



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 41: From the Field to the Firm: How Competitive Sports Prepare Attorneys for their Careers

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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler podcast series, the Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, counsel in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense Practice Group and a member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcast or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Megan Monson: Welcome to the latest episode of the Women's Initiative Network: *Real Talk*. I'm Megan Monson, partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Executive Compensation Employment and Benefits Practice Group, and I'll be one of your hosts today. I'm joined by two of my colleagues, Melissa and Bonnie, who I'll turn it over to introduce themselves.

Melissa Parres: Hey everyone, my name is Melissa Parres. I am counsel in the Mergers and Acquisitions Group at Lowenstein Sandler. We do a large variety of corporate and transactional work, and I'm excited to be here today talking to you all.

Bonnie Schipper: And my name is Bonnie Schipper. I am a second-year associate in the corporate group at Lowenstein. I do a wide range of corporate transactions and do a lot of work in the M&A Group with Melissa.

Megan Monson: Well, thank you both so much for joining us today. On today's episode of *Real Talk*, we are going to discuss how playing sports at many different levels provides valuable lessons that can help women navigate the challenges of a workplace and the challenges, in particular, of corporate law, more specifically as an M&A attorney. So, Melissa and Bonnie, why are we here today talking about women playing competitive sports?

Melissa Parres: Well, I think first of all, there's a pretty direct correlation between some of the lessons you learn as an athlete and those lessons can be leveraged

as an attorney. And today, we just hope to break down some of those lessons and talk about how sports have benefited us.

Bonnie Schipper: It's been well studied that women that played competitive sports at any level in their youth are more likely to be in leadership or management positions as an adult. And in 2015, a study done by EY and ESPNW found that 94 percent of women in C-Suite positions were athletes and more than half of those were at the collegiate level. And as current and former athletes ourselves, that's not a surprise since a lot of skills tied to success in a sporting environment directly translates to success at work.

Megan Monson: Can you tell our listeners a little bit about your athletic and sports backgrounds? What sports did you play and at what levels?

Bonnie Schipper: Grew up playing softball primarily. I was a softball player all through middle and high school and played division one softball in college at Columbia University and now play slow pitch softball as an adult in Central Park every weekend with Melissa. I also was a recreational basketball player. I did fencing, golf. Now I'm a long-distance runner, and sports have been very integrated for my entire life. But softball is what you're going to hear me talk about a lot today.

Melissa Parres: Similarly to Bonnie, I grew up in a family that prioritized sports. We were encouraged to try everything, so I got a chance to play soccer as a child. I played a few years of basketball in high school, but like Bonnie, softball was always my sport. I played softball really competitively in St. Louis, Missouri on my high school team and on travel teams, and I picked softball back up as an adult in New York where I play at a rec level in Central Park and all around the city. So, sports have always been a part of my life and continue to be even through adulthood.

Megan Monson: That's great to hear, especially that you both have continued to be committed to that as you've gotten into adulthood and started your legal careers. So, can you break down the connections that you see between playing competitive sports and being a corporate attorney?

Bonnie Schipper: There are a lot of similarities and transferable skills that Melissa and I will start to cover as we get into the podcast, but at a high level, we talk about M&A and transactional law in general as a team sport itself. As a catcher on a softball team, my job primarily was to communicate to everyone on the field what was going on and play a, kind of, point guard role on a softball field. Similarly, the M&A team takes that kind of position in a corporate transaction and tries to align lots of different players and make

a transaction go as smoothly as possible and organize a team to complete a common goal.

Melissa Parres: Yeah, bouncing off of that in M&A, just like in sports, there's a lot of different stakeholders to consider. In sports, you have yourself, the athlete, you have your coach, you have your different teammates. At the college level, you think about the school that you're playing for or even nowadays you think about the sponsors that maybe you would have as a collegiate athlete. And just like as an attorney, there's a lot of different stakeholders. You have yourself, the attorney, you have the partners that you work with, the associates you work with, the firm, you have to think about how your acts can help or hurt the firm. You have your client, there's opposing counsel, there's opposing business party, so there's a lot of different people to consider and it takes the healthy sense of competition and working towards the common goal to make sure that all the goals align.

