

Audio file

PODCAST_Ep19_UnifiedSports-FirstLady Mixdown 1.mp3

Transcript

Please note while we review and try to catch major errors this transcript will have mistakes from the transcription software used that may not perfectly reflect the spoken words of the participants;

00:00:12 Dr. Mark Ernst

Welcome to another episode of Elevated Insights. I am doctor Mark Ernst. I'm the Superintendent of Tola County School District, and this is a pretty special episode today. You may notice a little bit of difference in our audio. I don't know. Maybe. Maybe you sound a little bit better, maybe probably not worse.

00:00:30 Dr. Mark Ernst

But we are recording right now in the KSL studios in Downtown Salt Lake and our guest today.

00:00:40 Dr. Mark Ernst

Abby Cox, first Lady of the State of Utah, and Charlie Roberts, who's our unified swim coach at Tooele High School. So Abby and Charlie welcome.

00:00:48 Abby Cox

Thank you. Thank you. Thanks for having me.

00:00:49 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, happy to to have you, Abby. You're probably the most high profile guest we've ever had.

00:00:56 Dr. Mark Ernst

But I don't know. We've had some pretty good students that they, they, they're probably you're in the running there with you know.

00:01:00 Abby Cox

Absolutely. I I've come far below the students. I can tell you that.

00:01:04 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, yeah. And then they would tell you that as well, you know? Yeah, absolutely. Who? Who's Abby Cox? I don't even know who that.

00:01:07

Sure.

00:01:10 Dr. Mark Ernst

Is right. Yeah, yeah.

00:01:10 Abby Cox

Nobody knows who that is.

00:01:12 Dr. Mark Ernst

So we're going to talk today a little bit about First Lady Abby Cox and her background. And Charlie, you're gonna have to talk about your background as well a little bit. You're you're kind of a big deal in Tawila in in unified sports, which is alive and well. And and doing really good. All of our our school. So Abby, let's start with you.

00:01:20 Charlie Roberts

OK.

00:01:33 Dr. Mark Ernst

And I know a lot of people probably know a little bit about you and you have always had kind of a.

00:01:40 Dr. Mark Ernst

A love for special education and talk to us a lot about special education, how you got into that. And then I'll let you segue into unified sports and how that's kind of become a passion.

00:01:52 Abby Cox

Of yours? Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. I'm always. I'm always excited to to talk about special education and Special Olympics.

00:02:01 Abby Cox

Because it's just so dear to my heart. When I was a kid and you know this will date me, we all have our, you know, our times. But I I was. I went to Mount Pleasant Elementary in Tempe County and we.

00:02:15 Abby Cox

I was in second grade when a few students actually came back to the regular classrooms and prior to that, when the there was laws passed that that mandated that.

00:02:24

OK.

00:02:24 Dr. Mark Ernst

OK.

00:02:34 Abby Cox

Kids with disabilities had to come back to the regular schools, which they were not, which is so crazy to think about, but they were being bussed to special places by themselves and were not allowed in the regular classroom.

00:02:49 Abby Cox

When I was in second grade, the law passed idea and and things were moved, and so they they came back to the classroom. So I had three kids that had Down syndrome, Mount Pleasant sort of was the hub for some of the other kids around the county that would come to, to the, to our classrooms.

00:03:08 Abby Cox

So there were three kids with Down syndrome that came back to my class and were part of my school.

00:03:14 Abby Cox

And so I grew up all through elementary and and two of those kids were actually in my congregation at church. They were very much. It's a small community. So it's very much a part of the community and and our we're dear family friends with with both families. And so they they were part of my life. They were my friends.

00:03:34 Abby Cox

And and went through all of all of high school with them, actually graduated with two of them. One moved away during my middle school time. But so these these were just kids that were part of my life. So.

00:03:48 Abby Cox

When I went to.

00:03:50 Abby Cox

Decide what to what to do, what to what to study in school. I I really. My mom was an educator. My grandma was a was an educator and I just I just knew I wanted to go into education and because of the experiences I had with my friends, I wanted to go into special education. So I graduated from special education at Utah State.

