



GameChangers
Season 1: Episode 2
Laura Youngson

Seth: Welcome to GameChangers, the show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who have taken the road less travelled, and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson.

Laura: It's a bit of a process as opposed to, "I must be an entrepreneur, and I must have a unicorn business in a year," which is kind of virtually impossible. It puts a lot of pressure on. Lean in, have a little tinker around, and take the pressure off.

Seth: Sport, it's something that brings people, cities, and countries together. We live through our teams' highs and lows, feeling their victories and losses. We worship heroes, and celebrate the underdog. But on and off the field, sport fails in its representation of women. It's an issue that has taken our next guest around the globe to break world records, and driven her to create a new football boot specially engineered for the female foot.

Seth: We're kicking things off with Laura Youngson.

Laura: Yeah, where do you want to start?

Seth: I think perhaps kick off with Equal Playing Field. Tell us a bit about that.

Laura: A few years ago, I just, as you do, got really frustrated with some of the inequality that I saw happening in the sports world. The men's team ultimately gets funded, the women's team don't. You're like, "Oh, we're doing this again," and for some reason that just triggered this little spark in me, and I decided that I wanted to do something about it. So, then embarked on this crazy journey, and took a bunch of women to the top of Kilimanjaro, and we played the world's highest soccer match, and got a Guinness world record. Then that started this wild journey of more world records, essentially creating a social change movement, which has been pretty cool.

Seth: Correct me if I'm wrong, but you currently hold two world records, and you're about to go for a third.

Laura: Yeah, that's right. Off the back of the highest altitude match, we got invited to play the lowest altitude match at the Dead Sea in Jordan. I went there in March this year. Everyone asks us, "What's next?" At that point, we're like, "Probably should keep doing this world record thing." We've cooked up a pretty ambitious plan for the World Cup, next year, in France, the Women's World Cup. We're going to play the world's biggest soccer match, three and a half thousand athletes from around the globe.

Laura: Not on the pitch at the same time, to clarify. Because people are like, "But the pitch won't fit everyone." More so, 11 a side, roll on, roll off subs, apparently the game's going to last five days.

Seth: Wow. For 24 hours ...

Laura: 24 hours a day, you've got have referees, you've got to have subs. It's going to be pretty big for the fourth official.

Seth: What's the tryout process like? How is that people are ending up on these teams?

Laura: What we've done is, we've just put the call out to people around the world. We've had about 500 athletes sign up already to take part in the game, so a little way to go, but it's amazing. The coolest part is we've had 63 nationalities sign up to be part of this experience. Really women and men from around the world, coming together to play.

Seth: Equal Playing Field is about more than the records themselves, though. Do you want to rap on that a little bit?

Laura: I think one of the things we saw is the women's game is really underserved and underfunded. What frustrated us about so many things, the lack of opportunities, the equal pay ... It's ridiculous. I don't know if you know that. The Matildas get \$12,000 a year.

Seth: Wow, really?

Laura: It's so lame. Actually ... And respect. So, having more stories in the media. I think one of the stats that I read recently is that there's three percent of sports stories are about women, which is pretty shocking. You can't be what you can't see. One of the things we campaign on is looking at how do we create more opportunities for girls to play? Because [inaudible] ramifications, great health benefits, more likely to stay in school, you're more likely to end up in the board room as a CEO, if you've played sport.

Laura: Can we at least get a little bit more equality in pay? Some of the national teams have already started doing it. New Zealand's done it. Then, the third thing, can you get more stories out there about women who play sport? Because it's kind of a normal thing, and yet we don't see it. That's what we focus on. And world records. It's great to generate that kind of excitement, and we're able to talk about a lot of these other social issues.

Seth: It's really about creating cultural change through that visibility?

Laura: For sure. I'm building a network of women. One of the coolest parts of Equal Playing Field is, once we bring people together, they're creating their own friendships against the network of support. We have lots of people asking each other for help, and working out ... The best thing is actually seeing that everyone has kind of the same problems, and this is how you tackle it, and this is how you can make change.

