

**Jodi Evans:** Hello, I'm Jody Evans, I'm the Safeguarding Adults in Sport Manager for Wales at the Ann Craft Trust. Today I'm talking to Mhairi McLennan and Mari is the co founder and CEO of Kyniska Advocacy.

Hello, welcome Mari, thanks for joining me today. It's really good to speak to you and catch up.

Just for anybody listening, just wondered if you want to just tell me a little bit about you and a little bit about Kyniska Advocacy and your journey really so far.

**Mhairi Maclennan:** Absolutely. Hi, lovely to be here.

So I'm Mhairi McLennan and I am one of the co-founders and now have the sort of ridiculous title of CEO at Kyniska Advocacy.

We are a small, not for profit and we're the UK's only athlete and survivor led safe sport organization.

We work through education, advocacy and support to work towards a world where people can freely, sustainably and safely enjoy sport.

I work alongside an amazing team largely made up of volunteers. So there's co founder Kate Siri who is phenomenal and basically the reason that I'm here doing this work because yeah she, it was her wonderful idea to start this organization and we have a brilliant team of volunteers that help us with project delivery like our comms and social media side of things and general keeping me sane.

Um, I'm also a runner so as I said we're athlete led. I still compete and train and have a coach and all of that fun stuff. So I guess our unique vantage point is that all of us are athletes or and as an organization we usually get called up on or athletes exclusionary, the word, et cetera.

And I totally hear that as an organization we work from the perspective that an athlete is. If you have a body then you are able to be an athlete. So if you're practicing sport we would kind of elevate you and use the word athlete to refer to you.

But I totally appreciate that some people refer to be a participant than an athlete and yeah, our unique vantage point is that we've all still got our fingers in the pots, so to speak and we are living what it's like to try and practice and participate in a sporting world that currently we believe is not set up to, to prioritize people's safety and wellbeing.

**Jodi Evans:** Ah, absolutely amazing. I mean you're not that busy then really.

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Nah, I'll just sit tiddling my thumbs most of the time.

**Jodi Evans:** No, I know you're such a busy lady so I've been really interested. Where does the name Kaninska come from? How did you decide how to name her?

**Mhairi Macleannan:** So this was largely led by Kate. Again she's really the brains behind all of the brilliant creativity that we come up with. So Kyniska was the princess of Sparta.

Kate and I were both. Kate's really into classics and I was an English literature student. So we wanted a name that embodied the kind of bravery we felt we needed to kind of take the step into this space.

Particularly, you know, it was four years ago, so we were quite a lot younger and perhaps quite a lot more naive. And we wanted a name that was also would differentiate us from a lot of the women's sports organizations that are already in this space.

We wanted to mark that what we were doing was different and to make sure that we didn't drown in the already amazing organizations that are doing so much work. So we wanted to try and move away from title that had women or sport in it.

And during our research we found Kyniska who was the. Let me get this, the wording actually right because we did get pulled up by a historian recently and I really don't want to get it wrong. So Kyniska was.

She was a princess of Sparta and she was the first woman to win an event at the ancient Olympics. So in 396 and 392 BC she won two Olympic crowns in the four horse chariot race.

So women were obviously banned from the Olympics and to be in the Olympic sanctuary during the Olympic festival. And thus we decided that she was a trailblazer for women in sport.

And we wanted to continue that legacy, I suppose and carry that kind of fierce energy into what we did. And we had a campaigning origin. So you know, Kyniska was born out of a single issue campaign that we ran to implement lifetime bans for coaches that were found guilty of sexual misconduct and abuse in athletics.

And yeah, that's where Kyniska, the name comes from.

**Jodi Evans:** Amazing name. It is amazing. I bet she was a force to be reckoned with in her day.

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yeah, I'm sure, I'm sure. So, yeah, so we often say that we're doing the work we believe she'd be doing if she was still around, but I think she'd probably be pretty \*\*\*\*\* off at progress.

