

NARRATOR: Welcome to Intersections: The RIT Podcast. In this episode, Jackie Nicholson, who became just the fifth athletic director in RIT history last summer, and the first woman to ever hold the position, talks with Lauren Zeglen, co-captain of the women's soccer team and president of the university's Student Athlete Advisory Council, or SAAC, about the future of RIT Athletics, the experience of student athletes on campus, and the role of sports in creating a more equitable university.

LAUREN: Jackie, my question for you is, what has your experience been like since joining the RIT community? And what are some of your goals for RIT Athletics moving forward?

JACKIE: So, my experience over the last six months has been a whirlwind. It's just really getting to know RIT since it's very different from every institution I've worked for in the past. Really talking about my goals just for the rest of the school year is really just spending more time with our head coaches and getting to learn more about them. I spent individual time with them when I first started, but really getting to know more about them. Spending some time on the road like I did in the fall with our fall teams, doing that again in the spring and the winter with the rest of our programs just to see how our student athletes show up for competitions, before competitions, and after competitions. And then really spending a lot of time engaging the RIT community. Not just on campus, but the external community that interacts with RIT on a daily basis. So, those would be kind of my short-term goals for the rest of this current academic year. How have you grown as a student athlete during your time here at RIT?

LAUREN: It's crazy to think how much I've changed since I was an athlete in high school. Definitely for the better. It's made me a stronger athlete and person both physically and mentally. Being at RIT has been just such a great experience – so much personal growth. But, specifically, I think I've grown most as a leader in participating in athletics at RIT. When I first got here, I was able to look up to some really great captains in the beginning of my experience on the women's soccer team, and it really taught me a lot about how to connect with my teammates and support them in any situation.

JACKIE: As a student athlete, you faced a very serious injury this fall. How can student athletes lead through injuries here at RIT? How can you still be a leader even if you're not on the field of competition?

LAUREN: Yeah. So, it was definitely a struggle for me this year, tearing my ACL. But I was just able to rely on my teammates for support and then use that support to be an even better leader, be a more vocal leader because I couldn't lead by example as much anymore. I did my rehab like I could, but I couldn't really show up to practice like I used to and really push the level. So, I was more of a vocal leader and encouraged my teammates in that way. But I definitely couldn't have done it without their support. It definitely wasn't easy. I hope no one has to go through what I went through. But just know that your teammates are there for you and you can still contribute to the team even if you can't play. So, Jackie, what types of programs or initiatives do you plan to

have to improve the college experience at RIT and help prepare people for life after graduation?

JACKIE: I think one of the programs that I think we talked about in our first meeting is something simple. We started with the here and now. I think sometimes we focus on life after athletics, which is very important. But I wanted to spend time talking about mental health, which has been a challenge, I think, for every student, not just student athletes, across the country. So, we implemented some things this fall. And I'll give hats off to you and the E Board from SAAC for leading that. I said, let's do some mental health things, and you guys kind of took the lead with it and ran with it. I think something small like that makes a huge difference for people because they can see different ways you can take a break mentally and do different things, so something small like that. And one big thing that we're working on right now is we're hiring a new assistant AD for compliance and student athlete welfare. So, this person will be charged with helping develop the student athletes for life after athletics. They'll be charged with doing that programming and putting that in place for our student athletes. So, that's what we'll really be working on in the future. But I know it's important to prepare for life after athletics, and you do as well, because at some point in time it does end. So, just thinking about those future programs. We will really engage SAAC and our student athletes in those programming needs to see what student athletes need because my experience is almost 20 years ago as a student athlete, so it's definitely different. So, we want to make sure we engage our student athletes in that planning process as well for the future. And so, as we talk about the future, Lauren, what are your plans for when you graduate? We know you'll be coming back for another year, but what does it look like for you once you graduate from RIT?

LAUREN: Yeah. So, once I get my degree in biomedical engineering I plan on attending veterinary college. I'm still in the process of applying to that. It's always been a dream of mine. And it is kind of weird how I did biomedical engineering and now I want to go to veterinary school, but I just fell in love with RIT and the engineering program here is so good. I decided to go for it and challenge myself because you can major in whatever you want before you go to vet school. So, that is my plan for now. So, I know we do a lot with diversity, equity, and inclusion in SAAC. But what other role do you think athletics and sports in general can play in making RIT a more equitable university.

JACKIE: The biggest – the low hanging fruit is we talk about the enrollment of female students at the institution. And I think enrollment can be driven by sports, whether that's collegiate sports or club sports or intramural sports, I think that's a big way to get more female students interested in RIT and what we have to offer. So, thinking strategically, how we do that through sports is something that I think we can get done. I think that's an easy way for RIT is to partner with athletics or club sports or even our clubs on campus to grow those that are geared more towards females, which I think will help open the door to high school students coming in. So, if they see there's opportunities for them to get involved and engaged right away and there's something that engages their interest at the institution outside of academics, I think they'll be more willing to come into the institution. But I think sports is a big way to do that. I think we have the ability to

grow sports within athletics. For our female programs, we have some of the smaller rosters compared to our men's programs. So, we really want to look at our female programs to see, strategically, how we can we grow that enrollment for our female student athletes, which, in turn, impacts the institution's enrollment. So, I think it's a unique opportunity for us to do it. But I think we have to take a hard look as an institution to what are the unique ways that we can connect students to campus outside of just academics. And it's those extracurricular activities that I think can get done. And I know RIT is making a big push for female student enrollment at the institution, so I think it's an easy way for athletics to jump on board as well. And so, when you kind of talk about that, Lauren, what changes would you like to see for the future of RIT athletics, current or future?