Seth: I imagine that that network has been particularly valuable when it comes to recruiting players for the next world record attempt.

Laura: Yeah, for sure. It's the question of, "All right, call up your mates," do you fancy doing another world record? Yep. "Tell your friends, great." We've now had teams getting in touch with us from some of the coolest places, like the Somalian team got in touch recently, and they want to come and play. We're just trying to figure out how we can do that.

Seth: Exactly. I imagine you'll have to split them up. You can't have them all playing at once against a team of amateur players, for example.

Laura: We're doing a bit of work on the scheduling so that you end up playing ... because we've got lots of kids playing, as well. Getting kids ... getting a roughly matched team, but still being able to play against someone from the other side of the globe. Whether you're a Norwegian team and you get to play against a Lebanese team. That's the coolest part of having that cross-cultural experience through the language of football.

Seth: I guess the big part of that ... Tell me how these two projects tie together ... is your other project, which is Ida, which, I think came about seeking to create a football boot that actually suits the female foot.

Laura: Yes. It's something that's always annoyed me. I love playing, but I've always had to wear kid's boots when I play. They don't fit very well, and it's terribly uncool to be wearing 12-year-old boy shoes. Actually, one of the things I found was that most football boots are made for men and boys, and labelled unisex, obviously, unisex never means womens'. So, a lot of players were telling us, "Yeah, we get blisters. We have issues with the boots." They've already tried all the big-name brands, and nothing fits, so set out to create a boot specifically for women.

Seth: Did that come before or after you became involved with Equal Playing Field?

Laura: I actually had the epiphany on the mountain. We were climbing up Kilimanjaro. I'm sort of going along like, "I've got to wear these kid's boots again," and then started talking to these other players. Because we had players from about 30 nationalities and, "Is this a problem where you're from?" "Yeah." "What shoes are you wearing?" "Mens'." "Oh, okay." Really started to pull together this light bulb moment of, "Oh, this is a problem," and then, "We can do something about this."

Seth: So, to do something about that, you kind of went through this really innovative process, where I believe that was where you were part of the Melbourne Master of Entrepreneurship, I should say, sorry. Is that correct?

- Laura: Really using design thinking skills, and lots of very much the lean methodology. How do you build, measure and learn from what you're doing in the fastest cycle possible, so you can use your resources really effectively. We've done things like prototype with 3D printers to create the outsoles to be able to test as fast as possible. Using different materials, or just thinking creatively and differently about who is this really a problem for. How can we solve this in the best possible way? Even going wider than, "To solve this problem, is it a shoe we're creating? Do we have to change how we market to women?"
- Laura: A lot of that really deep thinking is super useful at the beginning, because it means you can move so much faster once you actually get to the point where you're creating the solution, and you can kind of run.
- Seth: We've spoken before, and I believe when we met previously you were kind of at the period where the product had been developed, and you were looking at crowdfunding, and marketing, and getting the shoe out there, into the world. I'm really curious to know, how did that process go?
- Laura: Really interestingly, we ran a crowd funder in June, and actually raised about \$20,000, but it wasn't enough. So, we had to then give it all back. One of the biggest things we learned from doing it is ... It was quite funny, actually. One of the professors, when I told him I was a crowd funder, he said, "Oh, so you're just doing massive validation tests?" I was like, "No, we're trying to get money." Then at the end, you're like, "We were just doing a massive validation test. Fair enough." Always listen to your professors.
- Laura: The best thing we found out from it was actually women really wanted to try the boots on. They support the project, love the project, but I want to know how it fits on my foot.
- Seth: Just not the blind buy.
- Laura: Exactly. What we did then is, went back to the drawing board and we spent a long time creating a prototype boot that's really true to fit. We've now created our own IP, and been testing the latest iteration of boots of athletes in Melbourne, and got really good feedback from that. That's helped us now as we move towards the production run.
- Seth: Is it a slightly more localized project than it was previously?
- Laura: What we've done actually, is because Melbourne is this beautiful home of sports, it has a really high urban density of clubs, especially a lot of women playing lots of different sports, so AFL, football, soccer, rugby, sevens, touch, ultimate Frisbee, all those kind of sports. Using Melbourne is a really great proving ground for what we're doing. People are really invested in the project here, but we know then we can take it global. It's almost you have to be hyper local, but always thinking global. Australia has such a good reputation for sports tech, and the sports industry, they always place well at the Olympics. The Matildas are doing phenomenally. So, to come from Melbourne is really an incredible place to be. Especially, the boot's made out of kangaroo leather, so there's an extra tie in, and everything.

