

# sports

MARCH 2019  
ISSUE NO. 1

FROM SCHOLARSHIP TO INDUSTRY



## NO APOLOGIES

LAUREL WALZAK IS CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE FOR WOMEN IN SPORTS. SHE USES HER VOICE, HEAR WHAT SHE HAS TO SAY.

PLUS: MORE FROM INSIDE THE GXSLAB

**GXS**  
WOMEN IN SPORT

**MARCH 8, 2019**

## **SHE MAKES NO APOLOGIES ABOUT IT.**

It is evident that Laurel Walzak is a true leader in the sport industry. She advocates on a consistent and genuine basis for women in sport whether as an athlete, a builder, a coach, in the media and beyond. No matter the setting, Walzak is not afraid to use her voice and influence to drive awareness and change for gender equality in sport, at all levels. You see by her consistent actions that Walzak leans toward finding solutions and opportunities that are mutually beneficial for all stakeholders involved. If you asked her peers, her colleagues, and her students, they would say she is a humble and confident leader within various distinguished sport organizations, governments and media organizations, and that she works tirelessly to carry on her mission for equality for women in her own unique and effective way.

We sat down with Laurel Walzak, ahead of International Women's Day, to ask her a few questions about what makes her unique about being a Woman, a Woman in Sport and a Woman in Business. And what we discovered about Laurel is that in addition to her being down to earth and direct and she was unapologetic.

### **WE ASKED WALZAK ABOUT HER BUSINESS STYLE, HER CAREER AND HER EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN SPORT.**

She claims she is a behind the scenes type business person, and likes to keep it that way. Most people, unless you work with her, apparently don't know what she is up to, nor are they aware of the time and dedication she puts into her work and her volunteer contributions. What is perhaps most unique about Walzak, is

that she is not looking for a pat on the back. She gains her own value and intrinsic rewards from her work, her contributions to society and working with others that share similar interests. Laurel describes herself as somewhat of a private and principled person with inordinate confidence and self-assurance. She tells us that she knows her confidence can be perceived, and has been perceived, as arrogance. However, she assures us that once you get to know her, you'll see that is not the case. Walzak said she used to apologize for this perception but that this is no longer the case.

From her role at Ryerson University, as Assistant Professor in RTA Sport Media, and the Director of the Global Experiential Sport Lab - a research lab where scholarly research meets industry practice - to her role on various Boards in Canada, Walzak continually puts women's equality and equity in the forefront. A little background, as stated on her website: in 2013, Walzak was appointed by the Government of Ontario Public Appointments Secretariat of the Ministry: Training, Colleges and Universities, to the Board of Governors of George Brown College. In 2015, she was elected as the Vice Chair of the Board's Academic & Student Affairs Committee, she was elected to the Board of Directors of The Canadian Women's Hockey League (CWHL) in August 2017, and subsequently elected and re-elected to serve as Chair of the Board. She was appointed by the City Council of Toronto to serve as a public member of the Toronto Pan Am Sports Centre Board (TPASC), ending in 2019, and elected to serve on as Chair of the Finance and HR Committee. Laurel serves on the Advisory Board for the Sport and Society, Common Grounds Research Network, to name a few.

**LAUREL IS A MARKETER BY PROFESSION. AND HAS MARKETED FOR THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE, MOLSON CANADA AND FOR SOME OF THE BIGGEST BRANDS IN CANADA, AND SO IT SEEMS NATURAL TO ASK HER ABOUT HOW SHE MARKETS HERSELF AS A BRAND.**

Walzak laughed, and said, “believe it or not, I preach and teach about your personal branding and its’ importance in the marketplace”. She started with packaging and proceeded to describe her brand look “as functionally grounded with feminine flare”. She looks down and refers to her footwear as the feminine flare. We learned that according to Laurel she will rarely be caught without wearing her designer shoes, specifically, Manolo Blahnik or Jimmy Choo. She parallels her love of footwear to marketing a brand and a product’s brand packaging, “I have two looks that are consistent with my brand image and packaging: in the classroom; and in the boardroom,” she states, “I wear glasses, 4 inch designer heels, I keep my hair chocolate brown and I always wear a blazer. Basically, I keep it consistent and simple, I swap between jeans and a blazer or a blue suit. I love my shoes, always have and always will. But please don’t be fooled, the packaging is only one element of my brand. I believe in taking care of my health and fitness and it is part of my daily lifestyle. Make no mistake, I pride myself on my physical strength and how that strength positively impacts my mental well-being and my confidence. I have always been sporty and athletic and I pride myself on these descriptors. I love my body and it is part of my brand. I am not boasting, rather I am celebrating my outer beauty and how hard I work to keep myself as fit as I can on the outside and the inside, as they go together.” “Ok, Ok,” she says, “enough of that. That all said, there is more to my brand than my outer packaging and appearance. My integrity, my drive, my direct and straightforward approach with people and my high expectations and demands of myself and of others is also part of my brand. I am solution oriented and must admit I really don’t like to be bogged down by petty politics or other nonsensical barriers or bottlenecks. Oh, and one more thing I have been called [is] aloof. I hear this more often than not, but I think it is because I have many thoughts in different buckets that sometimes I forget to lighten up or show the real softer side of me. This is something I am working on, that said, I

am comfortable to say that for now being aloof is part of my brand. I am evolving and always trying to improve and I have not decided if this is a good thing or a bad thing for my brand yet. I am open to more feedback,” she snickers.