00:04:10 Abby Cox

Did a student student taught here in in Utah in Cache Valley?

00:04:16 Abby Cox

For part of my I did a dual emphasis in early childhood and severe, and so my my other placement actually ended up being in Virginia because my husband went to law school in Virginia. So we moved and I did my second placement in Virginia. It was a great experience, a very innovative way to do special education where kids really were not in a classroom. I didn't even have a classroom.

00:04:38 Abby Cox

I had a caseload, so I really was providing special education services, you know, not a not a place. It really was a service. And so that's where I just really fell in love with the idea of just full inclusion and and getting kids in.

00:04:53 Abby Cox

Involved in in every aspect, so it's it's just been a, a, a love of mine since then and I just have a a joy when I'm around my friends with disabilities.

00:05:04 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, that's great. And that's kind of led you to take part in unified sports. And so how did, how did this all come?

00:05:13 Abby Cox

About. Yeah, so I you know, when you become, you know, a stay at home mom for all these years and and then I be when my husband was elected we, you know, I really had to think and I was kind of at the.

00:05:26 Abby Cox

Point my life.

00:05:27 Abby Cox

There you know, my my kids were mostly grown. I still have one left at home, but I I mean, I'm at the stage in my life where I really could get involved in a big way and I went to my friend Tammy Pifer, who at the time was Governor Herbert's education advisor. And I said, Tammy, I, you know, I don't know what to do as.

00:05:48 Abby Cox

Nobody gives you a script. Nobody gives you a a playbook for how to be the first lady. So I thought I knew I wanted to do something in education, specifically special education. That's where my heart is. And I said to Tammy.

00:05:51 Dr. Mark Ernst

How to be the first lady? Yeah.

00:06:01 Abby Cox

What? What do I do? What do what? What holes are out there? What? You know what could an initiative look like? And she said, you know, you really ought to get involved in unified sports. And I said tell me more. I don't know enough about this. You know, I've.

00:06:14 Abby Cox

Been in a hole in my.

00:06:16 Dr. Mark Ernst

You've been raising kids, yeah.

00:06:16 Abby Cox

With my kids and I said, what is it? I hadn't seen it in our area and I said, what is this? And she said, you know, it is where kids with and without disabilities play on the same teams together. It's it's beautiful. It's wonderful. It's special. Olympics is doing great work in this area.

00:06:32 Abby Cox

Really connecting children and building out empathy and connection so it really fit into what I was seeing and what I wanted to do as as an initiative, which is really, you know, this umbrella initiative of show up which is, you know, create empathy, connection, community.

00:06:50 Abby Cox

Because I saw that coming out of the pandemic and through our election, that it was just nasty and terrible and people were were seeing so many, you know, they were modeling such horrific behavior.

00:07:02 Abby Cox

And I was so disarmed by that that I thought I wanted to create something. And this is just absolutely where I thought we we should start. We should start with unified sports because that's bringing people together, is bringing communities together. It's bringing schools and and kids are connecting with each other.

00:07:22 Abby Cox

So that's that's how it started. Ended up getting, you know connected with with Tim Shriver and through Tammy and and now she actually works with him on the dignity and.

00:07:33 Dr. Mark Ernst

Ohh that's right yeah.

00:07:34 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:07:35 Abby Cox

And the call to unite foundation and and they're doing amazing work, but it really does stem out and he's still the chair of the of Special Olympics and it's just been a joy to participate in.

00:07:46 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, that's wonderful. And I've seen unified sports in Tooele County School District grow from. I think we started with two schools just doing soccer. Now we have 3 schools doing multiple sports, which impacts, I don't know how many students, but a lot of students, as far as on the field and then even more students when we.

00:08:06 Dr. Mark Ernst

Introduce our unified teams to the student body through pep rallies and and all that other fun stuff.

00:08:13 Dr. Mark Ernst

And Charlie. You're currently the coach of Tooele high's swim team.

00:08:20 Charlie Roberts

Assistant coach.

00:08:21 Dr. Mark Ernst

Assistant coach. OK. Yeah, we'll give credit where credit's due. Who's the head coach.

