

Transcript: Inside sports governance - why silence can be deadly

Speaker What will the changes to Sport New Zealand actually mean? The findings of the independent review highlighted the effect of Football Australia facing integrity probe amid NRL. Women's players experienced twice as much abuse as managers, as two former players for physical and psychological abuse to former players who suffered through an environment of fear, coercive control, physical. Whether it's anti-doping, match fixing, gender inequality, wellbeing, financial performance, duty of care, allegations of abuse or gender based violence, or disruptive power dynamics, the issues for sports boards are vast, and when headlines hit the media, sometimes the stories are heartbreaking and shocking. In this episode of Board Talk Off the Cuff, we're exploring sports governance through the lens of an athlete who transitioned from competing on the world stage to pushing for change on a board. Now, the important thing to note with sports governance is that athletes, as stakeholders are pivotal to the success and growth of sports in Aotearoa New Zealand. Therefore, issues like physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing plays an important part of helping them perform and rise to the top. I don't know how much it's improved. I'm not convinced. And here is a former athlete who competed in the five zero zero zero metres, which is twelve and a half times around the track in the heat, no less. At the Olympic Games in nineteen ninety six, when she was thirty two years old. Well, Paula Radcliffe lying on the track. She's absolutely run herself out as an hair from New Zealand comes through, but we're looking through the nineties. She ran three world cross country championships in the American road racing circuit. She's also competed three times at the Commonwealth Games. But before we get into the governance side of the story, it's important to understand what it's like to train at the top of your game and the rigours of life as an elite athlete. I started in the sport when I was about twelve or thirteen. You know, sort of around about the time you start high school. I was just good at it, I suppose, and I enjoyed it. Did you always have your sights set on like the Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games? Every runner. That's what you want to compete in. Competed in eighty six in Edinburgh, ninety in Auckland and ninety four in Vancouver Island and Victoria. I asked Anne to bring along some photos and the first one an. As mid race on the track. She's lean, focused and determined. There's a visible tension and pressure mounting of a steady stream of. Women pace themselves hot on her heels with the same look of grit on their faces. It's the Olympic Games in Atlanta, nineteen ninety six. So I ran in the very first heat for women over five thousand metres, which was pretty cool to, you know, do that. And then I just hung on to the the five women that were just going for it in that first heat and we ran the fastest heat. I think it was the first four women in each heat went through automatically to the final. And then it was the next two fastest people. Lucky for me, I was in the fastest heat. So I got through and it was hilarious because I thought, oh well, at least I've come to the Olympic Games. I've run a really fast time because it was my best time in the heat and that's great. I'm happy. And then a few people yelled it because I thought the next two heats would be faster, because surely you would know that that heat was fast. The first heat was, you know, reasonably fast. So let's run fast as well. So we make sure we go in. But they didn't. They ran slower after the second heat had been run. A couple of the other women that were in the same event as me came over and

in quick, quick, come and watch the last heat because you might get in. And we did. And so one in particular was Sonia O'Sullivan, who's right there behind me in the final wanted me to get through. She's from Ireland. You're in races with them all year, you know. Yeah. So there's some quite funny stories about, you know, trying to avoid each other so that you could win a race somewhere. And. And then they turn up to say, I was keeping quiet about this race. Why are you here? So you'd have a lot of fun, really. What is the lead up like to training for these, like, incredible international games? How much pressure is on you? Like physically and emotionally? Oh, probably quite a lot. But you kind of get used to it, I guess. You develop coping mechanisms and just have to ignore what some people are saying. And, and all sorts of things happen between being picked for a team and actually going. And I mean, there's lots of training and you have your niggles training not going as well as what it could have, but because you've been through it a few times, you know that if you do the work, that'll come, but sometimes the results are not there when you're doing the heavy training. So you kind of sometimes feel like, is this actually going to come together? By the time I went to the Olympics when I was thirty two, I'd trained to peak a lot. When I made it to the Olympics, I decided to go to the States early because I knew that the heat and humidity were going to be too hard to handle. I was running five thousand meters. I wasn't doing one hundred meters. You know, you've got to be prepared for that kind of humidity. So I had to train in it. And I think that's the key to being an athlete. You're not training to race all the time. You're training for an event, but then you have stupid stuff happens. You know, when people say, oh, you know, you're not good enough to go, it kind of unwarranted abuse and vitriol that sports people and others in the spotlight. Faith, you know, I don't know why you're bothering to train. This is like people on the sidelines who've never done it themselves and think they know everything, but there's plenty of people like that. You just have to kind of block them out. I did have a conversation with one of the people in administration at Athletics New Zealand, and I was like, well, I'm going early to the game, so can you give me, you know, my air flight costs because I'm a part of a New Zealand team. I should have my flights covered. Right? And it took ages and ages and ages and ages for them to pay it. And then when they eventually did pay it, the comment that was made to me and you better run. Well now, as if like, I got my ticket paid for because there's an expectation I should run well, like I've been picked for the damn team. What are you saying that to me for? I'm the sport. You're not the sport. So by the time I went to the Olympics, didn't really give a shit what people said. And in the lead up, though, what kind of pressure is your body under and where does injury fit in amongst that? I had very few injuries and I think every time you have an injury, you kind of learn a lot from it. Like which combinations of training don't go together as you go. You learn, okay, well, I can't do that with that because then that would really injure me. You spend a lot of time doing recovery massages, swimming, Stretching. So, you know, my training combined a whole multitude of things and swimming and, you know, even running in the pool as well as weight training and obviously the running training and, and then I'd have at least two massages a week. The stress on your body, you always had to recover from each stress so that you could go again. So it's not like you're building up as and you're building it up and then not recovering at all. You have to have your training staged if you like. So you look really young in this photo on the right here. It was probably the year before the Olympics. So in nineteen ninety four, after the Commonwealth Games in in Canada, I must have run the Chicago Marathon and then came home and had an endometriosis operation

