



ScratchThat Podcast Episode 33: Leveling the Field

Emily: Hey, I'm Emily Chenevert, advocacy nerd, Peloton enthusiast, wife, and mama to two and CEO of the Austin Board of REALTORS®. Every day, real estate is changing. So we're taking it to the experts to unpack major topics that you need to know about to be successful in this business. Scratch what you think you know about this business, and listen up for a fresh take on an old industry. It's 2021 y'all and I'm excited to kick off a new season of Scratch That with a very special guest. Sarah Thomas is the NFL's first full-time female official. Named one of Sports Illustrated's 200 most influential figures of all time, Sarah is a force to be reckoned with. She was the first female official in a major college football game, the first to officiate a bowl game, and the first to officiate in a big 10 stadium. And she made the post season history during the Patriots chargers 2019 AFC divisional championship by being, again, the first woman to officiate a playoff game. Her story of breaking the glass ceiling time after time was so inspiring that we invited her to share it with our members during last year's annual meeting. I chatted with Sarah right before the football season and began to talk about her journey, how she adapts to change, how she finds balance between working and raising her kiddos. And what I learned is that she's not only an inspiration, she's a wonderful person, and it put southerner in a boot. Get inspired and listen up.

Emily: Let's talk a little bit about how you started with officiating. What got you going?

Sarah: Being kicked out of a men's basketball league to be honest.

Emily: Well that would do it.

Sarah: Yea. No, I had played sports. My whole life college basketball came to an end and I went and played in a men's league with my brothers. And after three years I was kicked out because I was a girl and I just kind of was like, "What am I going to do with myself?" My older brother was officiating and I said, "Hey, can, can girls do that?" And he said, "I guess I so, Sis. Be there at six." That's what really got me started, but going into that first meeting and seeing these guys challenge each other, and I'm thinking, I don't know what I'm doing. A lot of people probably still don't think I know what I'm doing, but, um,

I just, I fell in love with it and saw a way to give back and stay involved in organized sports.

Emily: I had mentioned to you that my husband was officiating through college and then did high school ball. And they, the referees are as competitive. The officials are as competitive as the players are. It's a very, it's a competitive sport to get where you are. And I think people sort of underestimate that to some degree, but what led you to try football instead of basketball, basketball was your passion.

Sarah: So I did do basketball. It's funny. Yeah. I was just having this discussion last night with a group of friends. And whenever I started in football, the assigning secretary, Harold Cooper, he said, "Don't you want to try out basketball? And so I think that was his nice cordial way of, "Hey, we (wanna) see more women in basketball," but he never said that. But I tried basketball and basketball was a passion of mine, but I found myself wanting to coach the girls when I was officiating instead of officiating. And then I would get, you know, kind of irritated sometimes like, all right, these girls have got a lot of talent come on, coaches. So I just found myself leaning towards that as opposed to officiating. And it wasn't as much of a challenge to me because I felt like I knew the game of basketball in a sense from a player standpoint, but with football, I didn't know the game. So it was a huge learning curve for not only the rules, but also the game itself. I mean, as fans we think we know, but really, and truly

Emily: I was gonna say, a good Southern girl didn't know football?

Sarah: I think I did. You know what I mean? Like, I know what a touchdown is. Oh, that's holding, but really is it holding just, yes. We love watching football, especially here in Mississippi, in the South, like we said, but yeah, I just found myself being more challenged in the game of football.

Emily: So you got going at a high school level. Right. And, and how, how was that? Did the, did those high school boys take to you or was there where there's some giggles and laughs.

Sarah: There was more of a shock factor. Like, yeah, that's a girl. Um, and I'll wear my hair in a ponytail during high school. And then when I got to college, it was a little different. So I tucked my hair. So from the presence from high school, having my ponytail out, the guys saw me come in from a mile away and like, you know, she's, that's a girl, but college, it was just, "Oh, that's a woman." And uh, cause I tucked my hair. So I think it was more of a shock factor than anything. I don't think necessarily laughs or giggles because when you're an athlete, you really don't care. Male, female, black, white, you just want it to be called right.

Emily: And so as you went into college, you said you tucked your hair. Was it an intentional choice to sort of like neutralize yourself? Or was it most convenient? The hairs a situation when you're running on the field? I can understand that.

