

Greetings friends and welcome to the latest edition of the DiploSport podcast. In today's episode I interviewed Tiff Roberts Sahaydak who is the head women's soccer coach at the University of Central Florida. I became aware of Tiff Roberts back when we were both on campus at the University of North Carolina when she was a standout on the women's soccer team there as an undergrad. Luckily for her sake, she didn't hang out with the ROTC cadets so we didn't actually meet each other until I started working on sports diplomacy at the State Department. Tiff has become one of our standout, most reliable sports envoys that the State Department has sent out on our sports diplomacy programs. Our interview covers all around the world she's gone and how she's shared the messages of her life lessons developed on the soccer field with her teammates, with not only the young women she coaches at UCF.

Actually, interestingly along with her husband who's Tim Sahaydak, another Tar Heel, who is her co-coach. Tiff also brings the lessons that she learns in soccer around the world with her. I think there is a real powerful testament to how something as simple as the sport of soccer can bring people together, can help teach incredible life lessons. Not just to little girls, but to boys and girls all over the world. With that intro, I'll turn things over to me and Tiff.

Morgan: So we're sitting in a car at the Jefferson Cup right now. How many teams are here?

Tiff: That's a good question. There is a lot.

Morgan: All over the country or just the east coast?

Tiff: All over the country. I watched a team from Marin FC yesterday just outside of San Francisco. Yea..all over.

Morgan: I guess high school's spring break so they can travel.

Tiff: Not necessarily everybody though. For club soccer these kids miss a lot of school just for club soccer. It doesn't have to be on a break. It's pretty insane.

Morgan: Was it like that when you were growing up?

Tiff: Not as crazy.

Morgan: Where did you grow up?

Tiff: San Ramon, CA, the east bay area.

Morgan: When did you start playing?

Tiff: I started playing when I was 5 or 6 years old in the Bay area, my little hometown San Ramon.

Morgan: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Tiff: Yea, I have 3 older brothers. They all played, but in CA we were a little bit ahead of the game. Soccer was already popular and a lot of little girls were already playing. I actually played on an all-girls soccer team growing up. A lot of my teammates from the National Team had to play with boys because there weren't enough girls playing soccer.

Morgan: How do you think that informed your playing style just playing with girls?

Tiff: It was fine. You hear all the advantages of the players. A lot of the girls from the National Team played with boys growing, but I was a little different where I was playing with girls. I think it was fine because for me it was more about the bond that I created with teammates. They were my best friends. We did summer parties and pizza parties. That is why I fell in love with soccer because of all the relationships I was building when I was such a young age. They were just my best friends. I got the physical piece that I didn't get with my brothers. I have 3 older brothers and they played and we played pick-up in the backyard, 1-v-1, and we played all sorts of sports in the streets. Even though I didn't play on an all-boys team and get that competitive edge playing with boys, I got it in the house.

Morgan: What was the age spread? How much older were your brothers?

Tiff: I think I should probably know this, right? I feel like we've gotten older and I can't remember. I have a brother who is 2.5 years older, 5 and 7.

Morgan: Were they any good?

Tiff: Yea, of course. No one became a professional athlete. They all played. None of them played college sports, but they all grew up playing youth sports and they all played different sports and a variety of sports where I really focused on soccer. It was my passion. That was the sport I loved the most. I also ran track so I did both of them where my other brothers, like the one closest in age to me, did everything you can think of. The others played sports too.

Morgan: When did you realize that you were special on the soccer field?

Tiff: Probably never. I always feel like I'm trying to keep my head up above water all the time.

Morgan: When did other people realize that you were special?

Tiff: When I was in junior high, my coach...I don't know. There is an Olympic Development Program (ODP) and that was the only avenue of being recognized to play for the National Team at the time. I remember having to try out for ODP state team and they didn't have an age group in my age so I had to try out for an age group ahead of me so I was really nervous. I thought everyone at the try out was so good and I didn't feel like I belonged. I tried out, I made the A team. They made 2 teams and I made the A team so I was the youngest for the CA State team. Then we went to a tournament in Oregon and we played the state team from Oregon, state team from Washington and kids representing their states. The coach emphasized to the team to give me the ball. I was so confused because I thought, why do they want to give me the ball? I thought everyone was so good and I was learning from everybody so honestly I never felt like I was the best player, but hearing coaches tell me you're special. Something is going to happen, you keep going and you're going to be recognized. A couple of years later I was being brought up to the women's National team.

