

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Caster Semenya

JVN // Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness, and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. Now, if you've been listening to Getting Curious, or if you just know me at all, you will know that I love the Olympics. I love the Olympics so freaking much, I literally don't know what to do with my gay self. We've covered gymnastics, we've covered figure skating, we've covered diving. And today we're taking a lap around the track to talk about middle distance running, sportsmanship and gender regulations with an Olympian who needs no introduction. But we're going to do one anyway. Welcome to the show, Caster Semenya, who is a middle distance runner from South Africa. She earned a bronze medal at the 2017 World Championships for the women's 1500 meter and is a not one but two time Olympic gold medalist in the women's 800 meter. Her new memoir, *The Race to Be Myself*, is out now. Caster, welcome to Getting Curious, how are you?

CASTER SEMENYA // Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm doing great; fantastic. I'm in a happy space, thank you.

JVN // I love you being in a happy space! Now, I have to tell you, I really am a rabid Olympics super fan. I think it's because...in South Africa, on, like, TV before, like a sporting event, do they do those little, like, videos where it'll be like...it'd be like a video of you like walking slow motion and then you would, like, be like, in like, look at the camera...do they do those, like, little vignettes, you know, like about, like...

CASTER SEMENYA // Of course, they do that...always!

JVN // Yeah, I think that's like what...I think that's what gave me my like propaganda level obsession with the Olympics. Like, I love the Olympics—when I say propaganda, I think about North Korea. Like, I am like the way that North Koreans, like love, like Kim Jong Un is the way that I revere the Olympics. Like, I, I will do the clap. I will do that like...I will do it. Like if anyone talks shit about the Olympics, I'll be like, "Shut the fuck up. I don't care! I don't care; we need it. We love it!" So I'm just kind of obsessed. But I will also say that typically in the Summer games, I'm so emotionally exhausted after week one because of gymnastics. Because look at me, I...it's taken me a minute to, like, really understand the majesty of track and field. But then once I did, I fucking got it. I watched the World Championships, now. I love Worlds. I follow the people. I get what's going on. So then...but really kind of like fully, to be honest, it only happened in the last two years. But also part of that is because it really started in Tokyo because I was like reading the news about you and I was like, "These fucking bastards! What is going on with Caster?" I finally get into track and field. I finally make room for my life and then I'm reading in the news and like Caster is not...she doesn't get to go! Well, so we're just getting into: so basically, if you don't know Caster, as we just said, she's major, she's fierce. She has her new book. We're going to talk about everything. But I just I'm going to shut up now. So you're a middle distance runner; for those who don't know what events a middle distance runner do?

CASTER SEMENYA // Middle distance running consist of between 400 meters from me, say, because 400 still more, you know, a little bit longer, but it's a long sprint. But then I'll say 4, between 4 and 3K, you know, 3000 meters. So it's like 400, 800, 1500, 1600, and you know, 3 kilometers. That's probably what considered middle distance. But in in our era, we'll say middle distance, we will say, you know, about 1500 and 3K, because when you look at 800 meters, it's still a sprint. You look at 400 meters, it's a sprint because you know it's under 60 and you look at 800 meters, we go under, you know, 60, you know, every lap. So it's it's more long sprint, 800 meters nowadays. But then we see middle distance, for me, I'll say 1.5 mile, 2 mile, you know, and 3K, so all those events, but yea.

JVN // So middle distance running is like a big ass spectrum, if it goes from 400 meters to like 3000. That's a lot, right?

CASTER SEMENYA // No, not really a lot. It's ummmm, it's just nothing. It's just, you know.

JVN // When I watch the World Championships, like you would think, like, I mean, it's all running, but the strategy is all so different. Like, the commentators are always like, you know, "This person is dropping out of the 800 to focus on the 400," or like or like or like, you know, like, like that one...what was that one lady, and she fucking fell on her elbow and I was like, "No!"

CASTER SEMENYA // Hassan, Sifar Hassan. Yes.

JVN // You know, I've never screamed so hard in my life!

CASTER SEMENYA // It's a tactical, you know, race because it's a is a component. It consist of a sprint, consist of power, speed endurance, you know, endurance, all of those things. So that's why it becomes difficult for one to master middle distance; as long as you cannot, you know, do it up until you can get it wrong. You can never be the best middle distance runner. You you got to be crazy to be one, cause you need to be able to master speed. You must be able to have, you know, speed endurance. Your rhythm must be great and you must also, you know, put in the long stuff. You know, your base must be the longest, you know, to to be the best. So it is always been difficult for one to balance all of these races from 400, 8,1.5 mile and 2 miles. And for you to do that, you got to be talented.

