

Today's guest on the DiploSport podcast is skeleton racer, Katie Uhlaender, who is a three-time Olympian currently looking to make her fourth team at the Pyeongchang Games which will be held in South Korea, as she mentions later in the interview, well less than 2 years.

Katie is figuring prominently in the news now in the middle of the winter quad cycle because of the fact that she came in fourth place, just off the podium, in the Sochi Games in 2014. She'll mention that she came in fourth in less time than it takes to blink over the course of several miles down the track. What makes this even more interesting is that the woman that came in third place is a Russian athlete that goes by the name Elena Nikitina. Elena is implicated as a drug cheat. Katie mentions that she has an Olympic bronze medal pending a decision of the International Skeleton Federation and the Olympic committee. A very timely discussion as we head into the Rio cycle and much debate surrounding the Russian national team in all sports going to those games considering the systemic doping regime that was carried out under the instruction of the Russian government.

Great interview with Katie. She has a tremendous perspective and does not play the victim at all. It's great to hear how she uses these setbacks as motivation and inspiration as she goes ahead and gets ready to compete in her next Olympic games and make her next Olympic team. Without further ado, here is my interview with Katie Uhlaender.

Morgan: What's your name and what do you do for a living?

Katie: My name is Katie Uhlaender. I do skeleton as a hobby slash amateur sport. I work for Life University which is a (inaudible) clinic that is associated with the university. I am a world champion, three time Olympian, bronze medal pending. I don't know what else to say...I'm pretty awesome? Full of life?

Morgan: You certainly are. One of the reasons why you are awesome is the sport that you do. It's not necessarily a main stream sport, but could you tell me a little about what skeleton is and how it differs from luge or the bobsled?

Katie: Hopefully people out there know what luge and bobsled are. I quickly reference the Jamaican bobsled team. Skeleton goes down the same path. You are on a cookie sheet that weighs about 70 lbs, you go down on your stomach, and you do a lot of wishing and hoping and giggling.

Morgan: How fast are you going when you are laying on your stomach going down the track?

Katie: The fastest I've gone is 90. I would say average top speed is about 75-80.

Morgan: But that is no big deal because you have brakes, right? It's real easy to slow down.

Katie: It's all about committing of the speed. We don't have brakes. You come to the point where you have 2 choices. You can freak out or you can embrace the fear. I think if you embrace the fear rather than letting it consume you, it can give you strength. I think a lot people get that. I think that is what driven me to it. The ability to be relaxed in chaos and let the fear become something that surged a refusal to submit to failure.

Morgan: How does one end up becoming a skeleton athlete?

Katie: I have no idea to be honest. It's totally random. Somebody talked me into trying it. I had to make a decision of whether I would pursue my dream to become the next Diane Foster to survive the jungle or go be an Olympian and honestly that is way I thought about it at 18-19. I wouldn't have accepted any other pathway. I would have taken it to the top. I just happen to have an encounter with the right person and I think it's about showing you are willing to put in everything you have with what you are doing and those opportunities will present themselves if you have the courage to do it.

Morgan: How were you identified as somebody that might excel at the sport? Were you an exceptional sprinter? Were you a great athlete in high school or early on in college?

Katie: All of those and a little crazy. I was doing a lot of freestyle skiing and I met a bobsledder in a gym and she suggested I try skeleton. I wasn't really sure what it was. I graduated high school in 2002, just after the Olympics with the sport's return. I said, I'll try it..it looks pretty crazy. It looked terrifying which meant I had to do it. After three weeks, I won Junior Nationals and went to Junior Worlds and got 7th. I won Senior Nationals. That is why it became quite apparent I was at the crossroads of chasing my dream of becoming the next Diane Foster or an Olympian.

Morgan: Let's rewind. In addition to having a temperament that lends itself to being an world class athlete, you were also blessed with good genes. Being a world class athlete runs in the family, right?

Katie: I had the choice. My father was the (inaudible) in baseball. He was a Major League baseball player in the 60s and 70s. He's my hero to be honest. He instilled a great bit of the way I view sports and life as far as work ethic, perseverance, honor, integrity, respect and team work.

Morgan: Is it true that you keep his NL championship ring on a chain around your neck?

Katie: Yes, his NL ring. They beat the Pirates to go lose to the Oakland A's....Catfish Hunter...he was too good!

