

Talking Sport & Tech

Lisa Wainwright MBE, CEO, Sport and Recreation Alliance

Episode Transcript



Alex Zurita:

Hey, everyone. Welcome to this episode of the Talking Sport & Tech podcast, this week brought to you by me, Alex Zurita.

Milly Pelmore:

And me, Milly Pelmore. We have a great guest for you today, and here is a sneak peek at what is in store.

Lisa Wainwright:

We've all witnessed it through COVID, the loneliness that many, many people have gone through. And sport creates that community and that space for people, if they haven't got family, to have a new family, to have a new environment to be in. So, for me, I've just been extremely lucky over the last 30, 35 years to be part of a blossoming sector. I followed my passion of sport making that difference.

Milly Pelmore:

As you might notice from the difference in sound, Lisa's episode was recorded remotely. Over to you, Alex, to introduce our guest today.

Alex Zurita:

With us today is Lisa Wainwright MBE, the CEO of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, born and bred in Yorkshire, and self-proclaimed proud daughter of a miner. Lisa was the first to attend university within her family, studying PE at Warwick University, following that on by a master's in learning and teaching from De Monfort University.

Alex Zurita:

Lisa has a wealth of experience across a number of senior leadership roles in our sector, including being a membership service director at England Netball, head of sport at Sport England, CEO of the Volleyball England, chair of the Institute of Swimming, director of the Amateur Swimming Association, director of the British Olympic Association, and a member of the governance commission at the International Basketball Federation. Lisa was awarded an MBE in 2021, and is an advocate for inclusion and diversity within our sector, someone that has got huge wealth and experience. Really looking forward to hearing this episode.

Alex Zurita:

Lisa, welcome. And thanks for being with us today. We'd like to start by asking you a simple question. It's the same question that we ask every single guest in one of our episodes. If you could be an elite, top-10 athlete in any sport, what sport would you choose, and why?

Lisa Wainwright:

You know that that's an impossible question for me because I've got over 300 different organizations that I represent. So I could go through them all from athletics and archery and basketball and boccia and cricket and everything else, and crochet. But genuinely, I think the one sport that I just admire so, so much is gymnastics, particularly the floor routine. And I think it's just that blend of the artistic and the

technical that gymnasts have to have. They have to have control and discipline. They have to have strength. They have to have beauty. And I just really admire gymnasts because they do that. And I was absolutely hopeless at it, quite frankly. So anything I'm hopeless at, I really admire. Although I love all sports and recreation, for me, if I could be that elite athlete in that Olympic or Paralympic games, if you like, because I've got no knees left, it would be gymnastics.

Alex Zurita:

Brilliant. And it's a new one, so I suppose no one else has gone that way first. I totally get your initial point. It's like almost being asked to pick your favorite child, right? It's now an impossible. Or we get asked at Sport Tech Hub sometime, "What is the startup that is going to make it?" And it's like, "Can't really answer that." But, yeah, interesting. Going back to your answer. So is it a case of... We know, I suppose from childhood, that physical activity in sport was always part of you. And interesting, you mentioned that possibly that wasn't one of the sports that you potentially had a lot of access to, exposure to, or performed well at. So is it a case of just that admiration because of what they go through?

Lisa Wainwright:

I think it's the all-roundness of them. There is so much that a gymnast has to do, from every single muscle that they use, the technical part of it, as well as, as I said, the aesthetic part. A lot of sports don't have the aesthetic part put in it. So, for me, it's a blend of the aesthetic and the technical and the strength. And it's that blend that makes it quite complex for me. I did do gymnastics as a kid. I was very good at the vaults. I could just run and charge at it and somehow hit it and fly over. So I did love it. I then went into team sports, netball, and also athletics.

Lisa Wainwright:

And then taking my kids. I've got two girls, and when they were younger, I took them to gymnastics. I'm an ex-PE teacher. And it was around making sure they got the real basics of the ABCs, the agility, the balance, the control and coordination. It was that thing that I think is incredibly important. And if you said, "If you were a sportsman, Lisa, what would you do?" there are a couple of things I'd do. I'd make sure every child could swim. And I'd make sure everybody did gymnastics, every child, throughout and every single day, because those basics, real, real basics, in terms of ABCs and the life-saving skill of swimming, would be what I'd do.

Lisa Wainwright:

So that's why I admire gymnasts so, so much. I admire all elite sports people. The things they do, the sacrifices they make, are just astonishing. And we only ever see them performing, and they make the news when they either win or when they fail horrifically. We don't see the 12 to 18 years prior to that and all the sacrifices that they made, their parents made, their grandparents made, their families made. And a gymnast, I think... So I just sit and watch in awe, quite frankly, at them.

Alex Zurita:

I suppose we share the privilege of having two daughters. And yeah, that aspect, I suppose, of gymnastics from a performance point of view, but the core skills and life skills I suppose that gives them, right, around just, as you mentioned, agility, balance, coordinations, control. So quite key and integral, I suppose, going back into your early activity or engagement with physical activity in sport, and the importance of that as we drive towards having a more active nation.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I mean, my background, I come from Yorkshire. None of my family had been to university. We weren't very rich. We didn't even have a car. It was my PE teacher who... Bizarrely, in them days, they could drive you to different sports clubs. And I played netball, which wasn't played in our local area. It was the PE teacher who drove me to Leeds, which was a good hour away at the nighttime, and drove me back. So a good two hours of a teacher driving me to netball club. And it was that PE teacher that inspired me to, I guess, better myself through sport. I wasn't that clever, but she was very clear that if I didn't do my homework, I wasn't doing netball athletics. So I did my homework, and somehow... I genuinely believe this. I fell through these low levels of GCSEs, and then I fell into A levels.

