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Redbird Buzz Episode 4: Chris Voelz, Summer 2021

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Illinois State University

Chris Voelz

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 4: Chris Voelz

June 2022

Speaker 1 00:00

This conversation was recorded in the summer of 2021.

Nick Erickson 00:12

Welcome to Redbird Buzz. I'm Nick Erickson of University Marketing and Communications. As a child growing up in Chicago, Chris Voelz played all the sports. She loved to compete, and she had a brother who shared her passions. But once they got older, Voelz started to realize the differences in opportunity for men's and women's athletics. She couldn't understand why her brother could enroll in seemingly any sport, but she couldn't. Voelz, a 1970 Physical Education graduate, has dedicated her life's work to making sure other little girls aren't denying those same opportunities. A four-sport athlete at Illinois State, Voelz was inducted into the Illinois State Athletics Percy Family Hall of Fame in 1982. A distinguished alum, her work as a coach, administrator, leader and advocate has helped open the doors for generations of female athletes today.

As an undergrad at Illinois State, she served on the Student Athlete Advisory Board and knocked on the doors of administrators to advocate for the women athletes on campus. She would go on to coach volleyball at the University of Oregon from 1978 to 1988, serving as Associate Athletics Director at that time, but she felt a bigger calling than serving just one team. Voelz took on a larger role fighting against injustices, and served as a Women's Athletic Director at the University of Minnesota from 1988 until 2002. She set attendance, academic, fundraising and performance records in the Twin Cities, while also building eight athletic facilities and adding three sports. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* rated her as the 22nd most important sports figure of the century in Minnesota. Voelz co-authored the NCAA guidelines on gender equity, and she has served as the executive director of the Collegiate Women in Sports Awards since 2012. She received a lifetime achievement award from the National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators, and *Fitness* magazine once recognized her as one of the top 10 influential people in women's sports. Chris is still a proud Redbird and gathers every year at the NCAA Women's Final Four with a group of friends she made at ISU. We are Redbird Proud of Chris. And without further ado, here she is to discuss her journey and how Illinois State helped shape her career of fighting for social justice.

Nick Erickson 02:42

Chris Voelz, Class of 1970, has been one of the most influential voices for women and sports and we are lucky enough to be joined by her today on Redbird Buzz. Chris, thank you so much for being here. How are you and what's the word, Redbird?

Chris Voelz 02:57

Hey, the word is gratitude. I am so grateful that Illinois State reached out and on this occasion of a 50th anniversary [of the passage of Title IX] gives me an opportunity to say thank you to ISU and also gratitude for having been a Redbird. So thanks for your interest.

Nick Erickson 03:19

You are now the executive director of the Collegiate Women's Sports Awards, a role that you had since 2012. And you also run Athletics Plus, which is a consulting business focused on educational opportunities for women in sports. Could you just explain to listeners what both of those roles entail?

Chris Voelz 03:37

Sure. And I've got to make sure my colleagues know because my most of my teammates and classmates at Illinois State have long retired, but I have re-wired. And in my re-wiring, after many years of serving on the board of the Collegiate Women's Sports Awards presented by Honda I became their second ever in 45 years executive director. And it's really, it's the women's Heisman, but in 12 sports. And any of you who are curious, please go to the website at Collegiate Women's Sports Awards. But Nick, it was really a time in my career where I get to identify and celebrate, build collaborative relationships all over the nation to support this program, rather than, you know, just building and advocating and persuading, which was so much of my career. So it's more fun than work but it's a way I can still give back and hopefully a way I can still make a small difference.

Nick Erickson 04:45

How did your love for sports, how did that all begin, if we can take you way back down memory lane. Just what was some of your first memories of, you know, of athletics?