JVN // When did you realize that you were like, "Oh shit, I want to like..." did you have a coach that was like, "Oh no Caster, you're like, really good. Like, I think you're going to go to the Olympics." Or were you just like, "I love this. I don't care if I'm good or not." Like, how old were you and what did training or like, what does training look like? What did it look like? What does it look like...all of it.

CASTER SEMENYA // I've studied sports, you know, at an early age. By age four, I was already on the field, you know, playing soccer. By age of six, I started running, but I started more in sprints events. But then: this is about self-discovery. It's about knowing what you want. It's about, you know, having passion, you know, for sports. And age of, I think, 12 or 13, that's when I knew that, you know what? I love running more than I love soccer. I

thought I loved soccer with all my heart. But then running just completed me, I think as a human, because I'm in control of myself. I'm in control of everything. I own decision making because I don't depend on someone, you know, to win. I depend just on myself to make sure that I get those results at the end of the day. Yes, coaches, where I came from, I didn't really have coaches because in a way I'm coming from a rural area, a very dusty place where there's basically nothing. You know, I had no electricity, no running water, you know, for me to for to to get lights, you know, I had to use candles. I had to use, you know, paraffin stove and all those things. And it has been a lovely journey, but I think it just comes with that, like I said, the self-discovery, being aware of what you made, of what you best at and coming from that village, you have no coaching. You know, there are no, you know, coaches that have experience in terms of sprints. That's why I switched from sprints to middle distance.

And there's no one who discovered that I'm a great 800 meter runner, I'm a great 1500 meter runner. I just did it because there was no coach that can coach me to do, you know, the long sprints and, you know, 200 meters. And from then, when I discovered that, you know what I think it's something that I can do, it's something that I can get to Olympics, I met, you know, coaches, I'll say coaches because they're teachers. They were always in sports. And where we coming from, we only have a day to do sports; the rest of the days we in school, you understand? So I had to utilize that particular day to make sure that I showcase my talent. It may be in soccer, it may be netball, it may be in you know, I used to be a good actually a baseball player, so I played baseball in school. So they discovered that, you know what, "This has got to be a crazy one." And then they start putting more attention into, you know, my daily based movement. And they were like they said with me and they say, you know what—because they call me Mokgadi, do you know where I'm coming from—"You know what? We think you can do well, if you really focus in this business." And they start, you know, educate me about, you know, drugs, you know, you shouldn't do drugs. You shouldn't be doing that, you know. And then Ben Johnson, you know, situation came in. They tell him, you know, you don't want to be, you know, caught up in a situation like, you know, Ben Johnson's, you know, Marion Jones and all those things.

JVN // Oh my God, yes!

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes, yes! Because it's...if you look at it for me where I'm coming from, I was you know, I learned about all these things. I knew from age 15 that, you know what, if I want to be the best in the world, I got to, you know, keep it cool. I got to, you know, stay away from things that will not build me, you know, to be an idol, to be an example, you know, to the young upcoming, you know, generation.

JVN // Just in case people don't know, when you say, you know, where you're coming from: you're from South Africa. But tell us about like the, like tell us about like the city that you're from; the village where you're from, just so that everyone gets it.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, I'm from I'm from the southern hemisphere, which is in line with Australia; same season, but I'm from the bottom of Africa. Small...so it's a nice country. You know, South Africa is a very nice country and I originate from the north, northern part of

South Africa, which is now called Limpopo before it was called Northern Province. And I'm coming from a small town called Polokwane, but the region is Moletji and that's a region and the village called Ga-Masehlong...I know you guys pronounce it, "howmushalong." You know, it sounds amazing how you say it. And it's a small village, it's a dusty place. And we more deep in the rural; we are more cultural. You know everything about us, you know, it's about culture, it's about tradition. And I grew up in the society that, you know, always found me, you know, amazing. You know, they've raised me to be the best I am today. And for me, moving from that village, you know, to the world, you know, it's it's it's just amazing. And then the transition from, you know, primary level to secondary to tertiary, it has been amazing because they have built me to be the best. They have prepared me to be the soldier I am, today, because I'm a soldier, you understand? And when I was explaining about, you know, the teachers that, you know, had to take me through, you know, at fatigues in the spectrum, it's amazing because they had to teach me about the great, you know, East Africans, you know, in the 800 meters, like the Kenyans, Ethiopians, you know, all of those. And it's beautiful because they told me, you know, when I was like 16: "You can be the best you can be, you can be the best that you can be, if you believe. And we feel like you're the only athlete in this South African soil as a female athlete that can defeat those people," and I go, "Whoa, that's big. You're giving me a responsibility that you know, it's going to be heavy on my shoulders."