because I didn't realize I had endometriosis, but I wondered why I was having painful periods. It's really, really difficult to work around that, especially when you can't get off the sofa, let alone go running. It was pretty quick after I got back that I was seen. I don't actually know many other runners from my era that had endometriosis, that would have been in October. My track season still went ahead in ninety five. Actually, I was very lucky. Outside of sport, women face many double standards and are constantly under pressure to live up to often unspoken expectations, including around their physical body, how they communicate and behave. All of this filters through into sport. The report notes women athletes also experienced heightened rates of abusive and harassing behaviours, and Olivia Podmore is finally seen by a system that doctor warned we could lose someone if parents fight exposes systemic failures in cycling NZ. The tragic death of Olivia Podmore in twenty twenty one left people questioning what really happens in the background, and the lead up to high stakes competition. The price of gold what sport must learn from the Podmore tragedy. The incident revealed power dynamics at play where bullying and inappropriate behaviour, went on behind closed doors and wasn't reported. And the problem with the lack of reporting is that silence can be deadly. Five years on from the incident, what does and believe has changed in the sport? And has it become safer from a governance lens? And if not, why? I don't know how much it's improved in terms of the people around the person who may be a victim of, you know, what Olivia was a victim of? I'm not convinced. Let's say that sport is actually improved in that regard, because I think it will happen again or not, perhaps to that degree of severity, you know, of a death, maybe more that we just lose people to the sports. You know, you don't see young women participating in sport as much as when I was young. There was lots of women competing in cross country and running and stuff. But now I think we lose a lot of people because we don't make it attractive for them. We don't give them the pathways and we don't look after them. And as a firm believer that anyone sitting on a sports board needs to have an understanding of the rigors required to compete at the top level. Here's why. This week, the United Nations UN special Rapporteur on Violence against women and girls presented a report detailing the violence experienced by racism and ridicule, body shaming, sexualised comments, stalking, doxing and revenge porn. Gymnastics Australia breached human rights of girl with a broken back. Research indicates that those who have experienced psychological, sexual or physical harm don't perform as well as those who don't. But reporting can lead to further harm for the athletes in question. So what can boards do to ensure that women and girls are supported and continue to participate in sport and work their way up to the international stage? The sport should have protocols like, for example, I help run a swim club so no adult is with a child on their own. Number one, you know, it's a simple stuff like Stranger Danger, all that stuff, and it should carry on through into adult sport. You know, you're never alone with a coach. You're never alone actually, with anybody in the sport. You're always with somebody else can make it a policy, can't they? You see it in primary schools. You know, you don't ever see a teacher with a child on their own. But I think we we tend to drop all of that because we assume the athlete is an adult now, but the athlete is being manipulated like they're just a tool in the whole game, if you like. And so they're not necessarily going to question the coach. We're in actual fact, if it was policy, if it was always the way it should be, then everyone would just do it. And so you'd never be in that position to be abused, be manipulated and all of that. Yeah. I mean, there are cruel people wherever you go in life. And I suppose one of the things that I learnt as an athlete is you have to be pretty

