

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Verity Smith

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome back to Getting Curious. Honey, I'm switching it up. I'm not doing that same intro every time anymore, it's been years and we're doing something new. I hope you're feeling gorgeous. I already know you're gorgeous. You know I'm Jonathan Van Ness. Each week, we're sitting down, we're learning more together, we're loving life together. On today's episode, I'm joined by Verity Smith, where I ask him: who wins when everyone plays? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We're giving update, we're giving how our trans family is doing, honey. Because we know that sports are about so much more than competition or college scholarships. When I'm learning a new gymnastics or figure skating skill, honey, I feel capable, I feel strong—and more than what I can temporarily feel as a 35-year-old who is, like, I guess, an air quote, “athlete,” growing up, cheerleading and gymnastics gave me a place to feel accepted, nourished, engaged.

And if I wouldn't have been allowed to have, like, tried out for cheerleading or been a cheerleader, that would have like, really altered the course of my life, which maybe sounds hyperbolic to some people, but cheerleading and the group of people and the group of friends that gave me—and also taught me, like, work ethic, dedication, etc., like, it literally saved my life. And the way that we see people my age and older attacking young people and attacking people's ability to join a team, to play a sport, while calling them “frauds” and all these, like, vile, horrific things. It's fucked up. And this is a huge deal. It's setting everyone back. We hate it. So to talk about that, honey, we are talking to a gorgeous man, honey. Welcome to the show, Verity “Vez” Smith, who is the Sports Inclusion Manager at Mermaids. You may remember Mermaids and Lui Asquith, who we interviewed a few years ago. Go Lui, we love Mermaids. Also, by the way, Verity is a fierce ass rugby player, honey. How are you, Verity?

VERITY SMITH [00:01:43] I'm good, thank you. How are you doing?

JVN [00:01:44] I'm good. Thanks for asking. I think, you know, in my stand-up comedy, I talk a lot about, like, the queer experience as one of duality. And I think that every day we see things that we could be really heartbroken about that just absolutely turn your stomach and make us so depressed and make us really sad. I'm kind of in those feelings right now. You know, as we're recording this, we just had Brianna Ghey. As that loss of life happened in the United Kingdom—in what, you know, originally they said wasn't a hate crime. And it's, like, “How is that not a hate crime?” And now they're saying, you know, “Maybe it was a hate crime”—at the same time, in the United States, we're having all of these new bills debated in Tennessee and Arkansas, in Texas and all of these, like, Republican-ass state legislatures, we're seeing young trans people attacked constantly. And so I'm kind of in those feelings and, you know, mad about it. But also, we're really excited to talk to you because not that we're, like, sexualizing our guests, but you are just fucking gorgeous, honey. You're goddamn gorgeous. We love speaking to gorgeous people over here on Getting Curious. So in that way, I'm

experiencing joy, you know? So that's exciting. But really what we're asking today is, like, who wins when everyone plays? So how are you, first of all? How are you doing? What's happening? Tell us everything.

VERITY SMITH [00:02:56] Yeah, good. I'm feeling the same as yourself, after Brianna over the weekend. We've seen a lot of hostility, and it being used towards gain for gender critical movements. We've seen a lot of young people and parents at the moment really scared for their children as well. And I think that's right. So in this country, because people are pushing that hate that has been going out in the newspapers and state newspapers, removing Brianna's identity, their names, their pronouns, trying to find their deadnames and putting it out there. And we need this to stop now. We need to support, and if I can save one trans child through sport, then everything I've been through has definitely been worth it and I'll continue fighting for that. We need to make sure that trans and gender diverse children are seen and loved and they know that they're cared for. And we've been here since the beginning of time, it's not anything that's new. It's just our history has been lost and it's about time that we brought that back and people get to see who we are and to live our authentic selves.

I lost a lot of my years not being able to be who I was. And now I get to go out there, I get to go out on the pitch, I get to be seen. And we've just started to see an uptick from young children getting involved, saying, "Well, I've seen tennis on TV and I've seen football. I don't want to play competitive, but it looks fun. Am I allowed?" It's not if you're allowed, it's, "How do we get you involved?" But we need to start having those conversations. And if we're having those conversations and educating people, then we can only lead to a better world. And you asked the question: who wins when everyone plays? We all win because we're all out there and it's a human right that we should all be able to play sport. And there's no difference in that for trans kids. If we take "trans" away, they're just children at the end of the day.

JVN [00:04:23] Oh, God. It gives me the chills. So, let's just set the stage. First of all, I'm so excited that we're here. We've been planning this episode forever. If you've been listening to the podcast for a while, then you maybe do remember Lui, maybe you remember what Mermaids does. But can you just set the stage for us on, like, who Mermaids is, what Mermaids does, you know, where you are all based out of. And how does your identity intersect with your work?

VERITY SMITH [00:04:43] Yeah, sure! So Mermaids is a charity that supports trans and gender-diverse young people and their families. We've been around since 1995, set up around the kitchen table. We've now got over 40 staff we support around the UK and Northern Ireland. We do residential, we offer support services and webchats. We've got forums for people who can speak to their peers. We run support groups for parents as well. So they can chat to other parents. And we do a lot of looking at legislation, looking at what's happening within the governments. Myself, I work with national sports bodies, looking at, first of all, "Do you have a trans policy that supports people? If not, why not? What can we do to have a look at that?" I also take my time to make sure that I'm finding clubs for young people. I'm getting a lot of

emails from kids saying, "I've been turned away." I had one last week, a 19-year-old was told to go away from a rugby club and a football club and told that because they weren't born cis, they were no good, even though under their policies that they could play. So it's about having those conversations and educating people.

