

Greetings, friends and welcome to the latest edition of the DiploSport podcast. In today's episode, I interview Dr. Johann Olav Koss who is probably best known for winning 4 Olympic gold medals as a speedskater for his native Norway back in the early to mid-90's. Right now he is an internationally recognized social entrepreneur as the found of Right to Play International, which is one of the leaders in sports diplomacy around the globe. When I set up the interview with him, I couldn't get over what a total package he was. He's just this handsome guy, incredibly fit, brilliant. I mentioned that he's a physician. He's also MBA, but in interviewing him it became pretty apparent that he's also one of the most humble human beings on this earth. We did the interview in his office in Toronto and I have more photos of him hanging on my walls in Washington than he does in his own office. There is not a hint of any of his past Olympic glory hanging around. It's just a real simple office. During the course of the conversation which you are about to listen to, it became apparent why. He talked about the importance of role models whether that is Eric Heiden, the great American speed skater that he, Dr. Koss, first saw when he was early in his speed skating career that he decided to model himself after. Johann also talked a lot about his own parents and the impact that they played in his own life. I think humility was a huge part of his driving determination to be the best in the world at speed skating during the time. He's got a fantastic story about lining things up so he would be successful at the '94 Lillehammer games which were going to be the hometown games for this Norwegian speed skating hero. He did some really cool stuff spinning out of those Games, which over the last 20 years has only served to make the world a better place in places far away from Norway to include Africa. He talks a lot about his time in Eritrea and they do some pretty incredible work in Rwanda. This was a real honor to get time with him. He couldn't have been more amenable to sitting down and talking with me. I hope you enjoy listening to my interview with Dr. Koss.

Dr. Koss: (inaudible)

Morgan: You've had a very interesting life and background if you don't mind me saying so. Doing some reading and research on you, you're from Norway originally. You are a 4-time gold medalist and 5 time medalist overall at the Olympic Games. Multiple world record holder. Forgive my ignorance, even being a diplomat, I don't have much experience in Scandinavia. Is speed skating a national sport in Norway?

Dr. Koss: It's always been a very popular sport. It's not necessarily a very big sport. It requires a 400m track and there aren't that many of them. You see now with the change in climate that it's less and less natural ice opportunities. You see artificial ice. Skating is a tradition in Norway, starting in the 1880s. We really appreciate our legends in the sport through 150 years of the sport. It's been something that has always been close to people's hearts. I remember when I was growing up I was fortunate my parents, being extremely interested in the sport, not doing it themselves, but watching the heroes and following every lap time, writing it down, understanding what was required to become the best. They followed the heroes in the '70s. One of them being Eric Heiden from the United States.

Morgan: You have a lot in common with Eric Heiden.

Dr. Koss: I wouldn't necessarily say that except that we are both skaters and we both became doctors. He's an orthopedic surgeon now and I never practiced after my medical training through he was my role model. You saying that makes me blush because I always looked up to him. Remembering him in '79, he skated in Oslo in the World Championship and he was like a superhero. I was 11-years-old and I looked up to this guy who crushed every Norwegian. He became my hero and I wanted to become like him.

Morgan: He's a cyclist too. A world class cyclist also

Dr. Koss: He did professional. As he will say, he got a little too heavy for his bike, for the hills. I know he won the American Championship one year, but he was clearly a much better skater than a cyclist.

Morgan: I remember watching videos of him training. His quads were like an American football running backs. They were gigantic.

Dr. Koss: It's interesting. His training was very hard. Dianne Holum was his coach and she shared the training programs with my coach so I got them and we built on what he was doing. I don't think anyone trained more than him. We realized we had to do at least that and more to win the next generation.

Morgan: When did you know that you were at that world class level that you were going to be an Olympian?

Dr. Koss: I made the choice in the sport when I was 11 years old. When I actually watched Eric and I said this is my dream..I want to be like him, but I was really bad at it and I had a long way to go.

Morgan: You said you came to the sport relatively late.