**Jodi Evans:** I doubt it. I doubt it.

So I know that you've kind of been a bit of a supporter of Ann Craft Trust for a while and we, as you know, we do our Safeguarding Adults week every year in November and I kind of Wanted to just have a little chat with you today about some of the topics that we might cover over the week. But the theme for the week is working in partnership.

So when you. When we think in a sport and our athletes or women in sport, how do we work in partnership with others to safeguard and keep them safe? And I was just wondering, do you have any thoughts on that yourself?

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yeah. So I'll start with, you know, why we're fans of Ann Craft Trust and I think for us, so both Kate and I, and actually a lot of the other volunteers that work with us, the experiences that we've had of either,

you know, witnessing or experiencing maltreatment in sport have been as adults so over the age of 18, and the protections are just not the same.

And a lot of the time with the processes that then end up being followed within national governing bodies, it goes down a disciplinary route rather than a safeguarding route, which just basically means that it's harder to sanction any kind of repercussions that might come out as a result of an investigation are less than for the perpetrator because it's not as bad, quote, unquote, because you were an adult.

So apparently you know what's going on and you're more able to kind of discern. So we've always kind of looked up to Ann Craft Trust as that voice for adults really, who can also be, you know, not just as likely because, yes, the statistics do lean towards, you know, there, there are huge vulnerabilities with children, but just because you're 18 or 19 or 30 or 50 doesn't mean that you can't experience abuse in terms of working in partnership.

I think this, the sports space, I think because sport is inherently competitive and because we sport needs to exist in a world where people are pitted against one another. I feel that sometimes the sports space terms of the actual industry and the working space kind of adopts that attitude.

A lot of the people that work in the sports sector are ex athletes and I think are inherently competitive. And that competitive environment that they've grown up in has been one that requires you to either knock other people down or be really exclusionary in order to succeed.

And so it's a difficult space to make change in because everybody's quite siloed and working in their own little area.

And ultimately that means that, you know, the amount of change that we're going to be able to make is limited because one person or one organization can't do it all because there's so much to do and I think from our beginnings, we've always tried to work in partnership.

Our very first project that we did, which was a report on called stamping out sexual violence in sport, was in partnership with other organizations.

And I think that's where we've actually, I suppose, you know, had a lot of success, is that we have been able to kind of bridge holding national governing bodies and organizations to account whilst trying to also be a critical friend and work together.

And I think that that's where we're going to make the most change. And so it's recognizing our own limitations. So, you know, for us as an organization, our limitations come from the fact that a, we're so we have less experience.

You know, we haven't come from social work or social care backgrounds, we haven't got any, like, policing background. You know, we are limited in our experience and we don't know what other organizations know.

We're new. So I guess a large part of our inexperience is we need to work with other organizations who have that experience and who've done more in the space. But I think it's then also for other organizations to recognize what our strengths are.

So, you know, we've got that lived experience, we've got connections with sporting communities in a way that it's difficult for national governing bodies or sports organizations to have because we've got the independence that they don't.

And so I think, yeah, it's basically about being courageous enough as organizations to recognize our own limitations and not being afraid to work together for fear of that, looking like we're weak or not able to do the work that's expected of us.

Because I think partnerships ultimately make us stronger.

**Jodi Evans:** Yeah, they do, yeah. Brilliant.

So we've got five different themes running over the week and one of them is how do we listen to people? Do we kind of listen to respond or do we listen to understand?

And part of that, and I know that it's quite a prevalent topic within sport is participant voice.

You know, how do we capture that? Participant. Participant voice. And how. And why is it important?

Is that something that you consider yourself?

**Mhairi MacLennan:** Yeah, absolutely. I actually delivered a session yesterday to sports leads in Scottish national governing bodies, and one of our key factors in our circle of change is voice. And that refers to participant voice, but also not just participant voice, also practitioner voice. So basically the voice of the people working in this space.

Yeah, it's hugely important. And I think how we engage with participant and practitioner voice and how we use that is really poorly understood and really poorly done.

