Spotlight Session & Special Olympics #09 New

[00:00:00] What's your story? What does accessibility mean to you?

**Josh:** Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Special edition of the Inclusion Revolution Radio. Collaboration with accessiBe's Spotlight Sessions. The Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023 have officially begun. We're so excited to be speaking with a guest today that is at the Games, supporting all of the amazing athletes.

My name is Josh Basile. I'm your co host for today's show. I’m a C4-5 quadriplegic, paralyzed below my shoulders, and a power wheelchair user. I'm a Community Relations Manager at accessiBe, and a passionate disability rights advocate and trial attorney, focused on breaking down barriers to access and inclusion for people with [00:01:00] disabilities.

**Novie:** I'm Novie Craven, your other co host for today's show.

I'm a proud Special Olympics athlete and employee of Special Olympics International. I play bocce, basketball, and about any other sport you could think of. I love Special Olympics and the work our organization does to promote friendship, respect, and of course, inclusion.

**Josh:** Today, we will be talking with Kevin Negandhi, SportsCenter anchor, College Football Studio host, and a huge Special Olympics supporter.

In fact, Kevin has hosted the Special Olympics World Games since 2015. A trailblazer in the sports media world, Kevin has broken down barriers and set the standard of excellence for reporters and journalists everywhere. Thank you so much for joining us today, Kevin, and welcome to the Inclusion Revolution podcast.

**Kevin:** Josh, Novie, it's my pleasure. It's just great to see you guys. And I'm so happy to be a part of something that I think [00:02:00] is very important in all of our lives, especially when we talk about the current state of where we are in the, around the globe, the idea of inclusion, the idea of acceptance, the idea that everybody gets an opportunity.

It's really important to be able to be part of the ESPN broadcasts, the world games on ABC to showcase the athletes and over 170 countries and their delegations coming here. 7000 athletes. I cannot wait to be a part of it on Saturday.

**Josh:** That's awesome!

**Novie:** Where did your love of sports come from? And when you did, and when did you know you wanted to pursue sports media?

**Kevin:** Well, so I, as a kid, going outside, we lived close to a baseball field, Babe Ruth League baseball field featuring 13 to 15 year olds. playing every day in the summer and I would leave my house [00:03:00] in the summertime at 10 in the morning and I literally would come back to grab some water and maybe dinner and then my brother, my older brother would have to go find me at 10 o'clock at night.

I was always outside playing sports whether it was baseball, football, wiffle ball in my yard, basketball up the street. So I loved everything about just being active and watching games with my family, being the first person in my family born in America and watching sports with my dad who's trying to adjust.

He loved football, so I could sit around and educate him and talk about sports with him. And it was really our first connection. And my brother was older than me, seven years older than me. So he was like my coach and he was constantly outside with me. That's kind of where I have my passion when it comes to broadcasting, my mom shared a story with me that we had a basketball hoop and a mini basketball in the [00:04:00] basement and I would go downstairs in the wintertime and basically play for three straight hours.

Like, I had a league set up imaginary teams and I had all this stuff taken care of where it's playing music. I was doing play by play. It was for three straight hours every night. And my mom would just say, who are you talking to? Why are you like talking while you're playing?

And I said, mom, I'm doing play by play. And she said, but to whom? I said, if I don't do play by play, the game doesn't matter. It doesn't actually happen. So early on when I was eight, nine years old, this idea of always narrating what I was doing, playing sports. And putting together like a neighborhood newsletter of our wiffle ball accomplishments.

That's kind of where you could find out where it was traced when I was eight, nine years old that I wanted to do this, but I didn't realize that I could get paid and go to college for it until I was 14, watching a college basketball game. And they highlighted somebody who was doing [00:05:00] that. And I said, Whoa, I can get paid to do this.

And I remember watching, it was 1989, it was 14 years old. But I remember watching sports center that night. And I remember saying to myself, I want to be the first Indian American on SportsCenter. I, at 14, I had the craziest dream and to be able to live it 17 years later and become the first one is still surreal to me.

