

## E02: Politics of Disabilities in Iron Sports (Transcription)

**Intro (Marcia):** This is Disabled Girls Who Lift. We are reclaiming what's rightfully ours one podcast at a time. It's Marybeth, Chloe, and Marcia bringing you the thoughts and unpopular topics to you get out of that ableist comfort zone.

### Music Jingle

**Marcia:** Welcome listeners to our second episode of Disabled Girls Who Lift. Today we are going to talk about the politics of disabilities in iron sports! So maybe you want to powerlift, maybe you want to weightlift, bodybuild, do some strongman, you need some modification, you're a spoonie, you're missing an arm, whatever it is... Let's talk about it. So, I'm Marcia coming in from Florida.

**Chloe:** I'm Chloe, from Iowa.

**Marybeth:** Hey it's Marybeth from California! And the sports that I can cover really are only, competitively, would only be powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting. And I've only competed in two federations here in California... We have USAPL & USPA, uh Olympic weightlifting we've got USAW. So the ones that I've had the best interactions with on a federation level are USPA. They are one of the very first federations that I've competed with as, uh, full-power--that's the squat, the bench, and the deadlift and only recently have I started using different tools to compete with. So in the past I don't know I guess this is where Chloe and Marcia saw me first but 'A very impressive single-handed deadlifter who is only a hundred and five pounds!' That's who I was! But it fucked up my body so I stopped doing it.

**Marcia:** That's a terrible idea but you looked really cool.

[laughter]

**Marybeth:** Nobody knows the struggle or the pain, and the ineptitude of single-armed lifting, and I know some people do that and are allowed to do that when they are recently injured, but I'm looking into a more bilateral movement, a more efficient and safe movement, and also a movement where I can lift the most amount of weight because that's the kind of sport that we're in.

Um, so USPA, they've recently on their rulebook put out a "Personal message for our special and disabled lifters," it says. So if you are on the USPA rulebook on part 9.1.1 it says that "USPA welcomes all lifters and we'll always do our very best at all times to accomodate any special needs or requests. If there are any special requests that a lifter may have please contact us prior to the meet so we may assist you ensuring you're having a pleasurable meet. Powerlifting is a passion that should never be limited by one's own physical hurdles. Our staff is understanding and experienced in this area and wants every lifter to feel both welcomed and appreciated at our meets." So that is one of the most, the best, messages I've ever heard on a federation--

**Marcia:** Magical even.

**Marybeth:** Yeah! Because 1) it's inclusive, 2) it's welcoming to those that are either new to the sport or new to this federation, and 3) they're willing to do whatever it takes to accommodate you no matter what the disability is. That being, um, a syndrome you know a physical disability, you being in a wheelchair, So many different things, and my experience with them has been absolutely great! Like in the beginning I did have to reach out to Gordon Santee--he's on technical chair. I sent him some pictures, I just described what it is that I use, which is the Harbinger hook and that allowed me to

just grip the bar on one side because I don't have fingers on my left hand to be able to do so. Um, nothing else. That's all I use, and they were like yeah let's do it. And now they know who I am and I don't--I don't--need to do anything else. Whereas, for other powerlifting federations if you unfortunately...

**Marcia:** Pum pum pum. [laughter]

**Marybeth:** If you go on to the UCAP--UC--USAPL's website I, you know, I tried and looked on their disabilities tab, I think that's what it's called. I don't remember if it said disabled athletes or disabilities-- it says, "To Be Continued." Or it says, "Coming Soon," and it said that for the last four years. They haven't done anything to provide resources for those that are interested in competing. However, I did do a little bit of research in the past and the rule book really states nothing about people with disabilities in general. It's mostly for single-lift bench press competitions because I guess they've probably seen someone who was paralyzed and had an amputated lower limb and they were able to compete on a bench just like in, you know in, in the Olympics or the Special Olympics where they have Paralympic bench pressers. So they've only really lived and wrote rules based on experience without having those necessary conversations with their athletes and--I've--I've tried having those conversations with them and to no regard did they consider my lifting Device. They actually got their lawyers on me and said that it would be a hazard to--my hook, my lifting device hook, which doesn't leave my wrist nor does it fly off of the bar nothing like that--that it would be a risk to their co-- their, what are they called, the referees and their spotters.