00:08:25 Charlie Roberts

Holly Tate.

00:08:25 Dr. Mark Ernst

Ohh, Holly Tate. OK. Alright, so now, Charlie, but you have a little bit of a background. So talk to me a little bit about your background in swimming in Tooele high because this is important to know.

00:08:36 Charlie Roberts

Sure. My brother coached for a mere 49 years at the high school and his first year coaching I I tried to clarify this. People who's the older and who's the younger, but his first year coach is my first year swimming and this was pre Title 9.

00:08:41 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, this is a small amount of time. Yeah, yeah.

00:08:55 Charlie Roberts

So we didn't have girls and we had the pool to ourself. And so I I swam and then I later was the sports editor or I was the editor of the Twitter transcript and covered sports. You know, just part of the part of the deal.

00:09:12 Charlie Roberts

And.

00:09:15 Charlie Roberts

So swimming has always had a soft spot in my heart because you can see yourself improve. You know what you put in? You'll get out. You, you make lifelong friends, you Tooele, you become part of a winning tradition. And I'm not aware of any negatives that come from swimming.

00:09:20 Dr. Mark Ernst

OK.

00:09:22 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, yeah.

00:09:34 Charlie Roberts

Whether you get chlorinated and green hair and things like that, so that doesn't matter.

00:09:35 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:09:39 Dr. Mark Ernst

Hair's overrated?

00:09:40 Charlie Roberts

Yes it is. But last February 23 at the state meet I could they had some heats with the.

00:09:53 Charlie Roberts

Unified kids and I could just see Steve Marcine, who's at the Activities Association and saw his fingerprints all over it, and I went up and said, what's this all about? And he he threw out a few things. And about a month later, I got a call from Robin Peterson, who's also with activities association. And she says we need some officials at our special.

00:10:13 Charlie Roberts

Olympics meeting and I go. I'm not going to dequeue a kid that's trying his best, but I'll help. And so I went down there and it was at Lehigh and it was packed with kids, parents Co.

00:10:25 Charlie Roberts

Beaches and friends and I looked on the sign on the wall and there's a little 8 1/2 by 11 signed it, said twill of Giants scribbled in magic marker ago. We got this going on in 12, so I chased down the coach and started working with those kids.

00:10:44 Charlie Roberts

And help them prepare for the region and.

00:10:47 Charlie Roberts

And state meets and it's it's something gets in your.

00:10:48

So.

00:10:50 Charlie Roberts

Blood.

00:10:51

Yeah.

00:10:52 Charlie Roberts

Something that gets in your blood.

00:10:53 Dr. Mark Ernst

So how?

00:10:55 Dr. Mark Ernst

This is what I've been told that it's kind of giving you like a breath of fresh air, a second life, so to speak, this the coaching, the unified so. Talk about that.

00:11:05 Charlie Roberts

Absolutely. These kids start at square one. They learn how to push off the bank. They learn how to breathe. You can begin teaching.

00:11:16 Charlie Roberts

They're they're individual sports and they do the best that they can, which is plenty good enough. And then I started thinking, wow, if you're in track, there is no end insight and and the other sports, but the most important thing is the kids uniting with the kids on the swim team.

00:11:36 Charlie Roberts

And learning where those kids that may not have limited capacities, physically or mentally.

00:11:43 Charlie Roberts

We see them unite with these kids and become their friends and learn to. They don't have to learn to love them, they just love them and it's it's been a great experience for everybody involved.

00:11:55 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, that's awesome. And Abby, I know that you've had the opportunity to witness a lot of different competitions through unified sports. What are some of the things that that when you attend these events, what what stands out to you that one of those things that just stays in your mind that when you think you need something to think about, unified, what what comes to your mind?

00:12:17 Abby Cox

Yeah. I mean, I've had so many experiences, you know, we talked earlier I we went to the USA games in Disney World, Florida with our Twila soccer team and our Wasatch High school basketball team. And I'm telling you there is, I mean, you think Disneyland's.

00:12:37 Abby Cox

Fun try doing Disneyland with all the Special Olympics athletes. It's like there's not enough.