Dr. Koss: Not really, I was skating from when I was 7. At 11, I was like this is what I want to be best at. I started training, but I wasn't very good before I was 16. That is when I kind of broke through nationally in Norway.

Morgan: The first Olympic team you made was the '92 Albertville for France?

Dr. Koss: Correct. I tried out for the '88 Olympics, but did not qualify.

Morgan: That was Calgary, here in Canada.

Dr. Koss: Yes, I did not do that, but I won Worlds in 90 and 91 so I needed a couple of years before I was really good. After that, I was part of every important competition.

Morgan: And before '92, like a week before, didn't you have an operation?

Dr. Koss: I had a pancreatitis. I didn't have an operation. If I did, I wouldn't have been able to skate. I had a very big inflammation of the pancreas which was extremely painful. There were doctors in Germany where we were at a training camp for the Olympics who was exceptional. They managed to release tension which released (inaudible) which released the infection. I did not have surgery. Contrary to some reports in the US.

Morgan: Still very impressive. You still came home with a gold medal. As an aside and this is something that has always fascinated me. People may not realize this, but '92 were the Games in France and then '94, there was only 2 years between the Olympics. As an athlete were you happy for that because you were there in your prime and didn't have to wait 4 years between Games? Did that change your mind set at all?

Dr. Koss: Certainly it was amazing luck. I was at a prime age. I was 23 in '92 and 25 in '94. The other thing was that we got the Olympics in our home country which is a massive driver. The 2 year made it very easy to continue after '92, but in '88 (inaudible) came and gave the announcement that it was Lillehammer. I know that was our goal. Albertville became a goal on the way to the home Olympics because nothing is bigger than that. You can imagine that in a winter sport a lot of investment is needed to improve. They reshaped the thinking of sport. How to be a top sport, how can we win more. You can look at Norwegian success.

Morgan: You won the most medals in Lillehammer.

Dr. Koss: Yes, since then it has continued. Winter sport success is unparalleled in modern history. Its like how we were 50 years prior to that and then we had a number of years we weren't that great. They came up with a model that works. It's a model that can transform the sport and all different sports. It's not just specific to the one sport that you are working on.

Morgan: The Norway angle is a great launching point. It's a very important part of your story. It wasn't Oslo. Lillehammer is a small town from what I gather. You mentioned a moment ago. This is the home games. You knew you had a platform there. Maybe you can talk a little bit about why do people care about athletes? Why is what you did on an ice rink bigger than just winning a race in 1994? Maybe talk domestically and then we can get into the international.

Dr. Koss: Interestingly, sport in itself galvanized support from a wide range of people. There is nothing in our society that is making people to aspire to something like this. I had a role model even though I was Norwegian and he was an American, there were Norwegian heroes I looked up to. Having that aspirational goal and aspiration to 2 wonderful individuals, it makes you decide to do things in life that is very positive. It's a big driver for large amount of activities for children to have something to aspire to and goals and dreams to achieve. You wouldn't necessarily go through all of that positive behavior by training. I see sport as a very good influencer on young people's life and an incredible developer. It's very very important for people to look at that. The event itself galvanized people tremendously around the Olympics to say this is the greatest event. It actually reshaped the way Norwegians think about themselves. I think we looked at it and said, wow we can actually do this. We can be best at something in the world. We can present something that is very presentable. The pride level, the level of understanding, nationalism came through in a positive and successful way from the Olympics. It galvanized investments and technical development overseas. It ignited world industry and the Norwegian mentality that we can actually be very good at something. It focused people. That is what sport can do domestically. I noticed it just in the buildup to this Games and how people were interested in being good.

Morgan: You were 25 at the time, still a relatively young man. How were you so mature to say I'm going to donate my Olympic bonus that I'm going to get. Not only settle that, but turn around and say, hey, fellow Norwegians why don't you guys kick in some money?