So Mermaids is taking a step into that sports field. But we are still having struggles, as everybody does the work in trans inclusion at the moment, and it's about making sure we've still got a space for young people so they've got somewhere to go. Trans people are not going anywhere. Trans kids turn into trans adults. We need to make sure that those kids are protected and looked after as well. For me, my intersectionality for that comes from my background. So I played professional women's rugby for 26 years. It was not elite back then because women couldn't be paid to play. I played league and union. And then unfortunately I had an accident as well. I was outed in the national newspapers as trans and I hit the headlines. So I was then used as a "dangerous trans woman in sport," which still happens. Last night on social media, somebody had put a photograph of me six years before I'd even transitioned saying, "Why are we letting these trans women in these spaces?" I was still a butch lesbian back then. I wasn't even out. We hadn't had these conversations. So—

JVN [00:06:33] Wow!

VERITY SMITH [00:06:34] People are making these assumptions.

JVN [00:06:36] Woah! That's fuckin super intense. I don't think I even realized that aspect. So even just last night, on the goddamn fucking Internet. So Verity is a trans man and you played rugby, like, pre-transition professionally. And so these fucking trolls on the internet will find pictures of you pre-transition and say, "Why are we letting these trans women play fucking sports?" But you're a fucking goddamn—, I'm going to flip this fucking table over, Verity! Where are they? I'm going to—, I hate 'em! No, we're calm. We are gracious, but that pisses me off. How do you handle that? Do you have a good therapist, honey? Because you're fucking, that's—, I hate these people.

VERITY SMITH [00:07:20] I've got three dogs and I play rugby, so we're doing all right for there. If they're giving me that, then they're taking it away from someone else. But it's the whole impact that, that they know that I'm a trans man, it only takes a Google search to find that information and they're using it against the community. I was also put in the Sunday Times as a "dangerous trans woman" and the reason why referees were leaving the game. And it's—

JVN [00:07:39] When?

VERITY SMITH [00:07:40] That was five years ago? Five, four years ago? And it still happens now. I was in The Sun, I was on CNN, I was in the newspapers. I got beaten up on the pitch and outed, blood spat in my mouth by the opposition. And it took eighteen months, nearly two years for that to be dealt with. The two girls got a fine, and I got told to stay away from

them. So we've moved on from there, we're just now seeing policies being removed. We've played sports since the beginning of time. My sport, rugby, we've played for 20 years, trans women, trans men. No injuries in all those years. I'm the one that's ended up in a wheelchair due to a tackle by a much smaller female. But that's never talked about.

JVN [00:08:16] One of the most problematic J.K. Rowling tweets I ever remember was her retweeting this article about this rugby guy. And he was saying, like, "I'm a 50 stone, whatever, man. Like, all I would have to do is transition and then I can go tackle these women who are, like, a 10th of my size." And she was, like, "Fuck, yeah!" Well, I'm paraphrasing there, but she retweeted it. And so this idea of, like, rugby and contact sports is often brought up in terms of fairness in sports. Then there's your story, which really goes quite against that story. So if you're comfortable telling us, like, so, what happened?

VERITY SMITH [00:08:57] In my last game I was on loan to another team of Gloucester in England and we'd gone down for a ruck, which is a position to get the ball back in play from the gate. Referee had blown the whistle, nobody should have been moving, and somebody came around the back of the referee and tackled me from behind, not even the side. So my spinal cord was crushed into my vertebrae, so my legs stopped working. Went to the hospital. They told me unfortunately, it was soft tissue damage, missed what had happened. I've lost the sensation in my hands, in my legs now. So I use a wheelchair, and I've got all the complications with that. So I play wheelchair rugby now, which is fully inclusive, anybody can play, all genders. You can play if you've got a disability, you can play if you're able-bodied. It just gets everybody playing. But as you say, we talk about what is "fair play." What is fair play? If we all had fair play, there wouldn't be competition because the idea was to bring people in who are bigger, better, stronger. We'll talk about that, but nobody's talked about: you've got to have good coaches, you've got to have technique, you've got to be good at the spot to start with. You got to have funding, got all the equipment. Various things aren't looked at. You're expected to be good just because you big. I've seen trans women play rugby at six foot two and I've seen them put on their bum week in, week out because they've not played before. They're just enjoying themselves, they're enjoying it. They're not even the biggest players on the team, either.

I've had to play women who are six-foot-four and over 20 stone and things like that, and that's okay. But as soon as you put the word "trans" in there or does it matter? I'm five-foot-six and 13 stone, but I've played thirty years, so I'm more technical. And when we talk to people that wants to play whether it's the LGBT community, whether it's young people, whether it's trans community, what they say is, it's their families, their tribe, they may have lost their family, they may have lost their children, they may have been kicked out from home. Sport is somewhere where we can go. And like you say, it takes life skills. You learn different things that we take into adulthood and our work life, like problem solving and time management and all those things. So just because a child is trans, why should they have that taken away from them for an opportunity? And the other thing, why should we be telling kids what decisions they've got to make now about their bodies, just so that they can play sport when they're adults? We need to

make sure that they're safe. We don't do it with anybody else. We've got people like Michael Phelps who doesn't have to have operations to sort the webbed feet out, the lactic acid, all those things. But we're expecting trans people to take medication so that they can play sport when they're older. Everybody should be able to play sport no matter what, and there is no fair playing field. Otherwise we wouldn't have competitions.

JVN [00:11:12] Let's take Jessica Pegula. She's fierce. She's, like, the third ranked WTA tennis player in the world, but her dad is that fucking billionaire. If she had been born to parents with no money, her ability to get training, to get access to the private courts, to get access to the off-court training, to get access to the social capital, all of it would have been different. Now, I'm not saying she's not super talented because of course she is. But what your life is outside of sport does have an aspect on the fairness air quote, "fairness," with which you enter that sport. Even with figure skating, like, it's such an economic thing, like, if your parents can't afford that, your skates, coaching is, like, \$200 an hour from a good coach. What if you live in a city where there's no ice rink? And it's really this, like, inflammatory thing that we go back to, you know, with like, you know, this idea of fairness.

So when we're talking about gender affirming care of minors, like, that can look like therapy. It can look like new clothes. It can look like potentially puberty blockers, which is administered to cisgender kids all the time that experience precocious puberty. If a little girl goes into puberty too soon, if she develops breasts when she's, like, eight or nine, which is happening more and more, people don't know exactly why, but that is happening. So they will do puberty blockers. It also happens in elite sports. If a little girl's better to, like, not get hips and breasts if she's a figure skater. It's not like kids are having, like, irreversible surgeries performed as little children. Am I wrong in saying that?

