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Transcript of an interview with
Katelyn Smith

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KATELYN SMITH TRANSCRIPT – GAME CHANGERS COLLECTION

INTRO [LUISA]: *Welcome to GAME CHANGERS, a podcast about trailblazing West Australian women and their contribution to the wonderful game of soccer. This collection was produced and developed by the Centre for Stories and the State Library of Western Australia. Together, we are sharing stories that reflect our state's rich heritage, diversity and history.*

The interviews you're about to hear were recorded on Whadjuk Noongar boodjar, and we pay our respects to their elders, traditional custodians, and knowledge-keepers, who are the first storytellers of this place.

In the lead up to Perth hosting some of the games for one of the world's largest sporting tournaments, the FIFA Women's World Cup Australia & New Zealand 2023, we hear stories from local women who rose up against inequality and stereotypes to champion the game of soccer as far back as the 1970s.

We hear from elite athletes past and present considered to be the best in the game, both locally and globally; and we hear from community role models who are courageously making soccer more accessible and equitable for future generations of women, young girls and newcomers of all genders to the game.

Sports media journalist Kris Marano sat down and heard why self-belief, sacrifice and strength is what it takes to become champions of soccer.

In today's episode, Kris talks to the goalkeeper for the ParaMatildas, Katelyn Smith. Founded in 2019, the ParaMatildas is Australia's first national team for women and girls with cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury and symptoms of stroke. Katelyn recently won the inaugural ParaMatildas Player of the Year and Goalkeeper of the Tournament after a silver medal winning run in their first international Women's World Cup campaign in 2022. This is Katelyn.

KATELYN: My earliest childhood memory would be just kicking the ball around. I would've been under-eights at the time. We were just training and I only remember it because I really hurt my knee that day. I fell over in a pothole. And I really hurt my knee, but I think that was the first time, that was my earliest memory of kicking a soccer ball around with the boys. I played with Woy Woy's Football Club on the central coast in New South Wales. So, I was a part of them from the age of 5 till 16, 17. So, I played with them I think for 12 years straight. I played with the boys up until 15. And then because of the age back then, you had to move from the 16s, you had to move to the lady's division. There was no mixed, it was just men's and ladies. So, I decided to move to ladies and then the year after that I decided to take a break from football.

KRIS: So, what is it about soccer that kept you playing all those years?

KATELYN: I think it's like a big adrenaline rush when you're on the field. So much running. As a kid with ADHD, you like running. So just running up and down the field was great. Had a good bunch of boys that I was with from the under-fives till about the under-fourteens. Pretty sure I was a left-back growing up playing soccer. Definitely wasn't goalkeeper, but I was a left-back or a left-mid.

Because I've got two older brothers who are quite close in my age. So, we're, I'm '96, my brother's '95. My other brother's '94. So, they started playing soccer, but I wanted, because I grew up with them, I was such a rough nut, so I wanted to play rugby league, but back then the girls weren't allowed to play rugby. So, I had to stay with soccer.

Growing up with them and I was really close to my brother that was a year older than me, not quite a year older than me, really helped in becoming rough really. It's actually quite good because especially when you start versing new teams, they don't expect you to be rough; match them on the field, and when you do, they're just like in shock. So, it's like, I remember having a hernia operation. I was 11 and the doctor told me six weeks that I wasn't allowed to kick a ball or do anything. And I was still on the sideline the next week going, can I play them? The coaches were like, I don't think so. I was definitely there on the weekend and then I would always be back up for my brother's teams on the weekend. So, I ended up playing like four or five games every weekend.

KRIS: So, from 15, what happened from there? You said you took a bit of a break and then how did you start playing again?

KATELYN: I developed some really, really bad asthma at that age where I was, I spent more time in hospital than out of hospital. I took a very medical route, shall I say. So, I wasn't able to do the things that I used to be able to do, so I spent quite a lot of time in hospital in ICU, on a lot of medications that made me put on a lot of weight. And they didn't know the causes and the reasonings behind it, but I just physically wasn't able to do what I used to do. So, I had to take a step back, see a specialist, trying to figure out what's going on. So, I decided just to stop it. My body was obviously going through enough and decided to try and get my health under control. I think I took two years complete break from soccer. I decided, didn't decide, I got asked to go try out for futsal for a company back in New South Wales where they have an intellectual disability team, go to nationals and stuff. So, I did that. That was just one week a year. And then it wasn't until I was 20 that I decided to go back to soccer. And then I played for a year, had a year off, played for another year, and then I haven't played with a club since then, so it's about three years since I've played with a club on the weekend.