Chris Voelz 04:54

Yeah, I just, I just played. You know, I think most people are athletes, we're prone to love playing and movement and sport. And I played as a child, always encouraged by my parents to do what we loved. And that included making a little league baseball team when the coaches thought, Chris and Jeff (my older brother) were twins. Well, actually, that's when I went from being called Christie to Chris and cut my hair so I could make the team and, and that was just one of the experiences. I loved sport, whether it was backyard football, or basketball, or baseball or tennis. And my parents were athletic and educated and they just, they saw it pretty much as an avocation and as an interest or a hobby. Little did they know, I'd be sticking with it the rest of my career in life.

Nick Erickson 05:52

And you certainly did at Illinois State. I mean, you played a year of golf, two years of softball, four years of volleyball and basketball. I mean, was it as hectic as it all sounds? And just how did you manage the time?

Chris Voelz 06:06

I think "manage" is the operative word there. Manage time, manage priorities. When you love what you're doing, it's really easy to do it. I was fortunate to be a good student and really did not have a lot of rivaling interests, except I will admit for tipping my toe into protests during the Vietnam War, where we

had lots going on on our campus and University of Illinois. But make no mistake, compared to today, I was able to go from season to season, and from coach to coach rather than having to select one sport and staying with it the entirety of the year and summer. So I thought that was an advantage because I did play with different teammates, I learned from different coaches, yet always staying fit and disciplined and active. But there was never a dull moment, I can attest to that.

Nick Erickson 07:06

I bet, I bet, I can't even imagine. But you've had, you know, a career of leadership and athletics and you relate - you were a part of the Student Athlete Advisory Board for both Illinois State University and the State of Illinois during your time here. What did you gain from those experiences?

Chris Voelz 07:06

Yeah. Well, you know, first I have to give a nod to Dr. [G. Laurene "Laurie"] Mabry and Dr. [Phebe M.] Scott. You know, first my basketball coach and advisor, and in charge of intercollegiate athletics, and then latter, Dr. Scott, our department chair [Head of the Department of Health and Physical Education for Women]. I first served on the WRA Board, and that was a Women Recreation Association, and then when the Intercollegiate Board was created I worked as the president with my mentor, Dr. Mabry, and Dr. Scott later selected me to represent us on the Applied Science and Technology Advisory Board with the dean. So it was empowering. It was a time of growth, it was a wonderful experience in leadership training. It was a time at a young age where you could make mistakes and enjoy the learning. You could, you were put in positions, maybe above your pay grade, and you had so many administrators, coaches and teachers who believed in me and believed in us. And you know, you find out you never - you're not really a leader unless you have followers and I had the good fortune of being able to both lead and follow. And so it was of essential importance for me to have those formative developmental years experiencing in leadership to really set my foundation for the rest of my career.

Nick Erickson 09:05

So speaking of administrators at ISU, you mentioned a couple, but rumor has it, Chris, you have a story about a former president Bone.

Chris Voelz 09:15

Right. Right. Exactly. I have one I want to tell about President - I mean, Dr. Mabry as well, but let me start with President Bone. The rumor is true. My first year and second year at Illinois State I was in in Atkin-Colby [Residence Hall] and I did not understand why we needed to have a dress code to eat, why we needed to have ours and the men did not have any of the sort. So I made my way over to President Bone's office and sat with him and told him what my opinion was and he listened and was gracious and he said his door was always open to students. So I made sure that I went through that door several times. So then later I was with somebody in Athletics and they saw me on campus and I waved to President Bone and he said, Hey, Chris, how are you doing? So they pulled me in, this was Dr. Scott and Dr. Mabry, and they said, Chris, you're just the one. Would you go over and talk to the president about facilities for women's sports? I said, Sure, yeah! I understand we're in McCormick Hall and there's not much place, we run - when we score a basket, we run into the wall, and we have nobody there to watch us because we're not in the Field House like the men are. Well, of course, I would go

over and visit the good president and he would say, Oh, Chris, you know, we're going to do this in good time.

