

Episode 449

 Tue, Dec 30, 2025 10:56AM  1:05:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Blind soccer, international competition, Canada team, player classification, training challenges, team dynamics, physical demands, communication strategies, sighted players, game rules, team preparation, travel experiences, injury management, future goals, community involvement.

SPEAKERS

Jillian Sloane, Matt Greenwood, Steve Barclay, Rob Mineault, Ramya Amuthan, Shawn Marsolais

 Rob Mineault 00:16

Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

 Shawn Marsolais 00:21

Banter, banter.

 Rob Mineault 00:24

This is, of course, the podcast. No, wait, no, yes, this is the podcast. I'm getting my podcasts mixed up. This is, of course, the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversation about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault, and if it sounds like we don't know what we're doing, it's because we don't. We're trying something a little different today. Mr. Ryan Fleury is on vacation as of today, and so I've got a guest host stepping in to help me out with today's show, and that is none other than Shawn Marsolais from Blind Beginnings and the Limitless podcast. Welcome and thank you so much for helping out today.

 Shawn Marsolais 01:17

Thank you for having me. It's my pleasure to be here. Happy to help.

R Rob Mineault 01:20

Well, yeah, you know, we've -- the long and storied tale of this, of this particular episode, I won't bore the audience with it, but mainly because I kind of messed up. But yeah, we actually recorded a version of this, of this podcast, a few months back, and through circumstances, it actually, you know, it's it's going to work out for the better anyways, because we have got a great, great show lined up, and it's going to be really super interesting. So maybe you could step in to Ryan's duties here. He usually tells the audience what the heck we're doing today. So maybe you could tell us just what the heck we are doing today.

S Shawn Marsolais 02:13

We are talking about blind soccer, which I am so excited to learn more about. And we've got some great guests. We've got Jill, who is a frequent co host of the Limitless podcast, and her soccer coach and a fellow player. So we're in for a treat.

R Rob Mineault 02:34

Excellent. Well, let's, let's waste no more time and dive right in and welcome them to the show.

S Shawn Marsolais 02:41

Welcome back to the podcast. Jill.

J Jillian Sloane 02:43

Thank you.

S Shawn Marsolais 02:45

Jill, do you want to introduce our other guests today?

J Jillian Sloane 02:48

Sure. So today, we have national head coach for the women's blind soccer team, Matt Greenwood, welcome Matt.

M Matt Greenwood 02:57

Thank you. Hi everyone.

J Jillian Sloane 02:58

And then we have our CO captain and defensive left back player, Ramya.

R Ramya Amuthan 03:11

Thank you. Nice to be here.

S Shawn Marsolais 03:12

Okay, Jill, why don't you start us off and tell us, how did you get involved with blind soccer?

J Jillian Sloane 03:17

Yeah, so, like, blind soccer was something I always wanted to try, but, like, there isn't really a lot of programs for it, especially growing up, let alone, like, you know, anywhere right now, except for in Toronto. So I think it was back in July, I believe I just came across like a random Facebook post looking and it was talking about, like, building a women's national blind soccer team. I'm like, what is this? I was so instantly excited, and I hadn't heard anything except for that like, random Facebook post I came across, and there's a little, like, application form you could fill out. So I'm like, Okay, well, it can't hurt. Like, I just kind of thought, like, why not give it a shot and see what happens? So I just filled out the form, and then I, within a couple days, heard back from Matt and our captain, Hillary, and we set up a call, and they kind of walked me through Blind Soccer a bit. And before I knew it, I was heading out to Toronto, early August for, like, to go kind of try it out and go to a practice that they held, they hold every year. Um, yeah, it just kind of happened so randomly and quickly. But here we are.

S Shawn Marsolais 04:31

Wow, okay. Um, Ramya. How about you? Have you been playing blind soccer for a long time? How did you get involved?

R Ramya Amuthan 04:40

Yeah, so I think the exact date was July 21, 2021 because I went back into my email chain to figure out what my first practice was. It was very nostalgic. And yeah, so it's been a few years now. Obviously that was off the end of the pandemic, so we were just trying to keep regular practices going here around the Greater Toronto Area. The I guess, like the headquarters of blind soccer, if you will, is in Pickering Ontario. So that's just east of Toronto, and that's where, like our most regular club is at Pickering Football Club, and that's where Matt coaches us. So I've been around for four-ish years, and this was the first, like, big international thing we did together. But between starting and now, we've also had just recreational local tournaments, like the Para sport games in Ontario. We've gone to Lake Joe for a couple different like recreational competitions or training camps as well. So yeah, it's building.

S Shawn Marsolais 05:43

And actually I forgot to have both Jill, remind our listeners about your level of vision and curious about yours as well. Ramya, so Jill, why don't you remind us what your vision is?

J Jillian Sloane 05:55

Sure I have a condition called Retinopathy of Prematurity, so I was low vision, and now I'm fully blinded in both eyes.

S Shawn Marsolais 06:03

Okay. And how about you Ramya?

R Ramya Amuthan 06:05

I have Leber Congenital Amaurosis which is, long story short, a genetic condition, so I still have partial sight. But in Blind Soccer, we all have eye shades on anyway, so we can get into that.

S Shawn Marsolais 06:18

Okay, great. And Matt, you're not blind. So how did you get involved in blind soccer?

M

Matt Greenwood 06:25

Well, that's a long story, but the Coles notes would be, I'd first heard about Blind Soccer back in 2002 / 2003 when I lived in the UK. Moved to Canada, to Ontario, in 2006 and really saw sort of a lack of accessible programming in soccer clubs in general. So started to sort of push that agenda a little bit. I was working with the provincial Soccer Association at the time. And then around 2012 / 2013 was when the kind of the stream of blind soccer really sort of started to crystallize with me as something really significant that we we could really do some good things with. It was part of the Para Pan Am Games in Toronto in 2015 but it was the only sport that Canada as a nation, didn't have a representative team at, and we tried to put something together, but it wasn't really supported, unfortunately. But it's a legacy of those games we were left with the rebound boards that we use for all of our competitions now, and a nice set of audible soccer balls that we could distribute to to local clubs and schools. And from there, it's it's slowly built as Ramya , you said. We've kind of got a ground zero right now in in Pickering, but we have a program about to start up in Ottawa. We've got a small program in London, one in Toronto, at Toronto Hyde Park Football Club, and very soon we'll have a more established program out in in BC, at Jill's local club at Burnaby BC, as of Burnaby FC. And then we're also look to do some other programming startups in other provinces. So yeah, a bit of a scenic route to where I got to to landing with blind soccer.