tough to deal with all of that stupidity. But, you know, some people don't have the same kind of personality type as me. So you have to have structures set up that make sure that that person isn't alone and isn't bullied. Yeah. Because otherwise you open yourself up. And I mean, as an adult, you should know you don't be alone with a child. You know somebody else's child. Know that you just don't do that. So why should that change when their so called adult athlete? You shouldn't happen. Do you know what I mean? So even when I was coaching males, I would make sure that it was okay. Like if I had to hold their foot up or show them how to do an exercise or something. Can I actually touch you or not? You know, like, can I show you or do you want me to demonstrate? It's up to you, the adult, to protect yourself as much as it is to protect the child when it comes to board supporting athletes, and says more attention also needs to be paid to coaches. Definitely. I coached for a while and, you know, basically I was sidelined as a coach because, you know, I wasn't doing this or that or, you know, people thought that they could do better. So they'd start poaching the athletes off you and end up pushing them a lot harder. So they got instant results. But it wasn't actually looking after the athlete for the long term. And I think that's part of the problem with sport in New Zealand, too, is they're not paying enough attention to coaches, and particularly to coaches who were athletes themselves. And points to the example of Dame Noeline Taurua forced to step down as coach of the Silver Ferns, leaving shockwaves in the sporting community and. But the role of governance and transparency, and a lack of support for coaches across all sports that should never, ever have gotten to the public arena. It's just disgusting the way she was treated and so publicly. I mean, that should never happen. But what do you think then boards can do about it? Or if you were sitting on a board, what were some of the questions you would be asking? Well, I would be making sure that the coach had what they needed, that the coach was able to explain, you know, what she's seeing or he because it shouldn't be an attack on the coach. It should be supporting the coach. You've selected the coach much in the same way as a board selects its CEO for good reason, because they were they're a good coach. But I think what's happening in the world that we live in now, you get this sort of like a group think, I suppose. And there's a good saying in coaching that says you either coach someone before they know everything or after they realize they don't. And it's the middle part that's really difficult as a coach to comprehend that the ages where the athletes think they already know everything is the absolute time they're representing their country. You know, it's the early twenties, and it's not till they start hitting their late twenties that then they've had a bit of experience and then they go. She was actually right about that and it's too late. I think we need more support for coaches to say, actually, you know, guys, the coach knows what they're talking about. You guys need to pay attention, but there isn't enough of that. And it's really hard as a coach out there on your own if you don't get the backing from the people within the sport. It's really hard because, you know, athletes and parents will quick to criticize you, very quick to criticize you. Female course record here since nineteen ninety four in a record of twenty eighteen. Would you please welcome to the stage Anne Hare. And developing that thick skin through her sport. You could say it equipped her for the kind of resilience she needed to sit on boards. Ninety seven I retired from international competition, but then I did compete, you know, a couple of times after that as a passionate advocate for athletes rights and served on the New Zealand Olympic Committee and Athletics New Zealand. Was it nice to take a step back? It is nice because you put a lot of pressure on yourself, obviously, to run well and beat other people

and all that kind of stuff. So it's nice not to care anymore. Hey, I can't believe I ran twenty eighteen. How the heck did I do that? I think I ran like twenty four. I must have been asked to be on the Athletes Commission. I'd probably run maybe one or two Commonwealth Games. So it would have been in the early nineties. So they had Athletes commission teams commission, Sports science commission, different kind of groupings within the Olympic Committee. And so I did a bit of work on different committees. So I learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes, you know, organizing the uniforms, organizing, you know, athletes support and which was really good. And then obviously later on, it changed so that the little separate committees that were doing everything, then became paid positions. And so then they just had the one committee, and I was on the Olympic Committee for a while. For you, what was one of the kind of primary issues back then that you found was coming up versus what we're probably seeing now? I think there was a lack of listening to the athletes. I felt like, you know, we were there as athletes to explain some of the things that they needed, but often it was ignored. This was Athletics New Zealand, but I remember being on that board and we were talking about whether or not the cross country team needed a massage therapist to go with them. I mean, they were travelling to the other side of the world. So of course you need a massage therapist. They've got sore backs and all that kind of stuff and they're not well sometimes, you know, and they need someone who's got a bit of a medical, you know, whatever. They argued against me and they said, oh, we don't need a massage therapist. And I'm like, well, if you're sending a manager who can hold on to the tickets. Why can't they be a massage therapist instead? Because we've all travelled heaps. I mean, it's not like we don't know how to get on a plane at the end of the meeting. This guy who was pushing for no massage therapist was kind of going, oh, my back. After all this sitting, I think I need a massage. And I quickly piped up and said, no, you don't. Remember you said, we don't need them. What? I meant that athletes would have had to use like a hotel massage therapist and pay for it themselves. We used to give each other massages because we kind of knew what we liked and what we didn't like. But then, you know, it's the time, you know, you're having to put in effort. It's quite often hard to give yourself a massage, especially for your back or shoulders. You can kind of rub your calf, but it's still not the same as having someone there dedicated to help you relax and sort your muscle issues out. One of the biggest achievements and pushed for while on the board was for women's football. So we'd been talking about all the sports football included for, you know, however many years I was on the committee for. Before then we had a long meeting at the Olympic Committee about sending the women's football team to Beijing. Like, if it had been a men's team, would we have even questioned sending them? But it was a women's football team and they're not going to win a medal. So there was that argument otherwise. Papua New Guinea goes there were men that were advocating for it, and there were women who weren't advocating for it. But at the same time, I just feel like nobody should have been not advocating for it. And, you know, they qualified. And so the Olympics isn't just about winning medals. It's also about representing your part of the world, you know, because that's what the rings represent each part of the world. And with team sports, it is different to what it is for like an individual athlete. And I mean, I couldn't believe that it took us, I don't know, maybe an hour and a half or two hours to finally agree to send the women's football team. It felt like a marathon, but I pushed and pushed and look what happened to women's football since this from YouTube New Zealand versus Fiji and the FIFA Women's World Cup OFC qualifiers in