Chris Voelz 10:51

So let me just try and make this tighter, but you know, I mean, I've lived this over years. So my senior year, I'm receiving my diploma and he stepped into the line to give me mine, which was really thoughtful of him and I whispered to him, you know, I said, you know, President Bone, don't forget about the women. And he thanked me for my leadership and off I went, you know, on my merry way. Well, 17 years later, I was the head volleyball coach at University of Oregon, "the flying, diving, digging Ducks," there, and I decided as the president of the Volleyball Coaches Association that I should take a national preseason tour, so of course I called up and scheduled Illinois State University. And I think there was something in the *Pantagraph* about me coming home or something like that, and while we were warming up in Horton Field House, I looked over at the door and I saw an elderly gent in a red vest and a cane, walking with the support of his wife, and it was President Bone. And so I left my team, I walked over to him, I reached out my hand to reintroduce myself. He beat me to it with a hug, and said, Chris, I knew you would find a way to compete in the Field House.

Nick Erickson 12:20

Wow, that's an incredible story, that's -

Chris Voelz 12:23

So I think that speaks to the connectedness on campus, the fact that a president could know an undergrad and appreciate their, their mission at such a young age, and then come back and affirm it as well.

Nick Erickson 12:43

Much so. That's an incredible story, and you also mentioned Dr. Mabry as well, who was the director of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, and I know she was a big influence on you. So just, yeah, what was your relationship with her like and what's the story that you have of her?

Chris Voelz 12:58

Yeah, well, you know, I, I took statistics from her, I ended up being her, she was my advisor, she was my basketball coach, she was my golf coach. So like many good coaches, mentors, and leaders, you know, she saw something in me before I did, and I have to thank her for putting me in positions to practice leading over and over again, whether it was that President Bone's conversations about facilities or regional events when I was a spokesperson as an undergrad, but it almost didn't happen. And to that end, I went in one day when I was a junior and said, you know, Dr. Mabry, I'm going to be giving up my physical education degree because I think I need to have a different degree to go into law. And she said - well, her reply was kind of astounding to me at the time. She said, Well, Chris, anybody can do law. I'm surprised, I thought you were stronger than that. And I, I was really - it was a quixotic moment. I didn't really understand it. And she went on to say, You know, If you stay in physical education and intercollegiate athletics, there's going to be no blueprint, for few women will be doing what you could do. You're going to be creating a path rather than just following one, and, you know, I just thought you were more aspiring about making a difference. I - my throat, I mean, I just sunk,

because I thought here I was kind of lifting my game up and she told me to think about it. Well, needless to say, Nick, I returned the next day and I was all in. So from then on it was about creating that blueprint and going on the path that had not been created, and I have to really credit Laurie Mabry for being that kind of mentoring support and Illinois State as a whole.

Nick Erickson 15:13

That's incredible. When - you mentioned McCormick Hall and bumping into the walls, you know, if you ran too far out of bounds - when was really the first time that you noticed the discrepancies between men's and women's athletics and, you know, really realized that it doesn't have to be this way?

Chris Voelz 15:31

Well, you know, I grew up in a very, very equal family where my parents treated the boys and the girls alike, and it's whatever we loved we got to do, we just needed to get good at it or be disciplined about it. And so I did not understand when I went to high school and found out that there were boys teams but not girls teams, there was just GRA [Girls Recreation Association] or GAA [Girls Athletic Association] for the girls. And that if we competed, as I did, as a renegade, in high school, that the Illinois High School Association, had they found out, I would have been kicked out of the GAA. So I knew right away that things were not right. And yet as I went from high school to college there was really a mother lode of talent and insight at Illinois State where you heard about the teams and the national competition and Dr. Scott, who was on the commission for sports for women and president and Dr. Mabry, who was at one time president of AIAW [Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women], which was the precursor of women in the NCAA. So I think at Illinois State I was well aware that we traveled on buses and ate doughnuts for breakfast and the men were flying or taking coach and having sit down meals, but it was at the time where you - we didn't - what we made up for - what we lacked, we made up for with enthusiasm and love of sport, and with wonderful teammates. And so, you know, it's clear that ISU really lit the match for me because they agreed that it wasn't right. And so as I advocated for things to be equitable, if not equal, I guess that was the start of my pursuit of social justice. And I started young and, honestly, with my family believing in me and ISU believing in me.