S

Shawn Marsolais 08:06

So that's a lot of different clubs. Are all the players blind in each of those locations? Or are they a mix of blind and sighted players?

M

Matt Greenwood 08:18

Right now, they would all be blind within that sort of classification range of B1, B2, and B3, that Ramya you sort of mentioned earlier that there are those different ranges. When we first started up, we did try to get to sort of a critical mass of numbers. It's really hard to have a little game if there's only two or three players, but if you're able to throw in a couple of sighted players and put eyeshades on them, then you can get to some more viable numbers to have a nice little scrimmage. But really, since the pandemic, we've been able to manage and grow the program with all of the all of the players either being as B1, B2, or B3, classification.

S

Shawn Marsolais 08:59

Okay, I'm already going off script. But I'm really curious, how do sighted players respond when you put blindfolds on them and say, play soccer?

M

Matt Greenwood 09:06

I think you get kind of you get the full range. You definitely get the ones that would just stand still frozen and just panic that what the heck is happening around me, and they hear a lot of noises and just don't know how to adjust. You get the others at the other end of the spectrum that just really don't take any consideration of the risk and the dangers that are involved, and just run headlong after the ball and forget that there might be other people around them or goal posts that they don't want to run into. So when we set up a session, particularly with new players of any vision level, a big focus is on the safety and the communication aspect, so having them orientate themselves around the field. But what we do find is that a lot of sighted players, when they then peel the ice shades back and kind of get back to their level of vision, are really kind of overwhelmed by how challenging, how physical. Little how busy blind soccer is because of the amount of information that you have to take in now, through your ears and through touch versus sight, because soccer is such a visual game when you're scanning the field to work out where the players are, to pass to where the next tackle might be coming from, and even if you've got the ball at your feet, so taking away that is a huge adjustment for them, and something that our players really adapt to really nicely, really quickly.

S

Shawn Marsolais 10:31

So Jill, did you play soccer as a child? And if so, what was it like to play blind for the first time?

J

Jillian Sloane 10:40

So I played a lot with, like, my siblings, just in our backyard, so like, my twin sister, and then my two older brothers, mostly. And like, I could see, I was low vision back then, so I could see, not well, but I could see enough to, like, I think that's the ball over there. Like, maybe, let's go over there and find it. And like, my brothers were the kind of people where, like, they just pick you up. Pick you up and run with you to steal the ball from you. So I was used to, like, the kind of, I'm gonna say, quote, unquote, more contact side of soccer in that way. And I did play well after a lot, like, a lot of fighting to be able to play in the, like the youth, like local soccer club League, because they wouldn't let me play being low vision, because I thought I was going to get hurt, which, like I did, but it was fine, but I had to quit after I played for four years in the, like, the youth league. But I had to quit due to, like, losing my remaining vision. So when I came across, the National Blind Soccer team, and like Pickering and went out to Toronto and played for the first time. I like, it was because we played at Pickering, like Ramya said, it's a dome. So it's like, the roof is literally, like, this big tarped dome looking thing, I think so it was like, Really, like the sound bouncing off of that was really hard to like, I thought the ball was over to my left, but actually it's over to the right, like it was. I found that really hard to adjust to. Also and like, there's so much to pay attention to with blind soccer. Like you're listening for the sound of the ball. You're like everyone's screaming the word 'Voi', which you during play. Whenever you don't have the ball, you have to yell the word 'voi', which means, like, I'm here, or go or something in Spanish, so it lets the other players kind of know where everyone else is on the field, so then you don't, in theory, crash into each other as much. So like getting used to saying that felt really weird, until I got like, bumped the first time, then I realized the point of it, like there's so much to pay attention to. And then, like you're trying to find the ball and you're trying to, like, keep yourself orientated on the field. And like you're we run with what we call like bumpers, so our arms are up, kind of in front of us, rather than kind of down by our sides when we run to kind of block any impact. So, like, running like that alone was weird, everything else involved. And then, like, even though I can't see anything, I saw the way, like the eye shades and that, like, just having something like that on my face was an adjustment. Like there were so many things, and then it happened that during that first practice, there was a big volleyball tournament on the other side of the dome, so we're trying to listen for the ball and the other players while there's this tournament happening. So like, it was kind of like double whammy there a bit. So I remember feeling like, took the eye shades off. We were done the practice, and, like, I just felt, like, very, like, exhausted, but in a good way, but like, also kind of like, mentally, like, Whoa. That was a lot to pay attention to for two hours, or whatever the practice was. So it's definitely a lot to, like, pay attention to at the start, but then you just kind of get into it and like, oh, just like, soccer, cool.

S

Shawn Marsolais 14:03

Ramya, do you remember your first blind soccer practice?

R

Ramya Amuthan 14:07

I do actually, because, um, our captain of the team, the national team, Hillary, was there and I pretty much walked in having no idea what this would be like, what Blind Soccer was like, I had a call with Matt before coming to practice, because, you know, I wanted to know this was legit, but I had very little idea of what it meant to play an organized sport. Honestly, I didn't play organized sports growing up. So I grew up in like, an integrated school system and education system, and had a lot of physical activity experience with my brothers and just, you know, horse playing, but I've never been part of a team or played sports. It was kind of a thing where you get exempted out of so I was like, Okay, I really want to try this. I don't know why. I was just going through whatever. And I was like, I really want to try. Try some kind of physical activity like this. And I went to practice, and I had no idea how to put my foot on the ball, you know, like it would be the sensation of kind of learning what it means to kick a ball had to be taught to me from scratch. So it like a lot of people you asked earlier about um, what it's like for sighted people to put eyeshades on and try Blind Soccer. A lot of our players who have some level of sight, there's kind of this um conversation around like, oh, but you still have soccer intuition, you know, oh, like you, you seem to know what soccer is like. You know, you have soccer in your muscles, you just have to learn how to gear that and adapt it towards blind soccer, whereas, for me, it's kind of the complete opposite. I'm just like, I'm cool with contact. I run around a lot, and I have, like, body awareness and spatial awareness, but I have no idea how to play soccer. I have no idea what it means to take a ball off someone, pivot, turn, shoot, you know, that kind of thing. It has to be constant, practicing, repeating over and over again until I can do it with confidence. But that, like physical skill level is a completely different thing.