Morgan: This was when he was on the Cincinnati Reds, right?

Katie: Yea, that was his last World Series. He did 2 World Series. One with the Twins and one with the Reds. I feel like he's always here. He spoke very highly of the Twins. I spoke with Tony Oliva very recently and I'm hoping to go visit and catch up with them. Charlie Manuel..he had so many great friends. The guys back then were throw back. They were classics. Ken Griffey was there...George Foster, Johnny Bench. Most people my age don't know what I'm talking about. They were legends.

Morgan: They were his teammates with the Reds. I know your father worked with Charlie when Charlie was manager. You dad was a coach on his staff, right?

Katie: That was the team, yeah.

Morgan: Afterwards, did he retire to be a farmer?

Katie: In addition to working for baseball he had a ranch in western Kansas.

Morgan: Did you grow up on that farm?

Katie: No. I called my dad when I won my first overall World Cup and I got a big chunk of cash. It's not enough to buy a house or get a down payment. What do I do with it? I know I should invest. He said you should buy a cow. I looked at him and said, excuse me...what? Then he explained to me how it would work and he would cover the overhead and we would invest together. I bought 11 headed cattle in 2007 and he passed away in 2009. I had no choice but to go out to the farm and (inaudible) into the ranching life. I fell in love with it. It's the essence of America. You've got hard work, teamwork, community. It's about taking care of the bigger picture and not selfishly yourself. There is something very rewarding about that and feeding America.

Morgan: When you were a little girl, what sports did you start playing early on?

Katie: Baseball...I did gymnastics, baseball, softball, golf, track and field, power lifting, volleyball, speed racing. I don't know if I'm forgetting anything. I pretty much went out of high school into Olympic sports. I did play baseball almost my whole childhood..actually my whole childhood. I started when I was 7 and played through high school.

Morgan: You played on the boys' team? You didn't play softball in high school?

Katie: Well, they are two different sports. I remember when I was in second grade I was watching the boys do drills and play the sport and I was doing cartwheels in the outfield. I didn't realize it was boys versus girls. I thought of it like they are doing something and I'm bored. I went and started playing baseball. That was fine until I got into high school and people got upset. I was convinced that I was going to be a Major League baseball player until I graduated high school or til like my junior year when I realized being 5'3" and being female wasn't really in my favor.

Morgan: That hasn't stopped you from being a successful athlete and we'll get to that in a second.

Katie: No, not at all. I think I benefited from the challenges. I was an average baseball player. I could have made it maybe in the minors. The Major Leagues are the best of the best and I'm a woman. I have some physical limitations compared to men, but that is part of being a woman and I'm ok with it because I love being a woman.

Morgan: The values that you learned through athletics growing up and learning about who you are. I heard you talk about this a few minutes ago. I think there are some parallels between your love of being of somebody that is in farming and agriculture. What are some of the things you learned from sports in your developmental years?

Katie: Baseball is a really great sport for it because every time you step up to the plate you're battling the odds. It teaches you perseverance. It teaches you self-confidence and belief because every time you step up to the box the odds are you aren't going to get a hit. Every time that you step in the box, you have to believe that you are going to get a hit. I think that was probably my most memorable and awesome...I don't know how to explain what I'm saying...but a sport that left such an impression and facilitated my ability to never pay attention to what the odds are or what everyone else does, the naysayers, and just look into my heart and my own beliefs. Also, the fact that I was a girl playing with the boys. I didn't have a choice. I wasn't going to listen to them. I think there are a lot of lessons like that in sport. My father used to give me so much awesome advice. I remember when I was going to Junior Worlds after three weeks of being on the sled. I didn't feel like I deserved it. I was going to compete with

Olympic champions, America's Cup champions, National champions, European champions. Then there was me who didn't even own my own equipment. He said that reminds me of the first time I was in the batter's box in Yankee stadium with Mickey Mantle in the outfield. I couldn't get my knees to stop shaking and I was freaking out. Then I realized that the legends before me like Mickey Mantle took the same steps like I'm taking up to the plate. We had the same choice when we get there. Nobody cares how long it took you to get to that place. You make your own path. When you get there, you have to hit the ball. Are you going to believe and focus on your task or are going to worry about how you got there?

Morgan: How cool is that to have a story with your father that Mikey Mantle plays prominently in the middle. I'm a New Yorker, I'm a Yankee fan. That is just so cool that he was on the field with him in his first game in that wonderful ballpark of the old Yankee stadium.