Bonnie Schipper: And Melissa mentioned competition. One of the phrases that we've used a lot to talk about our boarding skills and work is collaborative competition. There's this way that people talk about corporate law in law school, that everyone is in a cutthroat environment and that we're trying to look out for our own interests. And in reality, that is not a setup where anybody succeeds. Softball has a starting nine and basketball has a starting five, and you want to be in the best position in the batting order, be one of those players that gets the most playing time and you're competing with your teammates for that spot. But you only win if your teammates are also performing at their best. And similarly, you want to be a go-to associate at a law firm, you want to be recognized for doing good work, but you also want everyone around you to be doing their best work and to succeed in order for your firm to do the best that they can. And so that's a very direct correlation between the work that we do as lawyers and the work that we do on a field.

Melissa Parres: Not every team is going to be the perfect fit for you. That's kind of how your career goes as well. You have to find the place that's going to work the best for you, a place that makes you feel like my success and other people's success isn't mutually exclusive. We can succeed together and push each other to do more and to be better.

Megan Monson: And I think from what you both have said, and I know my own personal experience as well, being in that team type of environment does really set you up with a lot of those type of skills that you will need in working in the corporate law environment and in law school, I think to Bonnie's point, I never really thought about M&A as a team sport, but it is. And so, you

really need to be able to figure out how to navigate all of those different people, all of those different situations and communicating with your teammates. What are some of the other transferable skills that you've learned as athletes that you continue to leverage in your work as corporate attorneys?

Bonnie Schipper: We can go through them one at a time. I think one of the first ones that comes out is time management for sure. Growing up, softball was always an important part of my schedule. In college, I played softball six days a week and had to lift four days a week, but even before that, I had to find time every day to practice and get to team events, but also had to find time for homework and internships and friends and other activities. And learning to be efficient with my time was critical because if you did not get your homework done, if you hadn't accomplished something that you needed to do, you couldn't just not go to softball because other people were relying on you, other people were expecting you to show up and they can't do their job if you didn't do your job.

In the same way, you have to be able to do your job at work. You can't just miss deadlines and push things off because you needed more time because you didn't take care of your own timelines. That time management aspect was a very important skill that I learned, especially when we're managing different transactions and all of those stakeholders that Melissa mentioned earlier.

Melissa Parres: Yeah, you're not only just learning to prioritize work against other work as an attorney, but you also have to learn to prioritize work against your own competing life needs and physical needs. I think that's a really tough skill to learn that sports helped me prepare for because there's been times in my career where there was enough work to work every hour of the day and you have to learn to take care of yourself and putting yourself first as a priority. I can only be an effective attorney if I'm getting enough sleep, if I'm feeding myself right. And once you learn to carve out that time for yourself, you realize that hour that I took to have a nice meal doesn't mean work is coming to an end and unraveling. I had to teach myself the hard way to learn to carve that time out and the more you do it, the easier it becomes.

Megan Monson: And I think on that probably because you were student athletes for so long and that was such a part of your life, you were able to build onto that skill of how to prioritize different needs and yourself much earlier than I think most attorneys when they're starting out practicing.

Melissa Parres: I think that's right, and I think also that leads us into another skill is leadership and teamwork. As a seventh-year attorney on transactions, I'm often the lead attorney. I'm leading junior associates, I'm leading specialist teams and other counsel, and sometimes I have to lead upwards and manage the partners or the clients. And I feel like leadership comes a little bit more naturally to me because of sports.

I never had a formal captain title on the team. I was never the star athlete that was going to have that title, but I always approached my teams with a level of positivity and high energy that I think made me a leader in another sense. And I've taken that into how I manage teams in the law firm. We can work really long hours and so, I always try to just approach the associates that I'm working with and the partners that I'm working with, with just high energy and keeping morale high. I try and check in with people, make sure that they're doing okay and let them know that we're working through this together and we're a team and I'm willing to pick up the pieces even if it means I'm doing a task that maybe a first-year associate would do. I'm a part of the team and we're going to get things done together.

Bonnie Schipper: I always had more traditional leadership roles on sports teams like organizing practices and leading from the top down in that environment. But as a second-year associate, my leadership role at a firm is a little bit different, is more about leading by example from a junior associate role in doing my job there and being a good member of the team. A part of that is learning how to work with other people and how to teach the first-year associates, and that requires learning other people's learning styles and communicating my own learning style because I'm constantly learning every day.