R

Rob Mineault 16:22

Yeah, I'm curious about a few things. So honestly, it sounds really draining because it sounds like there's, there's this physical component, but then this focus and listening for the ball, and listening to, you know, and trying to orient yourself to where the ball is. I mean, it must be both physically and mentally draining.

J

Jillian Sloane 16:40

Yeah, it was like, especially that first one, like, I said, like, I I almost felt like I had a headache after but partly, I think it was like, just to be fair, the Dome gets so hot that that was a big part of it, too. But like, you said, like the physical part of like running around, trying to find the ball, keep yourself oriented, and then, like, the kind of mental side of that, right? And like, I definitely felt it both, like in my body, but also in my head.

R

Ramya Amuthan 17:09

Yeah, definitely learning to go through an hour, an hour and a half of practice with eye shades on. Or if we're going to get even more closer to our trip to India, patching your eyes and then having your eye shades on top of that, it is draining. It's mentally exhausting. You have to kind of the focus level, the tracking of the ball, the trust, instead of, like you know, running away and freezing the trust that you still know how to play this game and can trust your teammates, all that kind of stuff takes a lot of effort and repetition.

R

Rob Mineault 17:47

The other thing I'm kind of curious about, because sound and the environment is so important, do you practice in different environments to sort of compensate for that? Because it sounds like it's kind of might be a very different experience playing it, say indoor as opposed to outdoors.

R

Ramya Amuthan 18:04

Yeah, I think Matt can attest to this being like a whine session from a lot of the players. Why do we have volleyball players here today?

M

Matt Greenwood 18:15

Yes, the other noise distractions certainly aren't ideal. Typically in international competition, it will be outdoors so that you lose that kind of acoustic reverberation off of whatever walls or ceilings might be around. But obviously we're in we're in Canada, so we spend more of our soccer season, particularly in Ontario, more of our soccer season indoors and outdoors. So we sort of have adjusted and grown to it, certainly in southern Ontario, but with the excessive heat over the last couple of years, it's actually been more preferable to play indoors, out of the heat and the direct sunlight when we're training. So as coaches, we're very aware of for example. So Gillian mentioned the dome. So if you're if you're near the sides of the dome, there's a lot more reverberation there versus the middle of the dome, it's a 70 foot high ceiling, so in the middle, it's a little bit better and sort of less reverberation or bounce back of the noise. And then we also think of things like not using lots of balls. So if it was a, I don't know, a you 15 boys sighted soccer session, probably all of the lads would have a ball at their feet and be dribbling around in a warm up or even in some of the drills, but with vine, soccer will be maybe 123, balls at a time, so there's not that overload of of noise happening. Often you get invited to do a session or a demonstration in a school gym, which are usually the worst places because the walls are tight and close the ceilings low. You've got kids chattering away in the background, and then the ball, when it's rolling on a hardcore floor, is then making even more noise, just making it that much more complicated. So being aware of the the environment we're in is really important. I just wanted to. Jump back to to what was Jill was saying, and you sort of talking about the information overload. So if the person on the field has the ball at their feet, they don't need to say anything. They don't need to use this word voice, because they know where the ball is. But even in that moment, their concentration is on control of the ball. But then if they hear a voice coming towards them, they need to be able to discern if that's one of their teammates, and they can let them kind of move on, or if it's an opposition player saying the same word. Now they've got to protect the ball and shield it from them, and then if they go near to the side of the field where the boards are, it gets a little bit louder. There. You can have moments where you've got two or three players all trying to get to the ball, all saying voi. But meanwhile, the coach on the sideline or the goalkeeper or the guide behind the net that you're attacking is also trying to communicate information across the field. So there's an awful lot going on behind those eyeshades for the players to discern. And so one of the really important things for the sighted participants, which would be the goalkeeper, the head coach and the guide, is to really think about what they communicate and when they communicate it so that it has the maximum impact, and we don't just overload the players with a whole bunch of shouting that just makes makes things even worse.

S

Shawn Marsolais 21:13

What, okay, what you just said about how you've got to recognize your play, your teammates, voice like that sounds really hard, especially maybe, maybe internationally, if people speak different languages, there's an accent. I don't know. Maybe that's easier, but, I mean, how is that?

J

Jillian Sloane 21:31

So it was funny, because the first time that I went to Toronto to for a practice, I hadn't met, like, I didn't know anyone on the team, I didn't know the coach, I didn't know anyone. So like, everyone's voice is new to me, right? Yeah. So I'm like, I'm like, everyone's saying boy and like, you all sound like the birds. I can't tell your voices apart. So I'm like, I kind of hope you're like, you can kind of tell who's on your team, because, like, they're more kind of behind you or beside you, in theory. So like, if someone's running at you, usually like, okay, that's probably someone from the opposite team. But when, like, in India, like you're right, like they're every team was from a different country, and, like, had a different accent, and we were kind of, like, laughing because they're all their voice sounded slightly different, yeah, like, they draw out the word, or, like, make one sound a little bit sharper or something. So we were kind of laughing at that, like, oh, there's Japan, like they sound different, or, oh, there's turkey, like, whatever it was.

R

Ramya Amuthan 22:28

There's a lot more communication than voi on the field, by the way, we didn't really get into it yet. But in blind soccer, you're also getting communication from the Goal Guide, which is the person behind the attacking net, and they're calling to the attackers when it's in that third of the field to say, like, okay, here's center. You can shoot now, there's someone in front of you, whatever the communication is. There's also your goalkeeper who communicates with the defense, right? So Jill and I had a lot of communication from our goalkeeper in India, Mackenzie and Cassandra, the two of them. So they would talk to us, to, you know, tell us where to go, or who to track, and that kind of thing. And then you have coach, Matt on the side of the field, in the middle, in midfield, talking to whoever's in the mid third. So you also get, like, actual instruction from sighted people outside and goalkeeper. But that's on top of us communicating with each other as well, to let each other know where we're at, or calling each other back to position.

