

IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

Bringing Advocacy to the Big Leagues with Carl Nassib, Jessica Berman, and Liz Shuler

Former NFL player Carl Nassib, National Women's Soccer League commissioner Jessica Berman, and the president of the AFL-CIO Liz Shuler join Charles Blow to talk about how advocacy for players in sports is changing the game.

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome to the stage, Charles Blow.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, Host]

CHARLES BLOW: Hello. Tonight we will be discussing bringing advocacy to the big leagues about the role of player advocacy in professional sports. And I am joined by a stellar lineup. First, we have Liz Shuler, president of the AFL-CIO, Jessica Berman, commissioner of the National Women's Soccer League, and Carl Nassib, a former NFL player, tech founder and philanthropist. So this episode is about players' voices. So I'm going to start with you, Carl, because you were a player who played over 100 games in the NFL. What was one of the most impactful things in the vein of player advocacy or advocacy for players that you witnessed while you were in the league, either for yourself or for your other players?

[Carl Nassib, a tall man with blue eyes and a sandy brown hair, Former NFL player, tech founder, and philanthropist]

CARL NASSIB: Great question. Yeah. I'm Carl, I played seven years in the league. And I'm really happy to be on this panel with you guys. The thing that I really appreciated—that was kind of a combination of both players, the league, and fans—was the advocacy around brain health and concussions. When I was in college, in high school, people thought about it. They would chalk it up to like, oh, he just got, you know, the wind knocked out of him or something, you know, pretty innocuous. But as my football career progressed, the awareness around it really improved. I never had a concussion, but I've seen a lot of players get really banged up, and it's frightening. So in my career, watching all the players, you know, advocate for themselves, you see, there's no more targeting. And seeing that change, just in my career, was really, really good, and I think we'll see the benefits of that for many years to come.

CHARLES BLOW: Liz, you spent your entire career working in worker advocacy. And, for a lot of the audience, they don't even think of athletes as workers. Entertainment is different from work. But in 2022, the AFL-CIO founded the Sports Council, of which the NFL Players Association and the National Women's Soccer League are founding members. What moved you to do that at the AFL-CIO, and what are some of the accomplishments that have come out of that?

[Elizabeth H. Shuler, a white woman with blond hair and blue eyes, President of the AFL-CIO]

LIZ SHULER: Absolutely. Well, it's an honor to be on the stage with you, Charles, and of course, with Jessica and Carl. Just as a reminder, the AFL-CIO is an umbrella organization of 63 unions, nearly 15 million workers. And many of our members, of course, are employed in jobs all across the economy that you would think of. But some of them play sports. You know, the, establishing a sports council within the labor movement, there's so much we have in common—no matter what kind of work you do—you want to show up and be safe and have, you know, safety and health protections. You want to have pay and decency and respect and a voice on the job. No matter if you're, you know, a minor leaguer, that's, that's playing, or someone who gets paid a lot of money to play sports, or if you're the security guard at the stadium, or someone who's working behind the concession counter. It takes all of us to make that ecosystem work. And so we like to say, you know, work connects us all, really, because someone else's work makes your work possible. And, you know, this notion of building a community within the labor movement to, you know, provide that space for athletes was really important because there is, you know, these universal issues that really connect people together.

But I think that the best thing that I've seen happen out of the Sports Council, the AFL-CIO, is really athletes standing up for, for workers who are struggling in other industries. And I'll use one quick example: Super Bowl comes around. Everybody's eyes are on that Super Bowl, right? And there was a group of bakery workers in Los Angeles a few years ago who were struggling with getting a contract. They were asked—they were making Carvel ice cream cakes.

CARL NASSIB: I love those.

LIZ SHULER: I do too. And they were asking for a dollar more an hour. And these were mainly women, women of color, who had been working at this company for nearly 20 years on average. The line I think was going so fast, they were speeding it up. And they said, if we're going to be working harder, shouldn't we be making a little more, right? They were in contract negotiations—Nowheresville. And so what we did is the NFLPA came together with the bakery workers, and we had an event with these ice cream cake workers and football players standing together to say, "There's no justice here, right? You can do better." And sure enough, after we left that event, the company called and they went back to the table and settled the contract like two days later. So that's the power of solidarity.

CHARLES BLOW: I love any story that has an ice cream cake in it.

LIZ SHULER: Happy to provide it.

CHARLES BLOW: Jessica, because these players are workers, their relationship with the team, management, the league—really important. How do you help to facilitate that and make sure that that relationship, it works for everyone?