VERITY SMITH [00:12:37] No, not at all. So in the UK, we're the same as yourselves. We've got long waiting lists. We're seeing that the children's GIDS service, which is the Gender Identity Service, it's not taking people on at the moment. And these waiting lists are causing issues. So what we're seeing related to sports, we're seeing some sports say, "Well, if you drop your levels of testosterone to a certain level by the age of 12." Well, children are on waiting lists for years. You can't even get seen or do anything until you're 16, if you go down the NHS pathway, you don't have surgeries til you're 18. But even then, with all the waiting lists, they are years out before we even start. So what are we doing to support these kids? So we're looking like we're inclusive, but really they're de facto bans from the sports bodies. So we need to be still having a look at this and look at what's happening. And again, why should children have to change their bodies to get involved in sports? Sport is there for all shapes and sizes, we tend to levitate towards a sport that we feel comfortable within. So as a big teenager, I actually got banned from playing football, so I got dragged by my grandparents to go have a go at rugby when I was 11. And from 11, back then, not much health and safety, I started playing on the women's team because I held my own. They rang my dad and said, "Look can she play on the women's team?" And my dad just said, "Look, if she can hold her own, then go for it."

And my first game I wiped my own coach out because she had to go play in the opposition because they were a player short, and I was playing senior rugby from 11. It's not necessarily someone's size, it's technique, and we need to be making sure that we've got these open spaces for children where they can see themselves. I didn't have any role models. I got told if I came out, they'd kick me out of the women's premiership. I got told that I wouldn't have anything left. So I actually married a woman, I tried to fit in, I tried to carry on playing so I could play my spot, but that wasn't me. So we need to make sure that children are playing sport as their authentic selves as soon as they can, so that they can make friends, they can find families, they can find their community and use that sports as, as they go out through life. And again, go out there, choose a sport, don't just settle for one, go out and find them, find everything. But waiting lists at the moment is really hard. Mental health's very draining at the moment within the trans community, sport could be a massive thing to open that up for children who just want to go out and play. But we've not been able to see that unfortunately.

JVN [00:14:45] Figure skating said that you could be trans and you could skate, you know, young trans people could skate in their gender identity, but they had to, like, be on, like, puberty blockers, like, by age 12. And they had to, like, achieve a certain hormone level, like, by age 12. But now, in all of these states in the US, they have made that a fucking felony where you could as a parent who gets gender affirming healthcare for your child, even if it's a puberty blocker, like, whatever, like, like, in Texas where I live, like you can be investigated for child abuse for that. So you have the sporting bodies saying, "Oh yeah, you can do it, but you just got to get this thing by the time you're 12." But then we have these governments saying that's illegal and you can't get any gender affirming care until you know you're 18. Or even in Oklahoma's case, they're debating a bill now that would make *all* gender affirming care illegal at any age, which I think really lays bare the fact that this was never about protecting kids.

This was always about, like, erasing trans people and making it as hard as physically possible for people to express themselves, to try to further erase us as we have been constantly, you know, tamped down for, you know, literally hundreds of years, which we've also talked about here. So I think that's, like, one really insidious way that you have, like, multiple governing bodies working in conjunction where maybe they're not even, like, maliciously working behind the scenes in conjunction, but their policies end up, like, literally excluding people and, like, erasing trans people's ability to, live, which I think is really something that people just don't look at. And it's just so troubling, it's just really so troubling. I hate it so much. And that actually, like, it made me get off of my track of thought.

But I want to circle back to this other thing and ask you about this thing in the United Kingdom. So here in the U.S., we talk about, like, separation of church and state and, like, how that's supposed to be a thing. And we have an episode on that, that either just came out or is about to come out, based on the order of how we do these. But I was reading on Fox News this morning, there was a teacher in California. Don't ask me why I read Fox News, it comes up on my Apple News, and I just want to read what the other people are saying because I feel it's

important to know, like, how other people are talking about our communities. So this woman was a teacher in California, in elementary school, and they had this policy that you can't out children if they're, you know, using different pronouns. If they have disclosed to you that they may be trans or, you know, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, whatever, they can't out the children to their parents. And this air quote "Christian" teacher said that that violated her Christian beliefs and violated what air quote "God called on her to do." But it doesn't say that at the beginning of the article.

First, it starts off as saying, like, you know, "I think that I need to tell parents, like, so I just couldn't reconcile those things," like, you know, either, like, one line to the parents or being true to myself. Like she's, like, "I can't reconcile that." But then a few paragraphs down, she goes on to say, "This violates my deeply held Christian beliefs. And I believe that people who are trans are confused and they are being played upon by the devil who is confusing them because God made people in the image of men and women." And that literally made me kind of drop my phone for a minute because we see Christian nationalism in the Republican Party is at an all time high in approval ratings. And they literally think that we're confused by the fucking devil and they feel comfortable enough to say that on the fucking news. And the news feels comfortable enough to fucking type that. And I can hear people in my own family and where I'm from being, like, "Yep, that is the work of the devil. They are confused. We should pray for them." Like, people actually fucking think that. And even if that is what you think, go fuck yourself because your thoughts and faith should not impact my goddamn life. So, like, are you supposed to have separation of church and state in England, too? Like, didn't that king make that to get away from the pope, honey? Don't you guys think that's kind of cute over there as well?

