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Transcript of an interview with
Mikayla Lyons

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MIKAYLA LYONS INTERVIEW 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 the 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 sports scientist, mentor, and educator, Mikayla Lyons. Enjoy.

MIKAYLA: I'm Mikayla Lyons. I am an NPLW player for Fremantle City Football Club which is a national premier league at women's here in WA. I'm also a strength and conditioning coach at Fremantle Dockers AFLW and also a sport scientist at Football Australia with the under-eighteens women's national team. I'm also completing my PhD in sports science, looking at the women's soccer talent pathway here in WA through Notre Dame.

KRIS: Oh, you're doing so many amazing things.

MIKAYLA: Too many! I think I've always loved sport ever since I was pretty much born. That's what my parents say anyway. I was always playing around with balls and bats and always been a sports fanatic. I think the first time I can remember kicking a soccer ball around and really, really enjoying it was probably primary school when I used to go down and we used to wear skorts. It was like the shorts with the fake skirt over the top. And I'd be the only girl playing with the boys at lunchtime kicking the ball around. I then went down to indoor soccer. And same thing, I used to play with the boys. We were called the Froggies. And played there for about probably year four to year seven. And Rob de Kleine, president of East Fremantle Tricolore at the time, came down and asked if I wanted to come and play outdoor, just from watching indoor soccer. And so, I went down for the first time and played outdoor. And that's probably when I really fell in love with the game, was that first year of outdoor soccer. So funnily enough, I've gone from East Fremantle, which is now Fremantle City.

East Fremantle, I was there for two years. I experienced very different seasons. So, one was with, I would say, maybe a negative style parenting coach. And then I also had one of the best coaches I've ever had and, you know, still in contact - David Moore. Just an incredible human being. And he probably really drove me towards trying out for the first state team. So that was about 13, 14. And then went through the NTC pathway, have come back to Fremantle City in the NPL and I've been there, I think it's six seasons now. And absolutely love it. Like, love everything about it. I think we've got, it's weird cause we've obviously had so many changes in players and coaches and support staff. But I feel like the culture's stayed the same and I don't know whether it's within the team or whether it's a club-based thing, but I feel like it's always been that supportive and encouraging environment. And when new players come in, they say the same thing. So, I think that's why I've stayed there for so long. Like, I'm very loyal to Fremantle City now. I've been really, really lucky to, to be a part of it.

If I think about what I'm most proud of, it's probably just being able to lead some of the younger players. I thrive off leadership. So, I feel like just having that opportunity to step up as captain for a couple of years and really lead and see the younger ones come through and play their first NPL game is a huge driver. Just maintaining that really supportive culture as well, which I think we all contribute to. I think we've got a really inclusive culture as well. We've had some players who have come to us and said that they don't feel comfortable playing anywhere. And they fit in in our environment because we've kind of created that environment where, you know, everyone's welcome and it doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter what color you are, and you know, what your beliefs are and what your values are.

KRIS: Seeing people as people.

MIKAYLA: Yeah. Exactly. I would say it's just like open, honest communication. We try really hard to always have conversations. If we feel like there's something that's not quite right or someone doesn't feel included, we really, really encourage them to speak up. And what I've witnessed anyway over the last couple of seasons is, we've had that, like, we've had people actually step up and say, 'Hey, you know, this is the way I'm feeling', or 'can we change this about training? Can we change this about the way that we communicate?' And so, I think it's just all about creating that environment where people feel comfortable to speak up. So even our, you know, our quieter, younger ones that have just come in, like even almost forcing it a little bit for the first time.

Well, we've had some come up that are like 15. So, they're little babies, you know. You ask 'em if they wanna take a warmup and the very first time they're kind of like, absolutely not. Very daunting environment of, you know, we've got 30-year-old on the team who have played for many, many years. But I think once they've done it once and they've stepped up and everyone encourages them, support them, and we all get around them. I think that that's almost that like semi-forced inclusivity, I would say.

I mean, I've had some friendships with 17-year-olds, like really, really close friendships. Because the same thing, you're all there for a common purpose. So sometimes you forget how young they actually are. And it's the same with, you know, 32, 33-year-olds. They might be a few years older. I think when you're on the same team, you've got, you know, 11 players on the field, you trust in them, you're working towards something and you're working for each other. The age doesn't really matter either. But it goes both ways as well. Like some of our senior players, we do the same thing with them, you know, maybe you're a quieter senior player, maybe don't yet feel comfortable stepping up and, and taking a warmup or stepping up and, you know, leading a conversation.