Seth: Diversifying a little bit. Tell me about Brunswick Aces, which is one of your other projects.

Laura: Whilst I was doing the course at Uni Melb ... Along with our neighbours, we decided one day that we'd start a gin company. Made it, sort of getting ready to this. Then suddenly had this epiphany that there's actually a lot of people not drinking, something like 24% of Australians don't drink, and the numbers increasing. Whilst we were looking around, my husband was training for a marathon, he was kind of fed up with having lemon lime fizzers, and his friends got to drink. So, we decided that we'd create a non-alcoholic spirit company.

Laura: Set it up, true start in your garage project, and then grow, and grow. We launched ... We've been trading for about a year now. Just had such a phenomenal response from people all over Australia who are looking for something different.

Seth: Again, a business that kind of started very local and has kind of expanded.

Laura: Yeah. A very organic growth, I think. It's one of the biggest things I learned this year is about having your customers ... really designing for your customers. Our customers are literally pulling the product out of our hands faster than we can make it, which is a great position to be in. That's where we're wanting to get to with the boots. We start selling again soon, and it's been having that desire from the customers, you know you're really making something that serves a need in their lives. You're not trying to force a product or push a product, because there won't be any longevity to your business.

Seth: It's great you mentioned the connection between that, having a take away from one business which you can apply to another. Because my next question was going to be, how do you find juggling these different projects?

Laura: I do sleep, in case you're wondering. I think one thing that I found, I spend a lot of time building teams. I outsource quite a lot of stuff, especially the tasks that I'm really not good at. One of my mentors was talking about strengths and weaknesses, and she was like, "Don't worry about your weaknesses, they'll hold you back anyway. So focus on your strengths, and get someone else to help you with your weaknesses." A lot of the tasks for Equal Playing Field, we have a team around the world, team specializing in communications, in programming, monitoring and evaluation, things like that. They really bring things together, and my focus is operations and the logistics that come from the sports world.

Laura: Doing that and being able to empower your teams to keep running and doing things is super important, and enables me to do the thing I'm best at, which is the strategic vision like, "Hey, we're going to go climb a mountain, and play a soccer match."

Seth: It's all about community thinking and building connection that way.

Laura: For sure. I think if you've got really invested teams, really happy people, you can be greater than the sum of your parts. You end up creating something that has this huge impact, when you've just brought a bit of you to the project.

Seth: How do you organize your day to balance all your projects?

Laura: I'm really good at triaging. Each morning, kind of list out what I'm looking at for the day, and really hitting off those big tasks first. Getting yourself set up so you get the win of the morning. You're like, "Yeah, I've done it," and it means you can do all sorts of other tasks. I'm also ... What I've learned a lot about in the past few years is knowing when I'm really productive. In the early afternoons, not very useful, I kind of mess around.

Laura: Often with our sports company, go and play a bit of sport because you've got too much energy, and you've got things to do. Whereas, in the morning, I'm really good at writing out proposals, and getting work done. Knowing yourself, and knowing when you work best means that you can start to schedule your day. I also say no to pretty much all meetings. If it's super important, we can pick up the phone and have a chat, but getting rid of a lot of time, getting rid of social media ... go on it for a set time. You tend to waste a lot of time, as well. Being more efficient and really prioritizing what you want to get done. That's kind of how I do it.