Lisa Wainwright:

And by then I thought, "This is something special. I'm really lucky that I've got to here. And maybe I could become that teacher and I could help others." And that's when I decided to do a teaching degree at Warwick University because I'd been inspired so much. And I just genuinely thought, "I want to help people like she did, Pat Green, with me, to make their lives better through sport." And that's really my motto, I guess, even today, even as a CEO at the Sport and Recreation Alliance. All I'm doing is hopefully helping organizations, and people within them, better themselves through sport, whether it's about the physical side of it and you want to stay fit, whether it's about the health side.

Lisa Wainwright:

My mom is going down to a Age Concern and doing healthy bone sessions. Whether it's me going down to my open water session that I've started doing with a mad group of people who are just bonkers, quite frankly. It's not about the physical bits. We only swim for half an hour, and then we eat loads of cake that everybody's made. So it's not really a healthy activity at all. It's a social side of it. Or whether it's just building those communities. Every local community has got some sort of outreach in terms of sport and rec. And I'm involved locally in Leicestershire with about a hundred different sports clubs and groups. And it's a family, it's a broader family.

Lisa Wainwright:

Again, in terms of the reach of what we do and what we are lucky to do in this sector, we've all witnessed it through COVID, the loneliness that many, many people have gone through. And sport creates that community and that space for people, if they haven't got family, to have a new family, to have a new environment to be in. So, for me, I've just been extremely lucky over the last 30, 35 years to be part of a blossoming sector. When I started out, nobody knew what sports development was, in the olden days. It's a bit weird to come into it. And a lot of people were saying, "You're bonkers, Lisa. You're a qualified PE teacher. What are you doing?" But I followed my passion of sport making that difference, not necessarily teaching. Although, I'm still day in, day out doing the same thing.

Milly Pelmore:

Couple of things I'd like to pick up on there. You mentioned with the swimming and gymnastics, if you had the power, you'd love every child to have access to swimming and gymnastics. And you just mentioned that we've come a long way in the sport development sector. And there are now huge drives and community initiatives to create that space for everybody to find something to get active, whatever that might be, whether it's your open water, swimming and cake, whether it's your childhood gymnastics, or whether it's healthy bones. Where do you think we are as a sector? We've come far in the last 30 years, but there's still quite a way to go. Where do you think we are in terms of allowing

every child to have that provisional... or not just child, every human. Let's just take within London, for example, making sure that every Londoner has a way to get active.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I think when you're in the middle of the sector, it's easy to think there's a lot happening and everybody can access sport and recreation. That's really not the case. I'm lucky I can pop down to the local lake. I can afford a wetsuit. Some people cannot do that. They haven't got the transport to get them there. So I think there are many areas in the sector we've still got to improve in terms of accessibility. And what I'm absolutely delighted with is, in the last probably five to 10 years, in particular, is a sport for development coalition world.

Lisa Wainwright:

So it's not just about sport for sports sake. Although, I'm core to that. My background is national governing bodies at netball, basketball, and volleyball. And I really believe in sport for sport. But actually, I also believe in sport for development. If you understand my story of where I came from, that's what changed me. And I think that is a real growth area. So local communities coming together to find the right activity for those communities. And it's not prescriptive. I think, many years ago, sport was quite prescriptive. You could do hockey or netball at school. You could do football or rugby at school, if you were lucky. I think the choice is now far greater, but I think there are still a number of barriers to accessing some sports. And a number of our members are starting to break those barriers down, which is great, but we've got a long way to go.

Lisa Wainwright:

I think the challenge over those 30 years... I mentioned about sports development being fairly new, and it was, but at a time when we'd got local authorities with quite large sports development departments. So I was in a national governing body world, which was fairly new, but local authorities were funding sports activities and sports centers, et cetera. And there's been a real shift, as you will know, in terms of local government and the amount of funding coming into sports facilities, sports departments. And so part of the sector has grown, particularly the national governing body side. But from a local government point of view, that's been reduced.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I'm not convinced there's a bigger network of people out there. I think roles have just changed. And I think that's happening and evolving again with the great work on uniting the movements. Sport England's new strategy around collaborating on a place-based approach, very, very different. And I think it's just going to take some time, these things don't change overnight, but a lot more time for a number of traditional type of activities to think differently about delivery options and engagement really at a local level.

Lisa Wainwright:

But I'm optimistic from our members at the Sport and Recreation Alliance. We've got to focus on equality, diversity, inclusion. We're about to launch our insight hub on that as well, so lots of tools available to help our members. But as I say, it's still not easy. And I hear you when we talk about young people. We're lobbying hard in relation to the PE school sport funding, which is always short term. Now that, to me, is a no-brainer in terms of funding a school sport or physical activity. Let's get the habits early, let's get family habits early, so we are not spending millions and millions and billions of pounds

years later in the NHS, where we're hitting huge problems around obesity, around loneliness, and plowing money into charities to try and resolve that. So, for me, one of the key things is around prevention being the absolute backstop, rather than cure.

Milly Pelmore:

I know that Alex will chat a bit about tech in due course, and prevention is a really interesting side of things. But you mentioned perhaps the network that we're working within hasn't necessarily grown, but the roles and the way we're working within it has. I'd like to know how... If you meet resistance within or outside your organization with partners, with anybody you're working with, resistance to this brave new world, to this new way of working or understanding that we're going to have to move differently if we want things to change, how do you approach that?

Lisa Wainwright:

I think if you are a leader and you have a vision, that will necessitate change. And some people are really comfortable with change, some people are just not comfortable with change. And it's all about motivations and understanding people. So a number of times where I've written and developed strategies with boards of different governing bodies, and the current one I'm with, it's about understanding how you can drive that cultural change within the organization, who you listen and drive with you, and sometimes who you have to let go of, because some people are not for change. And if you put all your resource and reserve into those few that will not change no matter how much time you put into them, you're not working for the 98% who you probably could persuade, in terms of that compelling vision.

Lisa Wainwright:

So that's kind of the philosophy of what I would do. One example is, when I was at Volleyball England as chief exec, I don't have a volleyball background, and they specifically appointed me into that role because I had no volleyball technical background. And most people thought of volleyball as indoor volleyball because that's the traditional main sport. And then if you were somebody slightly different, you might be into beach volleyball. And then if you were somebody who was very unique, you might be into sitting volleyball.

