSIBILITIES PODCAST WITH LUKE FEDLAM

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I'm sports attorney Luke Fedlam, and welcome to the Protecting Your Possibilities podcast. Each conversation we focus on sharing information and having conversations around how athletes can best educate and protect themselves or their life outside of their sports.

Luke: Thank you for tuning in once again to the protecting your possibilities podcast. I'm your host, Luke Fedlam. And today, I want to take a minute to say thank you, for all of you who have commented, or sent in emails based on past conversations that we've had got a lot of conversation from last week's episode that focused on Black Players for Change in the work that they're doing, both within Major League Soccer and in the communities in which their membership resides. So definitely great work was great to highlight their efforts. So thank you so much for engaging in providing commentary and comments. And again, that's what I really appreciate about this podcast, when you start a podcast, you never really know, are people gonna listen? Do people really even care what I have to say. And it's really cool to see the reaction and the response from so many across the country around the topics that we discuss.

So, today is the third of February, and it's the beginning of Black History Month. And so just want to acknowledge that. And, the cool part about having your podcast is that you can pretty much talk about whatever you want to talk about. And so what I want to do is take a moment in this podcast today is just to share some thoughts around Black History Month. And in particular black history as it relates to sports. Obviously, there is a wealth of information, and different stories that I could get into and talk about that could take hours and days to even get through when you think about the impact of African Americans in sports. But I want to just try to focus on a few different areas of some firsts. And in particular, look back historically, maybe some stories that you may not be as familiar with, or that you may not know much about, because to me, that is the joy of black history. Right. And that is the excitement of Black History Month is being able to be made aware of stories of all of the successes in different ways that trailblazers and others have had, as African Americans in sports.

So let's just get right into it. The first story that I want to share is that of Debbie Thomas. And if you did not know, Debbie Thomas is a figure skater, or a former figure skater, and she was the first African American to win a medal, an Olympic medal in the Winter Olympic Games, and that came in 1988. So here, we're looking at Black history that for someone like myself, I remember 1988 very well. So that does not seem like that long ago. And yet, Debbie Thomas really was a trailblazer in this regard. So she won the 1986 World Championship. She was a two time US National Champion. Like I said, she won the bronze medal in 1988, the 1988 Olympics, in thinking about that, this is something that is really kind of profound when you think about that. I mean, oftentimes, the Winter Olympics, there have been so many conversations about African Americans and winter sports. But since Debbie Thomas, there have been many other African Americans who have won medals in Olympic sports, but still, many of the Olympic sports are

not as engaged upon by African Americans. And so, again, when you think about what Debbie Thomas was able to do in winning an Olympic medal on the world stage in figure skating, that starts something, that's something that so often so many of us, all will tune in to the Olympics. And, definitely the statistics show that that more people tuned into the Summer Olympics, but even with the Winter Olympics to see for young girls and young boys to see someone who looks like them, winning a medal on the Olympic stage. That's important. That sets dreams and goals in motion. So just a solid hat tip and thank you to Debbie Thomas for her accomplishments and all that she has done.

The next one that I would like to kind of bring up is Willie O'Ree. Now, I've had a chance to actually meet with Willie O'Ree had a chance to engage with him around, I think this was, I can't remember the exact year that Columbus, where I live, hosted the NHL All Star game and weekend, there were a series of events and had the opportunity to be a part of an event with black sports professionals, where we had a chance to talk with and meet Willie O'Ree. So Willie was the first African American to play in the National Hockey League. Interesting, he had a unique situation where he actually was blind in one eye. And that's something that would have prevented him had it been known it would have prevented him from playing in the NHL, but he kept it a secret. So a couple years prior to being called up to the Boston Bruins, he had been blinded in one eye when a puck hit him in the face. And, that was something that he tells the story about talking to the doctors and not wanting his family to know and not wanting anybody to know, so that he could keep playing. And so now you think about this, of how good right how good you had to be, to be able to play in the NHL, and be blind in one eye and to be able to play so well that you kept it a secret so that that people couldn't even know that you were blind in one eye. So just to recognize the first black player in the NHL, Willie O'Ree man, just an incredible, incredible story. So definitely check out more about him and his impact on hockey from an even broader perspective beyond just his playing days, I think is something really worth noting. And just to put that in context of timing, that happened in 1958. So in 1958, there was the first black player in the NHL Willie O'Ree.