[JESSICA BERMAN, a white woman with light brown hair and brown eyes, wearing a brown jacket, Commissioner of the National Women's Soccer League]

JESSICA BERMAN: Thank you. And I echo everyone's sentiment. It's a pleasure to be here with you all and to share the stage. Yeah. So I'm the commissioner of the National Women's Soccer League. And interestingly, my background is that I'm actually a labor lawyer. I've always represented professional sports leagues. That's literally the only thing I've ever done in collective bargaining. So, have negotiated collective bargaining agreements in the sports space, really since 2002, on behalf of the NFL, on behalf of Major League Baseball, the NBA, ultimately now, most recently on behalf of the National Women's Soccer League with the NWSLPA, which is, a member of the AFL-CIO. You know, I think the sports industry, and I'm imagining most people in this room, aren't necessarily in the sports industry, just for a minute of context: Our business, unlike so many other businesses, is really rooted in the relationship that exists between management and labor.

And in fact, we couldn't do all of the things that everyone gets to enjoy as fans without the basic terms of a CBA being in place that is negotiated through these CBAs. The most important thing is actually that you can show up transparently, with integrity, be professional and respectful, try to understand each other's perspectives and figure out what is the most important problem to solve for yourself and for your counterparty and craft solutions around that. And, and so yeah, that's, that's pretty much what I've done my, my entire career. And most recently I've had the good fortune of being able to do that on behalf of these incredible female athletes, which has been the honor of my career.

CHARLES BLOW: Jess, staying on those athletes. You mentioned the collective bargaining agreement. You just established a historic win for the National Women's Soccer League. Talk to us about what was part of that agreement and why that helped to make those players' lives better.

JESSICA BERMAN: The most important thing that I could do in my role is, on behalf of these players, to make women's sports and the National Women's Soccer League in particular, a viable, thriving business. That is the most important thing that I can do. And luckily, we have an incredible partnership with the National Women's Soccer League Players Association. For the most part, we have alignment around a long term vision to create a league that is really the best league in the world, as we say. Not the best women's league, not the best women's soccer league, but literally the best league in the world. And in order to—thank you—

[applause]

And in order to do that, we have to build it together. It has to be in partnership. We have to look at the pie as not finite. And that's the spirit in which we approached our players association. And, we, we negotiated a really, a very player-centric agreement that has the best conditions for maternal health and for child care. We are, we like to say, like, supporting women and mothers is not a social impact issue for us. It's literally our business. Our players are mothers, literally, our players are child bearing. And they need solutions to be able to continue to play during the years that their career matters most and be able to have children. Like, none of us have to want to make these choices, and certainly a lot easier for me to have children and continue to work than it is to be a professional athlete. That was a key priority for all of us. Raising our minimum salary, raising the salary cap to be able to grow in a revenue sharing function as our revenues grow. And probably the most meaningful one for those of you who follow sports, hopefully many of you follow women's sports in the NWSL, but I'm sure you're all familiar with the concept of a draft and an entry draft. And we are the first professional sports league in America to eliminate the draft and to make all of our players full free agents.

LIZ: That was amazing.

JESSICA BERMAN: And that really was centered around this idea of giving players agency, as we call it, lowercase "a" agency around where they play when they're not under contract.

LIZ SHULER: Meghann Burke, who leads NWSLPA, Tori Huster, their president. They had a negotiating team, and a very engaged membership, a very strong union to be a partner, to sit across that table and negotiate with you. And I think that makes a big difference.

JESSICA BERMAN: We always want a formidable, smart leader at the union. It does not help us to be on the other side of the table as someone who isn't smart or savvy, and we love when the constituents actually show up, because then you actually know that you're negotiating with people who have authority to negotiate with you. So it makes it so much easier when you have that kind of buy-in on the union side. And, that was part of the key to us getting the deal done, for sure.

LIZ SHULER: It was groundbreaking.

CHARLES BLOW: Carl—your personal story. So you came out in 2021, two years before you retired. What was that experience like for you in the league and how did people respond?