J

Jillian Sloane 23:35

We also came like before, like when we were getting like preparing for India. We also came up with different like gameplays.

R

Ramya Amuthan 23:42

Yeah, right.

J

Jillian Sloane 23:43

So like, let's say, like our goal, for example, like our goalkeeper had she was going to throw the ball up the field, so she'd yell a certain term, and then us, like me and Ramya, for example, like as a defense would then yell that term, so the our forward players would hear it to know what play like, where the ball is going to go, because she would, like, Mackenzie or Cas would throw the ball, like, up, left side, right side or center. So then to let our forwards, because, like, the goalkeeper can't communicate with the players outside of her zone. So like, the goalie can't communicate or, sorry, let me rephrase this. The goalie can only communicate with our defense. Matt, who's in the midfield, can only kind of communicate in the that little area, I shouldn't say, a little that area. And then our goal guy can only communicate with like the forward players. So it's up to the players to communicate with each other, to let them know what you know, what's happening, what the play is going to be, that kind of thing. So, wow. So there's a lot happening.

S

Shawn Marsolais 24:44

That is a lot to keep track of. I'm I'm intimidated now. Matt, maybe can you just kind of give us an overview of like, how blind soccer is different from regular soccer, because we kind of skipped over. That, and I feel like we're getting pieces of it. But yeah, yeah ...

M

Matt Greenwood 25:04

The International sort of understanding is that Spain introduced the sport back in the 60s, and that's why we use the word voice, sort of an homage to them, from the verb I go. So that's sort of a nod to the founders of the sport. But in the last 20 years or so, since sort of early 2000s it's really been Brazil and now, sort of Argentina and France that are really taking up the reins and driving the game forward, particularly on the men's side, so that when it was established, very much a men's male sport, up until about five or six years ago, when the International Federation really started to push each of the International Paralympic committees and International Federations to start developing a female side of the game. And it's it's grown really nicely to the point that we were able to be in this world championships in October with seven other international teams, and there were probably another 10 or 15 international teams that either didn't apply to compete at that competition, or just sort of very early on in their development. So it's growing really well on the on the female side as well.

M

Matt Greenwood 25:04

Sure, it's, well, there, I always get confused, because there are, there are so many different types of, for me, sort of regular soccer, that are out there. Which is what I love about the game, that it's, it's that adaptable. But Blind Soccer really borrows a lot from Futsal, which is the sort of the official indoor version of soccer. So they play on a field that is 40 meters long and 20 meters wide, and along the long sides of the field are rebound boards at about a meter high, and they help keep the ball in play more often, so it's not going out all the time for throw ins, but also it helps, because there's that little bit of echo off the boards, so the players know when they're getting nearest to the boards or where the ball is, depending on how it's sounding on the field. So the field is a little bit bigger than a basketball court, if you like, and we play with some other Futsal rules, so it's a heavier ball most so for example, for the World Cup next year, the players would all be using a size five football. For us, we use a size four, and it's also weighted. So it is a little bit heavier, means it stays on the ground a lot more, and really kind of focuses the players on a dribbling type of game, versus just kicking the ball long down the field. So it's very much focused on dribbling and shooting versus sort of the passing style of game that you might see in order of other forms of soccer, and as Gillian had so eloquently described, that the field is divided into those thirds where the players can run freely anywhere they want to, but the communication is controlled within those thirds, and the goalkeeper who's cited is limited to a relatively small penalty box or penalty area, so they can't come out of that, and if they do, it would be a free kick to the opposing team. And again, similar to Futsal, we have accumulated fouls, so once you get to five fouls, the fifth and any foul after that would be a penalty kick to the other team. So you have to be really focused and aware of your discipline to make sure that you don't get an accumulation of fouls. And that resets itself in each half, but right before half time, you don't want to give away that penalty kick and give the other team a free opportunity at a shot on your goalkeeper. So that's really sort of the gist of it. So smaller field than what we typically see on sort of pro league soccer on the TV, but a very skilled dribbling game, and as the girls have both mentioned, quite physical as well, sometimes similar to hockey, when you get up against the boards and you're trying to fend off a player that's maybe twice the height or twice the weight of you that's trying to squeeze you against the boards. So our players and Jillian, you were fantastic at it in defense of being very strong back there and being real nuisances bugging the other players to get the ball off of them or make it very difficult for them to get a clean shot.

R

Rob Mineault 25:50

I'm just curious, how old is the sport, and what country was it developed in?

S

Shawn Marsolais 27:00

It's rare that women get a team of anything before the men. So how is it that we've got a women's team going to worlds and not a men's team? Yeah. I mean, I think it's great, but ..

M

Matt Greenwood 27:00

It's a wonderful question, and a very weird history that if I sort of monitor the think back to the players that I've I've come across over the last decade a little bit more at different times during that process, I've thought to myself, okay, we've got the semblance of a starting point to the men's team here, and then it sort of fades away - oh no, now we've maybe got some female players here that could become a team. And so it's just sort of really fortuitous timing, in the last 18 months that we've got a core of females together that are talented and motivated, are really driven to want to bring this together, and ultimately, you know, that enabled us to to get the women's team to be the first one on the on the international stage. The men might be next year. That would be wonderful, or maybe a couple of years away, still, but having a core group of female players that stayed connected, that wanted to understand and learn more about the game and really take ownership of their own development. And understanding how important this was has really driven us to this point, and the opportunity that we had in October and sort of put the stake in the ground as to, you know, the progress of the sport.

M

Matt Greenwood 27:22

Okay, cool. Well, let's talk about how you trained to come together as a team to go to World's. Like that's a really big deal. Ramya, are all the players from Ontario? Do you practice together regularly?

M

Matt Greenwood 27:22

I would say seeing Ontario players is still a bit of a stretch. We have our local practice around Pickering, and we have another club that's kind of kicking off, but regular practices as well in Etobicoke slash, close to downtown Toronto. And those two programs are going really well, very recreational, but also we have, you know, some upcoming things that we want to reach, like goals we want to reach, and things that we're planning for 2026 so all these kind of regular practices are leading to, hopefully, a bit more of Blind Soccer in Canada, and then everything else we're really just building. Like it feels like we have India in our pockets now, like this experience and what it took to get there, and now we just have to keep that momentum going for 2026. And Canada soccer, shout out to them, because they have been very supportive, very helpful. And Sarah, who joined us in India from Canada Soccer, had really like made it her mission to to bring the organizations together.