But then when I sit down looking at my personality, looking at things that I can do, I was like, you know what they're correct. From now on, if Boss can tell me that, if Ezekiel can tell me that, goddammit, I can do it, you understand? And from that day, you know, they did build that fire in me, but then me going through the 800 meters women, I look at the likes of Maria Mutola because we come we come from the South African, you know, part. And I'm like, if she's from Maputo, I'm from the Limpopo; come on, I can do the same thing. And I start idolizing Maria, you know, I start looking at how she has trained, you know, looking at her 21 years of career. I'm like, "Goddamn, I'm going to do that!" But I want to do it, you know, I want to do it in a style where I make people jealous. You know, I make people keep on questioning me because I always believed that as long as you exist in this world, people always talk. And people talk about something that is beautiful. People talk about something that threatened them. People talk about things that scare them, you understand? And I was like, you know what, let me do this. Let me see if I keep on doing this, how long it would take me, you know, to get to the destination I want to be. And since from that day, from young, being fearless, you know, understanding myself, understanding the better self, having the best relationship with myself and that play, my parents, you know, had to take into my life...come on: they played a role that, you know, I think I can never forget. I can never forget about it. I always appreciate it. I always cherish that for the rest of my life because what they did for me; it was all about happiness to make me happy every day, to make sure that everything that I do in life, you know, I'm happy. And they taught me how to love myself. They taught me how to appreciate myself, how to accept myself, and just be myself for me, before any other. I think that's a gift that, you know, a priceless one that no one can ever, you know, you know, take for granted.

JVN // I think I'm like, fallin butt-crazy in love with you in 18 minutes. Is it possible? No one made you become obsessed with track and field. You were just like you loved it. You were

into sports. There were mentors and teachers that saw that there was, like, huge potential here. And then even though it was pressure because they saw that you were, like, massively talented, they were like, you could really be the best in the world, but you were like, Ready? Even though that was a big order, you were like, "Fuck, yeah, I can do that." And so that's like how your training kind of started, right?

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, of course, of course. I think with me, I'll say I was born ready. I was born for this as much as you saw them, Nike, you know, her campaign way in a bunch: to do it. I think for me, the purpose of life, where I'm coming from, you know, we call it a calling; is more like a calling, as my name is Mokgadi, the one who guides, you understand? With us, these names, they can define you. They can define your personality, how you you are made, you know, for the world, how you are made to change the world. You know, I'm about inclusivity and diverse. I'm about fighting for what is right. I'm about educating people for their being; just for you being you, understand? And I think for me, I was born for a reason. My moms and my pops, they were given this gift so that for me, I can be a change. They way, they gave birth to...I'll say a testimony of God, you understand? And never get me wrong when I always tried to, you know, let people know that there's God and there's your ancestors, you know? Those two, when they connect, they make you able, you understand? For me I will say: I was born for a reason and I'm happy to embrace it because I'm not ashamed of it. I was born to be the change. I was born to come and educate people about life. I was born to educate people about self-love, self respect, self-actualization, self control. You know, maturity, what it is best, you understand? Being able to understand life in a level where nobody could, you understand? Trying to understand the importance of your existence, you understand? For me, I own that and I have no doubt about it. I'm not going to brag about it. I'm just saying that, for me being here today, it was meant to be, you understand? It's one of that, you know, chapter where I had to wait for it for the longest. I had to wait for it, you know you know, when I'm ready, when I'm mature enough to share the weight, you understand?

I'll say I'm aware because everything that I had to go through, you know, I have to share it with you now, today. I had to write this book. I've been approached before about writing the book, doing this documentary. I'm like, "Guys, I want to do it in the best way. I want to do it in a special way that whatever I'm going to say: it educates, whatever I'm going to say, does not judge. Whatever I'm going to say does not critique. It has to be the language where it's universal. It should be the language that, you know, includes everyone. It does not discriminate any other, you understand? It has to be the language where, when one read the book, resonate with it, connect with it, because it's not individualized. It's a is aware did that, you know, awaken someone's blindness, you understand. Where there's a light, you know, towards the end of the tunnel, you understand. Where mine, it was always been a little bit dark, I had to figure out how to lighten it. I had to figure out how to be good. I will say for me: yes, I was born for a purpose. And I know the purpose. And I'm living the purpose. I am the vision of myself. And I will do that; I'll make sure that I educate people to start loving themselves, to start, you know, appreciating themselves for who they are, regardless of what. And you know what Steve Harvey said? Other people's perception of you has got nothing to do with you. He's correct. Because if you wake up each and every morning, you look at that mirror; what reflects there is you; what reflects there should make

you happy. What reflects there, you should embrace. And if you can do that, you are free. But if you can't do that, you are imprisoned by, you know, yourself because you put yourself in a corner where you know no one can never understand. And I speak today, I always say to people: till you are in my shoes, you can never understand how I'm feeling. You can never understand the feeling of being different. But I always say being different is beautiful. Being different is great. You should not be scared of rejection. Rejection makes you the best that you are today because you learn from it. You start understanding that as a human you must have a room for disappointment. It's beautiful. You look at the basketball players they've been playing. Sometimes they lose the games, they fail time and again. You know, they say you fail a hundred times, get up 200 times, you understand? That's life.