CARL NASSIB: I tell people all the time, I was very lucky. I feel that I was a benefactor of a lot of people in the gay community that came before me and fought for our rights and really paved the way for people like me to do the job that they love. So my experience was great. I had the best reactions from my teammates, my friends, coaches, fans, everybody. It's like the best thing. So I'm very, very thankful. And, you know, when I came out, I incorporated the Trevor Project into my announcement because I wanted to get them in front of—Oh, yeah, clap it up for Trevor Project. I wanted to get their mission in front of people who probably never heard of them. You know what I mean? In front of sports fans who probably haven't heard of a LGBTQ organization

that helps, you know, at-risk youth. These kids need people to advocate for them. They need to feel that they're not "other." And, you know, I joined the board of the Trevor Project late last year, which has been, you know, a really rewarding experience so far. And, you know, now more than ever, gay organizations do need a lot of support. Now more than ever, they need foundational support. They need individual contributions. And, so, yeah, it just kind of feels full, so full circle to be up here, talking about how lucky I am for people that have fought for employee rights, for gay rights, for all these different things. So I just want to be like, thank you. You know, and this is, this is very, very nice.

CHARLES BLOW: Did you recognize immediately there was some things about the league as, as an advocate for yourself and for other players that might need to change to be more inclusive of more identities in the NFL?

CARL NASSIB: I do think that there is an opportunity for improvement for high school sports and college sports. I do think that they—it's not where people go to work. Right? So they don't have employee rights. You know what I mean? And so it's not where they go to earn their paycheck to feed their family. So they don't—there isn't that kind of respect. And I think that if we put a little more effort into that pipeline for not just male sports, but female sports, everything, then you'll see a lot more, gay athletes in the future. And that's something that I think would be super positive.

CHARLES BLOW: Liz, since the AFL-CIO represents so many workers, so many industries, what are some of the things that are super specific to sports and athletes that are not like other workers that you end up encountering?

LIZ SHULER: Yeah. And I was just thinking, as you know, you were talking about collective bargaining, I just wonder how many people even know these days what collective bargaining is, right? I think it's, you know, people have a vague sense of unions and, and, employers sitting across the table negotiating a contract. But the notion of a collective bargaining agreement is that, that contract that gives you the freedom to do what you do best, which is your job, and to be able to thrive in that environment.

So whether you're an athlete or, you know, someone who makes ice cream cakes, or you know, someone who's in construction or, you know, as a professional scientist, or, you know, a scientist or a teacher, you know, we want to be able to have a seat at the table, a voice, to be able to raise things that might be going wrong on the job that you fear speaking out around because, you know, in this environment, mostly people get retaliated against.

And so having a union and a collective bargaining agreement provides a process for you to actually be your best self on the job. And so I think about that with players, because you think about things like player surfaces. I know that's been a big issue across sports, and it is a safety issue. And it's something that we take very seriously in terms of negotiating protections in the contract. Things like, you mentioned maternity leave. I think too about reporting protocols when the league went through its crisis with sexual harassment, you know, you think about players

feeling like they had no where to turn, right? Well, now you've been able to negotiate something in your agreement that says, "You know what? Here's what happens. Here's what you do. Here's who you talk to," right? And, and how that gets adjudicated. And it's very transparent. And then finally, I'll just end on equal pay, because that's really what started the Sports Council and the AFL-CIO is I saw the U.S. women's national team out in front and, you know, the equal pay issue being so prevalent, and the athletes having such a powerful platform to talk about equal pay. But the labor movement have been fighting for equal pay since our inception. And so the ability for us to come together and uplift an issue that is so central to every working woman in this country.

[applause]

Yeah, you can clap for that, because we still aren't paid equally in the year 2025. But we think collective bargaining can be a tool that could be more widespread and utilized across industries, because it ends up being a win win for the employers and the workers, because when you have workers who are showing up and able to be their best selves doing their jobs, they're more productive, and the return on investment is higher. So we think that more unions, of course, is the answer. Yeah, yeah.

CHARLES BLOW: Carl, one of the things you're passionate about is financial literacy for players. Why is that so important for you as a topic?

CARL NASSIB: I've been very passionate about this for a long time. I work with the nation's leading provider of financial wellness tools to everyday Americans, Financial Finesse, understanding compounding and being a young investor and what that can do for you, you know, your career and your life and setting yourself up for generational wealth and generational opportunities. And, you know, when it comes to, you know, there's a lot of talk about, you know, the bargaining, but really hurts the NFL players, over the years and just the history, is that most of the players were never in a financial position to sit out, you know what I mean? They were, they needed that new paycheck.

So that's just like a very, you know, superficial layer that, you know, we were talking about earlier, but, it is very short-lived, the average NFL career. And the opportunity is so big. The onus is on the, is on the individual to get educated and make good decisions. Understand that life is long and retirement comes a lot quicker than you think.

