

Julie Haddon Transcript

[00:00:01] Julie: What we love about this league is that we are comprised of players that are also influencers, whether it's gaming, whether it's fashion, whether it's fitness, whether it's cooking, whether it's parenting. It could be a variety of things, and these players make their home inside our league, but they're also very vibrant in the community and very focused on building their personal brands and telling stories.

[00:00:24] Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to "The Speed of Culture." Up today on "The Speed of Culture" podcast, we are thrilled to welcome Julie Haddon, the chief marketing and commercial officer at the National Women's Soccer League. Julie's been instrumental in driving NWSL's explosive growth, leading innovative marketing strategies, building strong brand partnerships, and shaping the future of women's professional sports. Julie, so great to see you today. Thanks so much for joining.

[00:01:04] Julie: Amazing to be here. Thanks for having me, Matt.

[00:01:06] Matt: Absolutely. So, to those in the audience who don't know a lot about the National Women's Soccer League, why don't you just tell us about the league and where it's headed, and why you're so excited about its future?

[00:01:17] Julie: Yes, happy to share. So the National Women's Soccer League is the leading premier professional women's league in America that features, right now, there are 14 clubs, soon to expand as we are going to be rolling out in the seasons ahead to 16 clubs. There are 16 teams around the nation that all make up the NWSL. What you may or may not know, and your listeners may or may not know this, is that the women's soccer league in the United States does have the best players in the world that play here and make the NWSL their home. So when you think about the fact that the back-to-back World Cup winners from 2015 to 2019, or you think about the fact that the Olympics in 2024 had the gold medal winners, many of the players from the Olympics and the World Cups play inside this league. So it's a fascinating and exciting, fast-growing sports league with some of the best players.

[00:02:12] Matt: Yeah, and I think it really seems to be at the crossroads of just two huge major trends, one of which is just the growth in women's sports. So, obviously, we see the WNBA and women's collegiate basketball, and so many sports that are just exploding. And then, of course, just the overall growth in soccer itself. It's now the number one team sport among kids aged six to 12 in the US, and, obviously, on both the men's and women's side, just

incredible growth. So you're really at the crossroads of what seems to be a big cultural movement right now.

[00:02:44] Julie: Yes. I think the part that's exciting about the league right now is that we're at this intersection of culture and sport and disruption. I mean, there are a lot of new sports that we'll talk about later that are coming on that have different derivative ways of playing what has been a traditional sport. We've seen that in basketball. Are we seeing it in other sports? What we love about this league is that we are comprised of players that are also influencers, whether it's gaming, whether it's fashion, whether it's fitness, whether it's cooking, whether it's parenting. It could be a variety of things, and these players make their home inside our league, but they're also very vibrant in the community and very focused on building their personal brands and telling stories.

[00:03:24] Matt: I mean, that makes a lot of sense. I think, obviously, one way sports have changed from when I was a kid is that athletes weren't really as accessible. If you look at something like professional football, you barely even got to see most of the players besides maybe Joe Montana. You know, they're behind helmets on these huge fields and stadiums. And now fast forward to today, because we just had actually Tim Ellis, the CMO of the National Football League, on the podcast. He was telling us that, basically, people are consuming sports differently, and a big part of it is the athlete's engagement with the fan. They are sharing their interests. They are sharing their other ventures. And then ESPN is showing what they're wearing while they're walking into the stadium before a game starts. And I think all that, what I think that does over time is it brings the athlete more into the center of the cultural zeitgeist and the conversation point. And, obviously, we know sports is ultimately about people and people's personal trials and tribulations. So I'd imagine your ability to extract those compelling stories from the athletes is going to be incredibly important in drawing people to a game and then to essentially care more.

[00:04:28] Julie: Well, what we learn a lot is that people know we've got four broadcast partners. Our games are accessible, and you can watch any NWSL game, whether it's on ESPN, whether it's on CBS, whether it's on Scripps Ion, or Prime Video. Those are the "when to watch" and the "where to watch" that we do a lot with our marketing program, but the "why to watch" and the "who to watch." So it's beyond just the competition or the athleticism or the dynamic, real-time entertainment that makes soccer such a beautiful game. It's actually the players as influencers. It's what Tim called in that podcast, and I worked with the NFL as part of the NFL for many years, and Tim always would talk about this as "helmet soft." That strategy transcends our league as well. It's just as much about who these players are beyond the pitch, beyond what they're doing. You mentioned walk-up videos. You mentioned their fashion, their swag. What they're doing is, again, offline, and others follow them because they're such a great influence and a great beacon for so many people, especially young girls that want to be pros one day.