00:12:47 Abby Cox

There was not enough inside my body to contain the joy.

00:12:50 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, Disney doesn't have a corner on the happiest place on Earth. Marker, right? It it was over.

00:12:53 Abby Cox

Yeah.

00:12:54 Abby Cox

There. I mean it's to get like it was.

00:12:57 Abby Cox

Just unbelievably beautiful. But you know, there were so many moments.

00:13:02 Abby Cox

That I could point to one when I, you know this athlete, this basketball athlete, that was he, he was calling and he was his name was calling he was.

00:13:14 Abby Cox

He had collected all the states on his lanyard, all the pins for the states, but one he needed. He needed Oklahoma.

00:13:21 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:13:25 Abby Cox

And so we were on a mission to find Oklahoma, and we were walking into the soccer tournament to go watch her tuela team play and all of a sudden in the in just faintly we heard this cheer. They were cheering Oklahoma. They go Oklahoma, you know, and all of a sudden we're like.

00:13:45 Abby Cox

Hold on. Hold on. We ran over there. We're like, I'm sorry. I know you're in the middle of a game. We need a pin. And there's a picture. It's it. I handed him that pin.

00:13:52 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:13:57 Abby Cox

And justice, sheer joy. And and watching that team play, watching both teams play. I just there's there's just nothing more beautiful and then, you know, you and I talked earlier about, you know, the stories of seeing parents, both parents of kids with disabilities and. And you know. Also parents. I had a parent tell me one time of a a partner athlete said. You know, he he's a great athlete. He he had a really terrible injury. And he couldn't. He couldn't play.

00:14:36 Abby Cox

And he was depressed and he was having all kinds of mental health issues. And he was so inward focused. And woe is me. And he started playing unified sports.

00:14:51 Abby Cox

And she said, I'm telling you, he's a different kid. This kid looked outside of himself. He started focusing on somebody that was finding joy in, in their circumstances. And it was, it was. It's just a testament to me that when it, this is exactly what our students need right now. It's what.

00:14:54 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:15:11 Abby Cox

All of our students need every student, every human.

00:15:17 Abby Cox

That includes all of us need, love, and belonging. Yeah, they need to belong. And so whether it's a student that has IDD and who is who has struggled and who has been made fun of, or has not been accepted and not been included all of a sudden finds a friend.

00:15:35 Abby Cox

Through unified sports, or whether it's somebody that you know got cut, I mean I I got cut from a team, it's it hurts.

00:15:42 Dr. Mark Ernst

It. Yeah, not a fun day.

00:15:43 Dr. Mark Ernst

Day.

00:15:44 Abby Cox

You you have like, wait a minute. This I'm an athlete. Hey, what the heck?

00:15:50 Abby Cox

And all of a sudden, you know, if it's that kid that that is struggling, I've been that kid and and and could they have this moment where you know that that is so insignificant.

00:16:02 Abby Cox

When it comes to looking at what really matters and that love and friendship and belonging and connection is really what matters, and that's what I love about unified.

00:16:13 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, it's just wonderful. I remember one time we had a I was at a unified soccer game and we had this kid playing. I can see. I can see him perfectly. I can't remember his name, but he was as big as a door.

00:16:24 Dr. Mark Ernst

So, of course, on the soccer field, you're going to be the goalie then. I mean, he was a big kid, but he was a gentle giant. And so they they stuck him in goal. Unfortunately, I he I think he took a ball to the the head or face or something and he just couldn't handle that he had to. He had to go out and contain himself. But as soon as they were ready he they wanted him back in because he was hard to get the ball.

00:16:45 Dr. Mark Ernst

You know, but, but for him, when when the when he went into the game.

00:16:49 Dr. Mark Ernst

All the kids on our team just loved it and the kids on the other team, they're like, oh, no, how are we going to get the ball back? And he, he just became the hero, and it was so great for him to because he's not the hero every day, but for unified soccer, man, he was the hero. Just.

00:17:05 Abby Cox

And every kid deserves that every kid deserves to be the hero somewhere at some point.

