

SPORT FOR ALL: WOMEN AND GIRLS DIVERSITY
Rome, Italy

It is with great honor and my deepest gratitude to be with you today. Thank you to His Holiness Pope Francis, Santiago, and Monsignor Melchor for creating the Declaration on Sport and curating the Summit. Sport For All . It is a privilege today to speak to the subject of women and girls in the world of sport.

In preparation, research and reflection for today I share a deep appreciation and gratitude for the perspectives and articulations that have emerged from all your shared knowledge, experience, and wisdom. You have significantly broadened my views and commitment to the “Tie that Binds” us all.

I have a combined thirty-five years in the National Football League as a woman, and wife to first a professional football player, presently coach’s wife and mother to three daughters and one whom were all high-level athletes. We as a collective group have the power to forward the social cohesion and develop a widened visibility for inclusion and discrimination of women and girls. Our messages and words hold substance and can be tailored into compassionate and compelling works in a space where difficult words are necessary. Engaging in what has been lacking in programs and policy changes within our clubs, teams, schools, universities and organizations that sustain our women and girls as relevant leaders and inspire them to educate the next generation. They are an essential component for balance on so many levels. When organizations and family units have great awareness, invest in each other, trust, and inclusiveness is present, championships happen. I have witnessed it. There are champions in this room that know when all the stars line up, it is a feeling that you just know is undeniable. This balance happens when we keep ongoing dialogue with not just the athlete or coach, but the women, children and families that are a key component of a team and organizations. Awareness of physical and mental health for all, support, and dedication for that championship. Transforms the world around us. To best challenge you to action to level the playing field for women and girls in sport, please allow me to articulate where I come from in this world of sport.

Contrary to what most believe about the stereotypical woman or partner of a sport celebrity there is a huge misperception of a glamorous life. We have been employed by eleven teams, that is 1/3 of the entire National Football League, a professional athlete and now coach. As a result, we moved 42 times with four children. Our son Luke was born on a gameday, 45 minutes after his father finished a game. One week later, my newborn son was presented from the team a “very

coveted game football” (which was normally given only once a week after each game to the best performance by a football player and only after a victory) With fine calligraphy the ball read Luke Edward Del Rio, his birthdate, the winning score and in large print

“Waited for Dad to finish the Game”.

Somewhere in there I thought “Where’s my game ball?”

The hard truths of what our children and families endure with regards to the extent of bullying, vulnerability and inclusiveness could be categorized as a “silent disability.”

There were times I kept my children home from school after a loss to protect them from the regurgitated opinions and conversations from school mates, parents, friends, and yes even educators. In interviewing my now grown three daughters and son about their experiences growing up in the ‘bubble’ of having a father who was a former Hall of Fame baseball and football player at University of Southern California and then NFL player and coach. I was astounded to hear their comments as they described the lessons and wisdom, they gained from us through sport.

They all expressed how it has shifted the way they looked at their lives today. For example: one of my daughters said her dad had told her” To visualize seeing the volleyball at the target before I hit the ball. As a mother and career woman now, I visualize the same with any challenge in my adult life. “

Another daughter said she learned how to be a better teammate by encouraging others, but that also taught her lessons of not being affected to external identities through the wins and losses, but to balance it all every day. She went on to say-

“The ignorance of bullying happened almost every day to me and my siblings, when I felt it was so personal and I wanted to cry I would say my dad and I don’t get much time together during football season so could you please stop sharing your comments.”

My son who presently is a coach with the NFL explained that when he is questioned by the media about being uprooted and relocated geographically so many times, he articulates how it has greatly helped him accept and encourage,

diversity and inclusion. He embraces the best of where he is stationed in the present and his experiences and exposure to life challenges are easier to navigate because of his life in sports.

Being a mentor when called upon is powerful, in sport and in life, as we see our opportunities grow through our knowledge, wisdom and experience we must push through our comfort zones. With new initiatives the National Football league has expanded opportunities for women to secure jobs in American Football by creating the Women's Forum to connect women in entry level college football roles with NFL General Managers, Head coaches, and Team Owners. The forum is much like this summit with panel discussions, presentations, and breakout sessions. Women participants get an exclusive look into all aspects of the sport.