Seth: You mentioned the win at the beginning there, do you try to give yourself a guaranteed win every day?

Laura: Yes. It's a little bit cheating, but it really helps psychologically. You've got a task ... Either it's going to be a tough task that you know is going to be a pain, and you've really got to work on that, and put in some hours, or it's something that you can knock off really easily, and you're like, "Yes, got it," right, rolling into the next one. It's like scoring a little goal. Once you've got that first goal, it breaks the deadlock and off you go.

Seth: You have the world record coming up. Obviously, that's a huge thing on the horizon. What kind of other future plans and goals do you have lined up?

Laura: I think world records are pretty big, so [crosstalk] We have a vague plan to do seven world records, seven continents, seven years. We'll see how we go. Might have to do Glastonbury, and lie fallow for a year. It's kind of building on the momentum we've built, and continue to expand that network, and provide opportunities for female athletes. Then, with the shoes, really launching and getting the boots on the feet of players. That's going to be super exciting for me, just to be able to see people running around in the shoes we created.

Seth: Ideally seeing the players in your world records wearing the boots as well.

Laura: That would be the dream. Lots of hard work to get there, but I reckon.

Seth: Do you have any advice for students who are finishing, whether they're undergrad or graduate, and thinking about maybe kind of treading their own path?

Laura: I think what's interesting is ... One of the things I've realized, it's not necessarily a binary decision, like, "I must go into a corporate job, or I must do entrepreneurship." I think it's very much this thing where you can test the water on a small project. We talk about the minimum viable product for businesses. What's the least thing you can do to get out there in front of your customers? If you take your career in that same way, if you're interested in something, can you do a little something to see if you're more interested in that than another thing.

Laura: I liken it to, you start leaning over towards, perhaps an event horizon of a black hole. You're sort of leaning, and leaning, and leaning. Then eventually you'll just tip head first into entrepreneurship, or you'll tip head first into corporate. It's a bit of a process, as opposed to going, "I must be an entrepreneur, and I must have a unicorn business in a year," which is kind of virtually impossible and puts a lot of pressure on. Biggest advice, lean in and have a little ... have a tinker around, and take the pressure off. Because you'll end up where you need to be eventually.

Seth: Yeah, that's brilliant. I have one last question for you, before we let you go. Which is one that we ask all of our guests before we wrap things up. What's one thing that's not on your resume that you think has helped get you to where you are today?

Laura: That's a good question. I think one thing that isn't reflected on resumes is empathy in people. The jobs that I list on my resume have incredible stories behind them. I've been very fortunate, I've said yes to a lot of opportunities. I got to travel around the world and meet lots of different people. I think the experience of having to connect with people in other cultures, and other languages, and other locations ... when you're out of your comfort zone, doing lots of different things, it really sets me up for then, I meet anyone and I'm able to talk to them.

Laura: To be able to put yourself in their shoes, and have that empathy to connect with what the other person's feeling, and what do they want out of a particular situation. That helps with business, that helps with relationships, that helps with anything that you're trying to do, if you're selling yourself, or if you're wanting to get at the next project, or having a job interview. That empathy, and the connection with people, you don't get that when you're reading a resume, right.

Laura: To be able to think of ... There's other ways to convey that and express that. The more you can do it, the more you'll be prepared for any situation, any person. Also bringing that perspective into any conversation you're going to have with someone that you're connecting with, because that's super important, and it helps you get off on the right foot straight away.

Seth: Brilliant. Laura Youngson, thank you for joining us, so much. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you.

Laura: Thank you.

Seth: Cheers.

Seth: This has been GameChangers. I've been your host, Seth Robinson. GameChangers is recorded by Chris Hatzis and produced by Sophie Thomas.