JVN // Are we in the same age box? I'm like, I'm 36. Are we? Are you, are you?

CASTER SEMENYA // I'm 32.

JVN // 32 years?

CASTER SEMENYA // I'm 32, yes.

JVN // You're you're the baby.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes, yes I'm the baby.

JVN // You're the baby! Yeah. No I'm just kidding.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes, I'm a, I'm a matured baby.

JVN // You're a beautiful, mature, two time Olympic gold medalist, three time World Champion. Going into 2009, you're like, what, like a teenager, right?

CASTER SEMENYA // Yea.

JVN // So you're...because in the book, this was a really pivotal moment. You're at the Berlin World Championships; it's 2009. Why did you consider that to be, like the starting point of your career?

CASTER SEMENYA // Um, I'll say, because that's when I discovered my abilities. But I'm still, like, 18 years of age. I've just come from, you know, World Juniors where I couldn't even advance to the semis. And then I come from, you know, Commonwealth Youth Games, you know, in Pune, India; I win the championships. And I'm like, "Okay, I think I'm ready to showcase my talent." But before that, you know, I needed to start understanding sportsmanship because sportsmanship comes with respect, the pure heart, understanding the consequences of the outcome of, you know, the race, which is I've already experienced just to treat people with respect. People, you know, treating people with love, you know, accepting people for who they are. It doesn't matter what culture are they coming from, what religion, but understanding the whole spectrum of what sports' all about. Because

sports, it's all about including each and everyone who's in the competition, you know, regardless of what circumstances they coming from. That's why they always say: say no to racism and discrimination, you understand: that's the language I understood. But then also you have to understand that as an individual coming in, you you just the same as any other individual come into competition because we all have same common goal. We want to win. But then as an athlete, you need to understand that there will always be someone who's better than you. You'll always be that person who's better than others. And then if we are in the final, you have eight women in the final. Of course, they'll be number one till the last. You should accept that I'm going to be one of those. It does not matter what position, but the goal is for us to finish the race.

JVN // As long as you're not....fourth.

CASTER SEMENYA // The worst! It's the worst!

JVN // It really is the worst. Like I...

CASTER SEMENYA // It's the worst position that you can ever be because you just the one inch from the medal.

JVN // If your choice was to get fourth or not even make it to the semis, would you just prefer to like fucking not even make it to the semis if you knew you were going to get fourth? Or would you still want to do it?

CASTER SEMENYA // As a sports woman, I'll say it's...Okay it's hard to accept to be number four, but it's better for me to make a final because it's it's it's great to be in the final, to be amongst the best, you understand? So as much as I hate being number four, but I hate not making the final.

JVN // Not that many people can say that they're a two time Olympic gold medalist in the same event and three time world champion. Like is....does that make you like the most decorated South African?

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes, at the moment I am! At the moment I am. At the moment I am because even in the southern region, it makes me the most decorated. Because you look at Maria Mutola, she has three world championships. I did, you know, equaled that. But with the Olympics, it makes me third in athletics. But, you know, if you're going to look at into swimming, all those things, we took different sports because they can win more medals in one, you know, championships, you know. But for a middle distance runner in athletics, yes, I am.

JVN // So wait we have to go back to 2009. So you're minding your own business. You're in Berlin, you're 18.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, I'm there. Sorry to cut you. I'm there, you know, in the championship. But you must know that before that championship, there's been something

going on. When I won the African Junior Championships, I ran the world best, you know, in 800 meters category: 1:56:45, which is was my national record, my personal best and number one in the world. Now people start questioning my gender. I'm like, come on! Oh, gender; questioning my gender. I know that, you know, people have been questioning, you know, my being and stuff like that. And for me, the approach to the championship, it was a mess because before I left home, I mean, I've been tested, but not knowing that those were gender tests till the day, you know, of the test when you know, the gynecologist that we, you know, assigned to test me telling me that...because I asked him like, "Man, what kind of a test is this?"

JVN // Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. So your...so you just won the African Junior Championships? And then the IAAF, which stands for....?

CASTER SEMENYA // It's the International Athletics Federation, yeah.

JVN // So they were just like, we need to have you come do a test. And you're just like, "Oh, I'm going to like, piss in a cup to make sure that like..."