LAUREN: Kind of back to what you were saying, the mental health initiative is something I feel very strongly about, especially going through an injury this year. I'm really seeing other sides of being an athlete and how important mental health is. And I think a big goal would be to get a sports psychologist to help student athletes work through the adjustment to college, struggles with playing time, balancing harder classes, and the more competitive athletic environment. And also, like you were talking about, with their transition out of their experience as a student athlete. A lot of people here, I know this, they really love their experience here as student athletes. And that just makes it even more difficult when they no longer have it because they graduated or an injury occurred. So, I think helping our athletes find ways to get through these challenges is something that there's always room for improvement. And speaking of the future, what do you see as the future of RIT athletics, five to 10 years from now?

JACKIE: First, I see us as being the go-to institution or the most competitive institution at the Division III level, not only within the state of New York but regionally and nationally as well. And, so that's how I envision RIT athletics. When people think of Division III athletics in the state of New York, I want them to think of RIT. I think we're very unique in this state in that we have so many Division III institutions that we technically don't have to leave the state for competition. But when people think of RIT, I want them to be scared to compete against RIT or to come here or knowing that we're going there. So, that's how I envision us, being a very, very strong athletic program who is consistently winning conference championships, regional championships, and, hopefully, national championships as well. I think between our facilities that we are building, we currently have, and are planning to build in the future, I truly believe we can get there in the next 10 years at RIT and really attract students here and recruit. So, when people are coming on campus and they see these new facilities they'll know that we're serious about athletics here as well. I think we have a great opportunity to grow our staff as well. We have a very small staff based on the amount of student athletes we have. So, I think strategically over the next five to 10 years, I really want to essentially grow our staff, almost double it, to where we are based on our needs and the amount of sports we have. And then I also want us to be the go-to institution in the region, so if there's local high school tournaments or regional tournaments, I want people to say, the place we want to go to to host this tournament is RIT, the place I think we need to go to is RIT. When coaches want to send recruits locally, we want to send them to RIT. I want

RIT to really be known in the Rochester area. Again, because we have a lot of Division III's just within a 30-mile radius of RIT, I think everyone can get lost in that shuffle. So, I want RIT athletics to really stand out, even locally from those other schools as well. So, I envision us being that standalone athletic department for the city of Rochester and town of Henrietta as well. That's how I really see us in the next five to 10 years.

LAUREN: I like that. I like thinking about RIT as like the powerhouse for athletics because we're already there for academics. I think those are all really great points about it.

JACKIE: We need to match academics. We have it, as you said, academically. But now we need to match it athletically, which I think we can. I think we have some of the best facilities once we finish softball, baseball, the track and field complex, and then the futures we have for the stadium project for lacrosse and soccer. That's going to be one-of-a-kind. A lot of people don't have that in Division III, so I think we'll have something very unique compared to everyone else. And, so, Lauren, wrapping up. What advice would you have for someone thinking about participating in college sports?

LAUREN: The one important piece of advice I would give is that I think it's so important to meet the teams that you're thinking about joining. It's really important to feel comfortable with them. Sports are a great way to make lifelong friends, and here at RIT I've made friends on my team that I know will last a lifetime. So, it's important to feel like you can connect with your teammates and be really comfortable with the team culture. Culture is a big deal here at RIT, so you really want to make sure you fit in with that. It'll make your experience a lot better and your transition a lot easier. Your teammates are going to be the ones who will be there for you throughout your college career, so, both on and off the field, it's important to make strong connections with them and make sure you feel comfortable. One thing when I was looking at different colleges, was I would always meet the team if I was interested in playing soccer at that college. And just kind of talk to different people, see if you connect with any of them. I felt really comfortable at RIT and just thought the team was amazing. I was a little intimidated by them because I thought they were so good and I was like, wow, this is incredible. But they were all so kind and just incredibly driven, hard-working people. And I just wanted to be a part of that.

JACKIE: I think you hit it on the head. Making sure that you understand you have a passion for the sport. Collegiate athletics is totally different than high school sports. In high school, you usually go one to two sports per season, but in collegiate athletics that is your sport and that is your sport year-round. You're not doing anything else. You're not doing track in the spring and soccer in the fall and basketball in the winter. You are focused on your sport year-round. So, make sure you have a true passion for your sport and you can see yourself doing it 24/7 because you live it and breathe it and die it, essentially, at the collegiate level. So, that's very important. Make sure you want to be dedicated to it. This will change your student athlete experience. You won't have as much time to do everything else as a student who is not involved in athletics and you have to be okay with that. But you can make unique time to do some of those things

and get involved on campus. You just have to be very strategic about it. And you talk about meeting the team and learning the culture. Make sure you really, really spend your time doing that. Don't go to a school because you think it will be fun and it's a party school. Go to a school because of the culture of that program, the culture of the department, and then, ultimately, what is the academic portfolio of that institution as well.

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