April twenty twenty six. She has scored in her hometown and New Zealand. Get an early goal and there are major milestones that were made from having a women's team, including a growth and domestic crowds, which has been packed out stadiums, including at the semi-final between Spain and Sweden at a record capacity of over forty three thousand spectators. For shareholders and the sport, that's a massive win, helping to change the face of what was a male dominated sport and has seen a surge in women wanting to participate, too. It's massive and just what a credit to the sport and to those people that pushed for women to have that exposure. I mean, we've had a World Cup here now and we've got a local Phoenix team here that are we're in the final of the regional competition. You know, like what. And these women are going again to the Olympics and World Cups and whatnot. You know, it's fantastic. And they're drawing and top coaches as well. So it's those sort of decisions that can make a big difference later on down the track. But the fact that we had to fight for it. My sport, it's really, really, really, really hard to win a medal. In fact, it's really, really, really hard to get in a final, let alone win a medal. Wellington's got a female Olympic finalist. Not that many people would know and not many people would know it was me. If you had to pick us out in a crowd. But there aren't that many of us, so why limit it? So that's why Anne believes diversity on sports boards is needed if growth is to continue, but that the goalposts need to remain consistent. One of the problems is also keeping women in sport and on sports boards. If they've qualified, send them for goodness sakes. And that was one of the issues I had, not just with the football situation. It was lots of other situations that happened with athletes that had qualified and weren't selected to go. There was a couple of marathoners, and one of the marathoners had qualified in the ten thousand metres, and Athletics New Zealand were encouraged not to put them forward to the Olympic Committee by the Olympic selectors. So I knew that, and I was saying to them, you can't do that. If they've qualified, you set the standard way back two years ago or whatever, and I was really annoyed that they were moving the goalposts. You just have to change the standard for the next games, not for these games. You can't put the goalposts here and then go, oh no, we've decided there should be over there. There are different reasons people join boards, but it was so important to Anne to make a contribution to changing the sport and supporting athletes that out of frustration, she decided to step down from that board. So it was that kind of thing that actually drove me away from the Olympic Committee, because I think they lost sight of, you know, what it's really about? It isn't about picking who's going to be the gold medalists and who's not going to be the medalist. It's actually about sending people to an Olympic Games that have qualified and then supporting them to do well. You know, you fight a lot. You fight and fight and fight. And in Ann's eyes, that's what lets the side down. It's a struggle to be heard. She wanted to see change, and bringing women onto sports boards was also one of her goals. A woman, not woman as in lots of them, but just one. We tried to get more women on boards. Of all the individual sports, we talk about diversity on boards, whether it's like diversity of skills, of gender, ethnicity. How important is it to ensure that that spread is across a sports board? Well, I think it's very important because we all come with different life experiences. And clearly the male female divide is a pretty simple one to work out that we have different experiences, right? You can't deny it. So that's like an obvious diversity. If you're trying to be diverse, then that's the most obvious one, isn't it? What about the depth of knowledge of that particular sport? How essential is that? Well, you have to have some knowledge of the sport. I mean, some people say oh, so and so's got really good governance