Morgan: How old were you when you got brought up?

Tiff: I was 16 years old. I was playing for the ODP team. I was playing an inter-regional event on Thanksgiving in Boca Raton, FL and they identified me there and brought me straight into the Women's National Team from there.

Morgan: Did you have your driver's license at this point?

Tiff: 16....I didn't. I don't even think I did.

Morgan: Who were some of your teammates?

Tiff: My first training camp, the training camp Briana Scurry..it was her first training camp too so we both had our first training camp with the senior Women's National Team together at the same time. We'll never forget that. I remember Tisha Venturini. Of course, Mia Hamm was my idol so it was very weird to go on a camp and be teammates with her there. Foudy, no Brandi wasn't there...Michelle Akers, Joy Fawcett, Carla Overbeck...all those names that..

Morgan: The legends of soccer.

Tiff: The legends of soccer were there and I was terrified.

Morgan: At 16 years old.

Tiff: I think I had a picture of Mia from People Magazine in my high school binder. I had all my high school work with me because when I would travel for soccer I would have to bring home my bookbag with all my books and homework. I had a picture of Mia from a People Magazine article slipped into my binder. You know..how kids do that for inspiration and I was like Oh my God...so embarrassed.

Morgan: That reminds me of the first time I met you and I had you sign my Sports Illustrated. I don't regret that though. It was still a little embarrassing. What year is this now?

Tiff: That was in 1994.

Morgan: Did you play in the World Cup?

Tiff: Yes, in '95. My first training camp was in 1994 and my first international tournament where I made the traveling roster for a tournament was Portugal so it was the Iber Cup. I went and played in those games and got my first cap there. That was March of 1994 and the World Cup in 1995 I made that in the following 2 summers.

Morgan: Forgive me for not knowing my history..did we win 1995?

Tiff: We did not. I played in 3 World Cups--95, 99, 2003. 1999 was actually the only World Cup that we won out of all three. In '95, we lost to Norway in the semi-final. In 2003, we lost to Germany in the semi-final and that was at home too. Actually, 2003 World Cup was supposed to be in China, but the SARS hit. With 4 months before the World Cup was supposed to start, no one knew where the World Cup was going to be. We ended up doing it in the US because the US was the only federation that could actually put on a women's World Cup in 4 month's time. It was kind of this bummer World Cup because we did a great job putting it together short notice but it was a little bit of last notice. It had a weird feel especially coming off the '99 World Cup where everything was amazing. It was a little bit of a downer that one, but that's ok.

Morgan: '95 World Cup, '96 Olympics in Atlanta. Did you march in the Opening Ceremony?

Tiff: Yes, I totally remember that.

Morgan: We won the gold.

Tiff: We won the gold medal. We had these outfits, the ceremony outfits..they were a little funny. You have to look..it needs to be pressed, you are representing the US, it was a big deal obviously. Well, my blazer..I was with Tish Venturini and all of a sudden the athletes are marching out and that was before we were getting in the stadium and she tugged on me. She thought it was going in one direction and we were leaving this baseball stadium to go to the big stadium and my blazer got stuck on the thing and when she pulled me the shoulder ripped off. So I went to the opening ceremony with one sleeve...like I got into a fight or something before. It was pretty ridiculous.

Morgan: What was it like being on the medal stand after you had the gold medal put around your neck and you are hearing that anthem?

Tiff: That memory will stick with me for the rest of my life. It was pretty amazing because I may have told you this story. When I was younger, I share this story a lot when I'm with kids or when I do my sports diplomacy trips. When I was younger, I watched the Olympics for the first time when I was in second grade. I remember watching Mary Lou Retton win her gold medal and Jackie Joyner. Soccer wasn't even in the Olympics yet so I wasn't watching that.

Morgan: Jackie Joyner is a sports envoy too.