VERITY SMITH [00:18:28] Yeah. So what we're seeing at the moment is a lot of gender critical voices. So what they're seeing as "feminism," which it isn't because it's not including all women and they're sort of linking in to each other, and we've got people, like, making all these comments and sort of, like, drawing people in because people are educated enough to actually know who trans people are. We're not monsters. We're quite boring, really. We play sport, we come home, we have food, we have partners, we still have children, we have pets, we go to work. We're just the same as anybody else. And they're being clumped together and people are listening and their voices are getting heard in spaces like Parliament and with national sports bodies. And if a sports body's got to say to you, "Oh, we've put you in a room separate because there's certain groups coming and we want you to feel safe." Well, there's something to be said for that in that first sentence. If they think I need to be safe from somebody, then there's an issue with them being in that conversation. And again, using incorrect research, putting information out there that views cis men that are elite athletes to compare trans women against. And these are the sort of things that inflate in figures. We need to be making sure that the correct information gets out there. But the media at the moment over here, and the gender critical movement, is what's actually pushing everything. We've got Section 28, you may have heard, in the UK, which was in the eighties and early nineties, where

you couldn't talk or have education around LGBTQ. So we're actually going backwards, not forwards in this conversation.

JVN [00:19:47] That's a thing. They want to bring that back in parliament?

VERITY SMITH [00:19:50] Yeah, so there's a big petition out at the moment where loads of people have been signing it, saying, "We don't want this to be taught to our kids in schools again." And it's bringing back that Section 28, which is fear for a lot of people that grew up in the eighties and nineties from the LGBT community. And having people within parliament that are not supportive, that are having these discussions, we're not allowed to be involved. Our sports secretary had a meeting with NGBs to tell them they had to ban trans women and girls from every sport. But when we're seeing these bans, they won't say, "This is the science or research reviews." Nobody is saying anything. It's not transparent. It's just, "That's a ban and that's it."

So World Rugby, they started this dominoes effect. They banned trans women and girls even though they've been playing for 20 years. They were supposed to bring in a vote from all the national bodies. That didn't happen because they said they weren't going to accept it. So World Rugby brought the vote forward for two weeks and did their own vote instead of everybody else. So from that it was a knock on effect from England rugby, Welsh rugby, Scottish rugby, then steering from the sport, then British triathlon, then cycling. And this is what we're seeing right the way through. World Boxing wanted to bring in a third category for trans participants. There's not enough trans participants out there to actually get involved in these things. And again, we're not a separate society, we're the same humans as everybody else. And it's affirmative for, for trans women and girls to play on the girls team, trans men and boys to play on a men's team. And it's still okay to have those spaces and also to look at mixed sports and things that are a lot easier for people who identify as non-binary or gender diverse.

JVN [00:21:14] What misconceptions do these bans rely on?

VERITY SMITH [00:21:18] So what they're saying is that if you've gone through puberty, testosterone puberty, that you're going to be bigger, stronger, better than cis females. Well, first of all think of it as a landrover with the one liter engine. You're not going to go anywhere. You can't change skeletal mass. But once you've started taking HRT, the heart's not pumping as much. The muscles are a lot slower. A lot of trans women are not even the same level as cis women when it comes to testosterone, they're a lot lower. It's affecting their health because they want to get as low as possible and away from that "male" physique and figure. And we're not looking at that. We're not looking at what's happening to trans women. Their times are becoming slower. They can't do as much physio, they can't do as much work. And I say again, cis women come in all different shapes and sizes, but once you put trans on that, we're not having that conversation. I saw it in a chat group a few months back that there was a woman wanting to get involved in rugby, had never played before, in her thirties, and she'd made a

comment to say, "I think I'm going to take a step back from this because I don't want to have to prove that I'm not trans because I'm bigger than the other girls on my team." What we need to do is look at how sport as a whole treats women. So not just trans women, all women. We need to look at misogyny, we look at the sexual abuse within that. We need to look at the lack of funding, lack of money, how much women get paid to men. Where does that go in the media? We need to look at women's sports as a whole, not trans women. And then we'll start seeing a change in the shape of that. But we need to look up what new information is coming out there. So like the Canadian Sports Ethics released new information to say that trans women didn't have an advantage. We sent rebuttals to World Rugby from the International Gay Rugby Association. Nothing's been looked at because we've got people in strategic places that are putting a stop to that and we need to get that information out there.

JVN [00:22:52] Yeah, it reminds me a lot of that idea of, like, scarcity and abundance. And I think that part of what women athletes are reacting to is that there is less money, there is less resources, there is less funding. So when they have a perceived air, quote, "threat," even if it's not a threat, like, they are glomming onto that and they're, like, "Wait, no, we've worked so hard for this, like, how dare you come into our spaces and take what we've worked so hard for?" But so that really pits, like, women against each other for crumbs, like, fighting for crumbs, when in reality we should be asking, "Why don't you have a pie as big as these fucking men's pie?" Why is it that, like, male golfers, male basketball players, male football players, male soccer players, their purses are so much bigger than the women's? Like, there's so much more money, there's so much more resources for male athletes. And absolutely what you just said about sexual abuse, sexual abuse is rampant in women's sports, misogyny is rampant in women's sports. And we don't talk about that.

And then the one thing that we think—or that I think—about, like, in the salon world is, like, a lot of times when you're an assistant, you get abused in these, like, toxic work environments and then you end up repeating that abuse when you become the boss. And I think that we're seeing that because [cis] women have been abused and they have been subjected to misogyny and unfairness in sport, they are now turning around and giving that same abuse to marginalized people, which in this case are trans women. And I just think that's so wrong. So another thing, like, we learned on, like, *Getting Curious*, like, from Sabrina Strings about, like, you know, the fallacy of, like, the BMI and how, like, the medical spectrums that we say, like, "Okay, most women are with a nurse and most, you know, men are within this." They often come from, like, the same spaces and the same ages and the same geographical locations, like, we don't really sample people, like, from a wide array to say, like, "Oh, actually maybe these ranges are way wider than what we realize." Because as you said, like, there are women that are, like, 6'2 and 6'3 and 6'4. There's women with high T. So we have all this incorrect information out there, like, where can we point people to find more accurate? So Canada did one good one, who else is studying this? Anybody?

VERITY SMITH [00:24:55] Yeah. So there's some research coming out later in the year from Blair Hamilton, so she's somebody to, to watch out for. We've got some research on young

people in sport, which is social research, lived experience from young people that we're going to be releasing from Mermaids next month. It is really hard at the moment because we need to see what's actually going on, because, as you said, we come in all different shapes and sizes. My levels are very different to my friends' because my body doesn't accept hormones correctly. I had polycystic ovarian syndrome when I was younger. I had a full hysterectomy at 19 and menopause at 22. And that was fine because I was seen as a cis female. No issues with high testosterone or anything. Then, soon as you put the word trans in there, all hell breaks loose.