Lisa Wainwright:

Now, for me, that just didn't make sense. Volleyball's volleyball. Whether you play it on a beach, on ice, indoors, on your bum, it's volleyball. And we developed that strategy around three disciplines, one sport. That's volleyball through and through. And you can imagine some of the traditionalists who just were horrified at the thought that the beach players and the beach officials would possibly be on a par with the indoor officials and the indoor players, but that was the drive.

Lisa Wainwright:

And that's the case internationally. It's an integrated sport in that respect. So some of the people went by the wayside, and it's a shame when that happens. But as I say, you've got to conserve your energy for driving the ones that want to change. And that's what happened at Volleyball, a great strategy that was driven forwards. And some of the outcomes you would've seen in 2012, in terms of the great facilities that were developed across the London Olympic and Paralympic games. So, for me, it's about understanding the motivations, getting a compelling vision, and then taking people with you to sell the compelling vision. As a leader, it's not just your vision, it's other people that's bought into that vision.

Milly Pelmore:

I like that. And I think one of the things you said there has really struck me about you didn't know volleyball when you went to Volleyball, and that's precisely why you thrived in that job because you came from outside that specific sport and could bring a fresh perspective or a different perspective, or actually not mask, perhaps, the task that needed to be done with a love of a particular sport. I'm sure you now love it and play all three types, but when you came into it, it wasn't something you'd had much experience with. Do you think there's a lot that we, as the broad sport development sector, can learn from outside of the sector, whether that's individuals, whether that's looking outside to health? When we're thinking about tech, we know that's a lot we can learn from outside sports tech, specifically.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I think we should always be looking outside the sector. We live in the world, so we should be looking at what's happening in the world. And it always amazed me... When I was at England Netball, I was membership services director. It astonished me at the time... This is a long time ago, it's about 20 years ago. But it astonished me that the supermarket I shopped at knew what yogurts I bought and gave me vouchers for them. This is 20 years ago. And I thought, "If they can do that, why can't I find a way to do that to get to the consumers of netball, to sell more netball product to them?" And then the Theorem system came in place, and it moved on. But it's having that ability to not be frightened, to be vulnerable in a different area.

Lisa Wainwright:

So again, another example of something I did. When I was going into director roles, I'd been involved in our network for so long, I knew a number of directors, I knew a number of sports. And it would've been very easy just to stay in the sport, but I decided instead to do an NED diploma with the Financial Times, because I'm hopeless with money, absolutely hopeless. I'll talk about vulnerabilities and when you work on your strengths and you avoid your weaknesses kind of things. But I decided I wanted to go into an environment where I knew nobody, they didn't know me, and it would really put me on edge. And it did. I hated it. But I learned a lot more by doing that. Being NED on a finance sport or an NED in a sport is exactly the same, you're just an NED. But the environment that they created made me work harder.

Lisa Wainwright:

So to come back to your question around external influences, I would hope that leaders in our sector are always doing that, always thinking that. How do we bring across from one sector to another sector? That should be fundamental because we can always learn. You would expect me to see that as an ex-teacher. But it's constant learning, absolutely constant.

Lisa Wainwright:

I've just spoken this morning at a conference in Birmingham. There was a session before me on equality, diversity, inclusion, and the lady was talking about her day job. And I just showed somebody at the side of me a photograph of our last conference, where we had pronoun badges. And I said, "Have you ever thought about pronoun badges for your conference?" She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, having pronoun badges so people could put them on if they want to be called whatever they want to be called." She's, "I'd never thought of it." I said, "Well, interestingly, at our conference, all the under 40s took them and wore them. The majority of over 50s said, 'What the hell is that and why should I bother?'"

Lisa Wainwright:

And it just gave you an indication of sometimes where change can come from and where education can start. And that's not judgment on people who are over 50, by the way, or younger people. It's just another way of learning as we go forwards from different sectors. And this wasn't a sports meeting today. I was at a conference. It was a conference sector conference that I was speaking at.

Alex Zurita:

Lisa, I just wanted to jump in that. I wanted to, I suppose, ask as to whether you have ever considered yourself an innovator.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. It's never been called that. I think I've always tried to just look at things from a common sense point of view. So I guess some of the early things I did... When I was at Sport England, in one of my first jobs, one of the things I did is... There was a fear around something called child abuse, and this is the language that was used at the time, child abuse and child protection in sport. There was a big fear. Nobody knew about what was going on, but there was some indications there was a challenge in some sports. And I thought the only real way to look at it is to do some research, or what we today call insight. So I did my own research while in Sport England. Across the NGBs, how many cases have they had? Have they got any process and policies in place? What was the awareness? Et cetera, et cetera.

Lisa Wainwright:

Anyway, so from that piece of research, it basically demonstrated there were some support needs required. There weren't many policies in place, and there were some issues. And from an innovative point of view, which is the question you asked me, I could have easily just left that and said, "Yeah, we need to put a conference on." Or I could've done what I did, which is to say, "Let's bring the whole sector together. Let's start to build a framework with the key agency, which is the NSPCC, and then build a support unit through the Child Protection in Sport Unit and all the tools and fabulous work they do." But at the same time, to implement something, you need people who are supported. So bring a network of child protection managers across the sports at the time that were funded. So not only are you bringing policy and procedures in, but you're empowering people to do it who've got the right technical knowledge and the network around them.

Lisa Wainwright:

Now, I think that was pretty innovative. No other country had done that. I didn't at the time. I just thought it made sense to do this. So I think a lot of what I've done is now seen to be innovative. I did very similar in volunteering, and just done the same on the International Working Group for women and girls, in terms of a UK-collaborated bid. And some of the differences that I brought to that in terms of, again, thinking differently, looking outside the sector for ideas, it just seems to be a model of nicking stuff from people, quite frankly, and for using it as it is or adapting it for the sector.