CASTER SEMENYA // IAAF approached, you know, my federation probably—I don't know, what is it that happened—to say, look, she needs to go for the gender test. But my federation, they did not have balls to tell me that is a gender test, you understand? They send me there for me, with the idea of: it's doping test. But during the test this guy tells me no, start explaining, you know, it makes sense to me to say, "Look, man, this is not doping. Is this gender test," and say, "Yes, it is." And I tell him, look, man, I've got nothing to hide. Let's just get it done with this. And he had done the test. Then he tells me I have a bad feeling about it. I said, "Don't matter, I'm ready for anything." And for me going to the world champs, I knew that the same thing will happen to me, you understand? And for me, being in that world championship, I was determined to do my best. I was determined to win gold medal, you understand? And this was a gold! You know, the very the very most important thing for me, it was to win the gold. And that's why we came with this concept to say, look, we are going to write the book. We are going to let people know that, what we as women go through and when I'm in there in Berlin world championships and they keep on doing that, and for me, in my mind, I'm saying if they keep on doing the test, I keep on running, you know, I keep on pissing them off. I keep on making sure that all the things that they're doing will not distract me, you understand? Because I was motivated. But the most important thing that people need to know is that, for me. I was never ashamed of myself. I accept myself. I love myself. I love my differences; that don't make me less a woman because I'm different. But if you, as an organization, you're going to try to disturb me: you're going to miscalculate. Because for me, I'm not going to be disturbed by no men, no women, you understand? And when they did that, I allowed them to do it like I got nothing to hide. I'm a woman, but I know I'm a different woman. So there's nothing wrong about it, you understand. And I went; I ran then I win the world championship.

JVN // And when when you said that they kept doing that, they... so there wasn't, like, one test.



CASTER SEMENYA // No, it was not one test. I went through, like, about... I went to heats, they tested me: they came and drew the blood. Semifinal, they did the same thing, you know? And it's it's one thing that people need to understand that when people want to make you feel you don't belong, they will always come with distractions. But for me, I was not in that zone. I was in my own zone where my focus was more on competition, not being judged, not being criticized, not being questioned. You know, all those questions. And when people start telling you you're not enough, no. It's up to you what to decide. It's your choice to allow people to bully you; it's your choice to allow people to do that. And it did not shake me. I win that! I won the medal. I knew that even if I knew that, even if the results are not as how I wanted them, I know there was no men or any women that can come and pull me off the track and that's the best decision I have ever made in my life.

JVN // I only have my own limited idea of what it means to be under public scrutiny, but how mean and just cruel people can be. And I don't know how much of any I...

CASTER SEMENYA // Of course, it comes with: you have higher testosterone level and stuff like that. I'm saying, yeah, if I have testosterone level, then it's fine. But what fascinates me is that you say it has got an advantage and then you tell me I'm born a man; I'm not! I'm a woman. Yes, I understand that I'm a different woman. I love myself. I love myself the way I am. But if you have not done enough research about this thing and I still repeat it, testosterone level, high testosterone level in women, it don't make me a man. It has got no advantage because your advantages come through your hard work. If I work hard, I'll win. For instance, now, I've been sitting for five years now, you know, not competing. And do you think I can just go win 800 meters today, if they say go right now. You see, that's when you start understanding that when people are trying to destroy or try to separate women and try to destroy, you know, women's sport, that's what they will do. And I always say, you know, it don't matter, you understand, for me, because at the end of the day, if you you are going to regulate a women's sport; you killing it, you're killing it. Because if you're born a woman, there's nothing you can do. There's nothing you can do about genetics. You know, genetics are just there to be embraced. So that's that's that's the only confusion that, you know, always left me hanging. And I will always fight for that. I always fight for what is right.

JVN // I often hear when it comes to fairness in sports, it's like, you know, it's basic. This is just this easy. It's an easy conversation. It's basic biology. And it's like, actually, this isn't basic and there is a huge spectrum that people exist upon. And you hit the nail on the head when you said it was the dedication and the hard work.

CASTER SEMENYA // Of course.

JVN // There are infinite people who have infinite genetic makeups. And in your case, there was no cheating, there was no unfairness. You are born the way that you are born. You are born a woman, and you have genetic variations that mean that you have a little more test...or you have more testosterone. But the other thing is that I think people don't realize—and I didn't even really fully realize until a few years ago—women have naturally occurring testosterone any fucking way.

CASTER SEMENYA // They have fucking testosterone. Yes, you are correct. We are being made to hate the other side, not understanding what's really going on. They don't explain everything. They just make you to understand what they think is right. They do not want to make you understand what is really happening, which is: we as individuals, we need to start waking up, you understand? To go do more research, stop reading an article. When you read an article, go make research about it, to say: is this really true or not, without judging. Because then at the end of the day, you're still going to be a mother; you're still going to be a father. You going to, you know, you know, have that seed that is just like me. And then it will hurt you the most because you've been hating without knowing what's happening. And it's always the case. We need to wake up as people. You know, we need to go do more research.