Dr. Koss: It was an extremely personal experience for me. After the '92 Olympics, I was supportive of a bunch of charitable organizations in Norway. I was very passionate about it. I learned it from my parents, both being medical doctors. They always opened the house to people who needed help. My grandmother, who was my hero and protector and always believed in my dreams, she always said do unto others as you would want others to do to you. She lived in that philosophy. I think in Norway, a very very small country and very far away from everything, I looked at it very precise and geographically. We have a very big passion that we believe we can have an impact around the world. We want to change and contribute where it's needed. Norway has actually been a poor country for forever up to post Second World War. Then oil came and we became very rich. We have a tradition of understanding poverty and I want to change it. I was brought up that way. I had a chance to travel to Eritrea 6 months leading up to the Olympics because I (inaudible) Olympic Aid Ambassador which was a program organized by the Lillehammer Olympic Committee. Which, in itself was unusual because it had never

been done before in an Olympic Games. This was a legacy program of the Games and I was like wow...I was honored. I didn't think I would have time to go anywhere, to go to Africa prior to your Olympics. Training was impossible.

Morgan: They didn't have speed skating ovals in Eritrea.

Dr. Koss: (inaudible) I came down there and got to train.

Morgan: They didn't even weights though. You had to do make shift..

Dr. Koss: Yea...the gym room was made out of parts of tanks. I was on the bike. It's a bike riding country because it was an Italian colony so you could train on a bike. More importantly for me was the experience I had with the children. Realizing that the dreams of children anywhere in the world, even in war affected countries, they are to play. They want to play. They want to be a part of a team. They want to have coaches. They even know about soccer heroes, basketball, they do see them. Even in the worst areas of the world. I came in as an athlete and they looked at me. I never appreciated the privilege that I had because I had taken it for granted. It changed my life. Eritrea gave me a reason to skate which is interesting because we train 6-8 hours and it's very selfish in many ways. It's self-pursuit of success and excellence which is a good thing, but it's very lonely because you feel like you are doing it for yourself.

Morgan: That was something I was going to ask you about. I'm nowhere near your level, but I was a wrestler growing up and i like to run and do triathlons now...very individual sports like speed skating. You don't necessarily think of team when you do that, but it's interesting to hear you say it's lonely and it's spurring you to...

Dr. Koss: At times it was. You have hard times in the choice that you want to continue training. I am disagreeing that its not a team sport even though you are competing at the highest level alone. You are never alone because you are always with a team. You are not winning with a team, you are winning alone. If it weren't for the team, I wouldn't win. We work really well together and that helped motivate me, but the pursuit is selfish. At times I felt like that wasn't good enough. At times, I felt like I'm not giving anything back. This is why I wanted to be a medical doctor. I felt like I could contribute to the world in different ways. I wanted to follow the foots of my parents, but then I realized that if I can make one child play...because I saw this watching a group of children watching the posters in the main street. And I'm like what is on this picture? I looked at it and these are the martyrs, the men and women that died in the liberation war. These young 7-8 years old are admiring these martyrs and they have the same dream as I except they want to be soldiers. They didn't have anyone to look up to. If that is only what they want to do, to become recognized, then obviously you will repeat history and you will continue the wars. I was standing there and it gave me meaning of sport. Personally, I came home much more

motivated to win. It was incredible. I think meaning gives us a higher level of motivation. When you create meaning outside of yourself, you can create an even higher level of motivation than your personal motivation. I really wanted to do well at this Olympics.

Morgan: You knew you were going to have that platform. You knew it was in your own home country. You knew that you weren't just skating for Norwegians, you were skating for Eritreans. That is incredible.

Dr. Koss: After my first gold, I thanked my team and family that supported me. I had 3 days to prepare for the next race. If I win this one, I'm definitely going to give away my winnings to the children in Eritrea and I use that platform to describe what I experienced. I couldn't tell anyone because I hadn't won the race. What do you do if you don't win? To give me an extra feeling that this race is for this children. Of course, it became true and I gave my money away. It galvanized an incredible response. I was asked if we should engage the Norwegian people and I said 10 kroners for every gold medal we won. We raised \$18M in 10 days. Everyone got behind it. It was amazing. It was an amazing response from people who were already willing to do something internationally. It was also used to celebrate what we achieved during the Olympics and using that as a platform was massive.