Tiff: Yea, awesome. Oh my gosh...that is amazing. She was my childhood idol. I remember watching that on tv thinking, oh my gosh, it just connected with me. I want to be an Olympian. I was in second grade. That is my daughter's age right now. I want to be an Olympian..that is exactly what I want to do. From that point on, from second grade I was so committed to that dream. I talked about, I shared it and I actually have pictures, drawings of myself that I would draw for school projects. Whenever there was a "what do you want to be when you grow up?", it would be me drawing myself on podiums. I had this dream since I was in second grade. When you ask how did that feel, it was this unbelievable feeling because I had been thinking about it and drawing pictures of myself since the second grade. It actually came true...it was surreal.

Morgan: What I'm hearing you say, and let me know if I'm putting words in your mouth, is you saw other women, female athletes, reach the highest level of sport and even though they weren't soccer players, you wanted to be in their shoes. Is there a better example of what you're doing around the world when you go out for sports envoy now?

Tiff: No, I literally get the chills talking about it. You can see them because I feel like having that inspiration and that moment when I'm watching them on tv, it clicked for me, it inspired me, it kept me on track with my life. As a youngster growing up, it helped me make decisions on start having goal and staying on track. It kept me in line. I know exactly what I wanted to do so now that I have an opportunity to...that is my whole goal when I do these sports diplomacy trips. Maybe I can be that Jackie Joyner for someone else or Mary Lou Retton for someone else. Just inspire them and show them this is what I've done and maybe that fire will start burning for a young girl somewhere.

Morgan: We'll dig a little deeper on the sports envoy in a sec, but I do want to talk a little bit about the role of Title IX in your life. First, where did you go to undergrad?

Tiff: Undergrad, I went to UNC-Chapel Hill. Tarheels girl!

Morgan: We were actually on campus at the same time. I was the nerdy guy in the ROTC uniform. I would have made you laugh in the classroom though. How did you end up going to Carolina and then maybe we'll talk a little bit about women's sports at Carolina.

Tiff: I was recruited to go there. Anson Dorrance actually was the head coach of the US Women's National Team at the time. That is probably why he stopped being the women's National Team coach. I had the opportunity to be coached by him before I was ever a college player. That was part of why I wanted to go to Carolina. I was very intrigued by Anson. He was only my coach on the National Team for 6 months because he stepped down 6 months after I got brought in. I was very intrigued by him, the recruiting process was great with him. I also knew all my current teammates on the National Team, a

majority of them had gone to Carolina. My dream was to stay on the Women's National Team as long as possible and develop as a soccer player and I thought that Carolina had that environment in place for me to be the best soccer player I could be. Just through the recruiting process, I went on my official visit and fell in love with Chapel Hill. I had other official visits lined up. Notre Dame I had lined up, Stanford was on my list, but I went to Chapel Hill and I cancelled my official visits to other schools. I didn't even take them. Most other people take all 5 and I didn't even go to one other. I just followed my heart. I knew it...it was a done deal for me. You just know.

Morgan: You just know -- that is what college should be...Chapel Hill.

Tiff: Yes..it was that perfect picture of what I have that this is what I want my college experience to look like and it was a full package to me. What I think what helped is that I had already been traveling with the Women's National Team so I already had that experience of going overseas, being on my own, getting on an airplane by myself, and meeting a team. To leave CA, I love experiences like that and traveling so for me, my parents are always going to be there, my family will be there, I can always move back there, but for 4 years I can do something completely different and experience a different culture. I like that southern charm..I want to try this out. It was perfect.

Morgan: What made Anson such a good recruiter and what made Anson such a good coach?

Tiff: He understands that women want to feel cared for, they want to have a relationship and feel connected and he does a good job of that. He makes you feel like you are valued. He really told me a lot about what my strengths were and he builds your strengths up. He is one of the best. When he speaks you are mesmerized. He inspires with his words, but he gets you really motivated and pumped up to play the game. He's so competitive. Every training session is so competitive. He gets the most out of you and you want to play for him. He makes you want to play for him. I think that is because of the relationship that he develops with you.

Morgan: How many National Titles did you guys win together?

Tiff: 2

Morgan: Did you play 4 years at Carolina?

Tiff: I did, I played all 4 years at Carolina. I wasn't there in the spring sometimes because I was out for the National Team, but I was there for 4 falls.

Morgan: When did you end up graduating?

Tiff: Do we have to talk about that? I'm proud to say that I graduated so that is a plus, but it took me 10 years. I started in '95 but I actually got my diploma in 2005.

Morgan: You have an excuse.