So that's the origin and How passionate I've always been as a sports fan and as well as as a broadcaster.

**Josh:** As the first Indian American to serve on a national sports network, what obstacles did you face during your career and who, or what kind of motivated you to overcome them?

**Kevin:** It's a great question. So Josh and Novie, like when I started getting into this. This was in the 90's. No one looked like me on TV who is Indian American. No one of brown skin. If you wanted [00:06:00] to see somebody of Indian descent on TV, you have to watch the Simpsons and you know, Apu, like you would have to see Apu and that stereotype, right?

So I had to fight through this and come up with my own I will be the first, I will. I looked at multiple people for inspiration who I watched on TV and I later interned under. I just had a crazy dream and I just said, no one's going to stop me. that's how I viewed it.

The obstacles, getting my first job was extremely tough just because I went to a small town and getting an opportunity and my first job was in 1998 on TV, that was tough. And then, through the years I had to outwork people that were next to me that were given the benefit of the doubt.

So when I got to sports center and ESPN, there were a lot of people are like, why is this person on my TV screen? He knows nothing. So I had to outwork all the guys that I work with. [00:07:00] to prove that I belong and it helped me a lot though. It made me, , I think, immune to all the noise, the criticism.

It made me believe in myself even more. It made me stay consistent in what I was doing every day. I also knew that when I went on TV, that I wasn't just representing my family. I wasn't representing the area where I'm from, Phoenixville and Philadelphia and Temple University. I was representing Indian Americans everywhere, so I couldn't screw up.

Now, that, that's a lot of pressure to put on somebody that, who's in his early 30s, but to me, it was like, I gotta make sure I do it right, because if I don't, I'm making the first and potentially the last impression for people that watch somebody that looks like me talk about sports.

**Josh:** Thank you for sharing that.

**Novie:** If you had to choose your top sports moment, one as a fan and the other as a reporter, what [00:08:00] would they be?

**Kevin:** Wow. So again, I got into this business because I love Philadelphia sports and my connection with the Eagles has been there since I was a five year old kid when they went to the Super Bowl in 1981.

So when they won the Super Bowl, to be able to cover all of that leading into it in 2018, to be at the game, and then to host the championship parade. on ESPN, where I was hosting it in the city of Philadelphia. Our first parade for the Eagles winning the Super Bowl. That to me was everything, everything I could have asked for.

It was like at one point I got emotional at the end because it was like the eight year old boy was actually hosting the parade. The experience where I could share that. And I was looking at generational families celebrating grandfathers with fathers and sons and [00:09:00] daughters and mothers.

And you could see brothers and sisters and families layer throughout the streets of Philadelphia. And that was me. So to be able to share that story, especially at the network that I dreamed about working on, I think those, Things all coming together were pretty remarkable for me now. Also, I've been very lucky.

Like I've had the chance to interview idols of mine, like Bo Jackson, who I just grew up thinking he's the greatest thing in the world, like getting the chance to interact with Michael Jordan and interview Alan Iverson. There are different levels of my life that I look back and I'm like, I still can't believe I do this.

And this is pretty darn amazing. And I never take anything for granted.

**Josh:** That's awesome. Again, it's a lot. I love your story. I love your journey. And now you've seen so much, but over the years with kind of, can you share kind of some of the different ways? With ESPN, or at ESPN, they've [00:10:00] broken down barriers to inclusion within kind of the broadcasting field?

**Kevin:** I think the most amazing thing that ESPN has been able to do with Special Olympics is share stories and celebrate the journey. We're not celebrating gold medalists. We're not celebrating people who are the best of the best. We're celebrating people's journeys to get there, the idea that they're involved.

And I think when you look at what we're going to have 1, 250 plus medal ceremonies. And those are amazing being on the stand and being able to put a medal on an athlete is incredible because the electricity that they give off the energy that they give off, you could feel it throughout the crowd.