[00:05:29] Matt: Yeah. I would also imagine a big part of your success is how you package the content up to the younger audience in ways that they gravitate towards consuming entertainment content.

[00:05:41] Julie: Very much so. One of the best things, to your point, we always, we have a group of people that we have a social influencer group and led by one of our NFL colleagues, actually, who is based in LA, runs this department for us. Her name is Jordan. Jordan Dolben, now Jordan Jones. And one of the great things that Jordan has done with her team is they find ways to be culturally relevant and pull into moments that are happening offline or in other parts of culture that may not actually have anything to do with soccer or our game. For example, last week with the Met Gala, I should say, there were fashion pullouts that came from, like, some of the greatest hits from that night, and then we made some content that showed how these look like our kits inside the field. So there was a couple that showed, like, the Washington Spirit kit, and they have this one really interesting design. And how does that line up to something that's happening in the Met Gala? Or when we do releases, we make them tentpole moments. So every year, Nike makes bespoke kits for us with all of our 14, now 16 clubs, where you do an unveiling of it with the 14 that we've had last year and the year before, you're able to see the heritage, the culture, the story, the community that makes up what is part of the kit. What is germane to Chicago is going to be a lot different than what would be Angel City's kit. For example, it has all about these fun places in LA that are cool and part of the community, that makes LA such a rich, vibrant city.

[00:07:07] Matt: Absolutely. And I know that partnerships are obviously incredibly important, and some of the partnerships you guys have had, I just think are really great and, frankly, are like a blueprint for how any brand should go to market. Overtime, I know it is a media platform that you've partnered with, and we actually had Dan Porter, the CEO of Overtime, on this podcast as well. So we're getting a lot of the movers and shakers in sports, obviously, on the podcast, but I know that you've partnered with Overtime to deliver exclusive content and behind-the-scenes access to over 100 million followers of Overtime. Why is a platform like that important to building awareness for the league?

[00:07:41] Julie: Yeah, I mean, first of all, Dan's an incredible entrepreneur. I had the chance of working with him years ago at Zynga when we acquired his app, and he's just such an interesting mind to have in the sports world right now because he brings innovation and new ways of gamification and engagement. And that's exactly what we love about a partner like Overtime. I mean, their game-changing content is with this first time they've worked with the professional women's league. The second thing that we love is we give highlights, and we're giving a variety of content and moments that we're able to pull in from whether it's the regular season, whether it's the championship, the playoffs, even the Challenge Cup. We're giving highlights to the audience at Overtime, that has over 100 million social media followers, and game highlights and behind-the-scenes content. So, again, it's getting back to the point earlier. It's like you can understand the way to watch and the when to watch, but this helps infuse the "why to watch." I mean, one of the best cuts and the best clips, for example, when you get to

see the NWSL content, is in the partnership like Overtime, you're able to go in there and you're able to see how a goal, like Marta's epic goal from the end of last season, which I will give you the access to share with your viewers because it is so iconic, but she juked past many defenders, and she was able to score, which became the winner that took her into the championship. And so by being able to see their athleticism and the competitiveness of what a player who's from Brazil, like Marta, who's iconic there and plays inside our league, it opens up the aperture to more people to become fans. You get to see it. You get to understand the game, and you get to understand that the best players do play inside the NWSL that are around the world inside our league.

[00:09:18] Matt: Absolutely. I mean, Julie, as I hear you talk, as a father of two daughters, I just think what you're doing and what the NWSL is doing and the WNBA, and pushing women's sport is so important. Because when I was growing up, it wasn't really aspirational for women to be athletes, and it wasn't looked at the same way. And sports is so important, especially for young people, to develop a sense of self, a sense of teamwork, discipline, pride, leadership, all those things. And having a league like yours be aspirational for young women and girls to go in that direction, whether they end up in the league or not, really almost isn't the point because it gives them those lifelong skills, and the athletes that you have on the field really are the idols they look up to to go in that direction.

