



## Advancing women in sports

**Host:** Hanish Patel, User Friendly host and Digital Transformation leader, Deloitte Consulting LLP

**Guests:** Cathy Engelbert, commissioner for the WNBA, and Shiz Suzuki, assistant vice president for Sponsorships and Experiential Marketing at AT&T

**Hanish Patel:**

Over the last decade, women's sports has demonstrated time and time again its ability to attract large audiences. The potential for growth and untapped interest continues to drive a rise in investment in women's teams and sponsorship deals, and in turn can inspire more women to aspire to compete at the highest levels. But despite the ability of women's sports to deliver strong TV ratings, event day attendance, and overall interest, it's not often matched equally in media coverage, conditions, or pay.

Women's sports has immense potential value, not just in monetary terms but also in terms of what it signals for gender parity. However, for women's sports to fulfill its potential, it requires action by all interested parties. So, joining me today to discuss how value-driven businesses can lead the way in the advancements of women in sports are Cathy Engelbert, commissioner for the WNBA, and Shiz Suzuki, assistant vice president for Sponsorships and Experiential Marketing at AT&T. Cathy, Shiz, super excited to

have you on, and welcome to the show.

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Thanks, Hanish. Great to be here.

**Shiz Suzuki:**

Thanks.

**Hanish Patel:**

This is such an exciting topic, and let's get into it. We've got so much to cover here, so I'm actually going to use a sports term and say, let's tip off with this, and we can use it to ground our listeners. So, Shiz,

women in sports is not a new thing. So why is it an important aspect for us to be talking about women in sports right now, and more broadly, do you feel this discussion is different now than it's been in the past?

**Shiz Suzuki:**

So let me start by saying that I am very, very fortunate to be able to work on things that I'm really passionate about and supporting women in sports is certainly one of them. And I always say that it is not only the right thing to do for the next generation of young women, but it is also really good for business. So let me just back up for a second. I usually like to explain why companies like AT&T invest in sponsorships overall. And one of them is for brand building. Certainly, our brand, a 140-plus-year-old brand doesn't need much of an introduction, but it becomes so important to make sure that the persona of the brand, the reputation of the brand, the perception of the brand is managed and done in a way that is very intentional, and sponsorships is one of them.

And if you think about even the definition of a brand, that is this emotional meeting ground between a company and its people. And when I say people, that's customers, its prospects, its employees, and there's so much research out there that shows that when people love a brand, when customers love a brand, they are willing to spend more money, pay higher prices, recommend that company to their friends and family, and forgive them when unfortunately things go wrong. And I think all of us are very much so aware that the customers of today, and if we think about the customers of tomorrow, they're very, very much so particular about how and where they spend their money. And I think it rings true that people want to see themselves reflected in things like the content that they watch or the things that they buy and certainly the kinds of businesses they do business with.

And if you think about 50% of the U.S. population being women, 85% of household purchase decisions being made by women, for a company like AT&T it makes complete business sense to ensure that our brand is associated with strong female-centric brands like

the WNBA. But the reality is the stats are staggering. From a women in sports perspective, less than 4% of media coverage is women's sports. And less than a percent of sponsorship dollars goes to women's sports. We obviously, as a holistic industry, we need to do better than that, but there has been this really exciting momentum happening. And we're starting to see some changes.

**Hanish Patel:**

Shiz, thank you for that. Those stats just astounded me, and I remember Cathy in a recent op-ed you did I kind of read those stats and I really had to take a double take frankly to think that the percentage is so low in comparison, especially, Shiz, when you talk about, we want to see a reflection of ourselves out there. And like you said, it's 50%, but it's far from the balance when you think about media coverage and the percentage of sponsorship dollars going up that way.