So we need to be looking at people and not put everybody into the same category. It was working on a case-by-case basis. It wasn't perfect by any means, but it was enabling people to get involved in sport, and we're seeing that ripped away.

An example of that is I had a 14-year-old that was banned from rugby. She played when she was younger on a boys team. They've got two coaches that haven't seen her for three years, write an assessment, never even seen her since then to say, "Well, she had access to rugby from a younger age because boys play from a younger age. Therefore she's better than the boys." They didn't do anything. They didn't do a peer, they didn't check her playing against the girls team. They didn't meet her, they didn't see her. It was just a complete ban with no support around their mental health. What do you do when your sport's being taken away from you? And we're seeing that, we're seeing in England, we've just had four trans women banned from playing as well. No mental health support, nothing with them since the actual ban. They didn't come out. They didn't assess them. And they weren't even the biggest women on the team. So where is this all stemming from? It's hate and it's a lack of education and understanding. So we need people to go out there, meet the community, get people involved, have those conversations.

JVN [00:26:36] Do you see anyone doing that? Do you see any cis allies doing that?

VERITY SMITH [00:26:43] There's a young ex-rugby player, Sasha Acheson, that played for England Ladies, and she's come out absolutely fighting. She's played against women of all different shapes and sizes. She knows what she's talking about. She's come out there. She wrote a massive big piece to Bill Beaumont as part of the World Cup and England Rugby. And again, nobody's listening to that. We've got research in to say that cis women want trans women to stay playing. And that was ignored. We have thousands and thousands of responses to that. That wasn't listened to at all. We're seeing it from the misogyny side. We're seeing it from these gender criticals. We're not actually seeing it from the main of society. And the younger you go down there, we're seeing kids want to play sports with their teammates, we're saying kids who are supported by their gender diverse friends. But we need to keep this going. And in England, we don't see anything within PE, every area has got their own rules around this. And so kids are still struggling, whether they're allowed to wear a PE kit of their gender, whether they're allowed to go in sports, whether they're being separated. I've had it where I've had two parents on the phone. One said that their school's been really supportive.

The child's wearing the kit, getting involved, making new friends. And then I've had another child's parent who's been called in because the child's fighting in the toilets, cause the PE teacher's refusing to let them wear what they feel comfortable in.

JVN [00:27:52] That teacher on that article did that too, because she was, like, a PE teacher. And so she was, like, "I won't let, like, a male genitalia in my women's locker rooms." And it's, like, if you have a young trans girl, you want her to go in the bathroom with a bunch of fucking pubescent boys? You have a young fucking girl. And you want her to go into a bathroom with bullying. And as someone who did get chased around by boys screaming "f*ggot," and all sorts of other really scary ass shit, like, I avoided the bathroom cause I just didn't want to get beat up in there. So I always went to, like, a teacher's bathroom or, like, an individual bathroom or went, like, during class, like, never between periods. Like, I had to be careful about that. It is just so cruel, to think about. It is just so cruel.

VERITY SMITH [00:28:40] I think the other thing for that is, as to say, I've got a disability. And what we're seeing over here is, "Well, just go to the disabled toilets. That's the space." Trans kids are not disabled. You should be putting in safe spaces for all children to be able to go in there. We make spaces for kids from religious backgrounds. We make spaces—I've got scars all over, so I might not want to change just in front of people because I've got scars on my back, my legs, and that sort of stuff. But it's not happening. Trans kids are not disabled, they do not need to be pushed over there. So we need to have these conversations about what spaces should look like. And for me, if you're building a new project, a new space, you shouldn't be allowed that funding until you've made that inclusive so that everybody can get involved in there. And we need to start putting that into the work that we're, we're doing and what we're seeing. But it's not happening at the moment.

JVN [00:29:22] Absolutely. I also wanted to circle back just, like, if people didn't get it, like, you were injured by someone who was, like, smaller than you.

VERITY SMITH [00:29:36] Yeah. So I was playing post-transition. And during transition, I was coming to the end of a game, that was going to be my last women's game. And she was around maybe five-foot-three. Scrum-half is always because they get everywhere and cause so much trouble on the pitch. Just come around and took me out. But I've also had it where I've gone to play a game where the team knew that I was coming. I'd played the team previously. They turned up two hours early, didn't say anything. Ten minutes before the game, they said that they'd had an email from England Rugby to say that I was a danger to the women on the pitch, therefore I couldn't play. Young referee didn't know what to do. 3:00 on a Sunday afternoon. Where do you go? So I got marched off the pitch in front of everybody in my kit.

The upside of that was the person that went on to replace me with somebody that was a foot-and-a-half taller than me and ten stone bigger than me. And she just roller coasted over everybody in sight. What was the difference and what was the issue in regards to this? Comes off the pitch. They stood in front of the toilets. They stood in front of my own changing

facilities so I couldn't go in the changing room with my own players and they stood in front of the toilets. They wouldn't let me into the toilets. And nothing happened to them. And it's just crazy what's actually going on out here. And nobody's been dealt with before and legislation's being used and misinterpreted, like the Equalities Act. It should be up to the sport to prove. But that's not happening. They're just saying, "Oh, well, but we've got this research and that this is what we're going to do." Well, how did you come by it? Who did you use? What did you look at and who was involved in this? Because a lot of the bans haven't even spoken to the trans people involved in that sport.

JVN [00:31:01] And it's also, like, not even elite sports. It's, like, dancing can be elite and competition. But, like what if you want to join a dance troupe? What if you just want to go, like, do gymnastics? What if you, like, it's like an individual sport where it's not even, like, contact. But, like, you can't even just do something recreationally.