CHARLES BLOW: On the other side of that, like, you know, how does the league deal with financial literacy and, and helping players to navigate the money that they're getting and how they have a longer, life—not just a career which may be short, as Carl said—but a life that is supported by the money they make.

JESSICA BERMAN: Yeah. Well, actually really excited about a program that we rolled out in 2024 called Beyond the Field, where you take players who raise their hand and say, "Yes, we want to learn more about how to be more well-rounded while we are still playing; to seize this

opportunity while we are in the limelight.” And as you know, once you retire, the opportunities that are thrown in front of you become things that you have to seek out. Not that they aren't there anymore. But while you are an active player—and I advocated for so much of this with our NHL players when I was at the National Hockey League—which is to try to help players understand, yes, your bandwidth is limited because you are a professional athlete, and literally anyone in the world would take a meeting with you today. You could call the CEO of any company. You could meet with senators, you could meet with mayors, you could meet with governors. Take advantage of the opportunity you have.

But by the way, it also helps you while you are playing. It helps you speak to media. It helps you get endorsement deals from sponsors. It helps you in so many ways to develop your leadership skills in the locker room, to make you more resilient, to make you more confident. And so, we've taken these players and actually brought together all of our sponsors to say, “Hey, can you help us curate a curriculum that will basically enhance the lives of our players?” And so one of our partners is a financial services partner, Ally Bank, is helping us and has delivered for those players a curriculum around investment, around how to manage your money. Finally, now our players actually have money to manage, which is exciting. Just four short years ago, I think, five years ago, I think our players were making like \$5,000 a year, which is insane. And they all had side jobs and were very distracted. I'm sure you remember those days.

LIZ SHULER: No more side hustles.

JESSICA BERMAN: No more side hustles. Yeah, that was, that's what I walked into. It was like, “Okay, we have some work to do here.” But yeah, I mean, I really think it's just our responsibility, candidly, as a professional sports league to leverage the power of our partners to enhance the lives of our players while they are still playing. And because these resources did not exist five years ago, we've actually made an intentional effort to outreach to our former players who really built this league but didn't have the opportunity to play in it while it was an actual business that generated revenue that could actually pay them a livable wage. And so we're in the process of building that out and bringing our partners along on the journey.

CHARLES BLOW: Liz now that the NIL agreements are able to be entered into by people in college, even high school, what is the unionization prospects for people, for those, those groups of people, young people, possibly high school.

LIZ SHULER: Yeah. I think there is a conversation to be had about what a model looks like for the future that puts workers at the center, that they can end up having agency and, you know, some voice and control in that process. Because, I think, Carl said it was sort of like the Wild West. And we think, gosh, the model of collective bargaining could really apply here. You know, if you could have a consortium of players that really took the power into their own hands, right, and be able to, have their own voice and their own standing. I don't know what that looks like for the future, right? And all I know is that being in a union gives you a place for collective action. We're in the business of collective action. And I know the NFL Players Association has done an incredible job. You know, using that scale to negotiate better benefits for their players, and other

athletes organizations do as well. But, you know, the labor movement has been in this collective action business a long time. You think about a hundred years ago when workers were trying to find training to access the skills that they needed in whatever industry they were in. The unions, the guilds, you know, professionalized that work and, and was a place where workers could go and they could trust that they weren't, you know, in a predatory environment that someone was trying to play them.

You know, it was, it's more like, no, these are workers, these—this is us. Right? So whether it's training and upskilling, whether it's collecting your, your pension moneys and amassing that and investing it at scale so that you can influence the economy. I think there's just a limitless potential for the way new models could be created. You know, as these industries are evolving.

CHARLES BLOW: Carl, you are also in tech business. You founded Rayze, an app that connects nonprofits, businesses, donors and volunteers more efficiently. What inspired you in that space?

CARL NASSIB: Yeah. Rayze is the best. Rayze is my baby. And I was volunteering one day, and I realized that, you know, giving back to your community needs to be a lot more easy, and, and quick and without friction. And so when I was playing with the Buccaneers, I kind of first thought about the idea of—it was about five years ago. And then it kind of snowballed into this ecosystem to where I learned more about, the, you know, the philanthropy industry as a whole. I think for the nonprofit people in here, everyone understands that finding new donors, new volunteers, individuals, is, as you know, as difficult as it's ever been. We really need to support our local nonprofits. And so I wanted to make that process as, you know, easy as possible. We now incorporate corporate giving—corporations only account for 6% of all donations to nonprofits. And so we need to get that number way—I know people think that it's 75%. It's actually only 6%. And, you know, you mentioned something about, like, after the, you know, after your, your sport career is over, I do feel very, you know, blessed that I do have a next chapter. And it's been very, very exciting.