Alex Zurita:

That's brilliant. And it's such potentially a innovation, customers, agile way of working. These are all words that are heavily used, I suppose, within the sector now. And it's just, the reason for asking you that earlier is, in essence, when you were talking about your England Netball days and three disciplines, one sport and 50 or so new beach volleyball courts being installed across the country under your leadership. And then you talked about earlier around the supermarket analogy, which is absolutely so

bang on right. How comes Netflix knows what type of movie I might want to watch, or my supermarket knows what brands I would like to shop?

Alex Zurita:

And yeah, I suppose it's really refreshing to then go back and just hear that, just start with the problem that you want to address. I suppose, look to strengthen that hypothesis with some further research, some more thoughts, some more consultation, and then dive into the potential solution thereafter. It's a bit of a comment. I suppose, as a followup question, I'm interested to know how much do you trust your gut? How much do you go by gut feeling? Has that changed as a leader over the years because you've got more pictures that you can call back in from your memory? Or do you feel that you still trust in that gut feeling as you might have done in the past?

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I mean, they're some of the good things I've done. I've also done some shocking things, and you learn more from your mistakes than you do from your wins, quite frankly. And I talked about England Netball. The company we brought in to do the CRM system was horrific and everything went wrong. But we learned, and by taking the risk, it moved that sport on massively. So I think it's not all rosy tinted glasses. But I think I do have some sort of good instinct. What I have now is a good instinct and maturity to stop, work with a team of people that challenge my weaknesses. And then we still proceed, if that makes sense. So rather than me going, "Right. We're going to go for this. This is right for us. We're going to do this," I just listen a bit more, and then do a little bit more of a feasibility in the background to say, "Is this the right thing for this organization or for me, personally, at this moment in time?"

Lisa Wainwright:

Whereas, as I say, before, I probably, as a youngster, would've gone, "This is really exciting and shiny and bright, and let's do it." It's now, "It is shiny and bright, but it might not be so bright in a year's time, so just take care." But to come back to some of the things that, again, that I've tried to continue to do, is to work internationally. So when you get the privilege to be asked to go international ball, so both volleyball and basketball, you learn so much at a global level, and particularly those sports. They are global sports. They're not big in this country. They're phenomenal sports, but they're not as big as they should be. And to go into environments where they are huge, you can learn so much.

Lisa Wainwright:

So it was always about putting yourself in those environments to learn more. And I still do that today because I think it's really important to continue to learn at an international level, as well as a local level. Let's not forget, you can learn a huge amount from going down to that karate club in your village hall, and remind yourself that actually, yeah, they can't even afford to get the urn on to make the teas and coffees, quite frankly. That's some of the challenges that we have. So I think I still go for things. I've still got a good instinct. I think that's the sensing thing that you have as a leader. You can sense things in the right way, but you just check it. Or if you're not good at checking it, which I'm not, I have people around me that can anchor me, that can challenge me in my so-called personal board room.

Milly Pelmore:

I just want to pick up on the theme of learnings. You spoke about learning a lot there, Lisa, whether that's individual learnings or learnings as an organization. And I was chatting to one of our tech startups this morning, who said, "I just don't think that we've made any progress in the last few months. We

haven't got anywhere. We've not really done anything. We've learned a lot about what isn't working." And it's exactly that. They're actually three months further ahead than where they were at the beginning of the year because they've learned everything about what doesn't work, and that in itself is progress.

Milly Pelmore:

But I think that is still potentially quite a... not necessarily new, but a different way of thinking, that actually that failure in itself, those learnings, that is a huge amount of progress. And I want to see more of that within the sector, taking those risks. They might be guided. They might be slightly more grounded in evidence now that we're gathering all of that. But take those risks we learn quickly, and then we can say, "That worked. Brilliant," or, "Do you know what? That didn't quite come off, but we've brought people with us. We've tried some new things," and we go again.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. There's two things on that. My wife is quite up in the police. And we have this usual thing that I come home from work and go, "Oh, Sport England have taken another week to get a piece of paperwork to me." And she'll go, "And I've got two murders to investigate." And I go, "Okay. I'll make tea." And that's a standing joke, that our world is not people generally dying every day. It's not horrific experiences that people are going through. So it's an environment where you can make mistakes. And I say that there are issues clearly in some sports, from a health and safety point of view, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But it's the reality, we can make mistakes. We all learn from them.

Lisa Wainwright:

And the second part is exactly that. And using the analogy of sport... So my daughters are learning to swim, doing pretty well. They've got a new coach, and the new coach is trying to technically develop them for the next phase. They're going slower. They don't like it, do they? Because they're learning a new skill that's making them slower to make them faster. But they, "Don't like it, Mommy, because I'm not going as fast." "I know that, but eventually you will." And that's what we need to do with the tech companies, is actually... You'll go faster by making those mistakes and staying slower in that first lane just to start off with. I guess that would be my analogy of any sport where you try and develop a technical element, whether it's cricket... Whatever sport it is, you always go worse. Gymnastics, you get worse before you get better.

Milly Pelmore:

Yeah. Thank you for that reflection. I think creating that environment where we don't feel afraid to just try stuff, whether it's in a new swimming technique or trying out a new piece of technology, but just trying it and seeing what happens. A couple of things I'd just like to touch upon before we move on to our next section, because I think there are key challenges in the sector at the moment. One is around women in senior leadership positions. You mentioned that you had Pat Green, your PE teacher, who was the reason you are where you are today. I know you don't see yourself as an innovator, so you might not see yourself as a role model, but you do mentor a lot of women both inside and outside the industry. I guess, two questions here. Where do you think we are as a sector with equality and diversity across all levels, but thinking specifically at the moment with senior leadership levels. And secondly, what are the obstacles facing women in the sports for development sector today?