Tiff: I went to the World Cup, I was playing professionally.

Morgan: You were representing America.

Tiff: Yes, I always knew that I wasn't not going to graduate. It was suspended a little bit.

Morgan: As a girl growing up playing a sport and as a young women playing at the highest levels internationally and collegiately, tell me a little bit about Title IX and the role it played in your formation as an athlete.

Tiff: The opportunity to stay in college. To be able to go and choose a university. I got an opportunity to choose any university to go play soccer and have it be paid for. Having that balance of having my academics paid for and getting to play at a really high level and developing my game at the highest level was unbelievable.

Morgan: Was this feeling shared by your teammates?

Tiff: Yea, I think so. Back then, when you are 19 years old you aren't really thinking about that opportunity, but now that I'm older I look back I realize what Title IX was. I didn't understand that when I was in college. I actually tried to teach my current players about this more often. Try to educate them and make them appreciative people.

Morgan: I'm sure your players' moms could have played in college. Maybe some of them even did. I imagine that your mom wouldn't have the opportunity even if she wanted to.

Tiff: No, they didn't even have the opportunity. Think about what sport has done for my life. Soccer and sport has been my life. I met my husband through soccer. Financially I was taken care of and got an education because of soccer. Traveled the world because of soccer. I developed relationships with people around the world because of soccer and the sport. To have that opportunity to play sports as a woman. Think about everything sport teaches you as a woman as far as self-confidence and being empowered by the sport. I can't say enough about sports. To have that opportunity and Title IX, I owe everything to it.

Morgan: From your early teens, you were one of the best women's soccer players in the world even if you didn't believe it. How did you know that it was time to transition to playing between the lines to stepping off the field?

Tiff: That's always a hard transition, but I saw the writing on the wall the Women's National Team. I started getting less playing time, new coach and I asked the coach in 2004. I made the 2003 World Cup Team. 2004 Olympics I did not make the team. I accepted the role as an alternate in 2004. I just saw my role slipping with the US Women's National Team. With the new coach that came in after the 2004 Olympics, I was at this place where I need to know if I'm in this. It's a huge commitment to stay fit, train, and not know if you're ever going to get called in to a training camp. I felt good about my career at that point so if it was time to move on then I would be ok with that so I needed to know. I actually called the coach at the time, Greg Ryan, and I asked him to you see me in the future. He said, I think we're moving on. It was hard to hear, but I needed to hear it so I could move on and figure out what my next goals were going to be. My next goals were to finish school..actually I finished school already. It was more like what am I going to do next. I knew soccer was a passion, that is where my expertise is in. I just married Tim. Soccer was his expertise so we started coaching club soccer for San Ramon, the little club I started playing for. We moved back to CA, got married, and National Team was over. Oh..what I was going to say too about the transition out...unfortunately I would have loved to continue to play soccer but we didn't have a pro league anymore. The pro league folded. I could have played overseas but Tim and I just got married and I didn't want to do that anymore. Playing soccer ended up not being a priority over spending time with my husband in the same place because we spent a lot of time apart both being professional soccer players. Unfortunately, there were no more professional league or I would have continued to play professionally. The opportunity to play for the US wasn't there anymore. It was time to move on so we started coaching club soccer because we felt like that is what we knew we could do. We started our own little business, running the summer camp in San Ramon in CA. I brought in Lorrie Fair, Danielle Slaton, and one of my former teammates Kristin Luckenbill, who played in the Olympics and we played together professionally, and Angela Hucles. I brought in this superstar staff.

Morgan: A lot of sport envoys in that group.

Tiff: Yes...it was a hit. What a great experience. The kids that came to the camp..it was an all-girls camp.

Morgan: How many girls?

Tiff: We had probably 150 little girls that came. We had some amazing sponsors, scholarships to it. That is the route we started going into. We were going to develop some type of business plan to go with this and all of a sudden VCU called us out of the blue.

Morgan: Really? No idea?

Tiff: No idea. That never happens. The athletic director at the time. He was a Tar Heel so I think that is where the connection came from. The network is very strong. They said, hey, what do you think about college coaching--co-head coaches? Tim and I went and checked it out and that was 10 years ago.

Morgan: How long were you at VCU?

Tiff: 6 years.

Morgan: From there, you've been at UCF for?