VERITY SMITH [00:31:17] We're seeing it in grassroots, so the elite is filtering down, what we need to do is filter back up. We know how many people go to the Olympics. Not everybody is going to be an Olympic athlete. But if somebody wants to go out on a weekend with their friends and play some football or they want to go do roller derby or they want to play rugby or they want to go to tennis. We need to make sure that that's there and that's accessible, because young people don't want to be pigeoned out for being told that they're different, that they're not wanted, that they can't go and do this the same as their friends. We need to make sure that they're seen, that they're—, it's "How do we get you involved?" Not that, "You're not allowed," and we need to keep this going.

JVN [00:31:49] So then how do we see these bans affect intersex people?

VERITY SMITH [00:31:52] The same with intersex. We don't know necessarily how many people are intersex, we wouldn't unless you chromosome test people. So unless you go down that there's so many more people that wouldn't even know that they're intersex. If sports started doing that, there'd be even more misinformation out there because they wouldn't know what to do with that information because, at the moment, you do your drugs testing and things like that, but you don't do chromosomal tests. Nobody actually knows who could potentially have higher testosterone, lower testosterone for, for medical reasons. But when it becomes medical reasons, that's not looked at. There's so many people in sport, especially women, that have got PCOS, whose testosterone levels would be higher than cis men. But that doesn't get actually looked at.

JVN [00:32:32] Yeah, that one dumb bitch who was talking shit about Lia Thomas. If she had her way they would do that chromosomal testing and then hopefully if there was a God in any fucking universe and, like, karma, [REDACTED FT. OLYMPICS MUSIC]. I hate her. And by the way, her highlights look like shit. Ahhh! I'm so sorry I freaked out. That was my own misogyny. Like, that was internalized rage and misogyny. I'm so sorry. I take it back. She's just reacting to her misinformation, and we actually have to, like, be compassionate or something. See! Like, if

I can catch it in real time, like, other people probably can, too, which is so exciting. So here's a really important question. Do you have advice for someone, anyone, who's facing transphobia? Athletes, their families, who is going through this in their life now?

VERITY SMITH [00:33:23] I think it's about staying strong. It's about not putting yourself in situations where you don't feel safe. It's about keeping your views and having your views, reaching out and be that person that other people can talk to, be, not necessarily a role model if you don't feel safe to do so, but go out there, be seen. There is people that you can reach out to. There's Athlete Ally in America that you can talk to and get support with and get involved in sports. You've got Mermaids over here, we've got Sporting Pride UK, we've got Sports Pride Cromley, we've got Sporting Pride Northern Ireland, League Sports in Scotland—and, again, Mermaids ourselves. So there's people that you can reach out to and have those conversations with.

And it's about how you've been treated, what we can look at, can we find you a club? And it's about being inclusive, and I spend a lot of my time as well looking for clubs for young people. So coming to have those conversations with those fine people on social media. I got told the other week by a young person that they couldn't believe that there was a trans man that played rugby like them, that they could find somebody to look at. Just go out there and be those persons. And everybody else: just be a good human being. That's all we're asking. We're not going into a future that's binary. It's never been binary. People come in all different shapes and sizes. We just need to make sure that everybody is supported in this. I'm very lucky to play a sport. I've got a woman on my team Jordy, she's the one that scares me the most out of everybody. And in our sport, you can play people of all different sizes. We've got people who are five foot, we've got people over six-foot-five where we're allowed to hit each other full pelt with metal wheelchairs and that's okay, with my legs to be classed as a danger. And again, I'm still and put out there as a trans woman to show that this is dangerous. "This is who your wives, your daughters, your partners are going to be playing against." And that's not the case. That's not true.

JVN [00:34:54] I have a problematic friend of the family who literally said, she was, like, "What about these trans men who want to play women's sports?" And she said it real chill like that. And I was, like, "Listen, lady, if you're going to ask me a question like that, you're at least going to get the fucking question right." And I know that, you know, so, like... And she was, like, "I don't know. That's what they said on Fox." And I was, like, "It's trans women playing women's sports." But I do think that your situation, it's, like, there really isn't a way where people say, like, "Okay, if you're transitioning. Like, this is how you can do it. This is how you can go," because there isn't, like, an accepted way or even, like, road map to do it. So, like, what is any trans athletes supposed to fucking do? Like, you were winding down. And then, like, in your last game, like, you were literally paralyzed by someone littler than you, which is like, it really is, like, the twist.

VERITY SMITH [00:35:48] Definitely. We go into sport knowing that something could happen is a contact sport. It could happen to anybody. We see injuries in different things all the time, but there is no injuries from trans women. 37,000 women at the time were playing rugby. Four trans women. No injuries in 20 years apart from me, but it's not talked about. And we're not talking about trans men in sport either. Because if we talk about trans men in sport succeeding, then surely we've got to then talk about trans women in sport. So we just get avoided, I just get told that I have mental health problems or that I'm just a confused lesbian or that I'm inferior because I was born female. I compete just the same as anybody else on a men's team, I compete the same. I've put coaches on the floor. I've played for so long, I've got technique. It's not about my size. As I say, I'm five-foot-six and 13 stone. You can't take that away from me.

JVN [00:36:35] What is, like, your game plan for Mermaids? And, like, how are you guys working towards a more inclusive future in sports? Like, how are we working to, like, counter this misinformation and counter these transphobic policies?

VERITY SMITH [00:36:47] So at the moment, myself and Mermaids. We've been speaking with national governing bodies and having the conversations around, first of all, do you have a policy? What does it look like? What should that have in there? Why don't you have a policy? We're working from elites as well as grassroots. So for me, I'm finding clubs for young people. I've just found a football team for a young trans girl, she's absolutely amazing. She's moved up from being in the 14s to the 15s and is absolutely enjoying it. And if we can make those differences to these young people, they're going to turn into happy adults as well. I've been writing training packages and just written around trans inclusion in grassroots sports. So that's being piloted in the ultra area at the moment. In regards to having a look at how we get involved, getting these educators and PE teachers and people that actually work within this area to actually know what they need to do. What happens if somebody comes on a weekend who may be gender diverse, they may disclose to you rather than their parents? What do you do if a trans person, they may not want their records to catch into their name or their registrations. So within wheelchair rugby this year, you can now register as a trans man. So I don't have to argue every year to say that, "Can you take me off as female," and then in regards to this year, under 18s were not able to put their name down as trans. So we've seen the sport having a look at that to see how that can be changed as well.