**Marcia:** 'Cause that makes sense..

**Chloe:** That's insane.

**Marybeth:** Huh! So I think able-bodied rule makers are just fearful of us, really just making it on top and, you know, we'll talk about Chloe's records in a second but

**Marcia:** Triggered

**Marybeth:** Ay. Their... I don't know what it is. I don't know what it is, I can't speak on behalf of them but it has not been accommodating to say the least under USAPL. I've actually fought so so hard and I continue to fight with other legal advisors to see how we can get more of us to compete with them. Um, and then let's talk about Chloe's experiences with her powerlifting federations because I know she has a few in Iowa... Then I'll go into weightlifting.

**Chloe:** Yes, so I've started competing, um, in sanctioned meats back in 2014, my, the first federation that was accommodating to me was UPA. Uh, that, that's pretty much a Midwestern powerlifting federation. I don't know if you really see them so much out like on the west or east coast.

**Marcia:** Yeah we don't have 'em.

**Chloe:** No? Okay. Yes so they've been great um so UPA, I've also competed with RPS--they've been fantastic and coming up let's see in the Spring 2020 WRPF is going to allow me to compete in the Kern 2020 so that's great. I've also had good interactions with USPA. Um, Gordon Santee is really nice to work with as Marybeth said he's the technical chairman. As far as federations that I have had less than savory experiences with... I guess the SPF, um I inquired about competing uh... At the November 2019 Slingshot Reebok Record Breakers and I got in touch with the SPF President, his name is Jesse Rodgers. Um I emailed him explaining that I just would need a strap for deadlift. He did not email me so I had to get on Facebook, kind of track him down and say, "Hey..."

**Marcia:** Wow.

**Marybeth:** Wow!

**Chloe:** Yeah I was like, “Hey did you get my email, you know, I'm wondering if I can compete because I'd like to sign up soon.” He said, “Oh yeah, I emailed you back.” I was like, “No, no I didn't get an email back.” So he's like, “Okay give me a call.” So I called him on the phone and he was very kind of abrasive in the way he talks, honestly he wouldn't give me the time of day. He said, “Nope,” he said, “Cara Westin and I...” I don't even know who Cara Westin is... But he said, “Cara Westin and I already discussed you and, no, like you can't compete in the Open. You could do Special Olympics if you want, but you're not doing the Open.” Yeah, I'm opting to not compete in the Special Olympics I don't think that's a level playing field for me, so I did not pursue Reebok Record Breakers for this reason.

**Marcia:** Yeah and it's like so many levels to that. You had the chase this guy down...

**Chloe:** Oh yeah

**Marcia:** You had to hawk him down, so now you, and then on top of that you had to just get totally rejected like...

**Marybeth:** Yeah and the way that he says it like, “Oh we spoke about your situation and absolute no.” Did he provide reasons as to why you can't...

**Marcia:** Yeah. You didn't speak about... You didn't speak about me about the situation...

**Marybeth:** Like, can I at least have a word...

**Chloe:** Yeah I wasn't included in their conversation, they had a conversation about me and they decided no, that I can't compete in the Open. It's very odd.

**Marybeth:** And did he

**Chloe:** Sorry, what was that?

**Marybeth:** Did he say why? Instead he just provided that alternative for you?

**Chloe:** Um, he didn't really say why and it kind of turned into like a weird conversation. I was like, “Well here's the other federations that allow me to compete in the Open,” and then he started he was like, “Well I don't care what other federations do.” And it kind of got, you're like, he like he was anti other federations.