KRIS: Can you tell us a little bit about, I know there's a female coach this year of the Alfredo's NPLW team, Faye Chambers, who's the first female coach in the history of the club for your team. You've just talked about how, you know, as the leader of the team, she is creating like a very different environment in a very welcoming environment and just that connection, like women to women, and that energy and how that's shaping up so far for the season.

MIKAYLA: Look, I'm super excited about it. It's something that I think is a long time coming and it's a little bit unfortunate that we haven't had a woman coach in the past. Faye is honestly incredible and I think a lot of the women coaches that I've had previously, even at juniors, we've always had that added kind of connection. Whether it's gender-based or whether it's just the way that we've been brought up in a bit of a gendered environment. I think that it's very different. And some of the conversations we've had within the team as well are really positive around it. Like a lot of the girls say that they feel more comfortable coming to train, they feel more comfortable, you know, speaking up about things. They don't feel like they are robotic on the field. They don't feel like they have to do something otherwise they're gonna get screamed at. And we have that freedom to choose or make our own choices on the pitch and then also off the pitch. Seeing a woman in a leadership role as well is really, really important for the younger girls. It's been missing and hopefully now we've kind of set that precedent moving forward. And at the end of the day, if everyone's feeling supported and they're coming down and we're competitive, then it really shouldn't matter what gender the coach is.

And she's been in the position that we're in, like she's played football, soccer – what are we calling it? Soccer, football, soccer. So, she's played soccer and come through a very similar pathway to a lot of the girls that are in the NPL. And she's experienced, you know, a lot of male coaches and she's probably, you know, picking and choosing some of the traits that she thinks a good coach encompasses. I think that she's done a really good job of kind of coming in. So, I think that authenticity as well is just that added element where you don't have to second guess anything. It's like you really trust her and you almost want to do everything you can to impress her and make her proud as well, because you know that she's putting in so much effort to make sure that we don't have the same issues that she had moving through her own pathway in soccer.

KRIS: And what you're focused on off the field as well in terms of like how the women's game needs to be developed – can you tell us a little bit about perhaps your PhD or what your focus is and...?

MIKAYLA: The reason I kind of stepped into research was because I had been through the pathway that I'm now looking at. We know that there's, you know, huge discrepancies between the men's pathway and the women's pathway, but I think a lot of it is just, we just kind of talk about it and then we move on. So, what I really wanted to do was look at the women's talent pathway here in WA, so that's the NTC pathway and compare it with the men's pathway, which is the Perth Glory pathway. More so from like a holistic point of view, so can we actually look at the differences in financial support, in family support, competition structures, coaching styles, motivation of the players, like more of those external contributing factors that I think we miss sometimes. And then try and link that with our physical, technical, tactical, performance characteristics. So that's kind of the overall project we're trying to do and see what we can change at a micro level to kind of improve the overall development of our young women athletes.

I think a big thing as you just touched on is the difference between gender equity and equality. And it's really important to understand the difference because there's been plenty of times where I've had conversations about, you know, what I think is gender equity, and it comes back as, but you don't want the same as the men? It's like, no, we don't. We actually don't. So, we are not little men, and this is what I think a lot of the time, we have been treated like little men. And so, what's happened is we've copied these pathways and we copied these strategies from the boy's pathway and we've just implemented it into the girls pathway without really acknowledging the myriad of external contributing factors that go into long term development. So, equity is more about providing equal opportunity, whereas equality is providing the same thing. So, a good example that I like to use quite often is the men's change room have open showers and urinals, for example. So equality would be giving the women's team the same urinals and open showers. Equity is providing the women with the same amount of support in terms of the facilities that we have. So maybe three, you know, showers with closed off our doors, and then maybe three toilets. So, providing the same opportunity, it's not about providing the same thing, because we're not the same. And then as you said, asking the players what they actually want. And that's a huge missing piece for me is that we assume a lot of the time that we want the same thing, and often that's not the case. So actually, going down, if it's local clubs or even national sporting organizations, actually ask your women and girls what it is that they need to improve and what it is that they need to increase their wellbeing and maintain their wellbeing throughout that pathway.

