Friday, Aug. 30, 2024 / Equal-opportunity murderball

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The Paralympics kicked off Wednesday in Paris. And the Murderball began Thursday.

<SCORING IN> Bocebus

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): You might know murderball by its government name, wheelchair rugby, but the people who first played it called it Murderball. Because it’s fast. It’s fierce.

*<CLIP> 60 MINUTES AUSTRALIA: And it certainly looks like they’re trying to kill each other.*

SEAN: It’s bumper cars but everyone’s paralyzed and also playing football.

*<CLIP> BBC: Australia v. UK wheelchair rugby*

*England here are in trouble…look at the pace! And he’s out of his chair!*

SEAN: Like most of the best sports, murderball was invented by a Canadian. But the Paralympics are bringing a historic moment to Team USA. For the first time ever, there’s a woman on the murderball squad.

*<CLIP> NBC: And Sarah Adam, an historic moment on the board. She scores the first Paralympic goal for a female wheelchair rugby player in Team USA history.*

SEAN: We’re gonna find out why it was so hard to get here and dig into the complexities of co-ed sports on Today, Explained.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: Audrey Nelson is a freelance journalist who is obsessed with murderball, so we asked her to tell you about the sport.

AUDREY NELSON (freelance journalist: First of all, you'd see athletes in manual wheelchairs. They're rolling their wheelchairs with their hands, passing and dribbling a volleyball

*<CLIP> MURDERBALL (2005): SPEAKER 1: The objective is basically to inbound the ball. We play on a regulation basketball court. You go from one end to the other end.*

*SPEAKER 2: Stop the ball, stop the ball. Stop the ball. Stop the ball!*

*SPEAKER 1: Two wheels have to cross over the line with possession of the ball*

AUDREY: Points are being scored quickly. Almost out of control, if you kind of don't know what's going on. And it’s legal.

*<CLIP> MURDERBALL (2005): SPEAKER 1: Other than that, it’s basically kill the man with the ball. <whistle blows>*

SEAN: We asked her to tell you about murderball because the sport and Team USA are having an historic moment at the Paralympics in Paris.

AUDREY: Yeah. So Sarah Adam, she's the first woman to compete for team USA, mixed gender wheelchair rugby. And in addition to being that first woman, she has kind of an interesting story leading up to it.

<SCORING IN> Hannah - loop snippet

AUDREY: So most wheelchair rugby players get into the sport when they're doing rehab for injuries often, not always spinal cord injuries. But Sarah actually discovered the sport before she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. So she ended up just playing softball at the time. She ended up volunteering, with other athletes who were playing Murderball, and she pretty much loved it from the get go.

*SARAH: Fell in love with not only, like, the high speed full contact, but that kind of high speed full contact was this chess match, this strategy that was really similar to what I got out of softball.*

AUDREY: And then Sarah classifies in as a player in 2019. And what that means is, basically, the the Paralympics is is very concerned with your, your level of impairment. And so you're classified or sorted into these categories, in many sports based on the level of impairment that you have. And so her M.S. had progressed enough that she qualified to play the game of wheelchair rugby at, eventually, at the Paralympic level. And Sarah told me that as a woman player on a team of all men—and she's often playing on a team of all men, even when she is not with Team USA—she feels like she brings something different to the game.

*SARAH: I think I, as a female player, I'm not as big as my male components, so I have to play a more cerebral game. We like, we have to play a little bit differently. We have to take care of our bodies a little bit differently. So there's things that we're managing. So in that aspect, I think it keeps it interesting.*

SCORING OUT

AUDREY: Wheelchair rugby is really male dominated.

SEAN: Hm.

AUDREY: So, for context, in the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, only four women competed in wheelchair rugby out of 96 athletes total, and only three women have ever won Olympic medals in wheelchair rugby.

SEAN: Why is that?

AUDREY: So when the sport was being formalized, the people who were actually formalizing the rules made it so that the only athletes eligible to play were those with quadriplegia that was either caused by spinal cord injuries or neuromuscular conditions.

SEAN: Hm.

AUDREY: And primarily the people playing the game ended up having spinal cord injuries. And I learned this from Kathy Newman, who's the director of competitions and development for World Wheelchair Rugby.

*KATHY NEWMAN: The gender split on the spinal cord injuries was 80% men, 20% women.*

AUDREY: And so Kathy told me that this huge disparity is, is because men and boys are statistically more likely than girls and women to engage in the kinds of behaviors that cause spinal cord injuries. So they drive more motorcycles. They end up in more car accidents. And they do face higher rates of gun violence, which are all things that can lead to these injuries.