Nick Erickson 17:46

You mentioned that you had went on to coach volleyball at the University of Oregon and then had a, you know, a comeback to ISU, which - off the topic, but outside of Reggie Redbird, the Oregon Duck is probably my favorite college mascot!

Nick Erickson 18:01

But you also - then you were an administrator for some time there too, and when you left coaching volleyball at the University of Oregon you said at the time that, quote, "At the time, I thought I should be serving more than 13 or 14 women. I really had this bigger drive for social justice," which is - what was it like at that point in your life and your career, to come to that moment?

Chris Voelz 18:01

Yay, good!

Chris Voelz 18:21

Yeah, well, it was a real crossroads, because I had wanted to be a head collegiate coach, and I was working with the Junior Olympics, so I was thinking of that pipeline as well. But indeed, I was a coach of 12 to 14 young women, and while even being a Top 10 team, with all of its thrills and satisfactions, I got to thinking, how many times can one spend years recruiting a student athlete, only to be told at the last moment, Sorry, I just got a call from Stanford and I said yes. You know, I mean, it was like for nought, all of these hours and time. Or how much time could I invest on [service?] drills and feel that I was making a difference? So I went to what some people call the dark side, but I would say I really had to elevate my game in order to affect the lives of more student athletes with a real thirst to pursue gender equality and gender equity. And that was the path to do that at that time and so whether it was serving on committees or becoming a leader in the National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators or being a part of NACA [National Association for Collegiate Activities], I found a way to transfer my skill sets. Still try to motivate people and put plans and strategies in place to win the game, but the game was even more important, because the game was about fairness.

Nick Erickson 20:07

There is a story - I want to make sure I give them credit - in the *Minnesota Daily*, where you mentioned that you believe that the reason - you know, you spoke honestly, that you believe the reasons you got through the athletic administrator's door was because your name was Chris and that there was often a surprise when you showed up. If you could just kind of take us back to some of those early meetings - I mean, could you really feel, you know, being the singular woman in a room full of full of men and just what was that like?

Chris Voelz 20:34

Well, it was interesting and instructive. I recall once answering the phone, my assistant had put this person through, and I said Hello, you know, this is Chris. And the person said, No, no, I'm calling Chris Voelz, the associate athletics director. I just talked with the secretary, I don't need another secretary.

Nick Erickson 20:59

Oh, wow.

Chris Voelz 21:00

And I said, Oh, excuse me, sir, but I am Chris and I am the associate athletics director. Whew! You know, that was, that was something that I thought, Oh, I'm gonna change *his* mind! So I had a nice chat with him and I could only hope that when he hung up he was educated that not every Chris was going to be a male in athletics. I remember, I was in charge of game management and we, the Ducks, were playing UCLA, the male - in men's basketball - and a fracas broke out. And in that game management protocol I was supposed to go to the center of the court and make eye contact with the police and with our event management people. I mean, that was what the protocol said. So I walked immediately to the center of the court, made the contact, and later my father called me up and he said, Chris, what went on? And he was down in San Jose and he was watching it on television, and the narrators, the talent said, Oh my gosh, we even have a mother of one of the athletes getting involved!

Nick Erickson 22:19

Wow.

Chris Voelz 22:20

And I went, Dad, what do you mean? He says, Well, it was you, it was you standing there! And I said, Oh, Dad, it was just the protocol. He said, Well, why would he ever call you a mother of an athlete? I said, Well, his assumption was that anybody in charge had to be male. So the next time he came to campus as talent, I said, You owe me dinner. I said, I said, you know, and he - you know, I got to know him. And of course, my goal has always been to convince people, not to confront them, and so, you know, that's certainly, that's certainly one.

Nick Erickson 22:59

And to - I mean, to keep pushing for representation in athletics, you - a lot of times, in those, you know, conversations, kind of had to put your foot down to administration, people in power, and this is something that, I think, especially with kind of the "Midwest nice" aura that we have, it just seems so much easier said than done. But how did you develop the confidence to say no as an answer?