**Marybeth:** Yeah

**Chloe:** Not a productive conversation. Bizarre, it was very bizarre.

**Marybeth:** And that's a shitty thing right now that's happening in powerlifting, like there are some very very weird power dynamics happening amongst federations that... Like we're such a small sport, like yeah it has grown in the last four years and you, your members are growing and people are interested in it, but we are still so small in that we are not in the Olympics yet, we are still trying to explain what powerlifting is, as opposed to Olympic weightlifting, you know it's not in the mainstream, it's not covered as well in mainstream media, but you guys

continue this battle about who's better than the other, and we can tell you as disabled athletes who we think are more accommodating and who are close-minded, but get off your fucking high horse and help us out. We've been supportive for as long as we can remember...

**Marcia:** And it's not like this shit is free!

**Marybeth:** Exactly. We pay for our entry and our membership fees and travel and lodging, what the hell.

**Chloe:** Exactly.

**Marybeth:** Um, and even then, like sponsorships come at a very rare occasion and when they do it's hardly anything. Um, but USAPL I actually got a very similar response, Chloe, in that well one, USAPL wasn't responding for a very long time and they didn't allow me to compete in Nationals because of, because I guess it was the first time that they've heard of somebody wanting to use a lifting hook or any device to accommodate them in lifting. But I had to take it to the international level with IPF and the first thing they did was like, "Well we don't care about USPA, well you can join Special Olympics." Yeah and they sent me all of these links as if that was helpful to me but not considering like how much of a, how bad, of a denial that is to someone who has been competing in the Open for a long time, someone who has supported their federations, and/or is super excited about Reebok Record Breakers because they'd compete with their friends you know or compete amongst others and potentially win a grand prize because those are pretty damn big prizes."

**Marcia:** Yeah.

**Marybeth:** Not fair.

**Marcia:** And Special Olympics is awesome but Special Olympics is not for everyone, it's for the intellectually disabled and there's you know it's a different playing field.

**Marybeth:** Yeah.

**Marcia:** There's no reason that you should, 't be able to go with the Open, like really, none.

**Chloe:** Sorry, I'm not trying to cut you off... Me using a strap on my right hand for deadlift does not guarantee that I will not drop a deadlift. And I think that's kind of, it goes over some people's heads. I can still drop a deadlift... My left hand can give out, my right hand can still give out it's not giving me an unfair advantage.

**Marybeth:** Didn't somebody also ask for you to like post your videos or send your social media or something? Very intrusive?

**Chloe:** I, let's see

**Marybeth:** Or send me videos or

**Chloe:** I think, I think when I started talking to USPA for Kern 2018, or I think that was 2018, Gordon, he wanted me to send pictures of my condition, which yeah that did feel a little intrusive but I guess I kind of understand why he needed to see that so he could understand why I needed the strap.

**Marybeth:** Oh never mind, I thought you were talking about a federation that asked for social media, that would've been way out of line. Yeah I guess it is how Gordon, yeah... But again their rulebook is very vague and very general but also more inclusive than what I've heard elsewhere. But that's the point, that's where we're trying to get to; we're trying to get to a place where we don't have to ask for permission, we don't have to explain what we've been doing for the last you know, how long have you been competing you guys? I kind of have been in it for like 4-5 years.

**Marcia:** Yeah like 7 years

**Chloe:** At least five years

**Marybeth:** Yeah. Like not not that you should know who I am you know, I'm not one of those who puts myself on a pedestal, but I, we shouldn't have to constantly send you pictures and constantly explain like, you should do your research. If you are on a technical chair, if you're on a board or any sort of committee that writes rules for these federations, it is your responsibility to be accommodating. I'm not gonna to tell you how to build a wheelchair ramp, you know, I should expect it when I get there.

**Chloe:** It's really anxiety-inducing for me. Anytime that I'm looking at going to maybe a meet out-of-state knowing that I'm going to have to call the meet director and explain my situation. So yeah, I agree with you like....

**Marcia:** Yeah, that's a barrier by itself. Like, it's already shit to try to find a gym where you feel okay lifting in, you know it's already a whole thing by itself, now you finally want to compete and you're like, 'I don't know, I gotta call this guy.'