And like, we collect the objective data, but at the end of the day, everyone's so different. Like there's so much variability within and between individual variability that we have to have those conversations, otherwise we are just guessing. It's just all guesswork. And I think we're past the point of guesswork now. And we know as well that women are more likely to change the way that they move based on what they're wearing. So, like, there's been studies that have shown that when you don't feel comfortable with what you're wearing, you actually move different. So, if we're thinking about actions on the soccer pitch, let's just say it's a shot on goal. The men, and this is a huge generalization, the men often are not thinking anything about aesthetics. It's just, 'I wanna get this ball in the back of the net'. What we've found is the women, and whether this comes from, you know, how we've been wearing skirts in schools, like there's a lot of contributing factors to this. Sometimes we actually limit the range of motions just based on what we're wearing. And so that actually contributes to differences in performance outcomes. And they're the little things that we have to be aware of, and they're really easy to change. Like they're really not hard to change. It just takes a conversation and then implementing something like a change in uniforms where everyone feels comfortable.

KRIS: And as we have the Women's World Cup coming, so it's a hundred days out yesterday, [it's] really like the most momentous opportunity to create change for women and girls in football. I think also sport. While the whole world is watching, and we have games played in Perth, what does this moment mean for you when you look back on all the years you've played and where you're at now in your research? Like, what do you think women's football needs the most and what would you like to see come from the Women's World Cup?

MIKAYLA: It's incredible. Like, I'm super, super excited. I think it'll be, I mean, we get to host, you know, the biggest women's sporting event in the world. We can't undermine that. It's gonna provide such huge opportunity for women and girls in sport in general, but also in, in soccer. Get around the women's World Cup. If you haven't got a ticket yet, then get a ticket. Like just supporting even just by going and watching makes such a huge difference. I think every single person has a role to play. Maybe your role is taking your daughter to one of the games and that's fine.

KRIS: Is there another team you're gonna be cheering on in addition to the Matildas?

MIKAYLA: I have got all of the Perth games. I've got who I'm going for. I'm gonna go for Denmark in one of the games. Canada. And then we're hoping for an upset from Haiti, because why not?

I'm hopeful as well that we do use it as a catalyst for long term change. It's inevitable that we're gonna get an increase in participation and an increase in interest and you know, an expanding fan base. There is no doubt that that's coming, that just happens when you host, you know, events like this. But I'm hopeful that we use that. So not just, you know, sitting back and going, sweet, that's an increase in participation and now we've got, you know, so many more women and girls playing the game. I don't think it's about that. It's actually about keeping them in the game and making sure that they have a path that they can see towards if they want to go down the competitive route, that they actually have a really, really clear pathway that they can go through and if they want to go down the social route, that they have that pathway as well. There's room for everyone to play. The biggest thing is about investing in the increase. So, if there is an increase in participation, how are we actually gonna be set up for that and how are we gonna maintain that moving forward? Not just over the next two years, but over the next 20 years. And just making sure we do invest, we know investing in women's sport has so much potential. And I think that we need to change our mindset from investing for short term success to investing to provide opportunities, which is what we want. So, we need people to invest in the sport, even if they don't get that immediate return to really, really trust the process and know that you will get a return on investment.

KRIS: So, what does that investment look like? Like if we break it down to tangibles, what are we wanting the investment in? Like what does that need to look like?

MIKAYLA: I think facilities, that's the kind of the number one that everyone thinks about is, all right, let's upgrade everything in terms of the facilities and, you know, uniforms and all that kind of thing, those external factors. For me, I think investing in programs like mentorship programs, investing in clubs that are really, really advocating for women and girls, investing in wellbeing, you know, coaches, maybe investing in the actual pathway. So, the talent pathway, how can we get better coaching staff? How can we make sure that our women leaders have the opportunities that the male leaders have had in the past? Ensuring that we are not coming from one direction so we can't just go a bottom-up approach and we can't go a top-down approach. Making sure we have both of those at the same time. A top-down approach is opening up those gaps for women to step into leadership positions. We know that that's one of the most important things for, you know, leaders coming through, to see a woman in that role. So actually, you know, quotas, opening up positions on the boards at local clubs, just for women. We think about it as, okay, but they're not experienced in this, but how do we actually give them that experience? How do we give them that opportunity? They're not going to, women are not gonna do exactly the same job as the men have done in the past, but I believe that that's one of the best things possible. Like, we can't continue to do the same thing. So that's kind of your top down approach is making sure that they have something, a position to step into and feel supported. And that kind of comes into that bottom-up approach, which is, actually helping with increasing that competence. So we've increased confidence, but now it's about: let's provide coaching courses, let's provide, you know, upskilling courses and resources and make sure they're in an environment where they feel really supported. Maybe we give them a mentor where they're really encouraged and they feel empowered to step into that role, because without the competence, it's really hard to have the confidence and vice versa.