M

Matt Greenwood 29:17

So were there Men's teams in India as well?

M

Matt Greenwood 29:54

It was a like our tournament was just the female World Championship, but there was a men's regional competition just at the start of ours, just a three team tournament, and the week before that, there'd been an international Men's tournament at the same location, so they sort of shifted out. There was a break of a few days, and then the Women's competition shifted in right after.

S

Shawn Marsolais 33:18

So, Jill, you had to come in and play with a group of people who already kind of knew each other, like, this is a big deal going to World's. So you mentioned that you flew out in August, and then when did you see them again? And how were you preparing on your own?

J Jillian Sloane 33:48

So, yeah, so like the rest of our National team that, like with Ramya, like Hillary is our captain, then Diana and Zara. So there's only five of us. They all play at Pickering together, like, roughly every week. So they all played together for at least, I don't know, a few months, if not a year or so. So, like, I went, like I said, I went to I went and played with them in August. And then, like, cool, I want to be part of the team. Let's go. How do I practice at home? And Matt helped me get connected with the Burnaby Football Club. But because it was just me, it was, in a way nice, because my the coach here, Coach Kevin, it was just one on one with him, so it was nice that I got one on one, like he really got some good drills going and footwork and that kind of stuff. But it was, like, it's not the same as practicing every week with a team. And like, I didn't really have anyone to try and, like, defend the ball from, or, you know, that kind of stuff. But then unfortunately, Coach Kevin wasn't able to help me for, like, right before we went. India in October. So, like, he wasn't able to help in September. So then I no longer had a coach for the month before we left. So that was kind of like, oh my God, what do I do? Like Matt and Hillary, like our captain, they were really helpful and gave me, like, a lot of things to try at home, whether it was just dribbling around my spare bedroom, for example, until I think I made my neighbor downstairs mad because he kept hearing the ball, and then, like I went home, back home to visit my family, so I would like practice in my parents garage, or I kicked a ball around their very uneven yard, which made it interesting. Like, my boyfriend was really good. He would come, like practice, pretend to be my goalie, let me take the shots on him. Or, like my stepdad, I were kicking the ball around, like passing it around to practice, like passing and stuff. So my like, training experience was very unorthodox, very not normal, and that's why we're trying to eventually grow this Blind Soccer club in within our program, within the Burnaby Football Club. So I didn't actually end up practicing with the team again up until right before we left for India. So I actually flew out to Toronto, like five days before we left for India to go practice with them a couple times we went up to, like, Joe, where the like, the boards are for the field, and we practice there for the weekend. Had a little, a very quick little training camp, literally right before we left, which was also, like, I'm not sure about anyone else, but that was my very first time playing with boards as well. So like, let's play with boards for the first time, and then the kids go to India for a world champion. World Championship. It was like, I don't know what's going on, but we're just gonna roll with it. Yeah. So it was very, my training was very, just kind of however I can make it happen. A lot of it was just me practicing dribbling, practicing, like turns. So it, hopefully it's gonna be a little more consistent moving forward in the new year.

S Shawn Marsolais 37:04

So okay, so let's talk about World's. Then you got there. How was that experience? I'd love to hear from all of you with you.

J Jillian Sloane 37:15

Okay, yeah. So actually, the travel was like crazy, like, so it was my first International trip ever. First of all, like, it was the first time I've ever left the continent like, so that was kind of wild in itself, because, like, I was in Toronto for five days, and then we as a team, traveled from Toronto to Abu Dhabi, which was like, what, 13.5 hour flight, something like that. So that was wild. And then we had a layover in Abu Dhabi, and then flew to Kochi, India, which is the southern coast. And however, all the math ended up being it took us like 20 something, like 22 hours, 24 hours, almost two days, like full two days of travel. It was insane. And then, like, I was always saying the kind of nice thing about the way it worked out is, like, we kind of hit the ground running when we got to coach here, like, in the evening, at night, and then the next day we had practice. We had three days of practice before the tournament started, so we, like, didn't really have a choice but to adjust quickly to the time zone, which for BC, was 12 and a half hours ahead. So that was crazy. But then also, like adjusting to the heat and the humidity, um, and there's like, the traffic and just like the culture and like it was, there's so many things to adjust to, and like, we did it so quickly, and then we had, we went through classification, and I think that was most of our, all of our first times going through, like an official International Classification system. So that was interesting, because I didn't, I've never done it, and I didn't really know that there'd be, like, an eye exam sort of thing. So, like, oh, cool. And I was laughing, because they're, like, inconsistent light perception. I'm like, I could have definitely told you that. But, and then we had, like, we had games right away. So we played, we played Argentina for our first game. Then Japan, Turkey and then Poland, and we had one day off in between, like between the Turkey and Poland game, and we did, like a big, whoever wanted to from the team could go do, like a big kind of tour around Kochi, which ended up being, I think, a lot longer than we were expecting. So it wasn't exactly the most restful of days. Yeah, then we finished our last game and, like, headed home. I think it was the next day, if I remember correctly. So it was, like a lot, so many things back to back, like, just it was like chaos, but in the best way ever.

S Shawn Marsolais 39:58

You're bringing me back to my competitive sport days. Yeah, and I'm, I'm impressed you were allowed to do a day of sightseeing in the middle. I We didn't. We were never allowed not to. The competition was over, so, yeah, Ramya, how was it for you?

R Ramya Amuthan 40:13

Well, it was a lot, I will say that we have been planning for India, or like the likes of India, you know, like the hypothetical of doing something like this. We've been dreaming about it. We've been excited about it. We've always had it in the back of our minds. But then when we locked it in and sent in our confirmation that we're going to be sending a team from Canada, it's just been a grind. So it felt like we were like, eat, breathe, sleep Soccer, that's, that's what it felt like for the last year.

J Jillian Sloane 40:51

And it was team meetings twice a week too, right?