CHARLES BLOW: So if I have \$100.

CARL NASSIB: Yeah.

CHARLES BLOW: I want to give it to, you know, somewhere we'll make an impact. How does Rayze help me do that?

CARL NASSIB: Yeah. So what's really good for the individual, we really put the individual first. On Rayze, you can donate to, I think, 1.8 million nonprofits. We have over 80,000 volunteering opportunities you can get. If your company is on board, you get them to match it. We just instituted, your own personal donor advised fund called the, the Rayze wallet, to where you can put money, let it grow, for all those, finance people out there. So the benefit of it is, for the individual, you make all your donations from one place. And then when tax season comes around, you can, you know, export all your donations in an email, send it to your, to your, you

know, your accountant. There it is. And it makes it very, very easy to get involved quickly, but do it, you know, in a savvy way, financially.

CHARLES BLOW: I'm downloading Rayze.

CARL NASSIB: You guys go download it.

CHARLES BLOW: As I get off this stage. It is R-A-Y-Z-E.

CARL NASSIB: Yes. All right. Rayze, go volunteer. Okay. And also give to the Trevor Project.

CHARLES BLOW: Liz, I wanted to ask you how tech plays a role in your organizing. You know, I can imagine it. It plays a huge role. But tell us about that.

LIZ SHULER: Yeah, well, we use a lot of tech tools, ourselves, to actually organize them and really democratize the use of technology for people on the ground who want to form unions. I mean, just you and a coworker is all it takes, right? In your workplace. And, so we have a tool, called Action Builder that we use that's mobility driven, that enables people to, kind of, you know, map out their worksites and who their coworkers are that they can join together with.

Our laws are so broken now, our labor laws, it takes a real act of courage to form a union, because often people are fired when they try to form a union. It's sometimes a very high risk proposition. And, so, you know, tech tools are enablers and technology can be used for good, but it can also be used for evil, right? This notion of, you know, algorithmic management that we're seeing in some workplaces, to monitor every second, you know, of a worker's environment or, predictive analytics that are actually, you know, instituting forms of discrimination. And so we think that tech needs guardrails and that unions can actually be, and our collective bargaining, be a vehicle for making sure workers have a voice in how technology is used in the workplace. But also we can use technology for good to enable and help lift up the power of workers to join together and form unions.

CHARLES BLOW: So, Jessica, your season is starting again. How has the league and, you know, player advocacy grown since you've been at the helm?

JESSICA BERMAN: I think for the first time, female athletes in this country—finally—can be supported the way men have been for so long, to be able to train and play in professional work environments and actually perform at their best, and imagine a world where that is the case for future generations. What we're seeing today and what is now taking the world by storm with women's hockey and women's soccer and women's basketball and women's golf. This is the product of an entire generation of these athletes training and playing in environments that you wouldn't send your children to go and train or play in, and they're still that good. Imagine 10, 15 years from now where we finally now have the investment and the resources for these players to be able to thrive as professional athletes, the platform they will have if they choose to use it,

to be able to advocate for even more change beyond what they do just by kicking a ball is what I'm so excited about, and hopefully my children will get to enjoy.

CHARLES BLOW: Great. While we're on that high note of what could happen in the future. Liz, Carl, do either of you have something that you see coming in the future that you're really excited about in the world of player advocacy?

LIZ SHULER: I am excited about women's sports, where it's going, and the women athletes who have stepped up and taken enormous risks and shown such strength to make it succeed. And I just see the activism on the rise. They're willing to speak out, and from a worker perspective, I think about the solidarity that women athletes have shown in particular, to workers all across the economy and nine in 10 young people under the age of 30 support unions. That's recent polling. It's a high of like, you know, 60 years. The popularity of unions is really surging. And so I see these women athletes, especially in the next generation, being strong union members, getting out there, speaking out, speaking their truth and, you know, doing it unabashedly and, and they're unafraid. And so, I just, that gives me great hope.

CARL NASSIB: I mean to echo that, I've, you know, been somebody who's been a beneficiary of immense allyship and I, you know, leaving the NFL, I, you know, saw the growth of women being employed at, you know, a major, major roles, right? It's really, really important that women have allies and that that's not just them fighting for their rights. It's, you know, male coaches, players having respect for their careers, for, for their acumen and for their talents. So I that, that's what really excites me.

CHARLES BLOW: Let's give our guests a big round of applause.

[applause]

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