**Chloe:** Right.

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**Marybeth:** And all of the times, a lot of times the technical chair is not present at the meet, so on top of that you have to explain yourself to

**Marcia:** Again

**Marybeth:** The people checking in your equipment, the referees that are on this stage... Like "Oh I thought you would have known, because there's it was such a big deal when we were talking about it via email that you would have been looped in since you are at the meet." What the fuck.

**Chloe:** Right

**Marcia:** You have to bring your own brochures. “Hi, I’m Marybeth, here’s my brochure.”

**Marybeth:** Yeah, kind of like you know how, I don't know if you’ve watched the new Joker movie, but he carries around this card that explains his disability and why he has uncontrollable laughter. While it's not his responsibility, you know, people like, it's just easier for him if they see him at the bus just uncontrollably laughing that they understand that he has a disability. Like I feel like we need to, like I need to just carry that around or wear a sign or a shirt so that nobody can talk to me.

**Marcia:** Yeah it’s mm. So how is weightlifting? Is that any better?

**Marybeth:** Yes. So I’ve competed in one weightlifting meet and that was the best experience I could have ever asked for. Their, I don't remember the guy’s name, but he's actually the president of USAW... Um my coach at the time just shot him an email and said, “Hey I've got this lifter, she is competing in this meet, and this is the device that she's looking to use.” And at that time it wasn't Harbinger, I actually used uh, what is it called, Haulin Hooks, because it has not only the hook but it also has a strap attached to it so that it, the bar, stays with me. I mean, even then the velcro is not strong enough but it does what it can in the air.

**Marcia:** Yeah

**Marybeth:** And he didn't need to see pictures and he was like, “Yeah go for it. Good luck.” And that's it, you know like...

**Marcia:** It’s that simple. Wow

**Marybeth:** What about you, Marcia?

**Marcia:** Well in Strongman I haven't had the need for adaptations or anything, I do just compete in the Open, but the way that Strongman is structured, it's very, so there's like different federations or whatever. You have NAS, you have USS, um there's like Static Monsters, there's Official Strongman Games, but each of those things and each of those events it's not as standard as powerlifting. So you know a powerlifting meet, you show up, squat, bench, deadlift, you know exactly the order, whatever the federation is you know exactly what's the bar you're gonna use... Like Strongman it's like, ‘Oh I'm gonna host an event and we’ll do I don't know log, farmers walk, and they just pick and choose, and they tell you the weight, they tell you if it's an AMRAP, they tell you if it's a max, it's, yeah it's totally to the discretion of the person hosting the meet. So if you're on the other end of it and you don't want to compete in these able-bodied competitions you're kind of like SOL because you're gonna have to like dig deep and search for the one meet director that is making competitions where there's like adaptive divisions, or seated activities, you know the big federations have competitions um, like NAS that's usually at the Arnold's, there is an Arnold's Disabled Strongman, but you know how do you get there if you haven't been able to compete locally in your state? Like you’re just gonna show up at this giant competition? That's not ideal either, and even then you still have to do the same type of thing contact the people directing and say, “Hi, this is me, this is what I have, can I compete?” And they tell you, yes or no, like.

**Marybeth:** And so on top of that they also have to ask the meet director what types of events they're planning on putting on for that date?

**Marcia:** Yeah so usually they'll post, they'll post what the events are and depending on who runs it sometimes they post it you know, way in advance, sometimes they post it months in advance, but you'll know what's gonna happen, but unfortunately you still might not be like the right kind of disabled for some of these events because I do know people that have been like, "Hi I have Ehlers-Danlos and I'd like to do Arnold, the Arnold's event for the, people with Disabilities." And they're like, "Ah, no. Like no, it's not gonna be safe for you, you can't compete here."

**Marybeth:** And that's actually happened to one of our friends, Kresenda, right?

**Marcia:** Yeah, yeah that happened to Kresenda and she, you know, she reached out, she took that extra step, she's already competing, she already has to deal with being in the gym and people just looking at her, gawking at her and all this other shit, and she took that next step like, 'Okay, I'm gonna ask this guy can I compete,' and it was a flat-out no. And it was the same kind of experience, rude, like Facebook arguments, like very unprofessional, and it's just like why? It makes no sense for things like that to have to go there. Like, what, what is the actual problem? What are you upset about?