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. In terms of the sport and recreation sector, if I take it from a governance point of view, I think there's been some phenomenal achievements around women on boards. So when Women on Boards UK, which is a separate organization charity, set up, I became an ambassador for that group because it was about women who wanted to be on boards, not sport, but women who wanted to be on boards, a number of which were in the city. I wanted to gain experience in a different sector to then move through the so-called glass ceiling in the city. So I mentored a number of people through that process and brought them onto a number of sports boards. But I think the governance code changes that came in, as you all well know, the increase to 40% now of women on boards in our sector. And by sector, I mean predominantly funded NGBs at this point. Although, there's much broader membership of our organization.

Lisa Wainwright:

I mean, that's great, but it's still not 51%, which is what I would want it to be. And I'm extremely nervous that in the new code that if it's not as closely linked, it may reduce. So I think we've got some real good things to celebrate and to share that change around what we've done. But I think there are bigger challenges around... So let's look at the number of chief execs who are female. There are a number compared to globally, but we could use more, and then specific roles from a financial officer point of view. Also, are PD, performance directors. I know that UK Sport are doing phenomenal work in this area, but there aren't enough people coming through the pathway at that level, and that's where I see some of the challenges.

Lisa Wainwright:

But I think, overall, in terms of the last five to 10 years, we've seen a lot of progress at the top end. I will always help any woman that needs help to come into the sector and provide support for them. I've been very, very fortunate to have a number of grandmothers and grandfathers who've helped me along the way, and I would continue to do that. I think broader in terms of wider diversity. There's enough reports to tell you that there aren't enough intersectional women on boards, if you like. And I think that's the biggest challenge, both men and women, but particularly women. And I think that's the next stage for the sector. Although, I know a number of our members are advertising a whole host of different roles and not finding the right candidates from that diverse point of view. So we've still got a long way to go.

Lisa Wainwright:

But as I say, as a woman, because of the role that I have, I am therefore seen as a leader within the sector. And I've got two young daughters who I really hope they can see that there is a future for them, should they want to go into these environments. At the minute, they're more interested in can they have a Bewitched milkshake, but I'll get there eventually. They might be interested in mommy going to netball, or whatever else it was. You just got to keep working. So there's a lot more to do. I am nervous we might see a step back. And I'm hoping that with us winning the International Working Group for Women & Sport bid to host that from 2022 to '26, I'm really hoping that keeps a lens at the right level for women from all diversity and backgrounds.

Alex Zurita:

I'm trying to make a crossover to what we see in sports tech and tech, to be fair, broadly. We hosted a short while back a speed networking event for female entrepreneurs. Some of the challenges, I suppose, in that space, is a lot of private equity investment goes to men, even though, from a volume point of

view, there are a number of companies that are founded and led by female entrepreneurs. So potentially the point that it's been around the buyers more than the opportunity and the pipeline, right?

Alex Zurita:

So on that pipeline front, I've been fortunate enough to work in this sector for around 15 years now, with local authorities, in national governing bodies in sport, in football foundations, in an active partnership. And actually, I see a lot of amazing female colleagues. So the pipeline, seems to me that is not the issue. Is it just something... I suppose, you called it the glass ceiling. There's something there that's just stopping that next step, right? So is it a case that we just don't have enough female leaders? I don't think so. Or is it a case that it's just something that needs to be done around the recruitment process and that decision making process?

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I think there are a lot in the pipeline, and it's a good point. And I mentioned earlier, my wife's in the police, and she's quite high in the police. She's just about to do a national police assessment center, so PNAC, to move into the top three ranks. So eventually, I hope she becomes a chief constable. Now, the reason I tell you that story is, she's having to look after the kids for these three days that I'm in Birmingham while I'm at a conference. Now, that's difficult if you've got parents who are in these types of jobs that sometimes you need to be away. And the example I give, if she's successful in passing that PNAC, she has to then spend three months on a residential. Now, how inclusive is that? And this is not a dig at the police. It's just an example of the implications of her deciding, and us deciding for her to career progress, means that I have to consider what that means for my three months of work as well.

Lisa Wainwright:

So, for me, one thing that is clear is people's confidence, women's confidence in, "Can I do it?" And when I see men and women together, often it's the guy that will say, "I think I'll give it to go," and the woman that says, "I'm not ready yet." A guy will go for a job. A girl will say, "I need to have all the skills, plus 10%, before I go for it." So there's a little bit about confidence, and that's about perception of women. And then there's the reality. "I have got 90% of childcare at home. I am a single mom. I don't have my family who live near me." There's all those things behind it. And then there's the looking above that glass ceiling. "Can I really be asked?" And that's some of the questions people will go through, quite frankly.

Lisa Wainwright:

And that's what my wife went through. "Can I be asked to be in that environment with those types of individuals?" And I said, "If you are moaning about it, yes, you can because you can change it. So it's up to you to do that." And again, that's not about police. It's just about us as individuals, whether it's male or female, and some of the barriers that we might have because society, overall... And if you look at the stats through COVID around women and the childcare challenges that they had and still do have, how many of us went into caring for elderly, children, et cetera, during that phase, and maybe our partners didn't do the fair share. That's the reality for lots of women. I'm not saying it's for all women, by the way, there's some tremendous guys out there who would dearly love to stay at home with their families. But again, the perception is they should be earning more money, and they feel they've got to go out. So please take that as a balanced approach to it.

Lisa Wainwright:

I think, to give an example of where that could be different, what we've tried to do in all the jobs I've had... It's not a clocking in culture, and the sector doesn't need to be that. And I've always felt that we should be 24/7 people, on our own clock. So if I'm better at working at midnight, like when I was a student, then why am I not better at working at midnight? Unless I have to be on call for a specific reason in the role that I'm in, work when you want to work. Work when you're more creative, when you're more energized. I've always had a people-first attitude. And it infuriates me when people talk about work-life balance. It's like, "No. You got it completely wrong. It's life-work balance." So please let's start with life because you actually are more important than work. And believe you me, when you leave your organization, you'll get some nice cards if you're lucky, and a couple of friends, but actually, they'll get somebody else to do your job. That's what happens.