You could feel this sense of accomplishment. But I think just getting here. Being able to say that you could take a trip with your family and [00:11:00] be a part of it, that is also at the local level, the state level, and the national level, and the global level, where you could just take your family on a journey with you, where they're celebrating you, and you are on an even playing field.

Because all this is, Josh and Noby, is the ability to say, I want a fair, equal chance to be able to do something. And for us to be able to share those stories. There is nothing better. It whenever we do these events, I always come back and it's a great reminder for me to say this is what it's all about.

The Nuggets winning the NBA finals. Phenomenal, right? What's going to happen next with LeBron James? What's going to happen next with the Kansas City Chiefs. Now, what's going to happen next with Tiger Woods? those are big stories. What's going to happen next with Sue Bird? Now that her jerseys, those are amazing accomplishments.

But at the [00:12:00] root of it all, they all started somewhere that they wanted to get the chance to participate. And what we can do at ESPN is celebrate and pass on this specific message that all these athletes and their families want is the chance to be able to compete. For The chance to be able to just be on an even playing field where they are accepted and to share those stories.

I take that very seriously because I walk away and say, this is the reason why I was I got involved. I wanted the chance to be accepted. I wanted an even playing field. I wanted an opportunity and I relate to that so much in so many ways. And I'm just honored that we get to share these stories. I think 1 of the 1 of the things like Dana Schultz is going to be part of our unified broadcast and she is a legendary.

Special Olympic athlete as well as X Games gold medal winner. Her and I have talked, and I think she's going to share her story and experience. And one of the things is, when you look at Special [00:13:00] Olympics, it is all types of intellectual disabilities. And I think sometimes we come up with a stigma or an image of what, it's one thing and one thing only, and that could be something of physical disability.

No, it's, there are a lot of different layers to this. And all we want to do is showcase and celebrate the people who can get the opportunity to do this and when they go back, this is not a 1 day event. This is not a 1 week event. When they go back, they go back and I've been on campus at high schools when they celebrate high schools for their unified activities and their involvement.

The athletes go back and suddenly there's an identity for them where they can understand I am being accepted and that's what sport can do. That's what Special Olympics can do. That's what ESPN on this platform can do. Where somebody at home is watching and saying, I want to be able to do that. I can do that because I can see it so I can be it.[00:14:00]

And I'm just honored that we can share that platform. Novie and Josh, when I was in Seattle, five years ago, right? 2018 USA games when I was in Seattle, I was. I remember I was just walking by in one of the markets where they were selling stuff and you were interacting with a lot of different groups and a father came up to me and he just hugged me and it was very emotional.

And she's like, you have no idea what the platform is doing for not just my kid, but my community in my area, because it just changes things completely. And if we could do this and continue to do this on the national level, we are not just changing somebody's life in one day and one week. With this event, we are changing their lives moving forward and the idea that they could be confident and can be looked upon by others as equal.

Oh, yeah. I remember I saw you. I remember I saw you competing. That's what we want, right? We the most basic thing when we play recess when we're kids. We don't want to be the person that cannot get picked to play. That's all we want, [00:15:00] is the chance to compete and participate, and that's what we celebrate here.

**Josh:** Well, so much of it is just, like you're saying, a chance to dance, a chance to show your hard effort, your work, your persistence, to get to the games, and to be there to overcome obstacles, and to have a chance to show all the hard work that you've done to that point. It's a beautiful thing to be able to compete at all levels, at all abilities, and to showcase that and broadcast that to the world. It turns heads, changes perspectives.

**Kevin:** Yes, it does.

**Novie:** Yeah, it does. Definitely, when I was, I got picked to not only represent Special Olympics, but also... Represent other athletes and at the USA games. I was just beyond excited because, definitely showing the world that I can do anything,

**Kevin:** YES!

**Novie:** Bocci was my favorite when i started Special Olympics DC, bocci was my first sport. And when I got picked, I was like, wow. No, definitely. They really saw [00:16:00] that I'm definitely good at the sport that they had or had the ability for me to travel and definitely that was just amazing to not only represent Special Olympics, but also show the whole United States that anybody can do anything.