Sometimes it can be the smallest things, the smallest sentences that can make the biggest details: "women's only sport," "women's only taster sessions," "girls only." How do we change it? "Open to all girls," "open to anyone who identifies as female," "open to all genders." Language can play such a big part, but it's a small thing that we can change in here. So it's about educating people, making sure people can see themselves in the sport, not just putting, cis men, and cis women, or people that don't have disabilities and just using just static images all the time. We need to see ourselves. We need to be represented. Kids need to be involved. And I think it's really great having these discussions, we're seeing people think about it. We're seeing change in some sports. But again, we're not seeing change in other big elite

sports that we've got cis, white, older men, heterosexual men involved in these sports. And we're seeing women in certain spaces, as you said, that may have gone through something previously in their lives and they've got all the reasons as to why they're having these conversations. And I think if we open sport up, it's open to everybody, everybody can get involved in sport. It doesn't matter what your background is, it doesn't matter who you are. It's about getting involved, finding your way. If you are good at your sport and you become on that elite pathway, great. Get some support, don't just ban everybody. The Olympics says trans people can play sport, but then the national governing bodies are saying, "No." So we're falling in that gap. And trans girls should be able to have dreams as well. They should be able to dream to be involved in their sport or be an international player, the same as everybody else.

JVN [00:39:23] Absolutely. This idea that, like, you know, "Young people don't even know what they're going to be when they grow up, and how are we letting young people, like, make permanent decisions to their body? And what about the ones who detransition?" Because I know, like, the BBC and I know some of these news articles, like, they love a good old detransition story, like, that shit always buzzes, it's always trending because it's red meat to the base of these gender critical people. But I do want to talk about figures for a second: the people who do detransition, especially youth that detransition, it's, like, under 2%. And when I think about 2% of people. So 97 plus percent of people do not detransition. The idea that we would be making laws for everyone based off of what happens to less than 2% of people is, I think, quite shocking. We don't see it anywhere else. Like, divorce wasn't made illegal because 50% of people end up getting divorced or marriage, you know what I mean? There's a lot of possible outcomes that don't become illegal. What's different about transness that is so criminalized? And I just think it doesn't take that much thought to understand why.

VERITY SMITH [00:40:34] Yeah, definitely. And I think there's a lot of reasons for people, for their own personal reasons, why they detransition: that could be religious, that could be put on by their families. It could be for finance.

JVN [00:40:45] Usually it's lack of social support. It shows in these studies, it's usually, like, just a lack of societal support, generally, like it can be an unsupportive family, unsupportive workplace, the financial situation. It can be health care, but it's, like, lack of general social support is what is most often cited.

VERITY SMITH [00:41:01] Yeah, definitely. And young people should be allowed to find out who they are, with how that looks, as you say, through social transition, whether that's clothes, a name change, or anything like that. We all find our own way in life however that may look, whether that's gender, our sexuality, the workplace that we're going into. We all have ways in which we find out journey and go down that journey. It's about having those conversations and finding out who you are as a person, not society putting something actually on us, and especially for young people as well.

JVN [00:41:29] I also think that it's like, why are we putting this negativity and stigma on something? I just let people figure out, like, who they are and you don't need to like, vilify it regardless, you know? Like, it's not so hard. Okay, this is my favorite question. I think in your country, darling, it would be, like, "Picture it. It's a BBC Olympics montage." Because, like, we have NBC Olympics montage, you know, like, I hope you have, like, you know, it's, like, a little music comes on and it's like flashing of the athlete's thing. And then it's, like, "I'm back at the Olympics to try to get my shot at gold or whatever." And it's, like, you know, it's, like, a little montage. What has been, like, your rugby montage? Like, what have been some of the moments you felt the most strong, resilient, like, what have been some of your proudest moments? We would just love to end the episode on, like, a gorgeous journey in your athletics career.

VERITY SMITH [00:42:13] Definitely. I think my biggest achievement I got the [Rhino] Prop Star Rugby award in 2018, I was voted in by the public, which I never thought would in regards to the conversations around trans people in sport and I got to go and pick that award up in front of 28,000 people as a trans man, as myself, using that platform to talk around trans inclusion in sport. But for me, winning that award and the UK residents to actually vote for me to do that, and to have that, that's been one of my biggest. And I think my second is actually not giving up as to who I am and my sport. I think carrying on and playing and letting people know that it is okay, whether it's change through gender, sexuality, whether that's through disability, that you just keep going and we keep pushing that.

We've won the Treble, we're the first wheelchair rugby team to win the Treble in the UK, we've won the Challenge Cup, we've won the league. We're coming back out there again fighting this year to do that and we're doing that together. We're a mix of all different genders, a mix of abled bodies, a mix of disabilities out on a platform where we can all work together with everybody who's got your own unique superhero power. And ours is coming together as a group and just not letting anyone be behind. And that's what we need to do with the community. But for me, using those platforms to have those conversations for me is the biggest thing that I can do. I've got Mermaids on the back of my wheelchair rugby chair, I've got the pride flag on the back of there. So it's out there on TV. I just want to make sure that people can see somebody like themselves and get out there. And my proudest moment is the fact that I'm not a role model, but those kids that are out there that are doing it and competing, they're my role models because they're out there and they're living their most authentic life.

JVN [00:43:44] Abso-fucking-lutely. Wow. I just love you to pieces. I also, I think I would just want to say really quickly, like, I think just because of some of the tragedy and the, like, this legislation that so many people are talking about so casually right now. I sense within myself this, like, [PAUSES] like, frustration. This, like, discouragement. And a part of me wants to, like, just go water my tomatoes. Like, I'm just, like, "I can't fucking," like, I just feel like I'm this individual. And there's these, like, systems that are, like, literally conspiring against us and I just fucking hate it. But I just don't want us to get defeated. And, like, I'm, like, one of the

biggest cheerleaders I know. And if I'm feeling, like, frustrated and a little, like, then I know other people are feeling, like, frustrated, and it's, like, it's okay to water your tomatoes and, like, watch South Park or something and like, do what you need to do and then come back to the fight, like, reinvigorated. It's okay to like, be frustrated and feel your feelings, do some self-care and then come back. And I just think that too many people, like, don't do the coming back part.