R Ramya Amuthan 40:55

Twice a week team meetings. Yeah, exactly. Like gathering on WhatsApp and Zoom and Teams to, like, get everybody from everywhere on calls and keep cohesive, but also showing up to every single practice. And like, hosting sleepovers so that we can all show up on Fridays and Saturdays and Sundays, and then, like, actually making it to India, you know, travel plans and coordination and all that stuff, all this, by the way, without knowing, like, what the heck is actually India going to be like? Like, we had no idea what we were getting into. We could just kind of imagine or be nervous or excited, but it doesn't hit you until you have to walk out for your first game. So it was a very memorable, kind of visceral experience. Like, I remember when Matt was kind of giving us the rundown, like the tech rundown, of what it's going to be like to walk out for our first game. And he's like, you know, at 6pm we're going to be here, and 6:20 we walk out, and 6:30 we'd be singing the national anthem at 7pm kickoff, like, that kind of thing. Just like, okay, cool. And then when the day of, when it was happening, I was like, Oh my gosh. Like, the adrenaline just never stopped for like, two days straight.

J Jillian Sloane 42:16

There's, like, there's so much like, emotion to it, like, we're, you know, we've never been like, as far as I know, none of us have ever been like on any sort of international stage ever. And then, okay, we're standing like we have to, we have to walk out together. So like, we all put our hands on each other's shoulders, and we're guided by our goalie, and like, we have to stand on the line and sing O Canada. And there's like, five of us, and we're half in French. Yeah, in French, by the way, which half of us didn't even know that part we do now. And for whatever reason, Matt chose the opera version of O Canada, just kind of like it was crazy. And then, like, with even the eye patches and eye shades, we had to have, like the official reps check them to make sure it's they're properly put on. You can't touch your eye shades or the patches at all after they're moved or whatever. So we're like, okay, cool. Don't touch your face. And like, there's, like, some people, like, an audience of people watching. And like, there was just so much emotion. Because, like, we knew the, like, the steps of what to do, and we've done this in practice, but playing, like, walking out that first game, and then all of a sudden that first was, like, the kickoff goes, the whistle goes, and we're just like, Oh, we're literally playing for an International game right now. And there's a person running at me who like, you're from a whole nother country, and, yeah, been playing for a lot longer than I have, and like, oh my god, I just got ran into their support. Like it was just, I think the especially that first game, we were also, like, it almost felt like you were shell shocked, in a way where it's like, 100% Yeah.

R

Ramya Amuthan 43:53

The whole trip was shell shocking. Yeah. We all went from, like, very recreational, like we told you, you know what our soccer experience was, what our athletic experience was. This was our first time. Competition before India, it was just amongst friends. You know, that's what it feels like. We play neighboring clubs, and we play at Lake Joe, and we hang out all weekend, and it's just, it's not the same, like we got to know each other. But when you do something like this, and honestly, like Coach Matt's, like, steady, kind of grounded tone through all of this, is what got us through.

J

Jillian Sloane 44:34

You were just so You're so calm the whole time, you're fine. You just fell over. But like, oh, there's a board, you just match yourself.

S

Shawn Marsolais 44:42

Yeah, it's really rare to not have somebody on the team already that's been there, done that, right? So to go in with a team of like, all rookies, basically, yeah, all first timers, that's crazy. So Matt, how was that for you?

M

Matt Greenwood 44:57

It was interesting. I wouldn't even say the players were the challenging bit, like the players were so engaged right from the get go, like the fundraising needed to happen to, you know, to be able to afford the flights, that the plan was for nobody to have to incur any kind of cost, personally. And so our team captain, Hillary, really took the bull by the horns there, and really drove a lot of the kind of the fundraising and the messaging, email blasts and content that we got out on social media and a silent auction, and then that was supported by the rest of the team to do their outreach within their networks. And that was probably the sort of the challenging bit was trying to make sure that we could financially go and as Ramya had said, you know, Canada Soccer helped out wonderfully with with uniform, so that we all look the path when we're on the field or on the side of the field, coaching, which is a wonderful help to the to the budget, but that was kind of one of the biggest stresses in the build up. And then we started to have these twice weekly team meetings that included sort of a technical analysis of the teams that we were going to play, because we were the dark horses on the on the world stage for that competition. Nobody really sort of had seen us on any video tape, but we could pull up games for Argentina, Japan, England over the last two or three years and see who their star players were. So for for me, it was really exciting to be able to see our team on that world stage of going against the World number one Argentina, and see, you know, see how we'd be able to compete against them. But there's so many, so many other things that that came into play, because there's not really a a playbook on, oh, you're taking an International Blind Women's Soccer team aboard of what you need to know, yeah, a lot of it was I felt I was, I was having to own it and control it, at least for this first trip, to understand exactly what was being asked of everybody on what we all needed to do so that future tournaments will be able to

more easily divide up some of those tasks. So they girls have mentioned about classification, so there's still a need for them to be classified here in Canada before they compete internationally, and that classification only takes, 10 or 15 minutes in an ophthalmologists office. But they have to all be there. We have to sign forms, and we're there. Then we have to get the forms back. They have to be uploaded into an international portal. Somebody at the other end of that portal has to sign off to say, yes, we're good with these athletes. They can come it's like so many little bits and pieces like that that made it sometimes quite overwhelming that there was that much documentation or things that needed to happen, so it was almost a sense of relief when we were actually there. Were in the heat, we're on the field, the training sessions are really nice opportunity to get a bit of acclimatization, get a feel for the match balls, because they were a little bit different to our training balls, as we said before about the sound, get used to what noises might be around that are different to what we might hear in in Canada, and then be able to get on the field and actually compete. And the wonderful thing about our sport is the the sense of community amongst the other teams and also amongst the match officials and the organizers, like, they were so happy to have us there. They were very supportive with questions we had about, well, why was, you know, why did this decision get made on the field, and why do we have to do this before the game? And that very keen to to teach us, and we were very open to learn as much as we could and absorb it. And that's, you know, that was kind of really rewarding that I felt we came out the end of that tournament having learned so much and just from here. And you know what Julian and Rami are relaying now is just so cool that we have. I don't want to say this in a it's going to come across wrong, but we have players with a level of engagement and intelligence that they want to understand this and really own it and improve the game, rather than just come in and go through the motions of kicking the ball around on a field like they're real students of the game, which is what every coach ultimately wants.