Katie: I think I was blessed in being able to grow up with these stories and these men and athletes that held intensity and teamwork and honor to such high standards. I feel like it's a dying out perspective. The traditional perspective of taking ownership for your successes and your responsibilities and continually owning those things so you can continue to get better. There were never any excuses allowed. I try to surround myself with people that keep me in that same frame of mind which is why I'm training at (inaudible). They constantly challenge me mentally and physically to upload those same lessons that I learned from my father as a kid.

Morgan: You're in Arizona now, right, doing your training. Are you focused on Pyeongchang? Is that the next big goal on the horizon? Where is the focus for you?

Katie: I've finally taking my dad's advice and I'm only doing one sport. I put away all my extreme toys like my kiteboard and my skateboard and my skis and they are all gone. I am just sledding and being a professional athlete that doesn't get paid.

Morgan: Skeleton is not a huge revenue generator, correct? You aren't going to get rich being a world class skeleton racer.

Katie: No, I'm extremely lucky to have gotten a job with Life University. It's given me an opportunity to educate kids and put the word out on how concussions can be prevented and recovered from appropriately. I feel like I've got my hands in all the buckets I want to be in. I'm blessed because I wouldn't be able to compete in the sport without their help.

Morgan: You've suffered at least one concussion, correct?

Katie: At least that is the correct way to put it.

Morgan: Is it just from different sports? Did you did have any particularly nasty instances on the track?

Katie: Going into Sochi, my seventh run down the track, I got a pretty bad concussions and I suffered from post-concussion syndrome the entire Olympic year. I went to a (inaudible) clinic in Dallas and got treatment alongside of combat veterans that quickly put my self-pity in perspective. When I heard stories of them howling and fighting and never giving up this life being damaged and blown up and shot at. I realized I was being a big baby thinking whoa is me..I'm going to the Olympics with another injury. I realized that they were teaching me that i didn't need to focus on what I didn't have but focus on what I did have and make sure I brought 100% to Russia to fight. When I got there, my symptoms were better but my courage was restored. I went there damaged but willing to take every bit of heart and passion I had and bring it on the ice in Russia to attempt to get a medal. My concussion was quite the experience, but the fact that those veterans were there. I'm very passionate about assisting the veterans recovering from TBIs and educating other athletes on how to prevent concussions. Also give them hope that a concussion doesn't mean their career is over. It can be reversed.

Morgan: Is there a tie there between your commitment to wearing a uniform that has your country's name on it and what you learned and drew from these men and women that you were alongside in Dallas? Is national pride one of the things that gets you up in the morning to compete for your fourth Olympics?

Katie: Most definitely. I think that to go beyond that is also the 1% of the population that has that fire in their bellies and it's undeniable. Having that fire in your belly can quickly catch to a number of things to get passionate about. National pride is definitely one of them. It's not only that it's loyalty. National pride goes beyond borders. Our country is so unique in that it was meant to have power, it was meant to accept people from other nations and grow to a place of freedom. Internationally, they make fun of us a little bit because they talk about freedom but that's what our country was found upon is the acceptance of so many different cultures, heritages to come here and be who they are and who they want to be. I try to represent that as best I can with tolerance, acceptance, love, but also I'm going to kick your butt.

Morgan: I think that is the most American sentence that anybody has ever said to me.

Katie: You're welcome.

Morgan: You're welcome America. You've also been at least, if not world class, a national caliber athlete in at least 2 other sports. Maybe you can talk a little bit about your cycling career and your power lifting background..Olympic lifting.

Katie: Olympic weight lifting not power lifting. Sorry to the power lifters out there, but it's a little different.

Morgan: You were pretty darn close to making the summer Olympic teams in a couple of sports too, correct?

Katie: I wouldn't say that, but I definitely gave it a really good shot. My third meet ever was the Olympic Trials. I qualified for the Olympic Trials in Olympic weightlifting, 58 kilo class lifter. I was going to go for it again in Rio, but I ended up having 2 major surgeries...micro (inaudible) replacement in my hip and a micro fracture reconstruction on my ankle. I did cycling because I couldn't run and workout and I was really tired of being indoors. It was amazing and a lot of fun. Unfortunately, there was no real room to do anything with it because I didn't qualify for a spot. I'm hoping to potentially go back to it after Korea, but I'm going to ride the wave and see what happens. I have to say that I am drawn to competition and that feeling of relaxed chaos.