Morgan: Now is a good time to bring up the fundraising aspect. You've raised almost \$400M for Right to Play. What do you think the key is? Do you think it's setting the example? Do you think it's putting yourself out there saying, I'm doing this..who is coming with me?

Dr. Koss: For us in this moment, it is very important to be fulsome in it. That gives a lot of credibility and people believe in that. I think that is one of the thing that has been the cornerstone of our success of the organization. But that is not enough. You have to be deliberate with your programs and learn from your mistakes. You have to have set up with a very strong organization and have incredible individuals. I've been so fortunate to mobilize and recruit staff, athletes, everyone to recognize the thing. We've made mistakes and been forgiven and had the chance to re-do things while we can improve our impact. In the end, it's all about making sure because it's donated funds they are very emotional. People want to make sure they have an impact and affect what you are doing. I've had the same philosophy to it. You have to spend exceptionally well to make sure you can make a difference somehow.

Morgan: There is a similarity in our world in the government with the taxpayer dollar. We are compelled to be strong custodians of it. That is one area that I'm trying to do a deep dive here with monitoring and evaluation. I can tell you sitting across the table from you--I get it. I'm motivated by just hearing your story about going to Eritrea and seeing those kids. Based on my own experiences, what I did working in the Sports United office in the State Department I saw firsthand that these programs work, but knowing that and having the anecdotal evidence is one thing. How do you get quantifiable data that supports that what you are doing is making an impact?

Dr. Koss: You have to set up trials and make sure that you are doing proper research on it. Validation of how (inaudible) is applied. Sadly, then you have comparables, prior or post intervention, or comparable groups who does or doesn't get support who are similar. We've already proven that this works. You don't go and measure the sport abilities because it's not the government's call. Maybe the Chinese government...they have sport goals due to their interest in having sensation athletes. The United States, Canada, Norway government does not look at those goals. We look at children's wellness and you look at the 21st century skill set divided into basic children development. You look at physical, psychological, emotional development including committed development (inaudible). You can divide that into certain measurable areas. Of course, being active and physical activity with learning from the game improve the success. We see this tremendously particularly in the most disadvantaged areas of the world where they don't have the access. From the air you can look at the basic principles of gender equality and child protection which you can improve dramatically both interest of girls and protecting children from violence. If you can measure all of these things, and we have tremendous impact in this area. This should be good enough, but the government says that is good, but this and that and they always come up with excuses because they find investment is important in infrastructure and I say that is well and good but you have to invest in people. We go in and there has been a massive movement in (inaudible) in having access to school and there have been incredible improvement in attrition, basically starting school. They haven't looked at the attrition rates. The incredible drop out and lack of quality in the school systems, for instance Rwanda. We have a program there which showed in 2007 50% of children dropped out in 2007. By 7th year they dropped out. Over half of them couldn't read or write. You can look at the academic result of the 50% who graduated and they were around 40% on the national standard in the rural schools. This is very poor quality. We introducing our programing with training teachers in child centered play based learning technologies. Using physical games and sport to teach them the curriculum which is in the school. You can use it because there are 40-60 students and the traditional teaching methodology of standing in front of a whiteboard has no impact. It has an impact on 2-5 children of 40. By breaking them down into groups, they are actively learning what they are supposed to learn. In 5 years, we see an increased to 96% graduation and of those 96% graduating we have 85% on academic (inaudible)..you know, achieving standards. We are doubling the academic record and we are getting everyone to graduate. Now you can think that is incredible, but we see in parallel schools there were no change over the 5 years.

Morgan: So the control group was showing..

Dr. Koss: They were still in (inaudible). Then what happens is the Rwanda government looks at this and says this is amazing what is happening so they reinvest into the successful schools. In the next 5 years, we have an agreement with the Ministry of Education in Rwanda to say that we need to create a systematic approach to this. Child centered play based learning should be the standard of all teaching. Now we have to train all teachers in this in-service teaching. We created a continual teacher program which is a 3 year program of training teachers as well as pre-service training. That is when we can really scale. Now we are talking about millions and millions of dollars for 1 country where the government has to do it. Local investment plus the (inaudible) investment has to go through this program. We are

looking at quality learning now and we need to maintain quality teachers and this is the only way to do it. It's proven over and over again. This notion comes also from sport and the ability to maximize people's ability within their own skill sets.