So, Cathy, to that point, I'd like to move to you. And when I think about Deloitte, the WNBA, and AT&T, it seems like quite an odd pairing for this podcast with the three of us on there, but there's a real good reason for why we're all here. And the inaugural group of the WNBA Changemakers business sponsors includes Deloitte and AT&T. So to that, Cathy, can you explain for our listeners what this platform is and what spurred its creation?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Sure, Hanish. First, it's great to be here. Second, without Shiz and AT&T last season in a wobble, by the way, in the middle of a pandemic and a racial justice crisis, we don't have a season. So back to your question, Hanish, as to what WNBA Changemakers is all about. When we negotiated a very historic and progressive collective bargaining agreement, because our players in the WNBA are unionized, so we negotiated that last year, we launched the WNBA Changemakers platform and it was literally to directly support the WNBA and women's sports. Because I'm a big believer that we're hopefully also lifting women's sports across the spectrum. And I loved Shiz's emotional meeting ground because this was more than just a partnership. This is about activating it to help our

transformation across being a very player-first league, marketing, branding, fan experience. And there's no one better than AT&T to help us in that space. And they certainly did, and they have showed up amazingly and Nike and Deloitte.

So in light of recent conversations that Shiz just mentioned around disparities between men's and women's sports and the opinion piece I did on the conversation needs to shift to companies no longer checking off a box in their internal diversity, equity, and inclusion, but putting weight behind something impactful, something they have an emotional connection to because they're building a brand or they're looking for a consumer base that basically matches the values, ideals, and the fan base that we have. And so I think by founding and launching the WNBA Changemakers, this is a platform by which we want companies and more companies to come in and take advantage of the momentum that we see in women's sports and such a prime time to invest.

Because this was going to be exponential growth, and I think again AT&T saw that well before everybody else and has stepped up in a big way. Just to give you a little perspective, they ran a whole She's Connected brand-building series for our players and taught them about personal brand and network for career growth. So we're looking forward to what our second year, it is our 25th season, our second year of WNBA Changemakers brings, but we're really excited about it.

**Hanish Patel:**

So, Cathy, it's clear from your example there what the inaugural sponsors, in particular AT&T, have brought to the Changemakers program, and you talked about exponential growth going forward. What does it look like a couple of years from now? What will you be looking for from the sponsors into this program?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Yeah, it's actually a great question, Hanish, as we're thinking about the next generation of Changemakers already. And you know from my history with the firm I'm always about innovation. I'm always about thinking about our digital platform, our transformation of our marketing, our team operations. And so, the future



ADVANCING WOMEN IN SPORTS

is a multidimensional transformation for us, and whether that's data and analytics and getting more information on our fans or optimization or human capital recommendation and those kinds of things. So there's so much to do here, I think. Internships for players is something we have on our list, incorporating WNBA players into some of the issues that the companies that support us are trying to solve in their own business with their own talent platform.

You know these elite athletes in the WNBA have so much to offer, college graduates, top of their class, best athletes in the world. And so, I think one thing Nike has done, who is also a WNBA Changemaker, is actually taken retired WNBA players into a program where they help them develop their post-career skills. You're working through a cohort store in the course of a two-year program, and teams at Nike working with the WNBA saw that capacity of our players as leaders, whether it's on the court or off the court. So, I know as a former college athlete myself and probably never would have been good enough to play in the WNBA had it existed 35 years ago, but I see the leadership skills that are built into athletes who compete every day on the court. And I think businesses can hugely benefit from the skills and the attributes and the leadership that these types of players show.

**Hanish Patel:**

Cathy, let's dig in a bit deeper in that space, and clearly one of the goals for the Changemakers group is to significantly elevate the player experience, be that during their career or as you cited an example, post-career, and really to enable the league's business transformation. So how is the WNBA putting these priorities into action from a business transformation standpoint?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Yeah, it's a really good question because we have to keep pushing. I mean, women's sports is really hard, and we have to keep pushing to make sure that we're getting the exposure we need and that we're transforming the way we need to. Now, just to be honest, Hanish, the pandemic put us behind on a few things, but we've got four main categories for our transformation and it's brand marketing,

which is what AT&T does so beautifully, it's revamping our public footprint inside out and outside in, it's operational optimization, and player and team growth. So if our teams don't grow along with the league, if just the league grows and not our teams, we're not going to be successful.