*KATHY: But because of that, there was this perception that there would never… you'd never be able to have a separate women's competition. That, that they would just always be welcome to join, to join the men's program.*

SEAN: Beyond that, though, Audrey, is there like a skill issue? I mean, are men better at murderball than women?

AUDREY: I mean, it depends on what you mean by better, which is also something you could say about the Olympics. But I think, as Sarah kind of alluded to in talking to me, she's saying that generally women are going to be, you know, not as big, not as strong as, as guys playing the sport. And that is just something that is generally true. So that's certainly something that could intimidate women out of, out of playing. It’s certainly something that could prevent women from getting into the elite level because there are these bigger, faster, stronger players. And it's also something that women have adapted to.

SEAN: Hm.

AUDREY: Sarah says she kind of plays a more strategic game. She plays it with just kind of chess softball mindset behind it. Instead of focusing on these high speed physical collisions that also make up the sport.

SEAN: So like, yes, men are bigger, but yes, women are smarter.

AUDREY: <laughs> You could definitely put that that way. Yeah.

SEAN: <laughs>

AUDREY: So another issue is cultural, which is that…as Kathy Newman, the director of competitions and development at World Wheelchair Rugby…as she told me, there hasn't really been a concerted effort to recruit female players and a lot of this is in the way Murderball gets pitched or not, to young women who are recovering from injuries. So Sarah Adam, she has a friend, Mandy Marciano, who had a spinal cord injury when she was 13 and she's recovering. And here's the story Sara told me.

*SARAH: She's in rehab, and there's another young male with a spinal cord injury, similar spinal cord injury to Mandy there. The male was watching Murderball, popular documentary for wheelchair rugby that gets a lot of athletes involved in the sport.*

*<CLIP> MURDERBALL (2005): What we do here is we take these wheelchairs and turn them into a gladiator, a battling machine…*

*SARAH: And she said to the therapist, like, ‘Hey, what’s that documentary? What are you watching?’ And the therapist said, ‘Oh, that's not for you. You don't have to worry about that.’*

SEAN: Sad. Well, Sara Adam’s making history this year. Where does she think this sport should go?

AUDREY: Sara drew this interesting comparison for me between the recreational and the elite levels of wheelchair rugby and so recreational. She's all in on women's participation, and she's all in on the idea of having some kind of women's only space, which she's actually participated in, and she's found a lot of value in.

*SARAH: It was a unique opportunity to be surrounded by other women with disabilities that are going through similar things you are. Because me, yes, my male teammates— and they're they're phenomenal, phenomenal teammates—but we have different things that we go through. And to have that support that I didn't even realize I was craving until I was around other elite female athletes. I'm like, ‘Wow, this is so nice to be around somebody who gets it in a different level.’*

SEAN: So kind of counterintuitively, she's saying to end up with more coed murderball, you

should have more women's only teams?

AUDREY: Yes and no.

<SCORING IN> STBB 415

AUDREY: So she definitely thinks there should be more women's only wheelchair rugby teams. But she has, kind of, an interesting take at the elite level she's supportive of. Men and women playing together, but she's not necessarily supportive of something like, for example, a quota system that would say you had to have a certain number of women on your team. This is how she put it to me.

*SARAH: Whether you're male or female, you can either hack it or you can't.*

SEAN: Hm.

AUDREY: Wheelchair rugby is an elite sport. There is an elite level, and the eliteness of that level shouldn't be brought down by involving women or or men who aren't prepared to play at that level.

SCORING BUMP

AUDREY: So Sarah is basically advocating for, you know, having an elite league that just by virtue of physical differences and abilities, is probably going to end up being mostly male the way it is now. And then you have a women's only league where women can compete at a high level, but also have this uniquely female supportive space.

*SARAH: But I don't know that you're going to have enough females that would qualify for wheelchair rugby to have its own league.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Where do you think that leaves us with Murderball?

AUDREY: I guess when I came into my reporting, I looked at the fact that wheelchair rugby was co-ed, and I said to myself, ‘That's great. You know, we're done. It's equal. Men and women play together.’ Like, bada bing, bada boom. Awesome.