[00:10:04] Julie: Yeah, you know, it's interesting, Matt. You know, some of the early work I did in my career in sports, earlier when I joined the NFL, we did a program which was called "In the Huddle," and it was all about how a lifetime of skills comes from playing competitive sports, whether you're in the boardroom, whether you're an executive, as a leader, as you make your sport into becoming a pro or you become anything in business or government or community. There are so many things that you learn from being an athlete. In fact, when I hire people, it goes higher on my list of who would be a great candidate because I see that they know how to play a team sport. You have to face getting your ass kicked, and you have to be resilient, and you have to face failure, and you have to face adversity. And these are skills that really help you with the grit and the knowledge for your lifetime. And so that's why I feel very strongly about a lifetime of skills, because there actually is research from Ernst & Young that talks about that. And, again, I'm happy to link you to it. Madeline can get it. But the lifetime of skills that you get from being an athlete, there is legitimate research that is in this Ernst & Young report from a few years back that shows how you're apt to be much more successful because of being an athlete early on.

[00:11:24] Matt: For sure. Talking about women's success, another very successful entrepreneur that your league has partnered with is Alex Cooper, who obviously is behind the "Call Her Daddy" podcast and has become a cultural phenomenon in her own right. Right? Obviously, interviewing presidential candidate Kamala Harris before the last presidential election showing her influence. How important is new media like podcasts and partnering with Alex and her properties in terms of diversifying your reach to reach the new fan and your future fans?

[00:11:53] Julie: Yeah, I mean, what's exciting about the different forms of media that we're getting involved with, whether it's podcasts or whether it's a docuseries, we had our first ever NWSL docuseries that was part, that was called "For the Win," which was part of Prime Video that we worked with Connor Shell and Words and Pictures on. Or it's the full-fledged content of our games. It's the highlights. It's the social content. It's everything in streaming that we have our own direct-to-consumer property called "NWSL+." All of these things are finding new ways to a new fan base, new avid fans that are coming in. So I think that Alex is a great example of she's reaching people outside of the core. I mean, her partnership or her reach is millions; 20 million people a month listen to "Call Her Daddy," and some of our players listen to it. And Trinity Rodman was on it. And you're finding people that may not have heard of NWSL but really like Alex. And so these are the types of partnerships that we're looking at, things that either strengthen our core fan or bring in new fans. Because as we grow, that's obviously what our strategy here is: growth and bringing in new people to experience our games.

[00:13:05] Matt: We'll be right back with "The Speed of Culture" after a few words from our sponsors.

[00:13:09] Matt: So speaking of growth, I know a big initiative that you're behind is getting the league in front of brands who want to reach your growing audience. Talk to me about your sponsorship platform, the benefits that it offers to brands, and what are some of the ways that you think brands can take advantage of your continued fan engagement?

[00:13:27] Julie: Yeah, I mean, what's great about us is that we're small and we're nimble, so we can develop really interesting programs for brands. So one of my most favorite brands that we have just developed a partnership with recently in 2025 was E.L.F., for example, E.L.F. Beauty. And so the program with E.L.F. is going to be a mission. They're changemakers. We're changemakers. We have a joint vision, if you will, to bring in a diverse and equitable playing field for our fans and for their customers. It's actually called "Glow for Glory," which we'll be launching later this year. It's an open tryout in key NWSL markets to find the next young talent. So I, internally, was calling it our "American Idol," but it is a version of "how do you get to be a pro," and it's going to engage parents and older age kids and older age fans of ELF that may not have known about NWSL or people that know about NWSL but never thought that they can find a way onto the pitch and become a pro or get the exposure they need. So, any of these are just a great example of things that we can work together. We're working with Footballco on that program. Billie Jean King Enterprises is involved in that, but we're able to build really bespoke solutions to potential partners. Another one that I love in bolstering our commitment to mothers both on and off the field is Bobbie. So we have dedicated on-site feeding and lactation areas for mothers at the championship game in 2024 in Kansas City. We're getting on-site activations the 2025 and '26 seasons, where we're presenting an annual "Parents' Day" award to each season, one parent for each NWSL club. So, I mean, our partnership with Bobbie speaks volumes because these are not really traditional types of sports. They're not necessarily a beer brand or a car brand or something. And by the way, I would love beer brands and car brands, but we are also looking at other ways to find new solutions for marketers that want to

try to do something that's a little more disruptive because we have a very much a challenger brand DNA and ethos.

[00:15:25] Matt: You would challenge your brand, but at the same time, I mean, I think there are very few paths to engage with consumers, especially younger consumers, because they are spread out in so many different places. They're on TikTok. They're at live events. They're streaming and doing all these things. And advertising on linear television doesn't traditionally work unless you have live sports. I mean, live sports is the last bastion of live entertainment, and you have kind of everything going for you in terms of being culturally relevant as well as having this live sports aspect to really drive that engagement, that water cooler discussion, et cetera, and put somebody's brand right at the center of it.