I mean, the “-isms” are all quite related and I do think that, like, it kind of goes back to when I said that offensive thing about that lady who was protesting Lia Thomas. It shouldn't take for all women to have to start doing chromosomal testing for us to realize that these trans bans will lead down to it affecting everyone. Like, when you start regulating people's bodies like this and asking for menstrual cycles like they just did in the Florida High School [Sports Association], like, they just literally in the state of Florida, like, I mean, it got shot down, but their athletics board literally wanted to track menstrual fuckin' cycles to ensure, like, I don't even know what to ensure, like, that it was, you know, women in sports, pregnancy, abort, like, who fucking, it's—this sort of legislation, these sort of restrictions, it affects everyone. Right now, it's coming for trans people. Who historically gets fucked up next: [cis] women. Like, it's coming for you.

So while you're twiddling your thumbs thinking that this shit doesn't affect you, and you're, like, “I don't care. I can't change. I don't throw my hands up.” Your daughter is going to be getting her fucking ovaries fucking checked before she's allowed to join the goddamn golf team in five years at this fucking rate. Like, we were making progress. These threats are real. It's getting worse. Like, we have governments in the United States literally banning health care for adults. It was bad enough that we were, like, investigating children at the Department of Child and Family Services level for child abuse for gender affirming things which could have been addressed with therapy. But now it's, like, banning it for adults. Like, what kind of, like, Republican hypocrisy, overreach is that, like, for the party of small government, “unless you're trans, then we're going to blood test you, we're going to come to your house, we're going to take your fucking kids away. You can't play sports, like, go fuck yourself.” Like, that isn't normal. Like, this isn't. This is I mean, it is par for the course, but like, par for the course in things that end in bad ass shit that has happened before. So I just do think that we should wake up because this is, like, this shit is, it's getting worse. It's not getting better.

VERITY SMITH [00:46:48] Yeah, definitely. And what we're seeing over here is, again, the gender critical movement have been threatening legal action against any sports that go for inclusion. And sports are getting a bit worried on whether that can actually happen in this climate. And I think we need to be brave in these spaces. We need to have those conversations and we need to stand up for what we know is right, is correct. And what was working previously, I mean, what's changed in five years? Nothing. We've still seen no injuries. We're not seeing women taking over and losing medals. Nobody would want to even transition just to go win a medal. I'm scared of needles, never mind having to go and have my injections and operations and things like that. And when we talk about that, I thought I was

going to be six for four, good lookin', six pack. I've got a dad bod and I'm bald, it's like, we don't all get what we want. It's about every human being is very different and we need to make sure that we're doing that with our children as well. And supporting them on a case by case. Just let kids play.

JVN [00:47:35] Yeah. Just fucking let kids play. And also, like, speak up when you see something wrong because this shit's scary. And I also think one thing that we noticed in our public information episode, just reading that Fox article about the teacher in California, like it's *meant* to rile you up, like, it's meant to, like, I'm saying from the conservative aspects, like, you know, she's talking about God, she's talking about the devil. If you find yourself being like, "Oh my God, all of our kids are under attack," like, I can almost hear a devil's advocate saying, like, "But you're really riled up and you read that and immediately experienced it." And it's, like, "Yeah, cause trans kids are being fucking legislated against and so are their families, like..."

VERITY SMITH [00:48:10] It's, it's just crazy. And the worst thing is kids are seeing this. Kids are reading this in the newspaper. We've got the Internet now. We've got phones. We've got iPads. We've got laptops. I had a situation where I had two young trans people at a youth club, and they'd been watching two very well-known female sports athletes making comments on the news. And they just turned around and said, "How am I supposed to live when the people I look up to hate me?" And they're seeing this from their role models. I had a 13-year-old who spent all summer and saved up for some football boots and went to a local rugby club and they turned him away and told him he was born the wrong sex. These are things that we're seeing and that are happening and children are being told that they're wrong and they're not wrong. We need to support them. We need to educate others and have those conversations that maybe the young people can't have. But we can as adults and we can support them as well.

JVN [00:48:55] How come we can't threaten legal action for being excluded? We need some fucking people in here that are on our side.

VERITY SMITH [00:49:01] There's actually the first ever legal case that's actually being looked at at the moment against England Rugby in regards to the bans for the four women. So we'll see what's happening and see when that actually goes. We need to look at this as a human right as well—

JVN [00:49:12] Fuck yeah!

VERITY SMITH [00:49:13] Everybody has a human right to get involved in sport. But we're not seeing that and we're not seeing it from our sports bodies. And sport is one of those things where they can do what they want in regards to their policies, the IOC gives them an outline, but they can't enforce it. And then the sports go away and do it when, as we say, we're seeing

a domino effect. Everybody's scared, we still don't know what they're using or how they're coming to these conclusions.

JVN [00:49:33] I just want to go serve some transphobe with some legal action papers, and then I want to be, like, "You've been served." [LAUGHTER] And then I walk away. We love you so much. Thank you so much, Verity, for coming on Getting Curious for sharing your work with us, for sharing your story with us. Follow Verity on all the socials. Follow Mermaids. We love you so much, and we'll also include links to all that in the episode description, Verity. Thank you so much.

VERITY SMITH [00:49:56] And if you ever want to come and cheerlead for us as well, you're more than welcome.

JVN [00:49:59] I am fucking there in a heartbeat. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Verity Smith. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is Freak by Quiñ, thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. Also, follow us on that Instagram, we're doing a lot over there. We work really hard on it, we love to see you engaging in our comments, engaging in our questions. We just love the community that we're building over there, so don't be afraid to follow us @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Andrew, thank you so much. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.