Lisa Wainwright:

So, for me, it's that people-first culture that understands that, yeah, your wife is going to be doing that. So maybe we just need to look at the diary for the next couple of months. Or when I was very ill... I had cancer three years ago. I was really, really ill. And obviously, the impact was huge on my wife and my kids. And the police went over and above to help my wife, to help me. Now, that told me they were people first. They were thinking about the individual who is of real value to them. And because she was supported, she did a much better job than if they hadn't supported her, because she would've probably gone off sick and wouldn't have coped with it. There's too much about my family in this, but I think it's important to describe some of the things we've been through.

Lisa Wainwright:

And the other thing that I've always tried to do, and is pretty well balanced now through COVID, is flexible first. So if you don't feel like getting up today and working, then don't, just don't bother. But if you want to do it on Saturday, that's great. The outcomes are far more important than when you do it. And I think I've naturally done that in any job that I've been in. A couple of boards have found it really difficult. "Well, your staff are not in." "And? They're picking up their phones. They're doing the work. We delivered the outcomes. We smash the outcomes. So does it really matter?" But culturally, that's quite a change for some organizations to go through. So people first and flexible first would be the philosophy I say I would bring into an organization, particularly to help, where we started with Milly, women progressing through that glass ceiling, if that still exists.

Milly Pelmore:

And just chipping in there to say, I don't think there's too much about your family at all. I think that shows exactly the kind of leader that you are, which is, it's the human behind the role. You have a family behind your role. That's probably... I don't want to put words in your mouth... but perhaps more important than your job, at the end of the day. And actually, I think that really shines through, and that's really important. And I hope that people listening also see that. And I want to know about colleagues, families. I want to know. I want to know if your wife progresses to chief constable. This is why we get up and do our roles. Yes, we want to see more people finding the sport they love, but we want to have a good time doing it and get to know the people behind it. So yeah, thank you for talking about your family.

Lisa Wainwright:

Thank you.

Alex Zurita:

Yeah. I found that section very inspiring. A lot of thoughts in there that probably resonate with some of our thinking internally, and makes me also appreciate and realize the environment that we work in back along the sport, and the support that we've been giving as members of staff over the last two years. I could also see, and totally appreciate, your point that you might have gone into environments where boards were like, "Whoa. What on earth are you doing here? We're a Monday to Friday, 9:00 till 5:00. And people need to be at their desk during that time." So I can totally see that.

Alex Zurita:

I just want to, suppose, bring a little bit more of that into the conversation, and a little bit around your thoughts around technology. Firstly, when we were doing a bit of research, obviously, on your career so far, membership service director at England Netball, head of sport at Sport England, CEO of Volleyball England, director of the British Olympic Association, International Basketball Federation member. So yeah, it's a grand resume. You talked earlier about maybe some of the things that you experienced and saw. Where do you see the sector going, and whether that is from an innovation point of view. You touched on earlier around eradicating the fear of failure, trying to innovate a bit more. We ultimately are in an environment where we could, we can. So where do you see a little bit of our sector going forward? And what are you seeing from maybe the information coming from the members of Sport and Rec Alliance?

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. I think, as well all those grand titles that... I just want to reiterate, the ones that you didn't talk about was my local charitable work. And I learn as much from all those hundred clubs and organizations in Leicestershire as I do from international because I think it's really important to remember grassroots sport is where it starts for everybody. And it's phenomenal in that in itself, in this country. And I think one of the things... I'll come onto the innovation and the IT in a second... is in relation to COVID, I think... These are all the Cs. I think COVID's created more collaboration, and its continuing, without a doubt. If you can think that the sports minister was calling a group and supporting the UK Sport, myself, on a weekly basis at the start of COVID, that just doesn't happen, and sometimes more than a weekly basis. And that access and collaboration continues.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I think when you're in a crisis together, you learn to trust each other even more. You've got to find a way to trust each other because you've got to get through it together. And, for me, although the Uniting the Movement stated very clearly they wanted to be a collaboration behind it, COVID has moved it forward so much as an environment. And that's what really excites me going forward. So, I think, to come back to your point about the innovation, the tech side, from a collaboration point of view, what I've always observed is, most of our members work independently. So, for example, the ECB cricket will do one thing, and the RFL rugby league will do another thing, and somebody else around us will do another thing, and Movement and Dance will do another thing. Fundamentally, they're trying to do the same thing. And I just hope that, for the future, there's a collaboration, not just of size of sport, but of type of sport as well.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I think that's something that we ought to be doing a lot better. And that's what our members have been asking for, that we define some solutions to it. From a tech point of view, I think you can see,

during COVID, again, Peloton sales that went through the roof, I think, from all accounts. And even I started virtual cycling every day, and I hate cycling, but I did it. And I got all these medals that I now proudly have on my desk for cycling, believe it or not, from John o' Groats to Land's End, in the first month of lockdown.

Lisa Wainwright:

I'm not convinced we use technology enough, and I'm 50+ now. I see what my kids are doing and think, "There's a lot more I should be learning. I should be aware of other things that's happening, and I'm not as much as I should be." And, in essence, that's why we've got a conference tomorrow called Fit for the Future, which is basically our flagship conference for all our members, and it's all around digital and tech.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I think we've still got quite a long way to go. I think CRM systems are maybe not as embraced as they should be within the sector. And by sector, I'm not talking all the big sports here because I think they're slightly different. I'm talking the mid-range governing bodies and unfunded sports. I think there could be a better use of CRM systems, in terms of understanding customers.

Lisa Wainwright:

I think there could be a more shared collaborative and innovative approach to insight across a number of different groups. And I think it'd be interesting, again, from an innovation point of view, to start looking at leveling up collectively, rather than separately, running away to say, "This area's been identified, or these 20 areas. Let's start to look at innovating in these areas." How do we do that together? A bit like the active partnerships. Not all of them are doing it together, but are there four active partnerships that have got something that's so unique in their localities that you've been doing? I don't know if that's happening or not. So that's what I'd be probably looking at.