Um, there's definitely examples of good practice. So, you know, some national governing bodies have got really good, like youth groups that they have got like a, you know, a group of young athletes and they work with them.

But I think a lot of the problem with some of these groups is the group itself gives the athletes meaning and makes them feel involved. But I think the missing link is, okay, great, but like, and what is, what's happening in that youth group actually being considered seriously at board and governance level.

So, you know, if the athletes come up with something that they want to work on or for the sport to improve on, it feels like they put on a webinar rather than actually changing a policy or implement like playing with the structure.

Yeah.

So a lot of it feels like they're placating the voice and making people feel like they're listened to. But in reality nothing changes.

**Jodi Evans:** So it becomes like a tick box exercise more than something for, you know, positive change or.

**Mhairi MacLennan:** Exactly, yeah. And you know, like, obviously one of the requirements for funding from UK sport is that there's an athlete commission. But by and large these athlete commissions are completely tokenistic.

They don't do anything. It's again, it feels, I think when you're looking at it from the outside, and I'm going to be really cynical here and probably say things that are going to upset people, but it feels like sport doesn't.

The sports governing bodies don't actually respect the athletes and don't respect the worth or value that they can actually bring to the table. And so they create these com, these commissions to kind of replicate them and make them feel like they're doing something and feel like they're part of the conversation, but ultimately really limit the power or influence that those groups can have.

And so, you know, they'll say, oh, well now you're not going to be sitting in on selection meetings and now we're not going to, you know, send policy, selection policies to you in advance because it's conflict of interest.

And so they'll kind of create these reasons why athletes can't help or support to make the sport a better place. And I think it's ultimately because organizations are scared and they are scared of like athletes unionizing, which feels really strange.

Like why would you be afraid of people coming together to be heard to make the place better for everyone to exist in.

And I just don't see like practitioner voice being involved or implemented at all. Like there's, you know, some tokenistic efforts to listen to athletes, but nothing to listen to. Coaches, support staff, Parents like nothing.

Yeah. And I just don't understand.

I mean, I do, because I can, I can understand from their perspective. But ultimately, I think it's really short sighted to not involve a lot of the key stakeholders that make sport work.

Like without the volunteers, without the coaches, without the athletes, there is no sport. So what is it that you're protecting?

**Jodi Evans:** And I think you, you know, you mentioned earlier that we, it's important we know our own limitations and we know our own strengths and weaknesses and we don't kind of hide those weaknesses and we kind of face them and potentially accept other people's ideas, thoughts, opinions on how we can change and strengthen those weaknesses and how we can share the good things with others so they can learn from that.

I mean, you're an athlete yourself, as you've said.

Have you come across any really good examples in your time now where athlete voice has been captured really well and, you know, people have been listened to and positive changes have been made?

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yes, but no, I mean, look, when we did our, it wasn't in a structured way at all, but like, when we did that first campaign, which, you know, we titled UKA Zero Tolerance, we were listened to.

They did change the policy and they have since issued quite a number of lifetime bans.

So, yes, that is an example and I'm sure that there are other examples and I know everybody will hate me for saying this, but British gymnastics have made changes for better.

Did it have to get horrifically really, really, really terrible before that happened? Yes.

Can we therefore say that they really were actively listening? Probably not.

But that said athlete voice and participant voice did feed into the White review and those recommendations that were made by Ann Whyte did come from the listening that was done and some of those recommendations have been implemented.



But I think it's just so piecemeal. And I think that's the problem that, like, it is almost requiring people to like, seriously kick up a fuss and shout from the rooftops and take huge risks personally and open themselves up to huge amounts of criticism and judgment for them to be listened to.

Like, why is it so hard for voice to be heard and then changes to be implemented? Like, we need to be making this part and parcel of how sports operate.

**Jodi Evans:** Yeah. And you can bring it back to the real basics of preventative measures versus the protective stage. You know, when we put time, effort, consideration and thought into preventing things happening, preventing poor culture, preventing abuse, preventing bullying, preventing as you know, all the bad stuff that we really don't want within our sport, then you hope that the balance Tips and the protective phases when things escalate and go really wrong, that we would hope that that goes down.