KRIS: Okay. Well, you've had a big soccer journey. So, I just wanna talk about your disability for a minute. Can you tell us about your disability and how that comes into playing soccer as well, maybe how...?

KATELYN: So, I have multiple disabilities. I'm autistic, have intellectual disability, I have cerebral palsy, and I'm legally deaf as well. So having CP, having intellectual disability allows you to compete at the national stage but it doesn't allow females to compete at a world stage, it does for men. But not for women yet. For CP, we have the privilege of competing at the world stage as of last year they decided to... The men's have a Pararoos team and the females decided we would incorporate the Para Matildas, which is the female cerebral palsy team. That allows us now to compete in the world champs, Asian Cup,

represent our country and the football that we love growing up. Not thinking girls with CP would ever be able to get the chance to do that, is just great.

Being autistic, having intellectual disabilities, I've had that since a young age. My CP hasn't really come into effect until I started getting sick and being on life support and actually having a severe asthma attack where I was clinically dead for seven minutes has brought more medical complexity out in me. So, my CP wasn't relevant until then. Before that I was just known as a clumsy kid who would just fall over. But after that and all these other things happened, we went to a neurologist, we got diagnosed with CP. But yeah. And I've become legally deaf in the last two years.

Soccer's helped me in the, in the aspect of, there's other people out there with cerebral palsy who love football as well. And to get around people like ourselves, who we don't judge each other, we're really good around each other. We never talk about anyone else's capabilities and not capabilities. We're always there to help each other. It's opened up this whole, this whole aspect of your life where you enjoy going to camps. You have a good time. You meet other people from around the world who have similar experiences like yourself and stuff like that. So, it's pretty good. You get to meet people that you wouldn't even dream about meeting one day. They're just like a dream or a thought, but then when it actually like comes into reality, it's really, really good.

KRIS: So how did the opportunity to play with the Para Matildas come about? Can you take us back to that moment?

KATELYN: Well, living back in New South Wales, we had Charlotte running our New South Wales program. And because we weren't in the talks of having a team at the time, but the boys Pararoos had a team and they could, they went to training, and she thought that we could have a girls training session. So, we went to, I think I went to the second New South Wales all-girls training thingy. And then it kind of died down after that Covid hit. Nothing was said anything more about it. And then they decided to announce a team at the beginning of last year, so that with, so the Para Matildas came into the Football Australia community. We're a known team now. We're a national team and we're gonna be going, competing at the World Cup in 10 weeks for announcement to the World Cup.

KRIS: So, you went to training to be considered...?

KATELYN: So when you registered for Football Australia, there's parts in the section where you can click your disabilities and anyone who clicked a disability would then, I think the way it went was, you either knew someone from a different sport, or it just went up on the Facebook and it's like anyone with an acquired brain injury, stroke-like symptoms or CP can come and join this training day. It was more about developing or figuring out what the girls can or can't do and trying to adapt the activities, drills to what we can do. This was I think the biggest challenge, but we were just there with other girls like ourselves and just having good time meeting new friends. I think no one thought of anything of it apart from we're playing soccer, we're trading soccer with soccer with people like ourselves. So we met, I've met a couple of good friends, lifelong friends from the training and stuff like that. So it's been quite good.

KRIS: Yeah. What is the team culture like and how many players are there?

KATELYN: So, we're a five aside team, so five players in the field, four players and a goalkeeper. But we take 10 away with us. So, we're a 10-man team - 10-woman team. So, we pick 10 to travel with us. We

have a squad of, I think, 25, 26 people who have CP or ABIs, who are part of the extended Para Matildas family group. So, we have camps and we roughly invite 15, 16 girls to each camp.

KRIS: I think you mentioned there's a, is it a WhatsApp group, that keeps all of you connected while you're here in Perth?

KATELYN: Yes. So, we have a WhatsApp group with any activities coming up or stuff like that, but it keeps us connected as well. So, we all wished each other happy birthdays and happy Christmases and all this on this group chat.

KRIS: What was Spain like? Can you tell us, was that the World Cup, and what was it like in Spain?