As these women are hired and begin to be in positions of decisions at the top echelons of sports continued success and longevity of females in sport will become the norm. Factors like abuse and harassment in sport have been a deterrent but by implementing policies in the NFL to safeguard our girls and women.

In sport women are discriminated against in access, wages, safety, representation and respect. We all are aware of women athletes having to hide pregnancies or schedule them so sponsors and team contracts would not freeze or be voided. Change needs to happen on the field, in organizations and legislation passed to protect the discrimination of women and girls especially in vulnerable situations. Attentive listening and awareness of what really is going on in families and teams require all of us to be engaged and committed to building healthy relationships through authenticity to go beyond and reach the real joy of sport.

As a couple in Professional Sports in the position of head coach my husband and I strived to include women and families into the career of our athletes, staff, partners, coaches. It was a vital component in the plan and road to striving to reach the goal of Championships. We acknowledged this supports the balance of a team and we were keenly aware of the weight these women and families were under during a season.

I had the opportunity and honor to host and welcome these women before the season began. Most of them had just arrived in the city, knew no one, but were strong courageous very accomplished women forging their own path despite putting their careers on hold for sport. Giving them an example of their young lifespan, I used my life experience in sports as, first a girlfriend of a professional football player, then wife, then mother of four children, to create a common thread in conversation. This is a pivotal moment of knowledge for them as strong women and an opportunity to make a difference while they held the audience. Most importantly a voice in moving the chains for equality, inclusion, and dignity for women and girls. They also take on higher vulnerability and bullying in their new world of professional sports. We talk about the challenge of setting the bar high for achieving change, making a difference in giving back through philanthropy. Opportunities arise to globally give back, engaging in a community in countries games are played. By encouraging them to connect, network and find the need. Sometimes the problem is as basic as access to sport. My daughter and I reached out with organizations in Mexico City when we played two international games to provide sporting needs for thousands of children underserved and under resourced. In cooperation and through the generosity of sport partners our foundation and the team, we left uniforms, balls, sporting gear, transportation, and building funds and supplied tickets for the children and chaperones for the games.

We here are multinational, speak different languages, live different cultures, traditions, and beliefs, but the one topic we all agree on is love heals. We can connect and support each other by the stories we tell and lives we have lived through sport. Most of us have experience Covid fatigue but we as leaders must move forward with being purposeful with our commitment to the declaration Pope Francis is gifting us. Sport for All “The central role of women and girls in sport, is essential to the promotion of social cohesion and integral development.”

Women have been grossly underrepresented in all operations in the sporting world. I have experienced this myself as a sideline photographer witnessing a void of women photographers, the stadium media rooms are still a “boys club” of non-inclusion for women photographers. May we not forget a women’s keen eye view through a lens of a camera as a daughter, sister, mother and sportsperson.

As leaders what we say, how we say it, the tone, body language is all interpreted differently by our cultures, and influences. We all have awareness of the reality of inequality in all areas of sport pertaining to women and girls and these are charged with great challenges. We can achieve the advancement of women in the world of sports through the examples I mentioned, along with perseverance, role modeling, and educating women and girls so our next generation is making a significant impact. Reevaluate when you return home to break barriers. Follow women sports and sport figures on social media, like their post and comment. From an early age encourage your children to play and follow women's sports that champion women. Attend sporting events and interact in season and off season with your favorite female athlete or sport event. Pay attention to the female teams or the teams and sponsors starting the dialogue that leads to change. The higher we engage in supporting women and girls the quicker we all reach our potential. When we engage teams, workplaces, and companies, on a higher level and model the pure essence of who you really are and what you stand for it creates a groundswell. So together let's open the door, pave the path, change discrimination to make women and girls identical in their rights and invest in the future of a more peaceful, inclusive and most of all loving and joyful global world of sport. Remembering we ALL are "The Tie that Binds"

Thank you for your time and presence