Chris Voelz 22:59

I mean, I remember standing in for my athletics director when we went to a regional men's basketball game, and I called ahead and got an appointment with athletic director to do a facility walk and take them out to lunch. And I show up and he said, You're a woman? And I said, Yes, absolutely. And it was just those days where you were clearly in the minority. But oddly enough, Nick, so often I was the one of the few who had been a student athlete. And so you - the voice of a woman was not encouraged or credited, so you - one just needs to persist, they need to find ways to communicate, make a difference, and I guess that's why you need to be relentless. Because now we have scores of women who are - it's no longer big news, becoming an athletics director.

Chris Voelz 24:21

Well, I was thinking about this when you asked me to join this because I am actually surprised sometimes when I reflect upon some situation where I was called upon against the odds to stand up and it always had to do with integrity. I stood up against the system once in Oregon and then a few times at Minnesota, and each time I knew I was doing the right thing. Although, as a young administrator, I certainly was putting my job on the line and my evaluations might show it, the evaluation may say, Chris, we're freezing your salary because you're not a team player. And I would say back, you know, I am a team player with the university because this university expects us to do things legally. And so I guess I had the courage because my parents instilled the value system, and my teachers and coaches at Illinois State, also, I think, reminded us at every turn, that legal and ethical and moral meant something. So you just surprise yourself or not, you have to kind of take that truth to power sometimes, and isn't it ironic that I outlasted all of them?

Nick Erickson 25:49

Very much so, that's, that's great. And one thing that you also use Chris, I know, was the PMA formula, which stands for Positive Mental Attitude. And I'm sure that there were times in your career that was

just, it was just very difficult as you've mentioned, to kind of live by, but how has that approach to life really helped you in what I'm sure were just some really, really challenging moments as well?

Chris Voelz 26:14

Yeah, well, you know, again, that started - well, it didn't start, it probably was in my veins from birth, because you do have some propensity, I think, to be positive or negative, but after studying social psych - I had an undergraduate minor at Illinois State, and I studied coaching psychology for my master's degree and I landed on a French psychologist, Émile Coué, and he had this theory of positive auto-suggestion. And it really codified my whole approach, whether it is in coaching or administering or leading or life, and it just validates things about having a positive attitude and really, if you can afford not to let your dial go to angry and bitter, if you can stay in the range of hopeful and persistent, and you know, we all can if we choose to. So PMA to this day sustains me through, and has sustained me through, a variety, a myriad of challenges. When we admit it, there's only one thing that we can control, and that really is our attitude. So I choose a positive mental attitude.

Nick Erickson 27:40

I want to talk for a second, it's about your stop at, your 14 years at the University of Minnesota. Your friend Peggy Lucas was quoted in that same *Minnesota Daily* article that we referenced about your time there and I believe her quote was, "Chris was a whirlwind when she came to the U. Women's sports were under the radar and she single-handedly changed that." And just to name a few things that you did, you had a scoreboard that showed the women's [athletics] department's GPA, which I believe was the only one, you know, in the nation at the time that did that. You added three sports, you know, seven NCAA championship competitions, and you played a vital role in improving facilities across the athletic department. And during that time, you co-authored the definition of gender equity for the NCAA, you were named by the Star Tribune - a great paper, by the way - as one of the most influential people in the history of Minnesota sports. Looking back at those 14 years that you spent in the Twin Cities, what are some of the accomplishments you feel most proud to have spearheaded or been a part of?

Chris Voelz 28:40

Wow. Well, I'm proud of everything that you recounted there and I am grateful that people like Peggy Lucas and other people noticed that. I had a great ride as the longest-serving athletics director there. And I think most of all, was the joy of creating an inspiring and empowering positive culture, where we could raise enough resources from great donors to build, you know, the nine facilities for women, to endow tens of tens of scholarships and add three sports - that's like 130 opportunities for women - and to have those academics and record crowds, championship teams, and I think anyone in my spot would be grateful if at the end of their day they can say that we produced many a leader and a positive contributor to society. So it was a single challenge, rewarding experience, and yet, you know, very, very challenging because of us being under the radar and me so very clearly wanting to raise our image nationwide.