JVN // So what was going on by the time Tokyo comes around because you're still competing...you were still competing after Rio. And no spoilers for the book, obviously, people should...you should read the book and without giving anything away. But can you like give us like a little teaser of where things were so that people kind of understand so they'll go read the book?

CASTER SEMENYA // After Rio, I knew what was going to happen and they come with the new ruling to say, are they going to, you know, start this new ruling of the DSD from 4 to 1500, which is a mile. And I'll be like okay, cool. It's fine. I'm going to fight the case, but when I'm fighting the case, I'll be doing something different. I wanted to just switch back to sprint and see if it can work. I did a little bit of 200 meters. I'll be like, now, and then COVID hit and I stopped. Like for me, if I want to do maybe try to do Olympics in 2021, I'll go for long distance, which is not my specialty. Oh, I tried to do that. It did not work. Just to show that testosterone don't play no role in anything. That's when I realized, you know what, this people are fucking around; they're talking nonsense because I wanted to see if really this is true. If it was true, why, why couldn't I run 200 meters in 21 seconds? If my testosterone really plays a role and then I go back to 5000 meters, why can't I run at 29 or 30 if really the testosterone, you know, really play a role? You see now that's when you see: these people are messing around with us. They're messing around with the world. They're making the world believe nonsense.

JVN // So the IAAF comes out after Rio and they say, if you have any DSD things between.

CASTER SEMENYA // Four and a mile.

JVN // You can't...

CASTER SEMENYA // Must take medication.

JVN // Oh you must take medication.

CASTER SEMENYA // Take drugs. Yes.

JVN // So if you want to compete, you can, but you have to take these. You have to take...And what was the medication? Just like estrogen or something or like...?

CASTER SEMENYA // I have no idea.

JVN // You don't even want to fucking know: I'm not taking it.

CASTER SEMENYA // No, I have no idea about the medication, because you have to remember that they are just assuming based on remember in 2009 after that for me, then, IAAF, we had a deal that if I want to run, I must lower my testosterone. But they wanted me to do a surgery or something. We refused. And my gynecologist decided to say, "Look, we can try our best to make her testosterone low." And that's the only thing that I regret in my life is doing, because I...man, I sacrificed my life, I sacrificed my health and everything, you understand? And coming back to 2016, when they say you need to, you know, take medication, I don't know what medication it is. And I say, you know what? I am not going to go through the same shit that I went through, you understand. Yes, they can carry on with their, their ruling; I'll fight it, but I will not take that! It's talent, it's hard work, discipline, dedication, focus and being able to work through your body, that's all. There's no goddamn testosterone that can make no one fast. There's no way. It does not.

JVN // Caster, do you have any idea, like, how many people could this affect?

CASTER SEMENYA // It's a lot.

JVN // This could I mean, this is...

CASTER SEMENYA // It's a lot.

JVN // Yeah, it's not only...

CASTER SEMENYA // No, it's only one person. It's a lot of, you know, girls that are going through that. And the best that I can do for me as a someone that they look up to is to fight for them, to fight for what is right, fight for, you know, inclusivity, you know, and diverse to make sure that we fight for what is right and make them understand there are allies, make them understand their being, you know, and make sure that they also don't let anyone take advantage of them, make them feel like they are guinea pigs, make them feel like they experiment. Because at the end of the day, it's about respect, it's about dignity, it's about humility, you understand? And that's what I'm trying to do to teach them. They are who they are. Love them, show them appreciation, show them self-love so they can, you know, have that confident to help themselves so they can not try to change themselves for anyone because they have to feel, you know, they need to conform into the group and all those things. Just be yourself for you.

JVN // For someone who isn't even necessarily in athletics, for someone who doesn't even know or think that like these issues affect them: what do you want people to know who, like,

are involved in athletics, who are not involved in athletics? What do you just want like anyone to know around fairness in sports?

CASTER SEMENYA // Everyone, you know, has a body, you know, to compete; has got a right to compete. You know, it does not matter where you coming from, who you are, what you know, what race you are, language you are, what religion you you coming from; that's the universal language of it. I can't speak on behalf of anyone, but I can speak on understanding me as a woman I am, you understand, and as a woman who has, you know, the differences in her body, naturally. So I can only speak for that. But when we talk about fairness in sports, it's all about treating people with respect, you know, respecting each and every individual human rights, not trying to discriminate them, but treating them with respect.

JVN // What do you hope for the future: for your future in athletics, for the future of fairness in athletics like, like what, what's your hopes?