Next, I will bring up one that I didn't know about but i thought was fascinating and wanted to share. And it's Isaac Murphy. So Isaac Murphy is a Hall of Fame jockey. He actually is considered one of the greatest riders in American Horse racing. He actually won three Kentucky derbies as a jockey. Now, the timing of all this was back in the 1800s. Now, I'll be honest with you, I didn't even know that the Kentucky Derby went back that far. But Isaac Murphy was, he was just one of the best and is still considered one of the best jockeys of all time. He was from Kentucky. He actually unfortunately died of heart failure at the age of 34. so incredibly young, and it makes you just wonder what impact he might have continued to have in horse racing had he lived a longer life. But to do this, to jockey, he'd go on to win the Kentucky Derby multiple times. And to do this in the 1800s. When obviously, we know all that was going on in the world, and more specifically in the US during that time. incredible story and an incredible feat to be able to do that. And to really just break these barriers that existed, especially to do it in Kentucky with the Kentucky Derby, one of the preeminent horse races in American culture. So truly an incredible story to read about Isaac Murphy.

Next, I'll bring up another interesting kind of Olympic story. And that's with Alice Coachman. So, Alice coachman was born in the 1920s, born in 1923. And she made history at the 1948 Olympics that were held in London when she won gold medal, and she was the first black woman to win a gold medal. And she did that through the high jump Interesting backstory on her where she's from Georgia, Albany, Georgia, she was one of 10 children. And this was the segregated South at the time. And she was often denied opportunities to compete, to train and to grow as an athlete. And so when she went to high school, she went to high school called

Madison High School. And the boys coach, the boys track and field coach recognized her talent and really worked with her to nurture that talent. So she ended up catching the attention of a coach at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. And when she was 16 years old, they offered her a scholarship in 1939. And so she ended up going to Tuskegee, and she broke all of these records, even broke these records barefoot high jumping, and she did that through some of her AAU competition. What's fascinating about this is that she dominated the events and the events that she was allowed to participate in. And it just makes you wonder what she could have done if she would have been able to compete in anything that she wanted to compete in. But she wasn't. What also makes you kind of wonder about some things is that she was at the height of our competition through the 1940s, and the Olympics in 1940. And in 1944, were canceled due to World War Two. So you can only imagine what could she have done on the Olympic stage, having won a gold medal in 1948, what she could have done in 1944, and in 1940, as well. So, interesting stories of black achievement in sports over time.

And I specifically wanted to focus on some of the Olympic sports and some of the not as prominent sports, like your football and basketball, that we know so many of the stories of black achievement, because they're highlighted more frequently, but I wanted to focus on figure skating and horse racing and Olympics winter Summer Olympics. Because, again, Black History Month is about recognizing just historical achievement by African Americans, by black people in America, and wanted to just take some time to look at that.

But I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the impact in some of these other prominent sports, as it relates to team ownership. So we know so many stories in the NBA, and Major League Baseball and football and beyond of the achievements of African Americans, as players, even as coaches. But what's interesting is when you start to think about just the ownership of these professional sports teams, and African Americans as owners, and so you look at historically, what ownership has looked like, it's been pretty much less than 10%. When you look at basketball, football, hockey, baseball, we have ownership of less than 10%. But yeah, we have participation of the athletes and football, it's at 70%. In basketball, it's around there. And so from that perspective, you just really think about how important ownership is at the team level. And I think that that's maybe where black history will go in the future. And as we look at history in the making, I think that as we continue to see black athletes empowered, having opportunities for great success outside of their sport, their ability to galvanize and gather ownership groups, I think that we'll start to see more black ownership in our professional sports leagues, maybe not representative of the participation of athletes in sports, but I think we will start to see at least increases to hopefully beyond where we are today. And today, we're less than 10%. And hopefully that will continue to see athletes blaze trails, to go from being players to being owners. I think we all saw that LeBron James this season will pass a billion dollars in career earnings, which is an incredible feat.

But I think even beyond that, I think we'll start to see more and more African American business folks and others, hopefully start to get in that space of ownership, because it matters, and it makes an impact. Hopefully, you've enjoyed this conversation a little bit different than our traditional podcast episodes. But I just felt like with the beginning of Black History Month that I just wanted to address and look at some achievements of African Americans and black people in American sports, and also wanted to just kind of look to the future and hope that we continue to see achievement in the ownership level of our professional sports. So with that, I just thank you for listening, I encourage you to share this podcast with others. Again, if there are topics that you want to hear, or issues that you'd like for me to address, please do feel free to connect with me on social media at @LukeFedlam. Or you can reach out to me via email, or just leave comments wherever you listen to podcasts. And I'll be sure to get back with you or at least be

able to address what you raised. So again, thank you so much, and I look forward to talking to you again real soon.

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