Tiff: 3 years. We are going on our 10th year.

Morgan: You guys have had a pretty good run at UCF. You had a pretty good run at VCU too.

Tiff: Yea, we did. I'm really thankful to Norwood and Mike Ellis who were Carolina people who gave us the opportunity without having been college coaches before or even in the scene really. We had a big learning curve. I know it's not rocket science, but you're learning how to manage a team and all of the pieces that go along with it.

Morgan: Speaking of Tar Heels, the saying is that Michael Jordan would have a hard time coaching basketball because he is world class. He was the greatest on the planet and he may not be able to identify with the guys that don't start. Was that an adjustment for you?

Tiff: It wasn't at all because I think one of the strengths of mine as a coach right now is that I've had every role. I know I've played on the National Team, but I was a reserve on the National Team for many years. I know what it feels like to sit on the bench and have to be a team player and be selfless and appreciative. I've been a starter, a captain on my pro team, won at the highest level. I've lost on my professional team. We went from worst to first. I've been in every role as a player so I feel like I can identify with my players because I know what it feels like.

Morgan: How did the State Department find you?

Tiff: I don't know.

Morgan: Did you get the Pam Perkins email?

Tiff: I think so. At the time it wasn't Pam Perkins, it was Tom King. I think I received an email one day from Tom King and he asked if I would be interested to go to Uganda to represent the State Department with (inaudible).

Morgan: You had me at Uganda, Tom.

Tiff: Yea and I had never been to Africa before. I'm like sports diplomacy? This is amazing. It was kind of random, but I think it was this out of the blue. I was part of the US Soccer Athletes Council and even though I wasn't playing anymore for the US at the time, I was still involved with US soccer being on the Athletes Council. I still had relationships within US Soccer. I think I was on the Diversity Committee for US Soccer too so maybe doing that?

Morgan: Where have you gone with the State Department?

Tiff: So many wonderful places. Uganda was the first trip. I went to the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil twice, Thailand. For the State Department, not with Sports United, but I went to Bordeaux, France.

Morgan: With IIP?

Tiff: Yes. I went to Namibia.

Morgan: What do we do well when we send you out on programs. We being Washington or Post. What are the best practices?

Tiff: I feel super safe and secure because I know my parents are always like, are you sure? Is someone going to be with you? That is the first question my parents ask. Now that I've gone through it, the pre-trip protocol...we have our conference calls on the phone with the Embassy before we are going and with the State Department and the envoys all together going over the program and the ideas. Us having some say in what could be helpful or what works or doesn't work. I have a little more experience if someone has a plan, ok I don't know if that is going to work. The envoys are awesome because they are all very flexible. We go with the flow.

Morgan: Soccer players are great.

Tiff: I think what has been great is the pre-planning and having an idea of what to expect and offering feedback if we can before we get going.

Morgan: Because each country is different.

Tiff: Every country is different and every program I've done has been different. I love hearing what is going to happen or what is planned because I never know what to expect. When we get there, I feel safe and I feel like everyone is invested in the program, great turnout. They've done a great job of connecting and making sure there will be a good turnout and people know what is going on. I think we've been flexible and things have happened impromptu, but it's always been so positive on both sides. For the sports envoys, it's always been a positive experience for us. I see it as an exchange. One of my goals is to inspire, but the other goal is to be inspired and I always learn so much when I go on these trips with the people I spend time with whether they are from the embassy or a little kid that I'm playing with. I've gained so much knowledge and experience.

Morgan: Don't think for a second that that is not part of the bigger picture. You're selected for this because of who you are and your background and when you come back here, we expect you to be an influencer. Not brainwash, but we want you to share your experiences with your roster, with your

campers that you engage during the summer here in the States talking about being a diplomat, you're a sports envoy.

Tiff: I love that. That is something I'm very proud of and I feel like it's such a privilege to be part of the program and to have that opportunity to be part of sports diplomacy. It something I'm so passionate about. It's really easy for me to speak of and to come back and talk about it.

Morgan: Why do you think soccer is so widely played around the world?

Tiff: I think it's just an easy sport. You don't need a lot of equipment and you can play anywhere on any surface. You've heard those stories of kids in villages and they make balls out of different types of plastic bags, string, garbage, whatever. Finding ways to make it. I feel like it connects to any culture and any economic background. It brings everyone together, it's easy to play, you don't need shoes. It brings so much joy.