And I think sometimes we can miss the value in. Put in lots of time and effort into the preventative.

Time and space and a lot of safeguarding can sometimes be more reactive because, oh, no, this has happened.

We've got a problem. What do we do?

Okay, great. As you said, certain reviews have made some positive changes, but we don't want it to get to that point, do we?

Don't want it together in any sport. So, yeah, I get what you're saying there.

Okay. I mean, what some of our other topics of the week are. Developing professional curiosity.

So, I mean, it's something that I kind of always talk to people about who, you know, out there in the clubs and stuff. When they say to me, how do I know?

What do I look out for? What do I.

What's the signs? How. How do I spot something? And, you know, there's no black and white answer to that, is there? There's no straightforward answer. I think how I've kind of developed myself over the years in the variant roles I've done, I've been told I'm quite nosy.

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yeah.

**Jodi Evans:** And it's that curiosity of asking and, you know, opening that line of conversation really, in that line of inquiry, for want of a better phrase to it.

And, you know, it's not something that you can really teach people. You can only encourage people to kind of become curious about a situation or something they see in or hearing.

And so, you know, what's your kind of advice on that, really, within the sporting arena?

And it's a little bit tougher with adults, as you said, you know, that's why you kind of support Ann Craft Trust.

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's a hard one because I think what probably a lot of people would report is that they might have had that curiosity, but it's not encouraged by like sporting communities or the national governing body in and of itself.

And so do you know, a lot of the time people will be curious. And that was quite often what we hear when we're speaking with either parents or concerned parties who are trying to make a report.

You know, they'll say, oh, well, I saw this thing and then I reported it and now I've been ostracized and made to be a black sheep and a problem because this coach is really renowned or that athlete's really successful, so I've now ruined a career.

Um, and I think in order for professional curiosity to be Properly harnessed and developed. It's not only the onus is not only on the individual, it's also on organizations to enable and encourage that.

So the messaging from organizations has to be, be curious, you know, ask questions. If you see something that you don't like, here are the people you can speak to. And this is what that process looks like.

Because do you know, we're so good at that in other sectors of life. Like I think most people in the UK could quote to you the see it, say it, sort it on the trains.

Like they repeat it. Like when you're sitting on the train that Tannoy message comes on several times during a train journey. The posters are everywhere and it sticks in your head.

So you know, if you did see something you're like, okay, I think I definitely believe that I'll be listened to if I say something because I've got nothing to tell me the contrary.

But if you go to like a sports facility or an arena, there's no posters, there's no, there's nothing, there's no posters about anything actually to like.

And I know people might like say that the value of posters could be over egged but it's a visual representation and a guide to like set the tone of what that environment that you're going into is like.

And if there's nothing, you know, in terms of if you have ever tried to speak up and somebody's been like oh, why did you do that? Or why would you say that?

Or even just not advertising where or who to talk to at different moments. Do you know if like this is something we encourage people to do all the time when we speak with sports clubs?

It's like if a new member joins, take it as an opportunity to reintroduce your welfare office or your duty of care lead as well as like the club president and whoever.

If you don't want to be like sending the message that this is a club where things go wrong, like fine, but you know, introduce the whole committee. Why not, you know, say like this is the club president.

You can speak to them for these reasons. This is the treasurer, this is why you would contact them. This is the welfare officer. This is where they stand. They'll be at every single training session.

If you stand in the area that they're in, they'll come to you. You know, if not, you don't want to speak to them in public where someone might see you speaking to them.

These are their contact details.

Because I think yeah, we can potentially put too fine a point on the Individual requiring to develop professional curiosity, which we all absolutely should. And we should be looking out for signs and we should be learning how to spot them and what they look like.

And I often say, you know, if I had had education on what signs of abuse were or even, you know, what behaviors should and shouldn't be expected of a coach, like nothing that happened to me would have happened because I would have been like, wow, that's messed up.