Morgan: It's very interesting how its cross cutting. I didn't hear you say Ministry of Sport once in Rwanda. I heard you say Ministry of Education.

Dr. Koss: Obviously we are looking at this for (inaudible). That has to go through the education system. We work with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. Ministry of Health is due to we are doing health education in the school for preventative reasons.

Morgan: Vaccinations, washing your hands...

Dr. Koss: Exactly...sexual reproductive health which is so critical for survival for many of these places. Even malaria is still a number 1 killer in Africa within infancy and the first 5 years of a child's life. They deal with this type of thing and that is critical as an organization because we believe in behavior change. If you look at proper behavior change methodology, it comes from sport. There is not a coach that does not understand behavior change. If you become a coach, you are really looking to find if an athlete is changing their behavior to become better. That mentality we put into the education system and the health prevention system and what we call conflict resolution side. On the conflict resolution side we are looking at the humanitarian settings. There is more migrant crisis than ever since the Second World War. (inaudible) children is the highest that you can imagine. We are looking at the sympathetic and parasympathetic nerve systems. The parasympathetic nerve systems basically shut down and the sympathetic nerve systems are basically fired up by the fear/fight initiative. Both of these elements can be measured. We are now doing research with the Rockland Business School and Behavior Science at University of Toronto and looking at how we can create a normalized autoneuro system response in a traumatized child. You can do that through variables. You can measure that because you know they are extremely destructible the individuals that have a sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system response. They can be destructive to themselves or their surroundings. You need to get them into a normal range of response rate and that is only done through games and play and physical activity. This is extremely important for the State Department and anyone understanding this. You are not 10 or 100 children. You are talking about hundreds of thousands of children with different neurological response to what they have experienced. You can't have enough child psychologists to deal with this kind of trauma. You can do it through sport. This is the only way to do mass ability to get them into a normal neurological response. If you can get them into that, that is when you can have the proper conversation. Trauma will be recovered in that space. It doesn't get recovered in the two other spaces. If an apathetic individual sits with a parasympathetic the nervous sensors shuts down. You will basically not have an ability to react. You can come in and talk about their experiences because that is them basically repeating their own trauma.

Morgan: What I'm hearing is I'm hearing is a man who a tremendous grasp on the medical side and a tremendous business acumen. That lines up with your post athletic life. You went to medical school and have a MBA. How does someone like you make decisions and how do you decide this is what I need to do next. When you hung up your skates in '94, did you have your life chartered out or was it I need this skill set so I'm going to focus on this and I need this other skills set so I'm going to focus on this?

Dr. Koss: Coming from the athlete side, I already started my medical training when I was competing. That was ultimate goal.

Morgan: Your parents were doctors so it was natural.

Dr. Koss: I thought I was going to be practicing like Eric does. I love medicine. I think my experience in Eritrea changed other things and my experience with Olympic Aid during the Olympics made me focus. I want to make sure that the Olympics is responsible to do something bigger than the future Games. Then I became this Ambassador for Olympic Games, going to Atlanta and made them have Olympic Games. I got incredible support from Ambassador Andrew Young, former Mayor of Atlanta, and he was vice chair of the Atlanta organize committee. He was the only one who understood it. That group, back in '97, and we made it happen. It was amazing. Then we go to Nagano and Sydney. Those 6 years of my life, I was in aisle seat. I was part of establishing the anti-doping agency because of my medical background. I completed medical school. I traveled the world as a UN Goodwill Ambassador. I realized that there is nobody in the world on a global setting organizing sport as a tool for developing children. There were a lot of small initiatives and massively great projects around...(inaudible). It started locally but nobody did it on a global scale. We have to create this organization because nobody is doing this. It came to me through my own personal experience of my 6 years after retirement. Then we started Right to Play and I realized that I have to have business skills and I have to do my business degree. The amazing school of Rockland Business School gave me the chance to do that due to the growth and understanding of how to run a company.