S

Shawn Marsolais 49:12

That's awesome. So how was the actual playing? I heard there was some injuries, and I imagine there would be.

J

Jillian Sloane 49:20

Unfortunately, during one of our the first game against Argentina, Hillary, as you mentioned, who's our captain, very unfortunately, broke her hand. I think she just hit the boards wrong, like with her hand, like you really have to be the boards are not they don't have any give, like you just bounce right off. But um, however she had her hand was positioned, I think she was, she heard her hand wrong, broke her hand so Hils was out, and we only had one sub, which was me. So I was expecting, like, you know, anything can happen. So I'm like, I'll stop in when someone gets too hot or that's. I was kind of, my mindset was, yeah, and then Hils broke her hands, really, oh, here. Hils is out. Like, I went in full time, and like, Oh, my God, that's terrifying.

S Shawn Marsolais 50:09

And now you guys don't have a sub.

J Jillian Sloane 50:10

Yeah, we had no subs. Like, the thing is, like, you're in. It had to be like, 35, 40 above heat plus humidity, right? So with all the other teams, if their players struggling from the heat, they can just sub them off for another, like for a sub. We didn't have that option. So we're all just like, let alone, we're starting from the heat the whole time. So whenever there was, like, a timeout or anything, we'd run to the boards where Matt and Sarah were and, you know, Hillary was there for some of it are what the other goalkeeper, who wasn't in play, was also there. And, like, they'd spray us with little squirt bottles, or shove ice down our jerseys, or, like, ice cold towels, just to try and cool us off a bit. Um, but then there's like, you know, at one point, Mackenzie, our goalkeeper, got a ball to the face, and like, couple people almost got heat stroke. And like, like, you know, like this, and there's the, like, the boards, like, times you're stuck between two other players between the boards, and you're being pushed around into the boards. And like, you're, at least in my case, for whatever reason, I like to fall down a lot during games, so it wasn't me if I didn't fall down at least once. So like, you get turf burn and you get bumps and bruises, but it at least in for a lot of us, it just kind of fired us up and made us want to fight even harder. And like, if someone pushes off the ball, like, No, give it back. Like, I want my ball back, so you go, like, fight to get it back. So like, there's definitely some injuries, and you have to be like, okay with being kind of bumped around a bit, but like I said that at least in a lot of our cases, kind of fired us up and made us want to fight back. So it worked. It worked out that way.

R Rob Mineault 51:49

Well, I mean, so how did you do?

J Jillian Sloane 51:51

Ramya, you want to take that one?

R Ramya Amuthan 51:54

Oh, okay, are we talking about the scoreboard? Because I feel like we've been avoiding that conversation.

J

Jillian Sloane 51:59

Maybe walk through each.

R

Ramya Amuthan 52:03

So first game was tough. Oh, you guys have to remind me who we played. Okay, Argentina. We played first game, and that was really tough. They are the world champions.

S

Shawn Marsolais 52:16

Started off easy then ...

R

Ramya Amuthan 52:18

Matt, what did you call it the pool of death. Yep, yeah. There it was an eight team tournament, two pools of four, and our team included Argentina and Japan and Turkey and Canada. Turkey, sorry, and Argentina and Japan are really the champions, the world champions, their top three. They went home with gold and bronze this tournament as well. So we played Argentina. First, that was a five nil game. Then we played Japan next day, again, five nil game. And then we played Turkey, and that was fun. What was the score on that?

J

Jillian Sloane 53:00

That was 1 - 0. better.

S

Shawn Marsolais 53:04

That's really good.

J

Jillian Sloane 53:06

We got more comfortable, though it's a thing like each game. We got more comfortable. We kind of figured out how play works. We got settled in more so that, I think, helped. We got confident going in and going further into it.

R Ramya Amuthan 53:19

So okay, and then Poland was our last game. That was our best game, in my opinion. It was also one nil, but we kept it at nil, nil through the entire game, took it to shootouts and scored our sorry, it was two. One was the final score, because we scored our first goal for Canada, and that was Hillary. So shout out to Hillary, because she came back after she got to come back in for the shootout.

S Shawn Marsolais 53:49

That's awesome.

J Jillian Sloane 53:51

It was a wicked shootout. Was insane.

R Ramya Amuthan 53:55

Yeah, 17 penalty kicks, guys. Oh, my God, you ever sat through 17 penalty kicks in India?

J Jillian Sloane 54:01

They're on the field in the heat for 17 penalty kicks.

R Ramya Amuthan 54:05

Wow. All of these games are on YouTube, by the way, you can check them out, and I encourage you to spend 40 minutes.

J Jillian Sloane 54:11

During the tournament, they had an opening and closing ceremony as well. So in true Canada fashion, in the closing ceremony, they had different awards. They were giving out, and Canada got their Fair Play Award, yeah, so that we thought that was very cool, very Canadian of us.

S

Shawn Marsolais 54:34

Good job. Way to represent, right, right. Wow. Well, congratulations. I mean, this like good job for pulling a team together and getting there and showing up and, I mean, those, those last two games, are really close games. That's really admirable. I don't know. I think you should be really proud of yourselves.

M

Matt Greenwood 54:56

And I I explained to a lot of people, from my perspective, that Fair Play Award is, is sort of a beautiful moment that is kind of acknowledges the quintessential, I think, Canadian DNA, that these women were tough on the field. It was physical. They get got flattened, definitely Ramya and Jillian certain games got like, steam rolled over, but popped back up, got on with it, kept sticking at it, and then yeah, to go through that penalty shootout for 17 rounds in that heat was was excessive. Our goalkeeper passed out right at the end of the handshakes with the referees at the at the end. But off the field, our players and our staff were very engaged. We chat with the other teams. We'd sit and eat with, you know, with the referees or the organizers and just, just generally good people to have around a tournament. And I think that was respected by by the organizers. So the referees are the ones that actually vote on on who's going to win that Fair Play Award. So they clearly saw something goodness. And it was, it was nice to leave a tournament, as I said, having kind of put that stake in the ground and not left any kind of regret out there on the field. I think everybody gave everything they possibly could. And I said, told the players a couple of times, you don't want to be stuck at home when there's a foot of snow on the ground outside, thinking back to the heat of India and regressing that you you wish you'd have gone back, because there was something you didn't do. And I think everybody just gave 110% in every moment that they're on the field. It was a fantastic showing.