[00:16:02] Julie: Yeah, it's funny you say that. Mary Ann Turke, who was our COO at the NFL, always used to say, "Sports is the last reality TV" or "it's the ultimate reality TV." And I really like that. I say that and think about that a lot because it is not something that you ever want to be setting your DVR for if you can avoid it, because I feel that the collaboration to be able to have the banter when I'm watching the final four and I'm seeing the last minutes of a game and I'm talking to my college friends because we're rooting for one school versus the other or the ways that we watch our games even at the league. So there are people in the stadiums that are there that are texting with me that are saying, "Oh, did you see this? Did you see this? How does it look on TV?" Like, this is not something you find in traditional linear or even some of the things you'll see with more traditional programming. So I do agree. I think the excitement, the electricity, the connectivity is so pivotal to what you see right now.

[00:16:59] Matt: Absolutely. So let's shift gears a little bit as we wrap up here, just to you and your journey. So, as you mentioned earlier, you spent some time at Zynga; obviously, you spent a good deal of time at the NFL, most recently heading their global brand and consumer marketing there. So big jobs, big roles, high-profile roles. As you look back on your career, what are some of the areas do you think you focused on, whether it's personal or professional development, that put you in the seat you are today as CMO and COO of the National Women's Soccer League?

[00:17:30] Julie: Yeah, that's a really good question. And the honest-to-God truth is that I've been asked this before, like, "Hey, you had a great north star, you had a path." And I feel like that's not actually true. I would find things that I knew I really liked and wanted to do more of that. And at the same time, the things that I wasn't gravitating to as much, I found a way to do less of it. So often when I'm talking to students or I go to do the college visits or even sometimes panels, I think to get closer to your north star and what it is you want, you actually have to learn what you don't want. So in my case, it was along the way learning what I like more, what stack ranked higher, and what I liked least. And what the common themes I could say from having been in kind of three distinct, if you will, but kind of connected circles would be spending time in tech, whether it was with eBay or Twitter or Zynga or SoFi, even. What you learn in tech is relentless analytics, data. How do you measure? How can you get down to

understanding how your programs are performing and understanding the analytics that are unlocked in all of your work? What I learned from entertainment at companies like DreamWorks Animation, I learned a lot about how to be the ultimate deliverer of great creative. I mean, it's a creative industry to work on projects like *Shrek* or feature films like an Academy Award campaign for something like an animated CGI film when it was the only film right after *Toy Story* that was CGI animated and feature. It was all about the creative. It's about the story. And I know that sounds cliché because marketers always love to talk about the story, but there's nothing better than the Hollywood world about it because you not only have to do stories, but the stories around what is essentially the product is a story. And then I think the third part of understanding from sports is the ability to really know and connect with fans because the stories go nowhere if you don't understand your fan base. The stories go nowhere if you don't understand the data and the analytics of how everything you're doing is performing. So I think this intersection of tech, entertainment, and sports brings together this uncanny talent base of things that just make the home inside the NWSL such a joy to be a part of right now.

[00:19:47] Matt: Absolutely. And when you think about the younger professional that's entering, that wants to have a thriving career in the world of sports entertainment. What are some of the skill sets here in 2025 that you think people need to start developing at earlier stages so they can set themselves up for a lucrative career moving forward?

[00:20:07] Julie: That is a really good question. I think being patient with yourself to know that it's not going to be the first or second time out that you're going to get a home run. You're going to have some failures. You're going to go out there and you're going to whiff and you're going to say, "Wow, that was a really bad job." Here's an example. I took a stint one year that I thought early in my career, that I wanted to be doing something for the world, and I worked in an environmental science company. I realized that I love building things that have a raw emotion and passion attached to it. So that was not necessarily a great fit for me because it's not an entertainment type of a property. It was much more of a very serious, and yet to some, the north star, what they wanted. It just wasn't the right thing for me. But I did take that, and I know that I whiffed in that experience. And so I think if people come in and they don't say, "I have to fit in a box and it's got to be perfect," you go in and you say, "I'm going to learn from it, and I'm going to learn the good and I'm going to learn the bad, but I'm okay with taking from it that may not be only the successes." It'll be some of the things that didn't work. You're better for it the next time around. So I think that's one. I think the other thing that I find when I talk to people and I interview, and I've never really thought about this in a more mass way to say it, so I'm really glad, Matt, that you're asking, is often when I interview a candidate and they say they want to work at the NWSL and they say why, and they say, "Oh, because I love soccer." I think one of the things I would tell young talent is that's great. We assume you like soccer if you're coming in to talk to me about a soccer job, but tell us what you're going to do to make our brand better. Tell our content better. Tell us what you're going to do with your unique skill set that's going to make our analytics or our sales pipeline, or our creative better. And I think that's one of the things that often falls short is, we sell ourselves so hard and say, "This is why I love it so much" in a job like this, but you don't realize we're so busy as professionals. Everybody is.