CASTER SEMENYA // My hopes are more on this organization's, they needs to start respecting human rights first. We should start putting people first, respecting them, you know, accepting people for who they are before you can start regulating. And then they must stop this nonsense of regulating women's sports. My hope is that we as women be respected. We as women, be treated equally as men. That is my hope because if I say more than that, I would be, you know, messing up. I just want women to be respected. Women's sport must be you know, they must just stop regulating these women's sports because they talk nonsense, you understand. You talk nonsense and just leave women's sports alone. And if you we we we have to come and debate about any other issues, we must debate them in respect of others. We should consider other people's feelings. We should respect them, appreciate them for who they are. That's my hope, you know, for sports.

JVN // I just....you're so brilliant and you're so...just I don't really even have words, but it kind of makes me well up because you have not been respected the way that you deserve to be. You have not been treated the way that you deserve to be treated. And the beauty and the security that you have in how you show up in the world is so...like, I just took a COVID test; I do not have COVID and I have chills from my elbows all the way down to my toes. Like you just are such an incredible person. And I—my hope is, is—that you get treated with the respect that you deserve. And I think you are making the world the place that we want the world to be. And your're you're just a brave ass, fucking fierce ass, two time Olympic gold medalist, three time world champion. It's not your fault that you're so good. So now, now you're just...

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes.

JVN // You're minding your own business. You and your wife Violet, run the Masai...

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, Masai Athletics. Masai Athletics Club and the Caster Semanya Foundation. Yes.

JVN // So is there any, like, young Casters? Like, do you think anyone is just really gunning for like 2036 or 20... Let me think about this. 2028, 32, 36. Yeah, like do you think that you have like the next Caster Semenya, like for 2040.

CASTER SEMENYA // Not really the next Caster Semenya. But there's...we tried to, you know, make them be the best that they can be. We running the biggest development program, you know, around the country where we run, you know, it's like we have more than 100 kids under the the pro club where there's future. And my hope is that these kids they can learn how to respect themselves because it's all about self respect. Before you can demand respect, you know, from any other person, it's about you respecting yourself. I think those are the things that we are educating these kids. We educating them how to empower themselves. But as we empowering them and making sure that they understand, you know, humility; they understand self-love, self acceptance, self-appreciation, understanding about self-discovery, how to manage themself. And but also the most important thing is that we're teaching them how to invest in themselves.

JVN // Okay. So basically I'm just going to do a really fast like Olympic style fire round with you just while I have you like last few minutes. If you, if you had to compete in the Winter Olympics, like if South Africa came and they were like, "Girl, we need you for the Winter Olympics!" Like, what would you, what would be your sport if you had to pick a Winter Olympic sport?

CASTER SEMENYA // If I were to pick a Winter Olympics, of course, bobsled.

JVN // What about a different track and field sport? Like, would you be like a pole vaulter? Would you or is that just too high up in the air? Is it too scary? Are you a triple jump queen? No, those ankles. What? What? What else; if it wasn't running, but track and field.

CASTER SEMENYA // If it wasn't running, you know, on the track and field, it would be javelin.

JVN // AHHH! I just was thinking javelin. And I was holding my pen and I was like ah, I felt it: javelin. Ohmygod. Okay, biggest like upset or like track and field, like, was there like, is there like, is there like a it can be one of your races. It can be like any like, is there just like, is there like some race that stands out to you in your mind as like just like one of was like dramatic or like most interesting or something.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, the biggest upset for me would be my very close friend—we buddies—he false started this year in the semifinal, you know 100 meters, a man 100 meters. So because I looked, you know, forward for him to do well this year. He was ready.

JVN // Which one was he?

CASTER SEMENYA // Akani Simbine; he's a South African.

JVN // Oh, I think I saw!

CASTER SEMENYA // He's a South African sprinter, Yeah, for me it pains me to see that because I know how ready he was. I know how determined he was. I know how is he was eager to run, you know, in the final. But I think it's one of those days where we say if things are not meant to be, they're not meant to be. And I'll say it was the biggest upset as well as, you know, Fred Kelly not being able to make a final.

JVN // I saw that, too.

CASTER SEMENYA // It disappointed me as well. But I think it's a I'll say it's one of those things, man, that it happens where also: 2011, where Usain Bolt false started in the final! You get what I'm saying? Those are the biggest upset, which is we cannot control that. Those are not in our control, but it is what it is. They learn through it. They learn through it, they'll come back and bounce back and do the great, you know, the best that they can be. But yea, those are...it broke my heart to see that.

JVN // The last two questions, I swear to God. Is there any other sports that you just like when they're on, you're like, "Um Violet, don't talk to me right now. I'm so sorry. Please. Like, just. I can't." Like, my husband knows, like, if figure skating or gymnastics is on like that's what we're watching. If you don't want to watch it, go somewhere else, like there's another TV. Like, **is there any other sport that you're, like, a random super fan of that no one even knows?**

CASTER SEMENYA // Oh, I love basketball.