**Marybeth:** Yeah and why do we have to fight this battle? We're not, we're not looking for special privileges, we're not looking for you to pay us, we're literally handing you our money and asking for a spot on your list.

**Chloe:** Yes

**Marcia:** Yeah

**Marybeth:** And you know on top of that what if you need to fill that slot anyway? Like why not me? What makes that person better than me to compete in your meet?

**Marcia:** Yeah, so I'm not sure where the future of that is going... I know that locally every state, you know, every state has different people that usually run their meets... So like for me in Florida you know I'm going around and asking different meet directors like what we can do to have more adaptive events and we'll see how that goes, but if you don't have that already, or if you're not able to help that process go along then you're just like okay, shit out of luck, never mind. I'm not really sure where, it's either you have it or you don't unfortunately. There's also, um I forgot the way they phrased it, like America's Strongest Athlete with Disabilities, something like that. It's another Strongman event and I'm not sure if it's USS exactly because it's run by someone I've seen.

**Marybeth:** I've actually heard of that. Yeah...

**Marcia:** Yeah it's run by Chris Vachio who I've seen at USS events but I'm not sure if this is actually a USS event. So, so far I've heard that competition is a little more accepting and not as much of an argument to get into, but again if you want to try something before you get there, I don't know, Strongman is a very open sport and honestly people have the freedom to be inclusive but it does take work, and it will take work because you have to think of 'Okay if I'm gonna do a log press for the able-bodied, what am I gonna do for someone that needs to sit?' And you're gonna have to take that extra time and figure it out, and I don't know if people are afraid to do it, or if they don't want to do it, or maybe they don't think anybody will show up, like I'm not sure.

**Marybeth:** Yeah so it's called America's Strongest Disabled Athlete, at least that's what I see on some of the championship belts that they give out. It's so cute, and then at the top of the belt it says, 'Men's Seated Champion,' and then on the right it says, 'Strongman is for Everyone.' So that, that itself is just so inclusive and yeah the partners that they receive are unbelievable.

**Marcia:** Yeah, that's how it should be, and I know that, I mean that's Strongman. I know that CrossFit has a little more you know, there's like WheelWod, I mean if you go to Wodapalooza you'll see the adaptive divisions. So, you know, it's possible, it's not like this is something we can't show up in and we can't participate in. Just, it just requires like a little extra effort.

**Marybeth:** Yeah, and what they love using are the words, 'Liability' and 'Safety.' Like, everyone who competes in Strongman or powerlifting or weight lifting is a liability because we're pushing or pulling three times the amount of weight that is our body weight.

**Marcia:** Anybody, anyone. Anyone could dump a bar when they're squatting, anybody could drop a log press on their head... [laughter]

**Marybeth:** Anyone can drop a weight on their foot, loaders, anyone loading the weight can drop as much as 50 kilos on somebody's foot, a clip can fly across the room, projectile vomiting has happened.

**Marcia:** At World's Strongest Man I think like three dudes tore their Achilles the first day, like it's...

**Marybeth:** Yeah, knee wraps you know knee wraps sometimes rip off or um what's that full-body suit called, Chloe?

**Chloe:** Oh the equipped lifters

**Marcia:** Yeah, how many of those videos have we all watched where somebody squats and like their quad ruptures and they fall? I don't, personally I can't stand those videos.

**Marybeth:** Exactly, I'm not saying this is gonna happen anytime a disabled athlete goes onto the stage, it's just, this is everybody. If you're talking liability, you're talking every athlete, and we are signing that same form, that same waiver, what the fuck is the fear?

**Marcia:** What is the difference?

**Marybeth:** We're not asking for an ambulance or anything, to be you know, closeby, but if you want to provide that for all of your athletes, why not?