I think changing language as well around how we talk about women's sports. And it's happening now, like every now and then, but actually calling out your dad and your brother when they say things that are just based on, it's not their fault. It's based on, you know, historical stereotypes and, and really some of our, you know, sexist conversations that we've had. And just explaining what the differences are between gender equity and gender equality, for example. I think it takes those little conversations to make big changes moving forward. And it's just about calling it out when you, when you hear it, and hopefully we can kind of change that narrative moving forward where young boys and men are actually encouraging and really proud of the women in the sport. Because we all belong in the sport. And they actually become male allies and there's some incredible male allies already. I think that's what we need is that there are actually allies for women and girls.

KRIS: What is a sort of gentle approach to doing that if someone else is in that situation so that the man or the boy on the receiving end is that receptive to it and it sticks with them and they understand?

MIKAYLA: You know, I go along the lines of, if nothing had changed in the past from a gender point of view, where would we be right now? So, if you're talking to your dad, you know, this is your daughter, you know that you're talking to, if your brother, it's your sister. So, they have that emotional connection to that person. We weren't playing sport. We didn't have the opportunity to play sport unless it was netball or whatever it was. We also didn't have the right to vote. Like, and then you look at other countries and it's even worse. So, there are so many things where if we don't change the way that we see gender and the way that we see sex, the environment that we live in, would they want their daughter or their sister to be in that kind of environment? Funnily enough, a lot of men and boys actually really enjoy watching women's sport. You obviously have the few that, and they're usually your Facebook commenters that don't enjoy watching it, and that's great, that's fine for them, you know, they don't have to. I know plenty of women who don't like to watch men's sport, so obviously we have different interests, but the vast majority of men and boys actually enjoy watching women's sport. And I think that's a really big distinction to make is that, a lot of them are supportive. And so those conversations, if you just explain how it makes you feel maybe or why you want to see this change, a lot of the time, our men allies essentially are really, really supportive and actually kind of jump on board as an ally.

KRIS: Who have been some of the people that have sort of helped you along the way or have been your mentors?

MIKAYLA: The first people that come to mind are just my parents and my sister. I think they were probably the people who shaped who I was when I was younger. Now though, I've got some incredible role models and incredible mentors, which I'm super, super grateful for, but probably only started you know, having, especially women, mentors in the last maybe three, four years. So, when I started like postgrad study. Like Sophia Nimphius, Jenny Conlon, they're both my supervisors. Kate Starre was my performance manager when I started at Fremantle. Rae Dower, head coach of the junior Matildas and then Faye Chambers, now the NPLW coach. I think I look up to people like that because they're women who have pushed through barriers to get to where they are, and it's not as easy as what it's gonna be in 10 years' time.

I hope no young girl feels like she doesn't belong in football or in soccer, that she can see women and girls playing soccer at school, on the weekends, you know, for clubs, whether it be indoor or outdoor.

And that we are not kind of isolated to feminine sports, for example. That everyone actually can play any sport that they want and they feel bold and brave enough to go out there and give it their all. And they're not worried about the way that they look or the uniforms that they're wearing or the facilities that are around them, that that's all taken care of and they can just play the sport.

I think that stems from historically, you know, women being the "other" gender, so it's male unless otherwise indicated. Tight phenomenon I guess at a lot of clubs. And a lot of the time we have been given the leftovers, so if you feel like you're being given the leftovers in any aspect of life, usually you don't feel as empowered or as encouraged to step up. We're not gonna spend all of our time worrying about the men and boys' side of the club and then when we have leftover time, we have spare time, now we worry about the women and girls and that's how it's been. I think that's how it still is to be fair. Fremantle are doing an awesome job now, but you know, four or five years ago they probably were not there.