So, there's a lot to unpack there, I know, just in that, but we're looking at fan engagement and a whole reset of our digital platform, as you know with five generations in the workforce and digital natives coming in in big groups. So, this is going to be an important area as we get into the next few years for us to transform and use our partners to help us do that.

**Hanish Patel:**

Brilliant. I think about what you've said around what you're looking to do in transformation, and with that, Shiz, I want to pivot to something you also said earlier, and frankly for women, be that in the workplace or in sports, a clear gap exists, and we saw that from the stats you cited. So from your perspective, how is AT&T as a WNBA Changemaker business sponsor helping drive that change to really close that gap and help with that business transformation standpoint that Cathy just mentioned?

**Shiz Suzuki:**

And I'm going to actually answer this one starting with giving Cathy a huge shout-out. I mean, in a very, very short period of time, without her there wouldn't be Changemakers. I mean, she is the lead changemaker in this equation. And from a sponsorship standpoint, that partnership and that support that you receive from a partner, frankly, that is the key to success. A brand can't do it on its own. It really requires collaboration and support ideation. I mean, you put together a zillion ideas and most of them never see the light of day, but that takes a lot of time and commitment and passion from your property.

And certainly for us as AT&T, we always talk about the fact that from a sponsorship perspective, we love to be a brand of change. And obviously that requires that partnership with the property. And there's a story that I always like to tell my team about the fact that it only takes one person or one company or

one, it only takes one to be a part of the change. And the story that I love to use is one of Kathrine Switzer. She's the first woman to finish the Boston Marathon. And this is back in the day when people didn't believe that women could finish a distance of 26.2 miles.

Certainly now, today, we take it for granted, right? I've run a few myself. But back in 1967, she registered with a gender-neutral name using her initials. And when the race director saw her in the race, he tried to pull her off, and she prevailed. The male allies that were around her helped her stay in the race, and she finished the race as the first female. She later petitioned to get more women, all women who qualify, an entry, and that happened in 1972, so it was five years later. And she used that as inspiration to put together this really incredible pitch for a worldwide women's marathon event and started to go to sponsors all over the place. Avon signed on, and Avon allowed this event to flourish. And guess what? To no surprise for us today, but at the time it was a surprise for everyone, is that it took off.

I mean, women around the world were signing up and going around the world running marathons. And she later, Kathrine actually used this as a proof to the USOC that a women's marathon belonged in the Summer Olympic Games, and that happened in 1984. I have to say, when I saw that, that was a shock to myself, it's within my lifetime. And certainly we would never doubt for a second that in the future that a women's marathon would be a part of the Olympic Games. But there was a time when that was just not taking place. And so today we take it for granted, but it took that one person or that one company, it took these people to really be a part of that change. And so I always tell my team, when you wake up in the morning, be that person, be that change, be a part of that.

And so for me, personally, WNBA and the Changemakers program, this is part of my activism. Again, when I talk about the fact that I'm so fortunate to do the things that I love. And so from a sponsorship perspective, this is about looking for ways that we can help elevate women, help support them in the things that they're

passionate about. Cathy just talked about the fact that the WNBA athletes are such multihyphenate individuals. And by the way, we learned a lot of that through Cathy, and that's because Cathy's spent the time listening to these athletes. And so that's what's allowed us to have some of the successes we had.

And so to her point, in the wubble season last year, everything from providing them with a new 5G device on our 5G network, a year of subscription to HBO Max, this was around keeping them connected to the people and the content they love the most. And I think the part that just, I've just got to say, like really inspired me was after that moment, 37% of all the WNBA players, this was not prompted, these were not paid endorsements or anything to that effect. They went to social media to say, thank you and they actually dubbed it the Wubble. That organicness is something that, it's just so beautiful. And I know fans and audiences, they see that, certainly the workshops, touching on call it sponsorships and media dollars. Obviously, media is a big part of this equation. One of the things last season was around the WNBA draft.