**Kevin:** Yes, totally! And Novie and Josh, what you guys are doing with this podcast, you guys are making connections, right?

Especially in a world where it feels like we're more and more isolated, right? Where can I make a connection with somebody? And obviously with the pandemic, it made it very tough to you. For anybody to make that connection physically, right? But a podcast, you guys are making that connection. With so many people that sometimes can feel isolated and you're giving them, whether you realize it or not, I think courage to say it's not just me and it's okay if I feel this way because others are going along and they're experiencing this, but also it's okay to do [00:17:00] something and be somebody that I want to be to be involved.

And I'm telling you guys, the effect that you guys have on a podcast like this with this subject. You guys are, while you're just living your life, you're changing lives as well. And I know it can be heavy when you're explaining that to somebody, but what we're doing is we're trying to, we're trying to impact and change how people perceive themselves and perceive others.

**Josh:** As a leader in inclusive broadcasting, can you share what ways ESPN is making sports more accessible to a diverse population?

**Kevin:** Josh, I think how we can do it is just the ability to showcase these competitions, share featured stories, which we're going to do at our wrap up show on ABC too.

What I love is that ESPN is giving us the ABC platform, right? And then during the week on SportsCenter, you're going to see [00:18:00] clips of must see SportsCenter events from here in Berlin. You're gonna, you know, we're gonna have athletes on SportsCenter and when you can have athletes on SportsCenter, I hear it all the time when we do like a top player.

We have a high school player and how much it changes that community. So the idea that we can on a daily basis all week long showcase the inclusion revolution and then Josh and Novie, to add to that the 400 hours that we're going to be broadcasting streaming, I think that's just an amazing opportunity because when you look at what we did in 2019 in Austria, I think we broadcasted inside of 200 hours and now like that we can expand it and there's a generation that grew up and watched us in 2015 in LA. In 2017 in Austria and then in between, Seattle, the Orlando Games, and now there's a generation here in 2023 that watched it on TV and now they're taking apart, taking [00:19:00] part in it. I think that's what, how we can affect that change, right? Where somebody can see it, be it, give them a goal for maybe 2025 of the winter games.

And then you have that goal where you can continue to reach something every single day. What's my motivation today? My motivation is when I just saw this past week in Berlin, I want to be a part of that potentially or. How do I make sure I'm a part of the National Games, the state, the local level, it just gets, I think, people out the door to say, there are things out there for you.

And we're going to be able to showcase that as much as possible.

**Josh:** Well, telling those stories and I love that you're doubling it. Like It's doubling down and getting the word out even more. ESPN about six years ago, they put a crew together and followed me about a paraplegic and a quadriplegic adaptive sailing from Key West on a 60 foot catamaran to Cuba. And we introduced a sport I invented [00:20:00] called slingshot golf to a Cuban paraplegic, and they documented the entire adventure and they shared it with the world. ESPN is just telling the stories and letting the world know sport can inspire and empower and bring people together.

It's a common language and it's a language that we can speak together or we can have fun together and we can compete together. It's a beautiful thing.

**Kevin:** It's well said.

**Josh:** And what advice would you give to prospective reporters and journalists who are passionate about sports media, but feel like their voices are just not heard?

**Kevin:** My suggestion is ask questions. Seek people seek voices that can help you. When I was in college, every major event, I went to Temple University. So I was in pretty big market Philadelphia. So every major event I went to, I would seek out other reporters and broadcasters and I would just pick [00:21:00] their brain.

I'd ask them 2,3,4 questions. I remember whenever ESPN was in town, I ran into the late great John Saunders who turned out to be a friend. And I remember as a 20 year old, I was picking his brain won't work for him. And I didn't want to copy anybody, but I wanted to find out what their experience was. Take from this.