I still think Australia in general, particularly Western Australia, is still so far behind. That's me being, you know, completely honest through a lot of the research I've done, but also just what I've seen in being around soccer in Western Australia for so long. I do think we're stepping in the right direction, but I think it's too slow. You know, we're making these little moves, but at the same time, England and the US, you look at what they're doing with their pathways, it's just incredible. Like they've really, really taken that huge leap to lead in this space. And I think we've fallen behind a little bit. A specific example was what we were talking about not so long ago about the coaching certification. So, there's a photo of probably what, 25 men and then, Faye. You know, it's great to see so many coaches coming through, but we are doing something wrong if there are not women in that 25. And so just by seeing that alone, that's a really, really strong indication to me that we are still not doing something right. Because coaching at the end of the day is one of the biggest contributors to, you know, athletic development and also just how we perceive the sport moving forward and dropout rates. Staying in the sport and enjoying what you're doing. The coach really, really contributes to that environment.

And like you walk into an environment now, and this is something that I hope changes following the Women's World Cup. You walk into an environment as a woman in any sort of leadership position. For example, Faye, coaching, she walks into this environment, and she already has to prove that she's capable of being there. And whereas when men walk into, and again, a generalization, but usually when men walk into that same environment, their competency isn't questioned. It's like, okay, that makes sense. Male coach. When there's a female coach, we don't see it the same. It's okay, we start below and now we've gotta prove ourselves, we've gotta do that extra work. Another specific example is every single weekend the referee will walk up to our strength and conditioning coach and shake his hand. He's a man. Shakes his hand and says like, good game, obviously just the expectation that he's the coach because he's a man. The only male coach on our coaching staff. Every single game he gets a handshake and Faye's up the other end. You know, twiddling her thumbs. Well... and we all look at each other like again, we just got so, so far to go. We call it out as well now. Actually, that's the coach over there, the woman, right at the end in the, you know, head coach's position. "Oh sorry." You know, so I think even just that, like those mini examples of our perceived idea of what a coach should look like is flawed. And so, we need to change that as well through discussion and through changing our language and calling things out like that.

I think that's a big thing as well, is actually embracing the fact that it's not going to be easy. Like, you're not gonna, you might have some easy days, but a lot of the time it's gonna feel like you're taking one

step forward and two steps back. And that's just the way it's going to be. I think acknowledging that and then embracing it as a challenge is really important. And that's something that a lot of my mentors have kind of taught me over the last couple of years is, you know, as I say, if it was easy, everyone would do it. There's no one day or one thing where I'll go, sweet, my job's done. Everyone's, you know, everyone's equal. Like it's just not gonna happen. Like there's not gonna be that golden day or destination that we get to where we are satisfied with where we are. But the journey is the most important part and making sure that we're contributing to the journey for the next generation so that they can also contribute to that, is the most important thing for me.

Some people will shoot their shot if you shoot yours. So actually seeing you go out and be brave and do things that maybe people before you haven't done provides that opportunity for others to see that and actually do the same thing, follow suit. I think I've been provided that advice by many different people and different role models, is that even when it's scary, just go for it. Because at the end of the day, even by you going for it, even if you do fail, you've tried that very first time. And that's shown someone else or multiple people that you can actually go and do that and you can, you know, try things that haven't been done before. You will go through a lot of challenges and a lot of mini failures, but you'll also gain a lot of success along the way, whether it be increasing some of your characteristics as a person; character building, a lot of the time, some of these failures. I think a lot of the lessons that I've learned in playing soccer, and from my teammates, and being part of a team environment, has a hundred percent carried on to what I'm doing now in the other areas of my life. Whether it be research or work or even family life. Like, every single aspect of my life has got some sort of influence from my time and the lessons that I've learned in soccer.

KRIS: What is your advice for the younger girls?

MIKAYLA: Be brave and be bold and know that you belong in the sport. You a hundred percent belong in playing soccer. You have a position in soccer, whether that be as a player or as a coach or as a referee or as a board member. You can be a leader in that sport if you want to be. And gender has absolutely nothing to do with it. So, if there's anyone that kind of tells you that you can't do something because you know, girls don't play soccer I can guarantee you that it'll be one of the best decisions that you'll make is, is taking that leap and, and joining a team. So yeah. Be bold, be brave, and know that you, you belong in a sport.

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. 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.*