Morgan: Not to put words in your mouth, but those are universal values.

Tiff: For sure. That is why I feel...I'm really lucky that I landed soccer because it's so universal and global. You can use soccer to teach life lessons around the world. I'm glad that it's soccer that I'm involved with because it's so global.

Morgan: What could the State Department do better? You are in a safe space.

Tiff: That is something that I need to think about more. Let's do more of them!

Morgan: Good answer! You hear that Congress?

Tiff: I think they are so beneficial and like i said in the exchange so valuable to the envoys and to the participants that are involved in the program wherever we go. I've had such a positive experience that I'd have to think about it hard. Nothing pops into my head right now except for thinking let's have more opportunities.

Morgan: You haven't gone out for the State Department when you represented your country. YOU had a really cool experience during the last men's World Cup. Talk a little bit about that.

Tiff: Oh yes! That could be like a book. I feel like I could write a book on that.

Morgan: And you had a lot of advance warning that you were...

Tiff: Yea..no advance warning. I was at my own camp actually. I was like, guys I'm going to Brazil tomorrow and they were like what?

Morgan: You showed up at the airport without a visa or a plane ticket.

Tiff: I remember you were like, Tiff, I don't think it's going to happen. I'm like what are you talking about? I just talked to Protocol and they told me to go through security. You said, ok, you listen to them. Don't listen to me! It was actually the most amazing experience from the moment the White House calls to say, can you go to getting through the airport and going through Miami without a visa. I wrote it all down. I was typing it on my iPhone because I didn't want to forget this experience. There were so many things where it was like, this is not going to happen. Oh it is going to happen. It was this emotional roller coaster. I love adventure and why not? I'm always like why not, let's try it!

Morgan: So you were part of the White House delegation. It was the opening match?

Tiff: Yea..opening match of the men's World Cup in Brazil. Brazil was playing. I'm blanking on who they played.

Morgan: You had just been there, right?

Tiff: I had been there and that is why we thought my visa would still work, but of course it had just expired 10 days before. It was out of a movie getting over to Brazil without a visa, but it worked out perfectly. What I learned from experiences, if you want something bad enough...this would be an amazing experience..I really want to go so being really flexible and going with the flow and fingers crossed.

Morgan: You barely had time to pack.

Tiff: I really don't think I packed. I think I just threw some stuff. I didn't even think. I just went.

Morgan: There the White House decided that this was a major global sporting event and it was very important that there was a dedicated official US presence there. You went with Dan Pfeiffer, who has now since left the administration.

Tiff: Meeting Dan, that was a great experience. That is something that I'll never forget and yet again, honored and privileged to be a part of it.

Morgan: We're going to wind down now because we are at the Jefferson Cup.

Tiff: We are..some great soccer going on. Trying to recruit some of these kids.

Morgan: All officially and NCAA complaint.

Tiff: Yes..always!

Morgan: What's next for you?

Tiff: I'm at the University of Central Florida. I coach with my husband Tim. We love it. It's a great career for us and we have a beautiful family and we can do both. We can have balance. We have 2 girls and they both play soccer. I have high hopes. Everyone is like, what would you do if they didn't want to play? I'm like, nothing! Of course I would love them to play. I want them to be passionate about what they do. Love what they do and that's why I feel like I had a successful career because I always followed what I loved to do. So that is what I want them to do. Right now they love soccer so it's working out! Next plan is continue to recruit and develop young leaders, these young women. Hopefully continue to empower them. That is what I love about my job and college coaching is way more than X's and O's. I feel like I'm developing young women and leaders.

Morgan: Do you take lessons from Anson?

Tiff: Of course! I take lessons from him. I had this wonderful professional coach, Marsha McDermott. She played at Carolina too, go figure. She's at West Point now as the head coach. She was a great coach of mine. I take little pieces from all the coaches and teammates I've had and it's molded me into the coach and person I am today. I'm very grateful. Hanging out at UCF, loving it, and continue to do the business there and hopefully continue to do sports envoys and sports diplomacy and be part of the State Department.

Morgan: Anything else to add?

Tiff: No, this has been wonderful. This is great.

Morgan: Thank you for your time and that's all for now.

Tiff: Thank you!

(music)