Morgan: We talked about some of your CV. What makes a good athlete ambassador? Why is Summer Sanders so special?

Dr. Koss: Summer is a great example. The great example is understanding what sport does to you. Athletes have a very high level of self awareness. When they do become best, when they do that they understand the influence of other people that made you get there. That is what you look at. Do they have the understanding of how they become good? The importance of sport in their life and do they understand that they could never get there by themselves? Some people do think they can win by themselves but it is impossible. You take away a coach from an athlete and they will not be good. Forget

about it. Still athletes believe they did it by themselves, but it doesn't ever work. We don't pick those athletes because they understand that those are the athletes that we think they can translate their own experience to a child's experience domestically or globally or in a war setting or a developing country. Those are the best athlete ambassadors.

Morgan: It's that connection that they are able to make.

Dr. Koss: Absolutely! They can articulate it, they are passionate about it, they have personal experiences and they have a passion that other people should have the same chance. When you are going to the world of sport there is tons of them. We have more challenge, we have incredible Olympians because we grew out the Olympic movement. Our challenge is engaging the professional athletes. They are much higher paid, they have more ability to influence, they can give more away and they can a bigger impact as well. In their life, there is always a group of people protecting them that doesn't let them have the impact which they should be able to do. There is only a few who actually stick out. In our world we have Zuccarello, (inaudible) and they all grew up in Norway so it is not a fair comparison even though they do well in American sports. You have Andre Agassi. He's developed an incredible organization and does a tremendous amount of good. There are very few like that because...I think that the world of greedy (inaudible). Athletes...its very difficult thing because you know you are only in there for a few number of years and you are worried about the 50 years you are going to live and you have to be prepared for that. The people around you at the world of sport, they are there to maximize their return on your behalf in that short period. The minute you are out, they find another person. It a bit of....

Morgan: We say next man up.

Dr. Koss: Yea, that is a good expression. This is some of the things in my role as a founder of Right to Play. I go to great (inaudible) or running the organization. I only do the day to day, but looking at how can we meet athletes and educating them about their power and their ability to make the world a better place. I think athletes don't know it. I didn't know it. I had no idea. When I was skating, I just see the experiences it's given me in my life. It's unbelievable and I think other people should be given the awareness that is a choice they make. They can have that same impact.

Morgan: One of questions that I came in here with today, but I clearly know the answer...do you think the US government should invest in not just sports diplomacy but using sports as a tool fo development, peace, promoting business abroad? I'm sure your answer is yes, but what can do better?

Dr. Koss: There is so much more than you can do better. First of all, take it seriously..that is number one. I don't think the State Department really gets it. We've worked with several embassies and we've worked with State Department, USAID, and some funding programs but they are very small in

comparison to the whole overall budget. I think that it's possibly one of the greatest export articles the US has. I actually truly show what the US is about, like giving everybody a chance to succeed and admiring hard working individuals into a competitive landscape. They are heroes. This is incredible way to describe the American society and understanding that is something nobody cares about. Sadly we are using, particularly in the more troubled parts of the world, we are using other means to influence. These tools are not necessarily promoting American values to say the least. It's creating such an obstacle to understanding American society and values. Number of discussions with different people, for instance our program in Pakistan, we are educating over 200,000 children and over half of them are talking a lot about girls equity and equality and how they are contributing to society overall. We are daily in activities with 200,000. We have 6,000 junior leaders there dealing with the importance of education with girls. I don't think anybody in the US or State Department understands that platform. We can easily grow to a million children in Pakistan and then you reach a tipping point and you can create a change in an entire society from the grass roots. There is nobody else who can do that.

Morgan: We need to wrap up. Dr. Koss, thank you very much for your time. I'll keep you updated when I'm going to post this.

Dr. Koss: ok

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