00:17:08 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:17:09 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yep.

00:17:10 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yep, exactly right.

00:17:13 Charlie Roberts

I was just going to say on our little team, we have Connor, who's has cerebral palsy and spends most of his time in a wheelchair and to and to see him and he loves.

00:17:24 Charlie Roberts

Sports. He loves football. He loves soccer. He just loves it. And to see him, to be able to be part of a team and to participate and be a true member of that team.

00:17:38 Charlie Roberts

It is just wonderful. It's great for him. It's great for the kids.

00:17:41 Dr. Mark Ernst

Involved. Yeah, and so.

00:17:45 Dr. Mark Ernst

Charlie for maybe some of our listeners who don't fully understand exactly how unified works kind of give us a rundown of what happens for swimming maybe when, when.

00:17:56 Dr. Mark Ernst

A kid tries out for the team and they go to a meet.

00:17:59 Charlie Roberts

Well, we don't even have tryouts. If they're, if they're, if they're willing to put in the time and effort, they're on the team and.

00:18:02 Dr. Mark Ernst

They make it.

00:18:09 Charlie Roberts

What we did this year and it's new ground at our swim meets, we'd have them swim a 25 yard race and.

00:18:18 Charlie Roberts

It was just. It's just marvelous. They they do the best they can. They have in some instances they have other students helping them.

00:18:27 Charlie Roberts

And it's just a wonderful experience. And so that you teach them the same basic skills as you would it any. Anything else. Nothing's different. And they do the best that they can and they do and it's great and it's great. And it it has some benefits. I know with we have Sabine, who unfortunately was a victim of a shaken baby and you know, so she lost. Lost the use of the nerves in her in her neck and has a hard time seeing. And it is also in a wheelchair and halfway through the season her mom says, you know, her digestive system is so much better now. And it's strictly because of swimming.

00:19:09 Charlie Roberts

That's, you know, we didn't do it. So yeah, because of those reasons. And then everything else. And last night we had our awards banquet and and those kids were they're on the Nargil team. They got special medals for that and were recognized for their efforts.

00:19:24 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, yeah, that's great.

00:19:26 Dr. Mark Ernst

Umm and Abby? Correct me if I'm wrong. I think like with basketball, you know, there has to be a certain number of partner athletes and certain number of of our unified kids. Same with soccer. I think is that that.

00:19:40 Dr. Mark Ernst

Correct.

00:19:41 Abby Cox

Yeah. So it's it's 3 to 2. So if you've got a team of five, it's 3.

00:19:48 Abby Cox

Special Olympics athletes to to partner athletes and so in same I think it's a similar to soccer. So I mean really if you think about it, people are like well in these rural schools or these smaller schools, well we don't maybe have enough and I'm like yeah, you do, I promise you do because really what do you need three kids.

00:20:04 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:20:08 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah. So figure it out.

00:20:08 Charlie Roberts

You just make it work. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, there's there's plenty of excuses, plenty of excuses.

00:20:12 Abby Cox

Yeah, and. And I know in Tooele there and in a lot of these schools that that have had these programs and people are really excited about the programs and that are, you know Unified Champion banner school.

00:20:23 Abby Cox

I mean the wait list for peer athletes is really long.

00:20:28 Abby Cox

Yes.

00:20:28 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, it is hard to be one of those athletes.

00:20:29 Abby Cox

Because people, these kids love it. They want to be a part of it. And you, you know, you asked me. I thought of one other experience you asked me about really powerful experiences. I had the opportunity to go to the international.

00:20:43 Abby Cox

Games in Berlin.

00:20:45 Dr. Mark Ernst

Ohh wow.

00:20:46 Abby Cox

Last summer and.

00:20:50 Abby Cox

I was in the stadium.

00:20:52 Abby Cox

That Hitler was in in 1930.

00:20:55 Abby Cox

6.

00:20:56 Dr. Mark Ernst

Wow.

00:20:57 Abby Cox

And to watch those delegations from all over the world.

00:21:03 Abby Cox

Walk in there where?

00:21:06 Abby Cox

In 1936, they would have been murdered.