Like, didn't realize that my coach shouldn't be doing that. But at the same time I know that there were several people that reported my coach before I did and nothing was done, nothing.

And also, do you know, if something's wrong and happening and nobody around you thinks that it's weird and nobody around you saying anything, nobody's warning you, then you're going to think, oh, I'm the problem because I'm the one thinking that this isn't normal, but everybody else seems to think it's fine, so I guess I'll just get over myself.

**Jodi Evans:** Yeah. And fear of that rejection or being judged or. Yeah, that's a common, common theme that I found. You know, I'm, I think I'm 16 months in the sporting world and that does come across, I mean, and you talked about, you know, don't value a poster.

Well, I completely agree there because I've had two really positive experiences recently. One in Sport Wales Centre in Cardiff and one in Nottingham University. And on the back of the ladies toilets doors in the

cubicle were posters for wellbeing, mental health, domestic abuse, with little pull off tabs for support lines and where you can get help.

And I sat there and I thought, wow, like the world has moved on a little bit because if I was in need of help whilst I'm in the toilet, nobody can see me take one of those little support tabs off and make that call.

So I completely agree with you there on don't undervalue a poster.

**Jodi Evans:** That's great. Thanks Mhairi, I appreciate that.

Lastly then, before we wrap up, because I'm conscious of time with safeguarding adults, like you said, with children sometimes it feels a bit easier.

How would you say the differences in recognizing with adults when there's something wrong impacts the reporting. Do you think people find it more difficult to kind of recognize that there could be some abuse or harm or exploitation or coercive behaviours because adults are involved instead of children?

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yeah, I think it's to do with the vulnerability piece.

I think, I think there are a few people that would turn around and say that children aren't vulnerable. Like, we've as a society understood that they're like, children are vulnerable because, first of all, their brains are not fully developed.

You know, they. It's. It's. Yes, they can tell the difference between right and wrong, but if nobody's explicitly told them about different behaviors or things to watch out for, it's so much harder for them to recognize we've not got there with adults.

We don't. We just assume that on your 18th birthday, you immediately have all this information that has just landed on your lap, and you can tell who are bad people, who's trying to manipulate you, who's trying to abuse you, who's trying to, you know, extort or extract, like, something out of your person.

And that's so.

Like, that view is so misled.

And I think.

I think that basically when an adult comes across and reports something, the idea is that they've had a part to play in the end result. Like, you must have known or you must have encouraged it somehow, because we think that adults have got more agency, which they do.

But, like, if nobody has ever taught you what you should and shouldn't expect in a particular context, then you're not going to just learn it from nothing, you know, And I get that comment all the time.

Like, I. Even recently, I spoke with a female young reporter, and she asked me to tell her a bit about my experience, and I'm so comfortable doing that. But her first comment was, all right, you were 18, so you must have known what was going on.

And it's so brazen and, like, shocking. It feels like being punched in the face because, okay, yeah, like, I did maybe have more questions than a kid might. Like, I definitely thought, you know, I asked the other people in my training group like, oh, this is a bit weird.

Like, is this normal? And they were like, yeah, this is fine. Like, you know, we love him. This has been going on for ages. And you're like, all right, okay, well, I guess it's fine then, you know, and nobody else is calling it out.

So you just, you know, we're. You're still so young. Like, your brain is still not fully developed at age 18. It doesn't finish developing to 25.

So this assumption that, like, you're not gonna. You're just gonna automatically figure it all out is so, so, so misleading. And I think another part of the problem that we often highlight just around the adults piece is, like, a lot of.

Even when you are told how to spot signs, so much of it is about changes in behaviour.

But in the UK, by and large, people leave home to go to higher education institutions. And particularly in those first couple of years, you are around people that do not know you, so how are they supposed to recognize changes in your behaviour?

They can't. And in fact, again, I've had that comment so many times. Oh, you're so, like, much happier and, like, outgoing than I remember you at uni at university, you were such an introvert and, like, seemed to really hate the world.