As a softball player, I would take hitting lessons and have to practice my swing all the time, and I had a coach that would show me how to swing a bat, and I just could not replicate that myself until it was explained to me in words that I needed to do it in a particular way. And it all clicked made sense to me. And that's how I know I'm more of a verbal learner rather than a visual learner. And I think learning to work with different people and understanding how to communicate my needs and learning how other people learned best and bringing out the best in my teammates was an important part of my teamwork and leadership skills as a junior associate.

Melissa Parres: Yeah, that's right. I think teamwork is a huge part of sports and M&A or just legal life in general. You have to learn to put the team and client before yourself sometimes and show up when you don't want to, or maybe you just aren't as high-energy, but just know that you're working

towards a common goal and your team's there to pick up the slack when maybe you're not at your best.

Bonnie Schipper: Another direct place where you have to lean on your team in both sports and law is just high-pressure situations. High pressure situations are going to show up for every game and every deal. It's inevitable. You have to communicate with others and rely on your own training and not doubt yourself in that moment. Personal stories, when I tried out for my first travel team when I was 10 years old, my dad asked me if I wanted to be good or if I wanted to be great at softball. And being a hypercompetitive ten-year-old, of course I say I wanted to be great, and that meant that my dad was going to take me to the batting cage every single day against my will for years to make sure I was doing exactly what it took to be great. And as a catcher, I took countless hours of batting practice and catching practice and bullpen sessions with pitchers to prepare for every possible situation.

But that meant that when games were on the line, I was stressed and I was under pressure, but I was coming into every single situation as prepared as I could possibly be, and my teammates were as prepared as they could possibly be because they were doing the same thing and not doubting myself and being confident in my training in that moment is key to being able to perform. And in the legal field, you have to get as much practice as you can on all of these transactions. You have to work on as many deals as you can, ask as many questions as you can, and when new situations come up, you have to rely on your own experience, team's experience, in order to respond to the situation.

Melissa Parres: We always talk about in M&A how important it's to get the reps in. We literally use that phrase, and it's such a sports phrase of "you learn by doing," and M&A work is often lightning speed, so you have to stay on top of it. You have to learn as you go and have trust and faith in those around you that you're all going to work together to get it done. And it's so close to being on a team and playing sports together. It's undeniable.

Megan Monson: I really liked the point that you made about being able to deal with high-stakes, high pressure situations because a lot of things in M&A are moving quickly and it can be stressful. You're getting pulled in a thousand different directions and you have a lot of different things going on. But again, I think the experience that you both have had playing sports and being comfortable in those type of situations, I think really then gives you a leg up in trying to deal with that now with practicing attorneys.

Bonnie Schipper: That takes us to another one of the skills that we've talked about is resiliency and handling adversity because at the end of the day, even after we've done all of those reps and practiced and done everything right, sometimes things just go wrong. And being able to bounce back from personal setbacks on the field or in the office is just a part of the job. I will never forget being in a high school softball game and being in the last inning and dropping the ball to lose the game, and it will stick with me forever, even though it's been years. In the same way, I sometimes will find myself just kicking myself if I made a typo in an email or wondering if I missed something or gave the wrong answer to a partner. But learning from those moments and being able to improve going forward is what makes you a better player and a better associate and being able to use those to make yourself a better member of the team.

Melissa Parres: Yeah, I think something that we talk about in sports but also comes up in law is just being coachable. If I am working with Bonnie and I give her a piece of feedback, it's because I want her to do better and because I want us to work together better. And so, it's taking that feedback and using it as a learning opportunity. And I think that that's something that your coaches really lay into you with when you're playing sports and being able to take that criticism and not take it personally in the legal field, I think, is really key for success.

Bonnie Schipper: And you'll learn people have a lot of different feedback styles. Sporting field, I had a coach that was a screamer. I had coaches that were much softer and more reserved. And that translates to a professional environment. You have to be able to separate the constructive criticism from other comments, and that is up to you to be able to pick out that information and apply it to your own career and your own sporting life. You have to be able to push yourself forward and pick yourself up, put the pieces back together and move on and make yourself better for it. And I think having that practice of taking criticism and failing and sometimes hearing constructive feedback, sometimes hearing feedback that's maybe not constructive and being able to identify the difference and apply it appropriately, it's important.