Lisa Wainwright:

From a personal point of view, I'm still behind the curve on technology. I'm starting to embrace it, but it's well ahead of me. I remember about four years ago, somebody introduced me to Slack, and I was like, "Oh my word. What is that?" And now everybody seems to use Slack. So I was ahead of it, but I've come back a little bit. So starting to embrace it. But I think if we can get that collaborative together to drive forwards the innovation, I think that will move us quicker than us all doing it separately, because you know what happens. Somebody has a great idea, they pitch to one governing body, and then before you know it, they've gone to every other governing body. Let's find a different way of doing that to save time and to support the tech industries. If it's not the right offer, it won't be the right offer for them. So I think that's the approach I would suggest maybe going forwards.

Alex Zurita:

Thank you for that. I particularly like and want to pick up on the point around the place-based approach. You need to understand who they are, what they do. How do they do things? Is it an environmental thing? Is it a behavioral thing? This is access, inclus-abilities, that the opportunities on the ground are not right for them. I suppose when you look at it from an innovator's lens, what that doesn't give them, is scale, because, in essence, you're trying to potentially utilize a piece of technology, a product, as part of that intervention, but you're dealing within a micro place.

Alex Zurita:

So your point around how do we find similar micro places that share the common challenges, that then becomes so much more enticing for an entrepreneur, right, because you're then saying to that individual or that business, "Actually, you're not dealing with one place. You're dealing with multiple places. But all added up together, it gives you hundreds, tens of thousands, of potential people that might use your product." So there's a really interesting point there around the sector, and us considering that, to make it an enticing opportunity for entrepreneurs to come and, yeah, disrupt and help us tackle some of those long-standing inequalities or barriers to activities that we wanted to eradicate for a long time.

Lisa Wainwright:

The example is, some of the innovators will try and go, "I want to get to the RFU, the Rugby Football Union." That's too big. But to go with one club, the Northampton Saints, is too small. But a consortium of five is probably a better way to start because there'll be some nuances between the five that you can learn from. We go from one extreme to the other. It's the old delivery system. You either fund nationally or you fund locally. Actually, you need to fund the whole continuum, or support the whole continuum, to try and learn. And then you ramp up or ramp down. But we always start at one end or the other, and that's where I think we've got a chance to change that.

Alex Zurita:

That is so much of a better way of describing what I was trying to say, so thanks for that. You talked about the conference, Sport and Rec Alliance running a flagship event around Fit for the Future embracing technology. And that is, as I see, as I know it, very much something that has been put on by the organization for their members because the members have requested it. I'm interested in trying to delve a little bit into that. Do you see that this is just more of a, "Look, we're interested in learning"? Or is it a case of, "We're interested in learning and we're ready to take action"? Where do you think some of that interest come from, or maybe the wave of thinking might be at? With a touch of caveat that I appreciate the Sport and Recreation Alliance is hundreds of members, from governing bodies of sport, to universities and a grassroot club, and anywhere in between that.

Lisa Wainwright:

Yeah. We do a member survey every year, and it came out as one of the top topics. EDI was one, environmental sustainability, and data technology. So we put on the conference. I genuinely don't know what the outcome will be in terms of the individuals coming. But what I can tell you is the environment that our members are operating in. We've been, for the last two years, 18 months, in pretty much crisis mode from a shutdown of COVID, of closing competitions, closing events, closing doors, reducing staff, and trying to survive. We're now recovering from that, rebuilding and thinking about things differently. Some of the organizations will be thinking differently very big because of the risks they've gone through. Some will be tweaking and some will be learning.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I think that's what we've tried to do with this conference, is have a raft of different offers available and different solutions. So it depends on if you're an unfunded sport or organization, so Laban Movement and Dance. It might be about utilizing a different system for teams. Instead of using Teams or Zoom, they might look at a different system that's more integrated with something else. I'm just making this up.

Lisa Wainwright:

It could well be about disaster recovery for badminton after the YONEX Championships and the time of COVID, and everything else. Again, I'm making that up. So I think it depends on the individual coming, the chief executive or the person who's leading this particular area, which might be the COO, as to what solutions they might look at. They might go, "You know what? It's four years in. We're looking to re-tender our CRM system." It could well be, "I don't quite know what to do for my AGM, whether we go virtual, whether we go physical. I'm not quite sure. Are there any solutions out there?"

Lisa Wainwright:

There could well be a, "We've realized through COVID we haven't got our risk register and risk tools in place. We just need to re-look at that. And are there tools available?" In one of the sessions, it feels like a... And it shows my age... a bit of a Paul Daniels, Debbie McGee sketch, where there's going to be a smashing up of a computer on stage with dry ice and everything. And then the company's going to recapture all the data for us to show us live that that can be done.

Lisa Wainwright:

So I'm not nervous about that at all. But, hey, my teams say it's going to work. But that's really about risk. And how do you manage risk if everything goes? Where are you saving things? How are you saving it? How can you access it? All about data. So I can't really answer your question because it depends on who comes from the organization and what type of maturity they are, and their recovery mode as an organization. Are they still recovering? Have they come through that? Are they now starting to grow? It just depends on the organization.

Alex Zurita:

That totally makes sense. And I suppose what I'm taking from the answer is... Again, taking a step back through the work that we do at Sports Tech Hub is... You mentioned it a lot... around business tools, in essence. And I think we default... or I default, I suppose, the role that technology can have in directly getting people active. And we shouldn't forget, I suppose, the role that technology can have in just making organizations more efficient and effective, helping recover post-COVID, increase funding, diversify their income, make them run more effectively, and so on. So yeah, we shouldn't forget, I shouldn't forget, and take that as a point that got to be aware that technology has a role in helping on the business side as much as it is on the delivery side.

Milly Pelmore:

We're at the end of our conversation with Lisa now, ready for the quick-fire round. So, Alex, you're going to let me know when the timer is ready. And then, Lisa, off we go. Who was at the DCMS, the LTA, and now is at ukactive?

Lisa Wainwright:

Huw Edwards.