No, I was just being abused. Like, it's.

Yeah, it's. I think that's, you know, it's the vulnerability.

It's the social assumptions and, like, learned behaviour that we have and attitudes that we have towards adults and, like, our ability to navigate the world and that, yeah, basically we must have had some part to play in it or we must have been more aware.

And I think that that's just so, so wrong and misleading because anybody smart, like, achieve, accomplished, successful, powerful, intimidating, can be manipulated and can be abused. And it really, really can happen to anybody.

And I think that that's.

These assumptions that we have about what kind of a person is a victim are so damaging.

**Jodi Evans:** Yeah, great points there. And our CEO, Stuart, brought us together last year as a staff team and we kind of relooked at our values and our aims as a. As a charity.

And we now talk about safeguarding all adults rather than just safeguarding adults at risk. And that's one of the reasons why, because the term adult at risk makes people think of one thing when, rightly, as you've

said, anybody can be an adult who becomes at risk of manipulation, control, coercive behavior, abuse.

So we have kind of changed a little direction there, and we're advocating for safeguarding of all adults. And I completely agree with your points there. Thank you for that.

**Mhairi MacLennan:** I just think it's. Yeah, it's. It's. We talk a lot about. And in fact, there's a whole section on it in a. In a course I'm delivering on Monday just around that.

Like, yes, there are categories that make you legally vulnerable. Like, it falls into a legally vulnerable category. And that is important to recognize and it's really important to know how people that these specific categories, like, are influenced by or fall into these specific categories are inherently more vulnerable.

Like, yes, that's still true, but it's also true that we all have vulnerabilities, and we all have things that make us vulnerable.

And particularly in sports, by being in sport, by having goals and objectives, you are vulnerable. Why are you vulnerable? Because you need somebody to guide you on those goals. And so anybody in a position of power who says I can help you, they've got power over you.

And so you're more likely to listen to them. You're more likely to like turn a blind eye to any dodgy behavior because they tell you that they've got the keys to take you on that path.

And that can happen to anybody at any level of sport. Like you could be playing on the 5 a side weekend football that's run by the national governing body. And if you really want to get fit or lose weight or whatever it is that your goal is, that person has the power to help you and to manipulate you as a result.

And it's not to scaremonger and terrify people, but it's just to be aware that that is a dynamic that exists and like don't underplay how influential that can be.



**Jodi Evans:** Yeah. So. Well, just to wrap up a bit, I know your website's got lots of information on lots of resource, plenty of videos on there. I had a little nose myself some months ago actually when we first met.

Is there anything on there that you just want to mention that you think to anyone in the sporting world now is considering safeguarding adults within their sport might be useful for them?

Or would you just say, I mean.

**Mhairi MacIennan:** The videos and resources. The videos are probably running not the best, but they are there.

I think for us it would be like the kind of under the support section on our website. So we've split it under education, advocacy and support. In our support tab we've got a bunch of guides and toolkits.

So there's one that's specific to athletics, athlete welfare. We've got one for student athletes.

We've hyperlinked to the voices and sport work that we did with the NWG network, which is a kind of wholesale wellbeing and welfare guide. And we've also got a guide to trauma, informed and athlete centred disciplinary processes.

So there's a bunch of kind of like really in depth resources there and also our support service. So we run a support service for anybody really who's experiencing maltreatment or any form of abuse in sport.

And ultimately it's a handholding support service where we try to help you navigate whether or not you want to report, need to report. Can we make the report for you?

It is very much led by the person wanting to make a complaint or who has had the experience. And yeah, those are the things I would point people towards. And if you know somebody who's going through something, send them our way, and we'll do our best to help them.

**Jodi Evans:** Amazing.

Great. Thank you, Mhairi. I really appreciate your time today because I know how busy you are. And thanks for being so open and honest with us.

Yeah, thank you. Hopefully we'll speak again soon.

**Mhairi Macleannan:** Yes, absolutely.