Spotlight Session & Special Olympics S6 Ep04

**Novie:** [00:00:00] This episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio is brought to you by Gallagher. Since 2020, Gallagher has been in a global partnership with Special Olympics, supporting our sports and coaches development through programs, grants, major games sponsorships, and the 4th Year Mentorship Content Series, focused on coaches, mentors, and inclusion.

**Josh:** What's your story? What does accessibility mean to you?

Hello and welcome to another episode of the special edition of Inclusion Revolution Radio collaboration with accessiBe's Spotlight Sessions. 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 the Community [00:01:00] 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 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 can think of. I love Special Olympics and the work our organization does to promote friendship, respect, and of course, inclusion.

**Josh:** In honor of Autism Awareness Month, we're privileged to sit down with NBA player Tony Snell. Beyond his impressive career on the court, Tony's personal journey is one of profound significance. Diagnosed with autism in 2023 after his son was diagnosed at 18 months, Tony's story embodies resilience, advocacy and courage.

Today, we delve into his [00:02:00] experiences navigating the NBA while shedding light on the importance of acacceptance and understanding. Thank you so much for joining us today, Tony, and welcome to the Inclusion Revolution Podcast.

**Tony:** Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

**Josh:** Excited to have you on today's program.

**Tony:** Yes, thank you.

**Novie:** Can you walk us through your basketball journey, starting with high school in LA and Pheonix. Then playing college basketball in New Mexico and finally in the NBA.

**Tony:** High school. I started off in Hawthorne High School from my freshman, sophomore year. That's in LA. Yeah, I never played really, really original ball. So like my freshman, sophomore year I was like a street ball player. So, you know, I had to learn how to play in an organized way. So, played my first two years in Hawthorne High School and then I moved to [00:03:00] Merino Valley where, my other families were, they said it was nice down there, it'd keep me out of trouble. So I moved to Merino Valley, went to Merino Valley High School my junior year, and then after I was done with that year, my senior year I went to Riverside, Martin Luther King Riverside, where Kawhi Leonard played at, and it was a really good team, and that's how I got my name recognized.

Even though I played center, that helped me be versatile in my game. And from there, I had an AAU coach, his name is Marvin Lee. I still talk to him to this day, he really saved me from... Showing my full potential, my full skills, by putting me to point guard AAU, and that's when I started getting looks from colleges.

But then, I didn't take the SAT, so I had to go to prep school in Arizona, Westwind Prep is in Arizona. I don't know if they're there now, [00:04:00] but, I went there a whole year, trying to pass the SAT, and I did. And the whole time, New Mexico was following me the whole way, so I committed there. Played with Steve Alford and Coach Neal, for three years, the best three years of my life. I learned, I've grown really both on and off the court, but I was impressed of how much I've grown off the court. Cause a lot of my college teams would tell you I was a mute. I didn't really talk much, you know, socially distancing myself, but being around them every day helped me grow a lot.

And I got drafted to the Chicago Bulls, 20th pick in the first round. The team I've been looking for my whole life. Michael Jordan had been my idol. So being there, playing for three years and then I got traded to Milwaukee Bucks, and I played there for three years. Then I got traded to Detroit, played there for a year. [00:05:00] Then COVID happened, and after COVID went to Atlanta. Atlanta Hawks, played there for a year, made it to the East Conference Finals with Trey Young, and then, that summer went to Portland, Portland Trailblazers with Damian Lillard. And I got traded, I think, around January, maybe February trade deadline to New Orleans Pelicans where I got traded with CJ McCollum and, they made it to the playoffs, we lost to the Phoenix Suns that year, but that's my nine year career in the NBA. And I'm currently playing for the Maine G League, G League Celtics in Maine Portland I'm just trying to spread awareness of people on the spectrum.

And I'm here right now.

**Novie:** Wow. All I can say is wow. Those players you just named were wow. I mean, (whistle) amazing. Great story.

**Tony:** Thank you.

**Novie:** Are there any moments from your career that started [00:06:00] out as your favorite?

**Tony:** As my favorite, I would say just the journey in general, growing on and off the court, mainly off, because I know my hard work is going to pay off on the court, but mainly off the court, using my voice, learning social cues, just learning from that aspect is probably my biggest accomplishment.

**Josh:** And beyond basketball, your personal journey, especially regarding your autism diagnosis, has touched so many people's lives. Could you share with us a moment when you realized that you wanted to share your diagnosis with the world and kind of what motivated you to do so?

**Tony:** Mainly my wife, cause I always, I always felt like myself and felt different, but my wife saw something different.