SEAN: Hm

AUDREY: But we know from the numbers and from the testimony and people, like, involved with the sport that that's not true. But I think we do this with mixed gender sports. We write them off as kind of done as we've done all we can. And in doing that, we kind of stop asking ourselves these two questions: what's best for women and what's best for the sport? And I think that we should keep asking ourselves these questions because the answers to them are really messy, and they're also really interesting and really productive. And so in terms of what's best for women, as as I was talking to Sarah, I heard this tension between she loves her male teammates, she loves how she's kind of forced to play a different game than them, that she has her role on the team as a strategist because she can't necessarily play the same role with the with the contact, with the physicality. But she also breathed a sigh of relief when she's in women's only spaces. And then in terms of what's best for the sport, you know, I asked her straight up whether women playing with men improved the sport of wheelchair rugby. I kind of expected a black and white answer, and maybe that's just because I've played a lot of coed basketball. And I kind of feel like a badass when I do it, but it was not a black and white answer. And she wasn't all in on support of just full mixed gender league set up, especially if that involves kind of sacrificing the the quality of the sport at the highest level.

<SCORING IN> Hyperdrive

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: SPEAKER 1: Sarah history maker after all of the talk, how good did it feel to actually get out there and make your Paralympic debut?*

*SARAH ADAM: Yeah, really excited to be out there. I mean, the atmosphere here is electric. It was like once the whistle blew. I just come from playing rugby.*

SEAN: Well, what do you think, though? Before we go, do you think this should be a coed game at the highest level, or do you think we should separate out the leagues by gender?

AUDREY: I think it should be a co-ed league at the highest level.

SEAN: How come?

AUDREY: Because even after all of this reporting, I still think it's like, super badass to watch women in this game playing against men like I, I, I'm going to watch Sarah Adam this week and just absolutely lose my mind.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: That was Audrey Nelson. She’s a rising senior at Wesleyan University. And she was a member of the 2024 Vox Media Writers Workshop. It’s a free mentorship program designed to give aspiring journalists an introduction to the industry. And fun fact: I was Audrey’s mentor! You can learn more about the program at voxmediaevents.com/writersworkshop. When we’re back on *Today, Explained* we’re gonna ask if more sports should be co-ed.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*SPEAKER 1: So we’re here in a screening room at Paramount Studios and we’re getting ready to watch a new movie called Murderball.*

*SPEAKER 2: It’s about these gnarly dudes who play quadriplegic rugby…Hey, time is money! Could you roll the gosh darn film?*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* reached out to Andrea Bundon to ask her about the challenges involved in making more sports co-ed. Andrea’s not only knee deep in the subject matter as a professor focusing on the sociology of sport at the University of British Columbia. But she’s also taken part in the Paralympics herself as a guide for visually impaired cross country skiers.

SKI SFX IN

ANDREA BUNDON (sociologist): Both of the athletes I guided competitively have some vision so they can see me 5 to 10 ft in front of them. What they can't necessarily see is, is the trail going to turn, what the snow conditions are. So my job is like ski ahead and both provide sort of a visual marker that they can follow, but then also over a radio, give them information about what's happening in the race, about the tactics, about what's happening on the race course. You know, when you need to go into a talk, when you need to make a turn. So yeah, you're you're racing with the athlete. We're racing as a duo. And it was from conversations with these two women that, you know, I really became interested in Paralympic sport and the Paralympic movement.

SKI SFX OUT

SEAN: So we heard earlier in the show, Andrea, that this year, this year's Paralympics will bring the first woman ever on team USA's murderball squad. I wonder, you know, as someone who's thought about the Paralympics a lot, like, how big a deal is that?

ANDREA: I mean, I think it's a very big deal in the sense that team USA has an incredible team. They've been a dominant force in murderball or wheelchair rugby for many years. So to have, a woman on their team is significant. And the games are just starting, so the final numbers are being tallied, but it, it looks like there'll be eight women playing or competing, I should say, at the Paralympics in Paris, across multiple teams in wheelchair rugby. And that is the highest number of women we've ever seen at the Paralympics in this sport.

SEAN: How does the Paralympics do on on gender parity, on, on coed sports? And maybe to give people a broader sense, like how does that compare to the Olympics? But let's just start with the Paralympics.

ANDREA: Yeah. So I mean, when you're talking about gender parity, there's, there's definitely some positive developments. In Paris, the expectation is there's going to be 4400 athletes competing and about 45% of those will be women, which is an increase since Tokyo four years ago, where it was about 42%. It's an increase…it’s the highest number, percentage wise that we've ever seen at the Paralympics. So great news. But I think it also really matters how you're understanding gender parity or what you think that that means. So the other number we could look at is how many of the medal events are for women. So there's going to be I think it's about 560 medal events at the games. 235 of those are going to be for women. So less than 50 Certainly. It’s more medal events than four years ago, but it's still not balanced or gender parity. So, you know, by some measures, this will be this is really great progress in women's involvement in the Paralympic movement; by other measures I think there's there is a lot of work still to be done and, a lot of other numbers we could be looking at.