00:21:11 Abby Cox

For having an intellectual disability, I mean, it was powerful. It was so cool and we were we were watching them all come in and then we watched Ukraine's team come in. They announced Ukraine and the entire stadium.

00:21:16 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, that gives me the chills. Wow.

00:21:28 Abby Cox

Erupted.

00:21:30 Abby Cox

Watching those athletes and all, and what it took for them to be there, it was, it was really powerful. There's there's just nothing like it.

00:21:33 Dr. Mark Ernst

That's real, Martin.

00:21:37 Dr. Mark Ernst

Great story. Great story. So, Abby, if if the schools wants to get involved in unified sports, what do they have to do?

00:21:45 Abby Cox

Not much. It's pretty easy. Contact Special Olympics Utah if you don't have an organization in your school or your district.

00:21:53 Abby Cox

Correct. It's it really isn't much. And and what we've found, you know it does, it has some cost associated with it, but it really is minimal. And what we found a lot of success doing, I mean we go through businesses, we've been working with businesses all over the state to say come in and sponsor a team.

00:22:14 Abby Cox

And then Special Olympics has matching grants that they they go, they get you uniforms, they get you equipment, they they get you coaches stipends like that's all included in these in these costs and it's it really is I mean it's the return on investment is just unbelievable.

00:22:33 Abby Cox

And where we found a lot of success in helping with funding is through our education foundations, OK and many of many schools have many districts have them. I would say most a lot of our rural schools don't or our rural districts are really smaller districts. So there it it's as easy as you know finding the local.

00:22:54 Abby Cox

Grocery store and saying, you know, we need \$2500. Come, come participate. Come look. Come see what it is. And I promise you they'll they'll just hand over their.

00:23:03 Abby Cox

And and and you know, just a place like the local grocery store could say \$2500 per team.

00:23:12 Abby Cox

Per season, that's that's so little. And but it does, you know. And then and then you work with the district on transportation. One thing that we've worked really hard and lately is working on getting those rural school.

00:23:25 Abby Cox

Participating so in places in the state where you know you have some rural schools that that could could really compete with each other, even if it's not your traditional USAA regions or whatever. I mean. So for instance, we went to Santee County, where I'm from and we went to North Sanpete and Manti and Juab.

00:23:36 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, yeah.

00:23:45 Abby Cox

And and if Richfield and we said if you all start your teams.

00:23:50 Abby Cox

And then we you can play each other and then the travel isn't so so great. And so we start to use that. But you know, you go to these schools and say, look, like you said this should be part of your, it should be your girls basketball, your boys basketball and your unified basketball. That should be part. That's just part of your teams that you have in your school. And it should be built into your.

00:23:53 Dr. Mark Ernst

Right.

00:24:08 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah.

00:24:09 Abby Cox

Travel budget. It should be but.

00:24:11 Abby Cox

10 because those kids deserve that opportunity.

00:24:13 Dr. Mark Ernst

Yeah, I actually didn't know this. We had. We had a school that wasn't participating and I mandated it. Yeah, I did. I actually, yeah. And then I heard rumors that they weren't doing it. And I'm like, wait a second. And then I found out they they were. So they're OK so, yeah. So we're all right. Well, Abby.

00:24:19 Abby Cox

Perfect. We love that. We love that when it comes from the top.

00:24:27

Oh yeah.

00:24:33 Dr. Mark Ernst

And and Charlie, thank you both hats off to to both of you for just taking time out of your life.

00:24:41 Dr. Mark Ernst

To give back to some of the students and parents who need it the most, and I agree with you, Abby, you said all you got to do is if you need some help, just take somebody there and they're hooked, you know? So if if any school or any parent says is this right for me? Is this right for my special needs? Student come to an event and watch.

00:25:01 Dr. Mark Ernst

Because you'll learn instantly. Yeah, that that's something great. So thank you both for joining us. Thank all of you for listening to us another episode here.

00:25:05 Charlie Roberts

Thank you.

00:25:11 Dr. Mark Ernst

And be sure to like and subscribe to our podcast, and remember to elevate yourself by elevating things.