JVN // Basketball's cool.

CASTER SEMENYA // WNBA, NBA: I'm there. But there's this other sports; when I watch it, I don't want anyone to disturb me.

JVN // Is that like basketball?

CASTER SEMENYA // Cricket!

JVN // Oh, cricket.

CASTER SEMENYA // Cricket.

JVN // Oh, you love cricket?

CASTER SEMENYA // I love cricket because of you know, it gives me that focus. It's a it's one technical sports where you can't afford to make error; one mistake you out. So when I'm watching cricket, yeah.

JVN // I think they added that to the 2028 Olympics.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yes, I know. It's it's going to be there. So, I'm excited for it.

JVN // If you had to watch a sport that I'm obsessed with; one that's like, it's like that, like a very effeminate, queer, non-binary person would be obsessed with. Like if you had to watch, like, figure skating, gymnastics or like rhythmic gymnastics.

CASTER SEMENYA // I do watch that. I love it! I love all sporting codes; I watch that, you know, I'm I'm a I'm a fan, you know, so I'm a fan of that. I watch all the sporting codes. I love it. I love things that they're doing there. These people are supernatural.

JVN // Could you could you...have you ever attempted a backflip?

CASTER SEMENYA // No! I still love my teeth.

JVN // Mm yea, you wouldn't lose your teeth. I think...

CASTER SEMENYA // But I've never really tried to, you know, backflip and all those things because I'm scared.

JVN // No, I get it. But Caster, I do think that with your vertical, I think that we could teach you to do a backflip if you ever wanted to.

CASTER SEMENYA // Yeah, we can do that!

JVN // If you ever want, I'll teach you.

CASTER SEMENYA // I'm crazy. I can do that.

JVN // Yeah, I'm here. If you ever want to come, I will take you to the gymnastics center.

CASTER SEMENYA // You're going to teach me?

JVN // Yeah, well, I mean, if you like, I'll teach you that. And then you can, like, I'm such a slow runner. Like, if there is an apocalypse, like I'm fucked, like I'm...I get, I get winded, and I...we could do some cross training. Caster where can we follow you along? Are you, like, the most active on the Instagram? Are you on the TikTok?

CASTER SEMENYA // No I don't do TikTok, but I'm on Instagram at castersemenya800m. And then I'm also on Twitter at MightyCaster and then on Facebook, I have a Facebook page where it's Caster Mokgadi Semenya. Yeah, that's where I am.

JVN // Caster, I want you to get on TikTok. It wouldn't be an episode of Getting Curious if I didn't shame our guests into getting on TikTok, but...

CASTER SEMENYA // Okay, I'll do it for you. I'll go. I'll go create one today.

JVN // But you explaining like track and field, like all like talking about the book; like book conversion is really high on TikTok.

CASTER SEMENYA // Okay!

JVN // Like you would be the shit. And like, all of these people would do write ups when you went on TikTok like "Oh, Caster Semenya's on TikTok."

CASTER SEMENYA // Let me go do that!

JVN // You could do like training stuff, you could do like sporting reviews. You can do like what you're doing at the Masai Athletics Club. You could do everything, it would be really good.

CASTER SEMENYA // Okay!

CASTER SEMENYA // I haven't thought about it. I haven't thought about it!

JVN // Get on TikTok. We really we need you on TikTok. Caster Semenya, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We love you so much; thank you for writing your book. Y'all her new memoir, *The Race to Be Myself*, is out now. Did you do the audiobook Caster?

CASTER SEMENYA // It's out, it's out there.

JVN // Did you do the audio?

CASTER SEMENYA // Audiobook is ready. Better go listen. I did my prologue and I did the prologue and then those you know that how when I appreciate everyone that has been doing then my manager did the the whole entire book. It's beautiful.

JVN // Alright go listen to it you guys get the book now. Caster, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious.

CASTER SEMENYA // Thank you. Appreciate you. God bless.

JVN // Oh, that was so good. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. You can follow us on Instagram at @curiouswithjvn. And can I just say our social work has been so good. We are just slaying over there. So give us that follow. You can catch us on here every Wednesday and make sure to tune in every Monday for alternating episodes of Curious Now and Pretty Curious. Still can't get enough, honey, neither, can I? You can subscribe to Extra Curious on Apple Podcasts for commercial free listening, and our subscription only show Ask JVN, where we're talking sex, relationships and so much more. Our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our engineer is Nathaniel McClure.



Getting Curious is produced by me, Chris McClure and Allison Weiss with production support from Julie Carillo, Anne Currie and Chad Hall.