We always want to know, "Well, what's in it to help the league get better or my brand get better?" And so that's the one piece.

[00:22:08] Matt: I would also share as advice. Absolutely. And so looking forward for your career and, obviously, the league itself, what are some of the things you're most excited about in the years ahead in terms of personal and professional growth and what you're working on?

[00:22:22] Julie: Well, I think I'll start with professional. So I think with the World Cup coming in 2026, it's going to be so exciting to see soccer take over America, or another kind of football here in the states, just as we've seen actually the NFL go into the international markets. And that's also been really fascinating to see the NFL in Germany or the NFL in the UK. I think it's going to be thrilling to see the US hosting the World Cup. So I'm excited about that. I'm also really excited about some of these upstart, new kind of interesting, innovative sports that are happening, these rapidly growing things. Like I said earlier, I love watching what seven versus seven is becoming in soccer, or Travis Scott recently did something with Nike at Coachella, where they had this kind of one-on-one type of a soccer match. And so interesting, like I said, derivatives of what is traditional in today's ADD generation with young people and with our, we all have short attention spans, given so much attention is pulled in different directions with just life. I love these kind of short-form moments of new sports. I was watching "Unrivaled," the basketball team. That is so exciting to see how that is a new way to do that and becoming a fan of things that I might never have thought about before. Rugby is really interesting because, again, I think we're just looking for new ways to entertain and engage fans and athletes with the distribution channels being able to bring it to viewers that is now so ubiquitous. And then I think the second part of your question about personally what I think and get excited about, I really love leading teams and mentoring, and developing people. I know that sounds probably, again, corny to some extent, but, you know, I forget that I just think that I'm me, but I forget that I've been through the world of when tech became big or when mobile became big or when CGI animation was no longer an experimental form of filmmaking, and now it's the norm. So I love the idea of mentoring and developing young talent, and also really developing creative at scale and seeing how different ways of creativity can permeate culture.

[00:24:35] Matt: Absolutely. No, I mean, it's a fascinating time to be in the world of sports and, obviously, doing what you're doing. It's such a cultural fit at the moment, and I think it's only going to grow in the years ahead. So finally, here, Julie, we always ask our guests to wrap up with a saying or mantra that helps define their professional journey. I'm just wondering what might come to mind for you.

[00:24:53] Julie: I think I've said this before. I did a talk in Germany about a month ago, and I had a slide with this on it. But it is attributed to Paula Balzer, who I met when I was in my twenties, and she was at Clear Channel, which then became Live Nation. And she said this, and it sticks with me, which is, "Don't tell me about the flood, build an ark." So I often do that as many folks on my team will hear me say. It's really easy to say all the things that are wrong, but we know that. We're having a conversation, but what are we doing to the problem? What are

we doing to fill that ark and bridge it? So we'll be having a conversation, and that's one way I would say I summarize my career is because I'm a persistent and perpetual optimist. I will sit in a meeting, and we'll be talking about something that broke down. We've analyzed it. We communicate what was wrong with it. But now let's move to how we're going to solve it and how we're not going to do this again, or how can we learn from it? So I think that is probably my favorite saying is, "Don't tell me about the flood, build an ark." And I wonder if Paula Balzer even knows that she had such an influence on me with that saying, but it's actually, I think, on my Instagram and on some of my social favorite quotes, but I do live by that.

[00:26:01] Matt: I love that. Well, we're going to leave with that. This has been such a great discussion. I'm so thankful you took the time, amidst your busy schedule in a really high-demand role, to share your story and what you're working on with us today. So thank you so much, and continue to be a huge fan, and wishing you a great rest of 2025.

[00:26:17] Julie: Thanks, Matt. I'm a big fan of your work, too. I really appreciate you having me, and thank you.

[00:26:22] Matt: You're welcome. On behalf of Suzy and our team, thanks again to Julie Haddon, the chief marketing and commercial officer at the National Women's Soccer League, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review "The Speed of Culture" podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time. See you soon, everyone. Take care. "The Speed of Culture" is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and a Guest Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for "The Speed of Culture" in Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click "Follow" so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.