Morgan: Is that why you're able to show up in your third meet in a couple different sports and be ready to go and ready to compete at this incredibly high level?

Katie: You know..I can't say I'm the strongest. I can't say I'm the fastest, but I can say that I have an innate ability to work hard and put every ounce of what I've got out there. I think some people hesitate to do that, but I go hard and that is what I was talking about with the 1%. They get that fire in their belly. They know what that passion is like. It's something that is undeniable and it has to be focused on something.

Morgan: For you, right now it's focused on getting to the winter Olympics in South Korea in 2 years. We are halfway through the quad right now.

Katie: It's like 17 months..not that I'm counting.

Morgan: How's your training coming? How are you feeling?

Katie: I'm healthy. I'm so excited about it. You have no idea. I'm healthy for the first time in a really long time. I have kind of said this before, oh I have no pain most of the time. No, this is for real this time. I don't have pain. My leg isn't going out on me. My ankle works. (Inaudible) did my surgeries and they did phenomenal. These are my 9th and 10th surgeries. I took a year off and have really taken my (inaudible) seriously. I want to make sure that there was no question of me winning a medal this time. I was going to be sure that I didn't make the mistakes. The first mistake was getting injured. So all the toys are in the closet. I'm training with Altus which is the best place to push me mentally and physically. I try to hang out around people that keep my perspective in line with the lessons that my father taught me. Which includes (inaudible) Tiny...and then there is (inaudible).

Morgan: Is Arizona a skeleton hot bed? How did you end up there?

Katie: Altis came here so my coach, Stewart McMillian, and Dan Pass started a world athlete center that turned into Altis. There are 15 different nations here training for Rio. They are coaching them and I want to be surrounded by the best. I can't say Arizona is my first choice. I would have chosen Laguna Beach.

Morgan: You're working with track and field athletes, right? Getting a good start is a huge part of your sport too, right? Explosive sprint right off the bat.

Katie: Right, I am working alongside track and field athletes. I'm doing my own program but I have to say that I'm really hoping that osmosis works.

Morgan: You mentioned that there are 15 other nations there. I thought you did a great job explaining what it meant to represent your country. What does it mean to you to be able to be able to engage with people around the world through your sport?

Katie: It's amazing because I'm hoping that the media here and some of the (inaudible) and it does when we are around each other. The media highlights the extreme to get a rise out of people. I don't know why but it feels as though people are so segregating. They want so bad to be a part of a group, but another group isn't good enough or isn't awesome. I think that's the opposite of what the message is meant to be. Be proud. Be proud to be an American, Christian, Muslim, whatever, but it doesn't mean that you are any better than the other. It just means that we were meant to live in a country with tolerance. It's been really refreshing to be around countries from all over the world, different religions. We have different philosophical discussions as often as we can because it's the greatest way to learn. I'm really strong in my beliefs and who I am in my upbringing, but I really enjoy a lot of these people here from different cultures and nations and learning about where they are from and how they live. We have common ground and that's sport. We all go hard, we all have fun. I'm blessed..I'm blessed to be here.

Morgan: I was going to lead you into that, but you did it yourself. I was going to ask if sport was the common denominator and the thing that brought down walls and brought people together, but you said it better than me setting you up to say it.

Katie: Thanks, you're welcome.

Morgan: You are on fire. At the top of the conversation, you made a comment you mentioned that you are a bronze medal pending athlete out of Sochi.

Katie: It was kind of a joke.

Morgan: Understood, but it's certainly something. I'm trying to keep these interviews evergreen and there is certainly news that may or may not break this weekend on the status of Russian athletes being allowed to compete in Rio. There is a recent article the New York Times ran a couple days ago. Is there a Reader's Digest version of where you ended up at the end of the Sochi games?