Nick Erickson 30:03

Chris, last question for you - and once again, thank you so much for joining us - but we are approaching - in June of 2022 we'll be approaching the 50th anniversary of Title IX. When you think back to those

early days, what are some areas of improvement that you have been most pleased with and on the flip side, where are some areas that you'd like to see more change?

Chris Voelz 30:23

Well, if I can tell a quick story -

Chris Voelz 30:25

Laurie Mabry told me in 1972, when I was a second year teacher in the Chicago suburbs, that everything was going to change because Title IX just passed as a Federal Educational Amendment Act. Well, of course it was buried in the papers, because it was the same day that Watergate hit. So I thought naively, after hearing from my mentor, that equality would be just around the corner. I remember walking into the AD's office and I said, Guess what, we get to have uniforms for every sport now, like the boys, because of course our girls' teams shared one uniform. We get to go into the weight room, we get to - ! You can imagine my enthusiasm. Well, you know, it was, it was a time where, once again, Dr. Mabry put me on an AIAW scholarship committee where we were to decide whether or not women were to receive scholarships, and even many women were not in favor. You know, I knew that we would, with the interpretation regs, we would be in a position with good, well-intended people to make a difference. And, you know, I've certainly worked with many wonderful women and also male leaders, some who really got it, who really, you know, had a daughter and couldn't understand why the daughter and the son couldn't have equitable treatment. But, you know, even 17 years later, after that amendment was passed, I was on the NCAA Gender Equity Task Force and it was still not easy. And that's why - you mentioned I was one of the co-authors of the definition of gender equity, and that was because we sat in a room with, at the time, by the way, a handful of women, just a couple of us, and then a plethora of white males who kept saying, you know, we would abide by the law if only they knew what it meant. So finally that's when we were pressed to write the definition and give it to them and ask the NCAA to adopt it.

Nick Erickson 30:25

Absolutely!

Chris Voelz 32:43

Things have gotten a lot better. You know, we've got boys and girls teams in high school, we have lots of collegiate teams, we have lots of scholarships, we have lots of travel budgets and recruiting budgets. We still are not compliant. There are very few institutions in the nation that still are compliant with Title IX and I never really thought I'd be still advocating five years - five decades, actually - later. And for that reason, I'm on the Women's Sports Foundation Advocacy Committee where, with Billie Jean King's leadership, we do great work, work which I thought I would never still be doing. So - but let me just say, in terms of - we've seen progress, right? Cause there's an upside to this. I'm chilled when women are playing in front of large crowds, and when they get their education supported, when throngs of them get the life lessons that sports teaches, and they're able to stand up to many challenges - or just recently, when they represent us in the Olympics. That all is progress and big progress comes slowly. So I just hope that we will continue to use Title IX as a valuable tool to bring athletics to brothers and sisters and sons and girls - sons and daughters - in an equitable way.

Nick Erickson 34:27

Well, Chris, once again, just we can't thank you enough for taking some time out of your day to chat with us and I really, really enjoyed this conversation a lot and we are just forever grateful for your constant support of Illinois State. So thank you so much again for coming on and most of all, just thank you for making all of us here at ISU, you know, so proud to be a Redbird.

Chris Voelz 34:47

Well, thank you. And, again, thanks to my foundation at Illinois State of vibrant, vital professors who were always approachable, connected within a department who knew your name. Great leaders, great educators and I owe a great deal to ISU. So I'm proud to be a Redbird. So Go You Redbirds!

Nick Erickson 35:25

That was Chris Voelz, Class of 1970, and we thank her for coming on to Redbird Buzz to share her journey. Tune in next time to hear more stories from beyond the quad.