KATELYN: Spain, so that was last year in May, we went to the World Cup. It was an experience. Us girls went in with five teams, five teams that have never played a world stage before. We were all new, but we got, we formed really good friendships with the Netherlands girls actually. We would be out on the, at the end of every night where we stayed, they had like this happy hand that was a, like say a resort, a resort mascot. So, where we stayed at the happy hand, it just said happy hand on each finger and it was the resort mascot. So, he would come out on the pool every night and do like these singing, dancing with us. And us and the Netherland girls formed a pretty good relationship on and off the field, which was really good. I mean, by the end of it, we're all quite happy talking to each other off the field between the countries and that. So, and if we were to walk past each other in the resort, it would be really good. Like we would say hello, we'd become really friendly. But then once we hit that field, it was just like a flicker switch. We were like competitive and wanted to be number one. But it was great. We all laughed and giggled at the end of it. We had fun. Even when you're away representing your country, just that time away just to talk to your friend about life is what you need.

KRIS: Tell us about goalkeeping? Because I know you didn't start as a goalkeeper and that was something you evolved into. Who is the person who suggested that you should start goalkeeping?

KATELYN: I did play a little bit of goalkeeping back when I played in the mix. That's because one of the goalkeepers got hurt and I was the little sucker that put my hand up and said I'll have a try. But I never really played it properly. I played it a couple of games and then when I got sick and with my really bad asthma, I lost the ability to run the field like I used to be able to. So, I stuck myself in goals after I left school. But I did play goalkeeper for futsal, but I'd never had a training session or a coaching session or anything. I was just, I had the natural ability to not be scared of a ball. So, you become quite good at goalkeeping 'cause you're not scared to get the ball. But it wasn't until we had our training camp last year that our coach, Kelly, put out a group thing saying like what positions do you girls play? And stuff like that. And I just, I said left-back, but I do know how to play goalkeeper. Well, that was a mistake.

KRIS: A good mistake. That happens with every team, if someone puts their hand up to goalkeep.

KATELYN: It was, I mean it was a great mistake in the fact that I had my first goalkeeper trading session six weeks before I flew to Spain. I learned a lot in that short time with Kim being my left-hand lady, shall we say, I wouldn't have gotten anywhere without Kim. She's our goalkeeper coach and assistant manager. She taught me a lot in the six weeks and when we're over in Spain. And so being fairly new and not understanding, and going from a big field to a small field and then lucky enough the futsal size goals and our goals are the same size, but still not understanding where to stand and how to position

yourself... To find out I wasn't even catching a ball properly, I was catching them, but just I didn't know what I was doing. I learned a lot going back and watching the games again after we got back. I learned a lot watching myself play. Going, what was I thinking? Like I need to be more spatially aware of where my goals are. But it's been a great experience learning goalkeeping and then finally this year I've become really comfortable in playing it. I think I've come a long way since I started really training for it and having a lot of doubt that I couldn't be really good. But now I've seen that. So 12 months ago I couldn't even dive for a soccer ball. I was hopeless. Couldn't do it. But now having that capability and being comfortable in doing it.

I think what puts a lot of people off from being goalkeeper is... you let the ball in. So, I had a lot of problems with this when in Spain and versus America and just in general. Letting the ball in. You're like, oh, like I've just let them score. But then at the end of the day it's gotta get through the rest of the players. And I think that's the hardest thing as a goalkeeper to learn and understand. Yes, you've let the ball in but there's all these other things that contribute to you letting the ball in. Like it's a whole team effort for the ball to go in. So, I think that's why some people get put off it. And also getting a ball belted at you at a hundred miles an hour is not great at all. Yeah it's just, it's just crazy what goalkeepers go through. Didn't realize it until actually we got to Spain and I was like, oh this hurts. And then we had national futsal, so a national championships last October and we had to play boys 'cause it's a mixed league. We played boys and I was like, I said to my straightening coach Kelly, I was like, it hurts being a goalkeeper sometimes 'cause I got absolutely annihilated. Yeah, I had bruises all up and down my legs. I was just so sore. But at the end of the day it was like a good adrenaline rush. It was great.

KRIS: Yeah. You told me, so there's the element of being selected for the Para Matildas in terms of skill. But you said it is extra hard because of the grading and certification process. Can you tell us how that works for people who might not understand?