skills. But yeah, but you're governing something you know nothing about. How do you do that? Like, I wouldn't want to be governing a construction company, you know, because you wouldn't know what questions to ask. And I guess that's one of the most important things about governance is knowing what to ask. Because, you know, management can be not necessarily hiding something from you. But, you know, I have had an experience where they do try and hide stuff from you. And if you don't ask the right questions, the right information isn't going to come back to you so that you know whether or not, obviously, you know, your most important thing is it has to be a going concern. How are you going to know if it's a going concern, if you know nothing about the sport, and if you were to put together a sports tool kit, what would it focus on? What would be three key things? The first key thing I think all boards need to do is learn to listen. So that means you have to have a really good chair person, someone who is observing, who wants to say something. Because sometimes and quite often you can't get a word in and but because you get left to last as a woman, you're not really heard. And sometimes you're heard, but then they want it to be their idea. Now, there have been some inroads made since Anne's time on those boards. The latest stocktake from the Ministry of Women on Gender and Ethnic Diversity and Public sector boards shows that women hold fifty point two per cent of public sector board roles, and it's a sixth consecutive year above the government's fifty per cent target. but representation has fallen from fifty three point nine percent in twenty twenty three. So gender parity at the board table is an achievement, but maintaining it is another challenge. And as an reinforced, this still needs to be more representation of women and diversity in general on sports boards. If you don't give a platform for the women to speak, mostly they're not heard. Really. Um, so what are the three things? Having a really good chair, but everyone being able to listen. Making sure you've read the papers before you turn up. And that's basic governance one hundred and one, which I suppose is quite a common theme that comes through with directors that, you know, a lot of them, they complain about, people turn up and open the envelope at the table when they sit down and haven't actually read the papers. So if you haven't read the papers, you can't be participating in the discussion adequately to everyone else's level. So I suppose that's one of the important things I found being a director. A lot of people weren't on the same page because they hadn't done their homework. But if you haven't read the papers at all, you're not going to know that there was a complaint, are you? And so then you've got to be beefed up during the meeting. People are going to have to tell you what's happened, and then sometimes they'll put their spin on it. So then you get that groupthink thing happening, which is quite dangerous for boards. And a lot of boards do fall into that groupthink, you know. But you didn't read the papers. You haven't formed your own opinion. If you don't sleep on it after you've read it, how are you going to have formed your own opinion? You're not going to have formed your own opinion, are you? You're going because so and so who you like said that. So therefore that must be right. Leading up to this, we did talk about things that do need to change or a lot of gaps. Can you name some of those things that you would like to see boards on sports organisations change. In a lot of ways, it would be quite nice for men to just butt out of women's sport. You know, like, I've got a good friend who played netball. She was a silver fern. In fact, I coached her in athletics for a while to get her fitter so she could continue to be a silver fern. She'd done a coaching course and was just fascinated by all the stories that the other women had from other sports that are mixed, because netball, like really is mainly a female

sport. And I thought that was quite intriguing that she said that. And I thought, man, that's how we maybe do it, is we have women run the women's side of sport and men can run the men's side of sport. And you know, that way we can actually make it equal because we're governing what we need and they can govern what they want. Because, you know, for example, in athletics, you know, they talk about being equal with men. Well, being equal with men isn't necessarily equitable. You know, like just because the men run. Eight K cross country doesn't mean it's sensible for women. Like we had the steeples. They're made for men. So let's have the right height for women. We made sure that they were lowered. Same with the hurdles. Same with the weighted implements, you know, throwing implements and that kind of thing. So it kind of drives me a little bit crazy that women's sport is still essentially governed by mainly men. Because when we say we've got women on boards, they're not more than fifty percent of the board. So sometimes I think, wouldn't that be a better idea? You really believe that that would make sport in general more equitable? Absolutely, absolutely. Because then women are representing women in sport and then the two can come together. They can have a fifty fifty meeting, not a two woman on the board versus the eight men. It'd be five and five or even just have a women's committee, you know, for each sport has it for that amidst the rugby and the tennis and the athletics and swimming and whatnot, you know, have a committee that is just made up of women who come to the board with a recommendation on what's going to work for women in the sport, because otherwise we will get less and less participation. Thanks, Anne. That was former Olympic athlete Anne Hare. You've been listening to board Talk Off the Cuff, and I'm your host and producer, Sonja Yee. The Institute of Directors is currently gearing up for New Zealand's foremost governance event. The annual leadership conference is not to be missed, and this year we're bringing it to Wellington's Takino Convention Centre, where you'll hear important insights on the issues shaping governance now and into the future. Presented by international and local keynote speakers, there'll also be workshops peppered into the event, with plenty of networking opportunities to meet and learn from top leaders and directors from across the MOTU. For more information about the event or to find out about our range of courses, head to [iod dot org dot nz](http://iod.org.nz). Until next time. Mattawa.