**Marcia:** Yeah it shouldn't really be that complicated, it should really be that simple. And it's interesting that it has to be such a fight, but it is. I mean even for Strongman, I'm not sure the history of other sports, you know it started out with mostly just men. This is how it started so women competing is new, so maybe the, the new trend will be people with disabilities will be totally normal too.

**Marybeth:** Oh god. And we say this all in quotations. When we say, "right kind of disabled" in quotations, we say "trends" in quotations, because it should just be the norm exactly.

**Marcia:** This is uh real-life, real-life shit, that's how it happens. So here we are.

**Marybeth:** And then bodybuilding, did we talk about that? I know there's wheelchair bodybuilding, I, I know, there's a guy on Instagram called @adelfoskitchen, he's been competitively a wheelchair bodybuilder for a very long time, he has



an impressive physique, and on top of that he even dances salsa and other dance competitively. It's just amazing what there is out there.

**Marcia:** Yeah, what I like about the bodybuilding too is that they have, like you know how we went on the USAPL, it's like, the page says, 'To Be Continued,' there's no information, if you want to do strongman adaptive stuff like you really have to dig and dig on the internet, you have to find somebody, ask them like, but for the bodybuilding it's literally like wheelchairbodybuilding.com. And you go on the page and it's like oh do you want to do this? This is what you have to do. Easy.

**Marybeth:** And even if you're not a wheelchair user, I have, well we actually have reposted some bodybuilder women who have competed with an amputation or a prosthetic when...

**Marcia:** They have? I was wondering about that...

**Marybeth:** Mhmm, which I'll look into it more and I'll see if we can get her on this show but it's pretty damn awesome.

**Marcia:** Yeah that'd be cool.

**Marybeth:** Great. And a lot of what we have been competing in and the federations that we mentioned are very different from each other and they're also very different from the subject of adaptive sports and what's available there... Obviously there are lots of Paralympic multi-sport events, that includes powerlifting, I think, I don't know if it includes full-power but it definitely includes the benchpress. Um, and then it says weightlifting was discontinued, do we know anything about that?

**Marcia:** Yeah there's no weight lifting in Paralympics, or it's just powerlifting.

**Marybeth:** I wonder, let's look into that a little bit. And then Special Olympics has its World Games, then that, that's governed by the IOC, and mostly for, like we mentioned before, for athletes with intellectual disabilities, and again that includes powerlifting but not weightlifting. And then Highland Games, they have a parachair adaptive Highland Games, so again, paralyzed folks in wheelchairs, but there isn't much information. So if any of you who are listening that are, are, either competing in those other federations or in these other sports and want to highlight it a little bit more, we invite you to contact us, and get you on the show!

**Marcia:** Yes, definitely it's a conversation that needs to be had, will be had, it's gonna be stuffed down your throat, I'm not letting this rest.

**Marybeth:** Not my throat.

[laughter]

**Marybeth:** Yeah and, and I guess to conclude on this, like what, what is important to us--people who are looking to compete in either new federations or new sports--is it the verbiage or the language that's used in the rulebook? What, what are we working toward? Are we working toward being exclusive, being equitable, just checking off a box? Like I don't even think wherever they, they host local or national meets do they even check to see if there are wheelchair ramps or spaces for disabil- for wheelchairs, you know what I mean?

**Marcia:** Not really, and the way they set up the seats and the chairs and it's crowded and, it's, that's not accessible at all.

**Marybeth:** Yeah we go into these really small gyms and like yeah a lot of the times these sports were made out of backyard garage gyms but we have to consider our athletes with disabilities, and our patrons with disabilities, and make it inclusive and comfortable.

**Marcia:** Agreed

**Chloe:** Yep

**Marcia:** Yeah. Alright, Disabled Girls out...

**Outro 1 (Marybeth):** Thanks for listening to Disabled Girls Who Lift!

**Outro 2 (Chloe):** Don't forget to follow, rate, and like us on Spotify, iTunes, and Player FM. You can also find us on Instagram @disabledgirlswholift