KATELYN: So yes, it is harder to be selected for an Australian CP team as we have different classes in our, in our team makeup. So, we have oh one, two and three. So, we have an FT1, FT2 and FT3. So an FT1 is your least abled. So, people generally who have hemiplegia on one side, which is really bad, or they've got CP in all four or just affecting their legs. And then TF3 is you're more abled. So maybe just the one limb is affected or a stroke, but they're not really, they're just more capable. So, you have, 1's is a lower class and then your 3s is the higher, more able-bodied class. But there's rules in soccer, you can only have one TF3 on the field at all times and you must have at least one TF1 on the field at all times. So, you can have one TF1 and then the rest TF2s; or you can have one TF1, one TF3 and the rest TF2s. But you could be the third or fourth best player on the team. But if you're a TF3 and the three or four in front of you are TF3s, you may not get selected because you can only take so many through to you to the World Cup because you can only field one TF3 at the same time. So, you can't take 10 away and five of them be TF3s. Because it just wouldn't make logical sense. Anyone can play any amount of time on the field, but you don't want the same TF1 playing every minute of every game, because they're least capable, they're gonna get tired. I'm a TF2 and I die after two games. So, you need to have that variety so we don't get tired.

KRIS: Okay, so it's energy management.

KATELYN: Yeah. So, we fatigue, our CP athletes, we fatigue a lot faster than say able-bodied team. And we have to do so much more recovery to help our bodies heal for the next day. Because of us girls all having CP, like we're all having CP, for a lot of the girls hadn't been to a hot, humid country before, so we didn't know how to recover properly. So, we were all working by the end of it. But when selecting a

team, I think it's not even about selecting really players, it's how do we cope with fatigue levels and stuff like that. So, for me it's about getting in a pool. Some athletes or training sessions, some athletes might go from massage, some might just go and have a sleep. Everyone has different techniques on how to manage fatigue.

KRIS: And this reminds me of what you were saying when you joined the Para Matildas that you wanted the staff or the whole team to get to know you as a person. But that wasn't in place when you joined. So, can you tell me about how you led that initiative to make that happen?

KATELYN: Because we're still so new, it was just different. Like the staff were getting to know us, we were getting to know the staff. So, we all had to find, and because I'm still learning and understanding my CP, it was quite different. Different in the way that I'd never been on a way on a trip where I'd had these sort of reactions and getting to know my body a lot in Spain was really, really hard.

So, with the Para Matildas actually going into Spain we had five pages we had to fill out, didn't we? Of things we need, things that we don't. So, one of the questions was, what do you need? This is one of the things that I was trying to get involved in the WA program, but one of the questions going into Spain on the Para Matildas team, was how can we help? And I just said, I'm autistic, let me have a meltdown. So, I mean they were, the Australian team were actually really good in helping us girls in that sort of way. But we pretty much, we all had one-on-ones going into Spain to figure out what we needed and what they could do to help us. So we were, we were actually really good understanding what people needed, most CP athletes. But like I said, I was still trying to figure out myself and how things could help me.

KRIS: And you've talked about Kelly, your coach, being a really big support and that she's someone that you can be really open and honest with. Can you tell us a bit about her coaching, her leadership and how she really helps support the team?

KATELYN: So, Kelly's coaching is good in the aspect of she knows what she's doing, she's really good at her job and she knows how to get the best out of each player. She knows their limitations; she knows how to develop them in a way that I don't know how to develop myself. And giving that encouragement and talk is just like, no, like she's, sometimes she's brutally honest with me. She goes, Katelyn, no, just, you're gonna do it this way. Like, we know you can do it. And stuff like that. Whereas those talks, they go, oh, maybe actually someone believes in me. So, she's really good at those pep talks I think. Or sometimes she'll be like, Katelyn, grow up. I'm like, yes girl. But you need those sometimes. And I think she just understands us athletes on a better level than some other coaches would.

KRIS: Like when you're not competing internationally, you are based here in Perth and most of the team is on the east coast, and so you've been training or being part of the Fremantle City Football Club and maybe some others, but you talked a lot about how those girls really welcomed you in as well and helped you realise how good you are at what you do...?