#### **WHAT ROLE DID YOUR FAMILY AND PARENTS HAVE ON YOUR BELIEF AND VALUES TODAY?**

Walzak claims she is naturally driven and determined, and gives credit to her parents as she attests that they nurtured her this way. Walzak’s parents, Ed and Carole, consistently bestowed on Laurel, and all of their children, to get up early and work hard. She recalls at a young age that her parents would not allow her and her siblings to sleep in. “We were up on a Saturday mornings ready to be out the door at 7:00am, this was a regular Saturday morning ritual, even if we had nowhere to go”, Laurel shares with us. She gives credit to her parents and says that they lead by example. Growing up in Burlington, Ontario, as a child she recalls her dad getting up at 5:30am to be in Toronto for meetings starting at 7:00am sharp. She reiterates the word sharp, because she remembers her dad stating that he could not be late and that the culture of his leadership and company would not tolerate lateness. This stuck in her memory and is part of her current belief system. Walzak also often use to get up with her dad and proudly watch him head off to work. She said “he arrived back home at 7:00pm to have dinner with our family and we would sit around the table and listen to the stories of his day. My dad was an executive on Bay St. and his stories, as I recall, were mature, business centric and corporate in nature, definitely not typical dinner time conversation. My mother gave up her career to stay at home to care for me and my 4 siblings. My mom tended to us children on a daily basis. The regular stuff like making us breakfast, lunches and dinners, yes, but that is not what I remember about my mom as a caregiver. I recall my mother encouraging all of us to go after our interests. She was one of my greatest cheerleaders, and still is. She was the one who

provided me the opportunities to play sports, to go after my jobs and to push me in my studies, even at times of struggle. She was the one that believed I could achieve what I set out to achieve. She was the one that sacrificed for my benefit. She was the one that told me to keep my chin up and fight for what I believed in. My mom unconditionally believed in me and I never doubted that. I am grateful that I had such an incredible mother in my life. I do not take this for granted.”

“But in fact, both my parents were incredible role models. I don’t think we ever labeled it, but when I think back they were actually textbook modern day feminists, ahead of their time. They had three daughters, they were strict when it came to sleeping in, hanging out as a family, school work and dating, and they were generous and giving of their love to us and they encouraged us and pushed us to go after our goals and it was a normal belief in our household that we could have the same opportunities as men. I recall this as always being part of our dialogue at home and a key part of our belief and value system as a family. “Essentially, you can do anything men can do”, remember I grew up in the late 70’s, 80’s and 90’s”. So to work in sport, a predominantly male centric industry, it never crossed my mind that I didn’t belong, because again my parents made this the norm for me in my upbringing”.

#### **WHAT ROLE DO YOU PLAY IN ADVANCING WOMEN IN SPORT?**

“I have always advocated for women, it is part of who I am and part of my DNA. I made a decision many years ago, in effort to have a positive impact on young, up and coming women in sport business and sport media to develop an award to do just that, so I founded the Future Woman in Sport Award. Originally, to receive the award, a student in their final semester at George Brown College, Sport and Event Marketing program, in Canada, who has the potential to distinguish herself in a career related to sports, sports’ entertainment or

events, or sports’ media, can apply for the award. The preference is given to a female student as a way of giving female students equal opportunity to pursue a career in the sports, sports’ entertainment or sports’ media industry. I donated this financial scholarship bursary with this award and as well acted as the winner’s ‘champion’, as required by the award winner. As of recent I produced a Women in Sport mentorship web video series to communicate the important messages of why it is important to support women in their careers in sport, and the impact her mentorship had on the award winner’s careers. This is only the beginning. Since then I founded GXS Women in Sport, where I encourage women and men to come together to engage in meaningful discussion about inequities for women in sports with a specific and focused call to action for improvements and ultimately action for systemic change and women’s empowerment. This initiative is in collaboration with students and industry professionals, I will be launching a program related to this in the fall of 2019.

#### **WHEN ASKED WHAT THE ISSUES ARE FOR WOMEN IN SPORT, LAUREL BREAKS IT DOWN INTO FOUR STRATEGIC CATEGORIES, AND STATES THAT EACH OF THESE CATEGORIES REQUIRE ATTENTION AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE:**

“There are many areas, unfortunately. I realize them as the following:

One, access and participation: Growth of the game/ sport - from grassroots to professional.

Two, broadcast programming: media’s role - portrayal, stereotypes and representation.

Three, exposure: broadcast and overall marketer’s role - marketing to fans.

And four, commercialization: funding, under-representation, opportunities, decision making, earning power and governance.”

## **WHAT ARE YOU DOING TODAY TO MOBILIZE CHANGE FOR WOMEN IN SPORT?**

“I am focusing on three key areas:

First, my research. I seek to look at each of the categories just mentioned to understand the gender inequalities in sport and sport media to transform and mobilize change.

Second, continue my mentorship and grow my award for young and up and coming women in sport to provide them guidance and support as required.

And third, make use of the Global Experiential Sport Lab as a platform to: share knowledge in the form of workshops, seminars and speaker series; tap into global networks to galvanize leaders for change; and provide a place for both women and men to come together to work together to break down barriers for women in sport.”

## **WHAT DO YOU THINK THE FUTURE FOR WOMEN IN SPORT LOOKS LIKE?**

“It looks like an endless mountain that is made up of many summits to reach the infinite and proverbial top. But the good news is, is that all the summits are at some point in the future in reach. Some are definitely farther away and more difficult to reach than others, and we are going to require a lot resources, a lot of people, a lot of focus and commitment to reach summit after summit. Women cannot go this alone they need the support and commitment of men along the way and we are going to require some change of other women on those summits that push women back down the mountain, but I will address that scenario and issue another day”,

Walzak half-jokes.