Katie: I lost by quicker than you can blink over 4 miles. Four runs, four miles in (inaudible) and you cannot blink that fast. The only reason she beat me was her start was faster than mine. I out drove her and I was really confused watching her come down and seeing that I lost because I thought I won. She drove so poorly. I didn't see her holding on to that little bit of time but somehow she did. I accepted it and I committed to Korea and making sure that I don't lose again. This whole doping scandal has been nothing but a heartbreak. It's disappoint and it's heartbreaking for all clean athletes because we don't want to see stuff like this happen. Especially years after the fact after we've come to terms with our results. It hurts the Russians, Americans, the world. I think the only way forward is for them to uphold the rules that exist but not without compassion to allow those that broke the rules to come forward and help us figure out a way to prevent this from happening again. We need to come together and unite against Olympic doping (inaudible). I think it's very important. The only way I can do that is to represent what I believe in and that is being an awesome American over here competing clean and training my butt off.

Morgan: Do you see yourself...you are going to kick butt in South Korea in a couple years, but after that when you face what every athlete inevitably faces stepping off the track, do you see yourself staying involved as a leader in the Olympic movement, for the Olympic committee? Is there a role for you beyond the track?

Katie: I'm not opposed to taking a leadership role but I'm not to nominate myself either. If that were to happen it would have to come from my colleagues and teammates or someone else. I'm also ok with working at Life University and going home on the ranch. I'm ok being in the middle of nowhere and hanging out with my family, but I'm more than happy to step up and be a leader if necessary.

Morgan: This is a personal question, but if it does come out...and I know it's a hypothetical that there was doping involved and the Russian athlete did win the bronze ends up being stripped...

Katie: I'm sorry..didn't it come out that it was verified by (inaudible). What they are waiting on is the IOC's decision about what to do about it.

Morgan: If you are awarded the bronze medal, will you be upset that you didn't have your moment in Sochi to be on the stand?

Katie: I don't see the point in looking backwards at things that I cannot control. What would motivate me is that they took action and did the right thing. It motivates me to train harder and continue to represent the Olympic movement and spirit in the way that I think it deserves to be because it gives me hope that the right things are done and that compassion will be upheld. I'm going to chase that medal in Korea even harder, but if I was awarded the bronze it would add fuel to my passion and fire to represent the USA even better.

Morgan: What a great outlook. What's in the past is in the past. I can either dwell on it or I can use it to fuel me to be an even better person, athlete, American.

Katie: Nailed it 100%. I can only hope..my dream is to inspire others as my military buddies inspired me. It's not a good place to be in self-pity and that is one of the things I learned from them. I might have hard times again in my life, but I hope that is the last time I have any self-pity while I'm going through it. They taught me how to get up, move forward, and how to do better.

Morgan: As a veteran myself, hearing you say stuff like that is..those aren't empty words. Hearing you talk that way about the men and women that I put the uniform on with, that I went to war with really means a lot. Not to blow sunshine here, but thank you for that. I can't tell you what that means to me and those of us that have had to make the sacrifices and serve the country in that regard.

Katie: You don't owe me a thing by any means, but I owe you one. It feels weird that someone is thanking me for going to the Olympics, but high five..thanks for being awesome. Kudos for keeping the fire up because that is what I appreciate about our men and women in the military and thank you for that. Iron sharpens iron.

Morgan: That is badass. That leads me into the last thing. One of the things that I'm studying this year is the interplay between sports and government. A lot of athletes that you compete against come from countries that have Ministries of Sport that the government puts money into the Olympic committee directly and helps funds these people for better or worse in some cases. Do you think there is a place for that in the United States? Should the US government take a more prominent role or do you think that the system is works right now.

Katie: I don't think that we should ever be complacent in the way that something is functioning. I think there is always room for improvement. As far as incorporating government funding, I'm not opposed to it, but I don't really understand what the proposal is or how it would function. I think that there are a lot of different things and way to look at it. It scares me a little bit because I'm for smaller government. Government having less to do with my life than more, but I'm not opposed to having help either. Its just a matter of how it would function. That is a big question and I think that I would have to ask more questions to be able to answer it because I'm not fully educated on how it would function.

Morgan: A number of folks that I've talked to say, listen the government is big enough as it is. It's not the answer to everything and it doesn't necessarily need to get bigger.

Katie: What is difference between the government being involved or the union? I don't really know. I don't know how they would function differently. I think there is definitely an opportunity for the government to be involved in and more represented at the Olympics. (inaudible) its more about tolerance and acceptance of cultures that is how we learn from each other and that is what the Olympics are about.

Morgan: That is where I think there is no better way to end this interview. I really appreciate your time and Katie, thank you very much. Good luck continuing with your training and continuing to make us proud.

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