KATELYN: The girls at the Fremantle City Club are really, really good. They're really easy to talk to actually. And me being myself, I don't like talking to people at all that I don't know. So, the girls are really good. They say hello all the time. Faye's a really good coach and leader. I think she brings something different to the table in a good way as well. So, they're really welcoming in the sense that they didn't see me as different, I don't think, training alongside them. But it's a different avenue because they're all, shall we say abled, they don't have a disability, but seeing what they're capable of goes, oh,

maybe just that one day I can be more like them and to try and match it with them pushes me that much further. Just the way they move the ball I think gives me a lot of insight, especially playing as a goalkeeper I can, the way they structure their field, I look at it and go, I can easily change that or adapt that to be a smaller field. So, trying to get, and then I can lead our girls into this is how we need to be kind of structured and that. But then, when I think that, Kelly does it at the next camp anyway! So, learning and then learning how to communicate what I want on the field is getting a lot better too with them, because I thought I was screaming loud enough, but apparently not. So, and the way they talk to each other, I've brought that onto my game. So maybe not so rough when I'm speaking to them, if that makes sense. But be more nicer.

I train with Fremantle. I train with the WA Para program and I also train with two halves football in Joondalup. So, they're all one-on-one sessions that I do with them twice a week. And then I do gym as well. Monday, Wednesday and Fridays seem to be pretty full on. Not enough time in my day to do anything on those days. Tuesday, I go to swim group and then Thursdays I do sweet nothing. Sometimes I don't make it outta my bed. I'm just that tired and sore and sleep in. But the last couple of weeks is just mayhem, training, train, train, train.

KRIS: I wanna talk about the Women's World Cup in the Para Asia Cup as well, because that's coming up very soon and that that is the first, is my understanding, which is very exciting. Yeah, like how are you feeling with that coming up, going into that competition and what kind of change do you hope it will create for the game?

KATELYN: So, the Para Asian cup is coming here to Melbourne in November. I think that will bring massive changes along the east side. I'm not sure how far it will reach here, but knowing that we get to be seen in Australia is great. We never thought we would have a team and then to have a Para Asian Cup here in Australia is great. I would love to see massive changes in the aspect of Para Soccer. I think having a women's team now is gonna just drive that more and having the Women's World Cup here, it's just gonna drive that level of girls with any ability, any ages, in the soccer community. Just, I think it will drive it up so much. And I'm hoping big things come out of hosting both of them here in Australia.

I mean, just got there, have a go. It is a long road to get to where you will go. There is a lot of challenges, a lot of ups and downs, but at the end of the day, if you do reach your goal, it's the best, the best thing you could ask for. It's not easy in any means. There's probably more downs than ups. But once you get there and once you get that drive and hunger for it, that's all you really need. I mean, if I didn't have my older brothers, I probably never would've started it. Be yourself. Like don't change anything for anyone. Just be yourself. Do what you love, have fun. Just be yourself.

Being a woman in today's society, it means a lot better than what it was back in the day. As we all know, I've met some of the Matildas from the first World Cup they ever had and they said it's come a long way in the sense that we get a lot more opportunities than they used to. We're starting to break down the barriers and become somewhat more advancing up with the males in our society.

But I mean, considering we're only a year and a bit into being formed as a team, we get the same amount of camps as the boys. We get very similar opportunities with the boys on the world stage and the Para Asian Cup. So, we as Para Matildas have come a long way. So, we've done so much more than what the boys have done. We haven't done quite as much as the boys in the aspect that they've been here for 20-odd years. But we've done so much more and we're so much closer to their level in the 18 months that we've been existing compared to their 26 years. If that makes sense.

KRIS: Yeah, that's amazing. Anything else you wanna say that you think is important for the series?

KATELYN: A big thanks to all the people behind the scenes who made the Para Matildas happen. I think without them, none of us 10 athletes that went to Spain and all the 26 girls, 20-odd girls on the Para Matildas roster would be here today. None of our friendships would've been formed. None of our really good friends and community wouldn't be here today. So, it's been a massive achievement to get to where we are today and hopefully just building up from here. We're only gonna get up and we're only gonna get better. We're only gonna get more girls included into the game and just lead by example. So, do your best, but always just be yourself. Don't change who you are.

OUTRO: *Thank you for listening. This podcast was produced by the Centre for Stories. It was developed in conjunction with and funded by the State Library of Western Australia. Our organisations believe in storytelling as a way to build more inclusive communities. Head to slwa.wa.gov.au to listen to the rest of this oral history collection, or to centreforstories.com to learn more about our storytelling services and mission. Special thanks to our production team, script editor and executive producer Luisa Mitchell – that's me – producer and interviewer Kris Marano, and audio engineer Mason Vellios. Thank you.*