I know a lot of people like to think about the NFL draft, but everybody needs to remember, Cathy was first with the virtual draft. And at the time when we started to hear more about the logistics, we heard it was going to be on ESPN2. And we were like, why is it not on ESPN?

So going back to being a brand of change, listen, we raised our hand, we called in to the network and said, "Hey, listen, is there a possibility? And by the way, we will increase our media spend on this event." And they said, "Okay." And they did, they moved it to ESPN. We tripled our investment. We put our money where our mouth is, and it ranked second overall in viewership and was up 123% from the previous year. And this year, when we heard when the schedule was for the draft, we didn't even have to ask about it. They said it will be on ESPN.

#### **Cathy Engelbert:**

If I could just weigh in there, I mean, great story. And other things that Shiz is talking about the value in supporting. What people don't understand when you're in live sports and playing professionally,

they're still working moms, they're actually entrepreneurs, they're broadcast personalities, they're social activists. They're the role models of the "you can't be what you can't see." Well, you can see it in these WNBA players. So I just really appreciate how Shiz looks at this and that emotional connection and passion you can hear in her voice, right? An emotional connection to lifting something that's going to be really big here, and AT&T and Shiz and her team just can't be more supportive. But it is about that connection and making sure that you can affect change and have an impact. And that's what AT&T has done.

#### **Hanish Patel:**

So I want to stick with this train and, Shiz, you mentioned something about elevating women and, Cathy, you just mentioned that that's a kind of connection and kind of the place that women have in social as well. So thinking about the companies that really focus in on that place, and some are leading it, are tech and media and telecom industry, those companies. So what can those that are in that industry do to replicate or drive change in order to really uplift women more in their own organizations?

#### **Cathy Engelbert:**

Yeah, maybe I'll comment on this first. In every industry and organization I've ever worked with, and it's been hundreds, kind of diversity, equity, inclusion has become very clear that that is so critical to success. We see, and I wrote this in my opinion piece, study after study that validates that having gender diverse leadership leads to higher productivity, critical for innovation, and actually leads to being more profitable. So I was blessed to work for a firm that, back in the early '90s before it was trendy, said we need to have a women's initiative, not just for the advancement but the retention of women. Because there was a retention gap back then, and we were hiring 50% women, yet they weren't getting to the leadership ranks as quickly as they should.

But now at the WNBA, it's about building a pipeline and having a development culture and making sure that we're building and developing talent so the next time a head coach gets named, it's a diverse one. The next time a general

manager or anything in our ecosystem occurs, that people are thinking about how diversity leads to a better diversity of thought. And no matter what level I have in my organization or when I was at Deloitte or anywhere else, people are watching, people watch these kinds of things, they model behaviors for people around us. So, whether it's in the telecom and tech and media industry, or anywhere, including live sports, it's something that we all have work to do. We all have to build pipelines. We all have to actually do a little bit extra to make sure we're creating a culture to uplift diverse individuals.

Because by 2040, Hanish, today's minority will outnumber today's majority. And so this is actually like a real business imperative because that's not that far away. I think I'm 35 years into my career, 18 years or so, 19 years is not that far away. So I think once people figure it out, this is a business imperative that women and building the next generation of diverse leaders, whether it's women or women of color or people of color, is so important too, I think as we think about how to build a business and thrive in business. And I'd be curious, Shiz, to hear your thoughts on that.