Take from that. I think for young journalists, I would say, ask questions, seek mentors and I think that that's something that can hold true with any occupation. If you're getting into something that you don't know, seek out the right voices to lead you. I'm not saying You know, 10 voices. I'm saying in the end, find two or three reliable voices that you could lean on to help you navigate.

And listen, I'm 48 years old, Josh and Novie. I still ask questions. I still seek out people because I want to constantly evolve and learn. So don't ever think you have to be a finished product. Don't ever think you have to be perfect, especially in this day and age. What people want are real. They want real people.

They [00:22:00] want somebody who's organic in their thinking. be professional. But at the same time, give yourself a break and don't try to be perfect. And I think if you can try all those things, you'll be okay. And in the end, my last thing is just be kind to yourself. And I think that's the last thing. It's an underrated phrase that I say to myself that one of my mentors passed on to me in the beginning.

I was like, what are you talking about? And now, 15 years later, I say it to myself all the time. I say to my kids, be kind to yourself because I understand you demand excellence, but in the end, if you're not kind to yourself, you're not helping yourself.

**Josh:** It's great advice.

**Novie:** I like that. I like that advice. Definitely. Definitely.

What about Special Olympics drew you to the organization? What has been your Favorite World Game moment?

**Kevin:** Oh, wow. Novie, there are so many. For me, personally, my There are so many [00:23:00] moments, every time, like, I just saw our, our open on ABC that's gonna air on Saturday, and we capture so many elements over the years of just the look at of the athletes emotionally, the satisfaction before competition after a competition.

Those are so I think anything that we air is like a favorite moment. Oh, that's my favorite. Oh, that's my favorite. That's my favorite moment, right? To see the moms and dads, the aunts and uncles, the coaches who put in the time and understand what it means. Those are my favorite moments, right? The emotions that are carried through. I was very lucky to be a part of some medal ceremonies and to be on stage and see everybody in the crowd and like you, you get to award an athlete a medal. [00:24:00] It's amazing like you are walking on their energy. And you don't need to do anything else. And those are the moments.

So nobody, I love the question, but I think everything about what we do every single day with the competition, you can say, that's a favorite moment of mine. That's a favorite moment. That's a favorite moment.

**Novie:** I just watched some of the part of the good morning and when they told Loretta, she was going to Berlin, it was just like.

Me and my mom both had tears in our eyes. It was like,

**Kevin:** YES, that's what it's all about, right?

**Novie:** I was like, just like, wow, she's definitely a mile. She's definitely a role model for me, but definitely, but also she's always telling people you can do anything. You know, everybody's had trouble, everybody's had hard times, good times, but definitely the way that they showed when she found out that she was going to [00:25:00] Berlin, it was just like, That's the true meaning of Special Olympics.

**Kevin:** Absolutely, well said.

**Josh:** After hosting the World Games multiple times now, is there anything that you've learned about accessibility and inclusion that you've taken back to ESPN and tried to implement?

**Kevin:** Oh, wow. Josh, that's a great question. I think what I take back is trying to provide a voice. So, small little example, I host, my, my regular job during the week is the 6 PM Sports Center and I'm really proud and I love our crew. It's making sure like, hey guys, there's a piece of video every day we're going to try and bring and coordinate. I'm not going to be here during the week.

Can we find a way to get that in the show? And talking to my producers who are phenomenal and my coordinating producer who are immediately like, [00:26:00] yes, what can we do? It's just being a voice in the room. That's the most important thing I can do while I'm there present, making sure that there's a voice in the room for everybody when it comes to equality, when it comes to saying, hey, I'm going to go fight for us.

Now, when I say that, there's no resistance. He's just making sure he, I, in the mess that we're going to have with the NBA draft this coming week and Major League Baseball, and we're talking about the NFL, we're talking about the Stanley Cup Final just ended, and all of that. Hey, can we carve out 30 seconds of the best video of the day from the World Games in Berlin?