Milly Pelmore:

Correct. Which former professional cricketer and director of Surrey Cricket set up her own charity called the ACE Programme Charity?



Lisa Wainwright:
Ebony Rainford-Brent.

Milly Pelmore:
Correct. Ebony Rainford-Brent. Prior to taking up his role as chief exec at Sport England, where did Tim Hollingsworth previously work?

Lisa Wainwright:
BPA, UK Sport, CBI. Do I get three? Go.

Milly Pelmore:
BPA. Correct. We'll give you that. Who is the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport?

Lisa Wainwright:
Nadine Dorries, out of the jungle.

Milly Pelmore:
Correct. Between Feb 2017 and January 2022, Emily Robinson, who is now the CEO of London Sport, was working at which UK company?

Lisa Wainwright:
UK Anti-Doping.

Milly Pelmore:
Correct. Jack Buckner has just been made CEO of British Athletics. Which two other organizations has he previously been chief exec at?

Lisa Wainwright:
British Triathlon and British Swimming. Did super jobs in both.

Milly Pelmore:
Correct. Lisa Wainwright, that was a brilliant, a brilliant conversation. And I have to say, you absolutely smashed that last round. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Lisa Wainwright:
It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.

Milly Pelmore:
Alex.

Alex Zurita:
Milly.

Milly Pelmore:

What a brilliant episode. Again, so much to take away from that conversation, Lisa. And a huge thank you to Lisa for joining us from her hotel room in between conferences. I, for one, find Lisa really inspirational. She's not afraid to stand up for what she believes in and makes some difficult decisions, but she's also so human and compassionate. She sees the individuals behind the roles, and I think that came across really strongly. She also apologized for talking about her family at one stage. But actually, that's so important. And I think that side is a big part of who Lisa is today.

Milly Pelmore:

One of the things she mentioned, is that she doesn't see herself as an innovator, and that, instead, she just uses common sense. But I think, actually, her attitude towards not being afraid to take risks, learn fast, and learning is progress, I would actually say that probably does make her an innovator, albeit not a self-professed one, which I thought was a really interesting theme that came through. She wouldn't describe herself as tech savvy either. But actually, I think in the way that she leads, it really comes through that the places she takes her team are to those places of creating that space where they can innovate and they can take risks. And overall, that's a really good thing for our sector.

Alex Zurita:

I would've loved to be a fly on the wall during her time in some of those senior leadership positions, where what she was describing in terms of the culture that she was creating is very much like the here and now. And I would've loved to see how the intricacies of dealing with that, trying to create that change in those moment in times... I think there's a lot in there that really backs the style with the substance. There's some really, really lived experiences that have shaped the way she leads, she works with people, she takes our sector forward. Aside to that, from a then content point of view, professional point of view, two things that really stuck out with me was, we are moving as a sector into being much more focused on places and affecting places, getting under the skin of those places and, therefore, trying to eradicate the challenges or address some of the inequalities in those places.

Alex Zurita:

If I'm an innovator listening to that, I might be slightly fearful that the scalability aspect of my product might be limited, right? If you are working with an organization that is really trying to effect change at a micro level, it might make you feel that there is a volume to affect, ultimately, people that can use my technology. What I really like from Lisa's coming around that was, how do we get similar places around a table, hypothetically, and then, therefore, enable that innovator to then access scale by then implementing that product in places that have got similar look and feels? So you're not retrofitting volume. You're actually tangibly bringing organizations together or places together that share common problems. And then you, as an innovator, what you're presented is with a number of places that you can affect.

Alex Zurita:

So I think that was really interesting, and the point that, I suppose, for our sector to be mindful of how do we continue to collaborate so we can share that learning of the places that we work in? And at the same time then, as an innovator, just being able to have that in your mind of ultimately... It's finding look-alikes, right? It's finding customers that are like the ones you've already got. So where can I continue to find those look-alikes in other places that the sector might be working in.

Alex Zurita:

Collaboration was also a key point that Lisa touched on, and she mentioned around COVID creating a collaboration continuing. And I just hope, obviously, that does continue because, actually, talking about places there, there might be, for example, active partnerships working in places in Cumbria that might share similar challenges to a place that an active partnership might be working with in Devon. So the importance there on how do we continue to share learning amongst each other and collaborate amongst each other, with the view of being able to scale interventions, whether those are physical activity type interventions or the use of technology, to create bigger reach.

Milly Pelmore:

A lot of our points there share a similar theme, whether it's the way Lisa leads her team, whether it's how she approaches collaboration within the sector. It's all about bringing people on that journey with her. And some people won't come on that journey. And actually, Lisa's okay with that.

Alex Zurita:

So I think as a bit of a summary with the things that stood out with you and I, potentially a common thread there is, the bringing people with you on the journey. Lisa mentioned that. Whether that is your board, your members of staff, the members you work with, the sector, innovators trying to teach the sector. It is important, I suppose, that we continue to harness that collaboration, co-creation, co-design face.

Alex Zurita:

At the same time, I suppose, Lisa mentioned, give people an opt-in opportunity to be part of that journey. But also, be aware that not everyone is going to be on that journey with you. That's okay, I think, as long as there is that opt-in, as long as there is no blind spots or assumptions that make you think that certain organizations, a certain part of the sector, or certain type of technology is not going to work for a certain audience. Just collaborate, co-design, co-create, get to some strong hypotheses, follow your gut, follow your instincts, let people be part of that journey. And if people naturally fall off, it's okay, as long as you continue to give them an opportunity to opt in at a future in time.

Alex Zurita:

That is it. That is the episode. That is a wrap. That is our takeaways from the conversation. It's always Milly and I trying to surface a bit of the learning that we took from that. I hope you enjoyed that as much as we have. Be sure to subscribe, download, share, and leave a comment on your preferred podcast platform. We would really appreciate that. And don't forget to tune in to the next episode to hear from another amazing leader within our sector, and talking all things sport, tech, and leadership. See you later.