<SCORING IN> Richard goes skating

SEAN: We heard some arguments earlier in the show, even from, from Sarah Adam herself, that, you know, we shouldn't just make like the Team USA murderball squad, like 50-50 men and women. It should be the best possible athletes, even if that means there's more men on the team than women. Do, do you agree with that sentiment?

ANDREA: Absolutely. I mean, I'm not in favor of, like, introducing a quota for women on the team without some reason behind that. We want competitive teams.

SEAN: Yeah.

ANDREA: We want to see the best athletes competing. There's, there's no denying that. I mean, another way we could look at this is what's the endgame and why, why has Murderball taken the approach they have in terms of including women? Which is, you know, there's one woman on the USA team this year; it’s said there's expected to be eight in Paris overall. Fantastic. But is the goal that… to use the mixed gender sort of label to get some women onto these teams? Exceptional women, I would say. And Sara Adam is exceptional, in so many ways, onto these teams to maybe increase the visibility of women in these sports, to build the depth and to, to really, you know, inspire other women to participate in these sports, to get some representation. And then eventually get to a point where there might be enough, enough depth, enough competition that we could see two teams at the Paralympics. A men's team and a women's team. Is coed sport, intended to be a path to developing the women's game. Or is this the end game itself? In which case I would say we're probably only ever going to see, you know, 1 or 2 women on each team.

SCORING OUT

ANDREA: In some of our research, we've also spoken to women who have been on teams that are technically coed, but in practice, mostly men in wheelchair rugby and para-ice hockey or sled hockey is the other, the other sport we looked at. And, you know, some of these women have really incredible experiences and really successful careers on these teams, and felt they were supported and felt that they had, like, a meaningful role to play on these teams. Other women we spoke to talked about how this was a really, really lonely experience. Being the only woman on the team and having to break into these very often masculine spaces often being the first woman in that space, it was more discouraging than encouraging. And in many cases was the reason they ended their sport career or went back to playing on, let's say, less elite teams, but where they could play with more women. So is this, is this intended to be a step towards developing the woman's sport or is this where we stop?

SEAN: Is there like a day you think we'll see less separation between men and women's sports at the professional level like the NBA? You know, could it, could a WNBA player play in the NBA one day? I know we're getting there with, like, refs and coaches. But do you think there's a day or we'll get there with athletes too.

ANDREA: In some sports it makes a ton of sense. In other sports, maybe less sense. I mean, there's, there are biological differences between men and women. Not necessarily ones we, sort of, focus on. I think women can compete with men in many, many instances. But it also…I think we could be a lot more creative in how we form competitive groups and how we organize our sports. So, you know, thinking about, does it always have to be separate based on gender or sex? Could a weight class be more relevant? There are different ways we can organize our sports. Sex integrated or coed sports could serve one purpose, but that doesn't mean that there shouldn't also be teams for women or other instances where it does make sense to have gender segregated sports.

<SCORING IN> Tremendous sideburns

ANDREA: I mean, one of the things I love about coed sports is that it does create an incentive for whether it's your national team, your national organization, or your local club, or your high school track team, to invest in both men and women. Right? Say you've got a really, really great track program at your high school, but you have a lot more men and boys competing than women. And suddenly the regional championships introduces a mixed relay. You're suddenly going to be a lot more interested in recruiting a few more female athletes to the program, right? And making sure that they're getting the support they need so that you can enter a really competitive mixed team and maintain your, your championship title. The other thing I like is that, you know, it's really important for, for women or for girls to see women represented in sport. We know a lot about the role of having role models, of being able to see yourself. But I would say it's almost, maybe even more important that like, men watch women play sport. <laughs> And, you know, we know a lot more women watch women playing sport than men watch women playing sport. So a mixed event might be the only time a young boy actually watches a woman compete, and that has incredible benefit as well. For them to see and to recognize the athleticism of women. I think mixed sport, coed sports are, like, really incredible opportunities that way.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Andrea Bundon! School of Kinesiology. University of British Columbia. Haleema Shah produced. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard fact checked. Rob Byers and Patrick Boyd mixed. I’m Sean Rameswaram. It’s *Today, Explained*. Watch some murderball this weekend!

SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]