**Shiz Suzuki:**

No, 100%. I love what you said about the fact that the companies out there that hire the diversity and hire the women and have them in their leadership ranks. It's about higher productivity, it's about more profitability, it's good for business. And so we've also talked a lot at AT&T about making sure that we have teams that are reflective of our customer base. For me, very specifically for sponsorships. I think about certainly our customer base, but also the fan bases and making sure that I've got a team that reflects that. And why is that important? It's important because when you have those people at your table, then we're able to create sponsorship activations, we're able to create programs, advertising, messaging, things that are a lot more relatable to that fan base or the customer base.

And the reality is there are qualified women, right? But certainly we need to hire the women, the diversity into these ranks. And I just have to say I do have to give a shout-out to AT&T. I mean, this is

a company that was progressive enough to put me, I'm a woman of color and I had zero sponsorships background, and they put me into this role to run one of the largest sponsorship portfolios in the United States three years ago.

And for them it was about, listen, if you want change, then you've got to put in somebody who has a different perspective. I certainly brought a different perspective to the table, and we've made some of those right changes. And I hired, I've hired women, I've hired women of color into my teams. I love it, by the way, when I can walk into like an e-sports negotiation and bring a team of all women and see the surprise on people's faces. It's still a bit of a rarity, but I'm hoping that, again, like we can be a part of that change.

Representation, it really matters. I know there's that saying, if you can see her, you can be her. I was trying to explain this to somebody the other day, and there's a beautiful viral video from Hamilton. It's the Hamilton that was on Disney+, came out last year. Anyways, Phillipa Soo, who is Chinese American, plays one of the sisters. And there is this little Asian girl who's watching this, this was captured, went viral on social, and she's watching Phillipa singing on TV and she's saying, "It's me, it's me." And she's pointing at Phillipa and it just, ah, it melts your heart. So, I always use that as an example of, this is why representation matters, it's for that next generation. So, hire them. They're out there.

**Hanish Patel:**

That's fantastic. Great story, and it kind of makes you think about all the change that we've seen over the last number of years, and still, as we talked about earlier, plenty more to go. Talking about change over time, I guess, one of the things I saw was this year marks the 25th anniversary of the WNBA, and I understand this season's manifesto is Count It. So to that, Cathy, can you describe what that means?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

I'd love to, Hanish. This is my favorite part of the season. So to basketball fans out there, they know count it means when you make a shot in the face of adversity, you say count it, you know, money in the bank, count it. So, translating that

to the WNBA, Count It is about counting everything that the WNBA is and has done, whether it's the work they've done in the social justice space on criminal justice reform or LGBTQ+ representation, working moms defying expectations.

I mean, literally, that's why we did our logo. If you look at it, isn't the traditional two five, or isn't the traditional even XV, it's tally marks with our standard orange tally mark being the fifth for it gives perspectives to like we're still counting, right? We're not done. And I think no one thought WNBA players could dunk and they can, no one thought they could come back after being a mom and they have. We have one player who's had twins and came back the next season. So, it's literally counting all these accomplishments. We wanted a way to celebrate the league's impact not only on the game, but culture at large.

So, I think we're trying to blend signifying a little bit about the future, but a look back at history. I mean, the WNBA players stand on shoulders of giants like Sheryl Swoopes and a whole litany, Lisa Leslie and Rebecca Lobo. And we formed an advisory council for the 25th season of some of these legends, but also people who launched the league back in 1997, coming off the Gold Medal that the USAB Women's National Team won in the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. So, just so great to be celebrating. And by the way, Hanish, you may not know this, but we're the first women's professional league in the U.S. to get to 25. In fact, we're two times getting to versus other leagues. So we're just setting the stage for the next 25 years, and count on the WNBA is kind of like why we came up with Count It, and I think it's actually gone over really well on social. And we'll just continue to count the ways the league is making progress on women's empowerment, and we're a league of 80% women of color, and it's really important to invest in their success.

**Hanish Patel:**

I love it. And with that backdrop, Shiz, how can businesses support this?