Melissa Parres: Yeah, I think I also learned through sports how to stick up for myself, and I think I found my voice through sports. That's come in handy as an adult playing slow pitch softball. I play on a lot of co-ed teams, Bonnie's my teammate on a bunch of these teams, but it's not uncommon on the co-ed field for men to assume women don't know how to play or don't care as much about the game. And so, we're relegated to the less "skilled" or less involved positions, or we're relegated to the end of the batting lineup just because we're a woman.

And even though I might have more softball experience than them, Bonnie certainly have a lot more softball experience than a lot of the men we play with. But sticking up for myself in those situations, which I have and continue to do, has allowed me to find my voice in the professional realm as well, where in similar situations women might be talked over or treated as less strong in a professional setting. And so having a place outside of work to practice finding that assertive voice has strengthened my confidence in and off the fields and in and out of the workplace.

Megan Monson: So, what advice would you give to law students or female attorneys who also love sports?

Bonnie Schipper: There are a couple of different things that we've talked about. I think one area where sports might be helpful is knowing where to take a risk and knowing when to be more reserved. Knowing when to put yourself out there and try something new and push yourself is definitely the way that you're going to find new opportunities and challenge yourself and maybe help get buzzer readers shot or do something that's going to save the day, and that's going to feel fantastic. But also, you have to know when it's better to put your team before yourself and take the safer route. And I think sports is a place where you can learn when it's appropriate to put yourself out there and push boundaries and when to make the phone call and when to send that email and try to do something new and other times when you want to take the safer route and ask for help.

Another place that we might apply all of this sporting advice is just when you're applying for jobs, make sure you talk to people about it. I think we've talked about these transferable skills. It's not a bad thing to bring it up in an interview and tell people that you are an athlete and explain that these are skills that you got and how they help you. I've certainly talked about softball in a lot of interviews, but just as much as I talked about softball in my law firm interviews, I talked about fencing. Fencing was a sport that I picked up in law school itself and did all through grad school experience. And I had the same experience of high management and learning to be competitive in dealing with adversity, and people wanted to hear about it. And so, if you have shown commitment and learned these lessons through really anything, whether it's a sport or any other activity that you were committed to, I wouldn't be afraid to bring it up.

Melissa Parres: And on that note, don't be afraid to try something new. I picked up the ball again as an adult playing rec league co-ed softball, and it's really opened up my world. It's opened up New York to me, and I've met a ton of people who I maybe wouldn't have met otherwise. And thinking like a lawyer, that just means networking opportunities. You never know when the person

that you meet on the softball field is going to need an attorney. And if you're known for showing up to the field with consistency, with a good attitude, and with sportsmanship is pretty key. It could help you win clients. And obviously you're not going to show up to the field with business cards, but every interaction you have is a chance to show who you are. And they might say, "Hey, Melissa is a lawyer. We might need her for something." There's a lot of professionals who play sports and so don't be afraid to get back on the field just as a way to meet people as well.

Bonnie Schipper: And one thing Melissa touched on earlier is in order to do your best work, you have to take care of yourself off the field. And playing sports is one way to make sure that you're prioritizing both your physical health and your mental health, and giving yourself an outlet to do something other than your job and make sure you're stepping away from the computer and making sure you have time to talk to other people and getting outside and doing something fun. And then you can go back to your computer and do your work the rest of the day, but you need to step away for a moment, be able to refresh and go back. And so, sports is a way to help move your body and maintain physical fitness and take care of yourself and make sure that you're able to be your best teammate on and off the field.

Megan Monson: Well, thank you so much, Melissa and Bonnie. This has been a great discussion in hearing about the strong correlations between playing sports and practicing law, and in particular the skills that you've learned as athletes that really can set you up for success and give you a leg up as a practicing M&A attorney. So really want to thank you both for sharing your wonderful words of wisdom with our listeners, want to encourage our listeners to stay tuned for future episodes. We look forward to seeing you for the next episode of *Real Talk*.

Melissa Parres: Thanks for having us.

Bonnie Schipper: Thank you.

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