And can we make sure we could showcase that? And they were like, absolutely. Tell us what we can do. Tell us where we can find it. And then coordinating that with producers behind the scenes here in Berlin. And producers over there in Bristol and making sure that happens and everybody's on the same page.

That's what I can try to do consistently every day on [00:27:00] the air. And what's amazing, Josh and Novie, is that everyone has been on board and said absolutely love the idea. Let's do it. And I will continue to promise everybody that's listening my promise to you that I will try to be the voice in every situation for people that are facing these struggles and facing the lack of accountability, right? Where all they want, all they want is to be seen. And I will make sure that I continue that fight and make sure that we carry the flag wherever we go.

**Novie:** What are you looking forward to most about World Games?

**Kevin:** Novie, what I'm looking forward to most, I think the best part of these World Games and these events, and people don't see this, is the health and wellness checks that the doctors can carry out when we talk about [00:28:00] over 170 delegations from around the world, and they get the chance to see how they feel they get the chance to say, Hey, do we need sneakers? What sizes are you wearing? How? What's our health? How about our eyesight?

Check our hearing? Those are the things that I'm most looking forward to. And those are the things that are not going to make TV. Especially not on Saturday night, but during the week, they're there every single day and we have doctors and volunteers and nurses that are constantly helping many of these athletes who are coming from countries that they are not getting the attention that they deserve when it comes to their health and mental wellness.

And for this week, they get the chance to follow up on hey, do we have enough for you when you go back? Are you being taken care of when you go back? Oh, you need glasses. Let's check your hearing. I've heard stories about shoe sizes not fitting and being, you know, somebody was wearing an [00:29:00] 8. 5 when they measured, but they actually was wearing a six for a year and the ability that they can go back with stuff.

That's the stuff I'm most looking forward to because I think in the end, when they go back, when the noise comes down, and they have to figure things out on a daily basis, they have the amazing memories of competing here, but also moving forward, they're in a much better situation, both physically, health wise, and mentally.

**Novie:** Yes, like when I was in Seattle, I attended the Healthy Athletes event, and definitely that was definitely like, mind blowing, because, I have, I think I'm deaf in the right ear. And they were like, you have a little hard hearing in one ear. And I was like, okay. And, you know, definitely it was just amazing to see how much they really can take.

Part of your health because, you know, people are going in there like, oh, I have this [00:30:00] problem. I have this problem. They're like, yeah, we'll help you fix it. They're like, yeah, thank you. And definitely it was just amazing to see how they really put our health in their hands. Definitely.

**Kevin:** Absolutely.

**Novie:** In a few words, can you answer the question, What's accessibility and inclusion mean to you?

**Kevin:** Yeah, wow. In a few words, Novie? Oh, I'm not sure if I can do that. What it means to me is the chance to be seen, the chance to be heard, the chance to be involved. The chance to be a part of something. Accessibility where... There's physical accessibility, like when you show up to a building, is there a ramp? I think we've done a better job of being aware of that over the last two decades compared to where we were last century, when it comes to [00:31:00] availability and inclusion, are there programs for me to be involved in because all we want, all we want is to hear our name during recess, right?

So are we going to be included? That's what I look at. Can we continue to open more doors for people that feel like they're isolated now more than ever? And I think it's really important and we could, we get to showcase that on ABC right nationally and globally now more than ever inclusion is the most important thing I think because we need to make that personal connection and it needs to continue even when we are not talking about it or putting it on TV.

It just needs to continue on a daily basis.

**Novie:** Thank you, Kevin, for joining today's episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. And the Spotlight Sessions collaboration. You're an incredible advocate for the Special Olympics movement and we are so lucky to have you in our corner. [00:32:00]

**Kevin:** Novie, thank you.

**Josh:** And you can learn more about accessiBe, the Inclusion Revolution Radio, and Special Olympics by subscribing on YouTube and following us on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn find us using our handles at accessiBe underscore community and at Special Olympics. Thank you to Kevin. Thank you to all. And we're looking forward to our next episode.