**Shiz Suzuki:**

I'd say join us, join AT&T as supporting women's sports, supporting the WNBA, invest, just start with one thing. I think for us, specifically, there's going to be

more to come that we're going to be talking about and supporting for the 25th season. But as the season tips off May 14, you can certainly count on us to be there to support these incredible athletes. There's so much more to come in collaboration with Cathy and our leadership team. We're super excited.

**Cathy Engelbert:**

I love it. Shiz has the count it down. I love it.

**Hanish Patel:**

That's brilliant. I opened up with a bit of a sports term with tip off, so I'm going to close with one. Cathy, Shiz, before the buzzer sounds, any closing thoughts?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Yeah, I would just say as you think about transformation in business, sports now that I've been in it about 20 months, it is big business. And so everybody thinks sports is so different than business and it really isn't. And we need support, we need marketing, we need branding, we need to build household names in our players so that, for instance, the audience listening here knows who Sue Bird is, Diana Taurasi, Elena Delle Donne, Nneka Ogyumike, Diamond DeShields, who is a fabulous athlete playing for Chicago. Certainly, Candace Parker who just got traded from LA to Chicago or assigned in free agency. And then we have Sabrina Ionescu and Crystal Dangerfield, who was our rookie of the year last year, and Kennedy Carter, and Jonquel Jones is coming back to Connecticut. So we have just so many great storylines in this league, but America needs to learn who these players are. So we're going to do our part.

And AT&T and our other WNBA Changemakers, Nike, Deloitte, and then ESPN has been great since the beginning of the league on broadcast, but we're going to do our part to get those stories out there. And we just ask that everyone find ways to support women in the workforce, working women in the WNBA, and become a fan. We love to activate and engage with our fans, and we skew younger and more digital natives and more diverse, but we'd love to drive a fan base that is more rabid and avid than we even have today. And we have a pretty rabid and avid fan base today.

**Hanish Patel:**

Fantastic. Shiz, any thoughts from your side?

**Shiz Suzuki:**

Yeah, definitely. I'll go back to the, if you can see her, you can be her, in that fact that representation matters. And having incredible women in visible places for the next generation is something that is so important. I have a five-year-old niece and when I think about her and the things that she's exposed to, certainly, I want her to know she could be a pro-basketball athlete like Nneka Ogyumike McKay or a commissioner of a professional sports league like Cathy, or in a boardroom like Cathy was in a CEO role. And I want her to know, you can achieve anything that you can put your mind to, and it is so incredibly important to have the right role models out there for the next generation of young women.

**Hanish Patel:**

Fantastic. I'm going to quickly slip in another question for the both of you. And that is, how did your March Madness bracket work out? And did either of you have Stanford as the winner?

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Don't we love Hanish? He's talking about the women's basketball bracket. I did have Stanford as the winner only because I've got two Stanford grads who played basketball, one in the WNBA, one in the ABL that predated the WNBA before the WNBA started. And they would—I had to root for Stanford. But I actually had UConn in the final and obviously that didn't work out, but they are going to have a fabulous team in the future. And I think all the teams showed up. You look to sell the ratings, Hanish, and it was such an exciting tournament. And we get to draft some of these players into the WNBA this year. So we're really excited for them to continue their basketball careers.

**Hanish Patel:**

Fantastic. Shiz, how about you? How did you get on?

**Shiz Suzuki:**

Busted bracket. So I was supporting my Lady Bruins and they had a really great start, but you know what, there's always

next year.

**Hanish Patel:**

That's the light. That's the light. Well, I failed miserably on mine, so I'm not even going to say how well I did or how poorly. And with that, Cathy, Shiz, I want to thank you for taking the time out today to join me on the pod to discuss and share your perspective on an incredibly important topic. And frankly, I, for one, learned a hell of a lot today in our conversation. So I want to really thank you for taking the time out. Really appreciate that.

**Cathy Engelbert:**

Thanks, Hanish. Have a great one. Stay healthy everybody.

**Shiz Suzuki:**

Thank you.

**Hanish Patel:**

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