J

Jillian Sloane 56:30

And the nice thing too is, like, I mean, we were such a small team, like the dining, dining room of the hotel where we were staying, like every other team took up, like two, maybe three tables. We took up one, staff included. So we thought funny. But the really nice thing is, like we, like the whole team. We again, through all the various phone calls and meetings and stuff we had building up to India, like we got to know each other really well. And then during, like, the training camp at Lake Joe for that weekend, like, and even all through India, like in travel and everything, there was the team atmosphere and like, the like, there was no drama. Everyone got along, no like, if someone was feeling, you know, just really hard on themselves one day because they didn't play as well as if they thought they should have, like, the whole rest of the team, kind of, like, rallied around them, boosted them up, like, encouraged them. Like, we all just really had each other's backs and it that was really nice, because I've been in other sports where the atmosphere was not like that, and like, you felt really bad for, like, missing a goal or whatever it was, but the whole time. And like, the travel was exhausting, the games were exhausting, like, the heat everything. But we all just kind of, we tried to stay there and be present for each other. And like, we did a lot of debriefs, like we did team meetings before each game. Of like, this is what you know is expecting. This is what we're hoping for. We did like, kind of debriefs after the game, and, like, everyone just, there's no drama, and everybody was really positive and helpful. And, yeah, like, I don't know, and like, a lot of us hadn't really met each other before all of this, right? So, like, we're all relatively new to each other, and just to have like, that kind of really positive, like team atmosphere, like the and like the care culture that we brought into that was really, really nice to have.

S

Shawn Marsolais 58:24

That's great. So what's next for Canadian Blind Soccer? What's the next goal? What's the plan?

M

Matt Greenwood 58:35

The next thing on our calendar, all being well, is an international competition for the American Nationals next September in Brazil. So we'll again, we're planning to have a team meeting in the next week or two to already start talking about that. Again, the fundraising will be a key part of that. We obviously know an awful lot. So some of the, some of the challenges, we can put fast forward, buttons on and move quickly through those. But a key part of this is to grow the program. So we need to find more female players out there. We need to find another Jillian diamond in the rough out there that we can drag and pull up onto a field and and can shine on the world stage. So that's a big part of what we'll we'll be doing over the next few months, is to grow that number of players, because we don't want this to be a team. Canada brackets Ontario players with a token BC player. This needs to be representative of the nation, and we want to find those other players across across the country. But yeah, Brazil will be our next target, and I know from the chat to seeing from some of the other countries, they're all excited about getting back there next year, so should be an exciting challenge.

S

Shawn Marsolais 59:47

Well, good luck.

S

Shawn Marsolais 59:49

How if somebody is listening and they want to get involved, how did they get in? How do they get involved?

M

Matt Greenwood 59:56

The easiest way is probably if they visit the. Um, Soccability website online or email inquiries at soccability.ca. We have a website there with a bit more information about the programs, and particularly the ones that we've got running right now in Ontario. But those emails will come through to me, and then I'm able to direct them to where that local program might be. And just in the case of Jillian, you know, I've got no, no awkwardness in shaming, you know, a club into starting a program if they don't have one, or providing some field time. If we've got somebody out there that's interested, then I'm happy to lean on a grassroots soccer club and, you know, encourage them to find some space and hopefully have a coach available that can kind of come and give an hour or two hours a week to help to develop a player right there in their local community.

S

Shawn Marsolais 1:00:57

Awesome. Thank you so much all of you for joining us today. This has been really awesome to hear about your adventures, and it's brought me back to my sport experience too. I'm feeling a little nostalgic, but congratulations for showing up like that. I don't know the sport sounds tough and India sounds hard, and the whole thing sounds pretty challenging. So good job.

R

Ramya Amuthan 1:01:23

Thank you.

J

Jillian Sloane 1:01:23

Thank you.

R Rob Mineault 1:01:25

Well, see, so that wasn't that wasn't too bad for for our first attempt at a crossover.

S Shawn Marsolais 1:01:31

Yeah, sorry, I might have taken too much of the lead there. Can't help myself.

S Shawn Marsolais 1:01:39

No, I know, I know, and you should when we are talking about sports.

S Shawn Marsolais 1:01:43

Yeah, well, brings me back.

R Rob Mineault 1:01:45

This is exactly. It's very ironic that the day we were doing a crossover show, I'm I'm the host that's left to talk about a sport episode. So no, that was great. It's really interesting, and it's really heartening to hear that this sport is gaining some some momentum. And you know where it sounds like they're expanding into some different cities now, trying to to start up some new clubs. So it's exciting, but man, I tell you, I couldn't even play like regular soccer, let alone this, because this sounds like 10 times more intensive and dangerous.

S Shawn Marsolais 1:02:24

Yeah, I I would be like, Ramya, like, how do I kick? I'm that person that never really learned to do that. So to try to, like, get all those skills and then also be paying attention to all of the other audio information coming in that definitely sounds like a challenge.

R

Rob Mineault 1:02:41

Oh, absolutely. And, and, holy cow. Like, talk about trial by fire. Like, you know, their first international matches against the number one rated team in the world. Like, yeah, I think that they have, they have, they should be very, very proud of of themselves, and the fact that they hung in there and they finished tournament strong. It's gonna be very exciting to see what, what's next for them. Yeah, I totally agree. And what, what's next for blind soccer. So I fully expect you know that that club in Burnaby, we better, we better see a Blind Soccer club here in Vancouver pretty quick. That would be so cool, right? Yeah, all right. Well, let's get out of here.

S

Shawn Marsolais 1:03:24

Well, as we wrap up, Rob, where can people find us?

R

Rob Mineault 1:03:28

Well Shawn, I'm so glad you asked. You find us at www.atbanter.com. and if they want to drop us an email, they can do that at cowbell@atbanter.com.

S

Shawn Marsolais 1:03:47

Excellent.

R

Rob Mineault 1:03:51

Well, listen, thanks again for stepping in and yeah, hope you have a lovely holiday break. Of course, I'm going to see you like later this week, but well, you too, and everybody out there, Happy Holidays as well, and we will see everybody next year.

S

Steve Barclay 1:04:18

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