And, mainly my oldest, my boys, both of my boys, since I found out that he was on the spectrum. [00:07:00] It helped me want to step forward and let him know that it's okay to be different because I know that feeling of, you know, growing up different and not being able to connect with people. So I wanted to, you know, step forward and open up.

Even though I'm a very private person, my wife helped me try to open up more, share my story and that I'm doing it for my boys and other people out there who we can relate to, and, you know, let everybody know it's okay to be different.

**Josh:** Thank you for sharing that with us. And if you could share a little bit more, tell us a little bit about how your diagnosis influenced your perspective on life and your role as an advocate around autism awareness.

**Tony:** Just being diagnosed pretty much confirmed what I've always been feeling the whole time. It's just now it's a label to it. But, yeah, it's, it just [00:08:00] helps me confirm like all the moments of everything from childhood till now. But, I'm very excited to be a part of something that I can, you know, relate to and let everybody know. So sky's the limit, you know, everybody, everybody has a gift and use that gift and just keep striving and you'll make something happen.

**Josh:** Beautifully said.

**Novie:** What advice would you give to children who may be facing similar challenges related to autism or other developmental differences and want to play sports professionally?

**Tony:** For me, embrace the challenges. Like, growing up, you're going to always have a challenge. Face it. If you want to play football, spend a lot of time playing football. If you want to, any sport, any sports you play, just spend a lot of time with it, build your confidence. [00:09:00] I know if you go against anybody, believe in yourself. When you put a lot of time in and you believe in yourself, that's all you really need is believe in yourself and you can go, you can go beyond this world.

**Josh:** We all know that you attended the World Games last summer in Berlin, where both your sons participated in the Young Athletes Demonstration. How did this experience influence your decision to get more involved with the Special Olympics?

**Tony:** Mainly for my boys, me and my wife and my kids and my boys. That was a great experience for all of us. Like, even for myself, I've never been around that kind of environment, it was amazing. It was phenomenal. And seeing how everybody, how they compete, it's just the competitive spirit is amazing.

Just love being around that. It's a great feeling.

**Josh:** That's awesome.

**Novie:** Tony, I can compare to you. I'm very [00:10:00] competitive myself, so definitely, you know. Can you tell us more about your foundation and its mission?

**Tony:** My foundation is really, is to unite people and do sports and any way we possibly can. And that's, go and grow from there.

**Josh:** And Tony, you played in the NBA for nine seasons with the recent NBA trade deadline. There has been an outpouring of support, regarding your support from the basketball community, urging that a team sign you for a 10th season, thereby making you eligible for the NBA's Lifetime Family Health Insurance Plan.

Can you share the significance to your family of what it would mean to be signed and receive these premium benefits and kind of why it's especially important for families raising children with autism.

**Tony:** [00:11:00] I feel it's important for my family, just like in any career, you want to work for your benefits. Like, teachers, when you work a certain amount of years, you get a benefit. And the same on my side. I'm trying to reach the 10 year mark to reap the benefits and working for it, and I'm continuing to work for it so I get the benefits, and, like, just like any job you're in, you want to have as much benefits as possible, and that's what I'm working for.

**Josh:** And understanding kind of that every case is unique. There seems to be a bigger argument to be made here, about many families and individuals having to fight for access to the right to health care and supports. Something which the Special Olympics has been striving for on behalf of those with intellectual disabilities for six decades. Can you share some of your thoughts on this?

**Tony:** Yeah, I really want to help out. I know it's a pain to be on the waiting list and I really [00:12:00] want to change that, the best way I possibly can. I continue to show awareness and, I really, you know, even for, families who, you know, can't find the help, like the minorities, especially in the Black community, it's difficult for them to try to get in there and I want to help as much as possible to try to you know, if people and their family need some help, provide the help as fast away as possible instead of being a waiting list for a certain amount of time and, you know, I want to change that.

**Josh:** And changing that you are, so thank you for having these conversations.

**Tony:** Oh yeah, for sure. Yes.

**Novie:** What does inclusion mean to you?

**Tony:** I think inclusion means to include everyone. Like, it's super important. I feel like everyone deserves to feel included in this world, regardless of who you are, just include everybody to work for the same goal. [00:13:00] I think that's what inclusion is.

**Novie:** Thank you for joining us as we explored the amazing journey of Tony Snell.

From his time on the court to his complementary advocacy. Tony's story exemplifies resilience and compassion, as we celebrate his achievement both in and out of the NBA. Let's embrace his message of unity and understanding.

**Josh:** 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 on our handles at @accessiBe\_Community and @SpecialOlympics. Thank you, Tony. Thank you, Novie. Thank you all for being here today with us, and we're looking forward to our next episode. Bye, everyone. Bye, Tony.

**Tony:** Thank [00:14:00] you.