Sarah: No, I, I prefer to have it in a ponytail, but Gerald Austin, conference USA supervisor knew that I would be stereotyped as she's a woman. Why is she out here? If they saw

my ponytail, he's been there. He's been at the level of college. He's been there with NFL and it was more in my best interest, in his opinion for me to do that. And I do agree with him. I did, I blended in it wasn't necessarily, "Oh, she was blowing a call. It's a woman." But now there are a lot more women that are officiating and I'm going to entertain wearing my hair out this year.

Emily: Yeah. I guess I can understand, you know, it's a, both a path of least resistance, but also neutrality ensures that you're judged on the merit of, of what you do.

Sarah: Exactly.

Emily: And I, I can, I can appreciate and understand that. I can't tuck to my hair and fix it over here. But for most part I'm welcomed. I know. Talk to me a little bit about, as you were breaking into the NFL, how you feel like that reception was, how, how did people receive that? Most?

Sarah: I think the players, coaches, my peers, honestly, they, they accepted it, but of course like any new rookie, any new employee, I try not to just put it towards a male female thing, but yes, there was a level of respect that I had to earn, but that's in any occupation and when they saw my merit or they saw that I'm working as hard as you are off the field to be ready when we go on the field, are we going to make mistakes as officials? Of course. But it's all about and how you prepare to get to that, that game. Just like before you get to the board room, you've gotta be able to do the things behind the desk in your own office. And it's just kind of like that in the game of football.

Emily: Who do you feel most mentored you through that? Who, who helped, you know, what you had to do to prepare who took you through the steps to get you ready?

Sarah: I can't just like name one. There's so many and yes. Gerald Austin, Wayne Winkler, Jeff Bergman, Byron Boston. I mean, there's tons of people that, and I just have to go my mom and dad. I mean, if it weren't for my upbringing, I don't think I would be the person I am. So I have to give a lot to them. But all of that, Emily to say, yes, there are people that I pick up the phone and I call and I talked to maybe on a daily basis, but every football official that went before me, they were all male. But from the start of this, if it weren't for them holding everybody else on that field accountable and laying the foundation and just the integrity that every official that I've ever encountered in the NFL and across the country, but all of them are mentors to me.

Emily: They've set the boundaries, right. And then you, you fall in those guard rails, but you make your own way too. I mean, I think I read a quote from Gary Austin about your ability to both judge the rules in the context of the game, but also the context of the way that they were intended to be implemented. And I think that's a hard thing to do to get in the way of people's passion when they are competing and then still make the call. So, how do you handle the feedback that you get when the call doesn't go the way that they want?

Sarah: There on the field is pretty short-lived at times. I mean, some can carry on a little longer, but they're passionate about it, but you know, the, the spirit of the game, or if I miss something, I don't want to, I'm going to go back and critique. None of us want to, um, but it's kinda like, you know, you've, you've got a speed limit of 65 miles an hour. If you're doing 66, 67, there's going to be some leniency there. Now, if you really start violating the law or the rule, and you're doing 70, 75, then we're probably going to have a situation. So I think it's knowing the rule, but the spirit of the game and not getting yourself interjected into the players and what their passion is. We're there to manage. And I want to say administer athletic justice.

Emily: Oh, I love that. That's a powerful way to be. That's better than just referee and the rules you're officiating.

Sarah: I heard my high school, white hat used to say that he used to say that don't let the rules get in the way of a good game. We're just here to administer athletic justice.

Emily: Oh, I love it. How much conversation is there on the field? How much feedback do you get in real time?

Sarah: From peers or coaches or, or...?

Emily: Uh, both from the coaches and the players, I would say, well, yeah, here's, you're working as a team. Yeah.

Sarah: It's pretty immediate with us. It'd be like, "Hey, I said, that's a good get, Scott." Or, "Hey way to be there." "Hey, what do you think about that?" You know, that feedback amongst us as a team yes. From the players and the coaches, right? I mean, if they're, if they're passionate about something, they're going to express it. Um, but there's been situations where we've made some great calls on the field and the coach is going to say, Hey, it was a great job. So it's professional.

Emily: Yeah. I mean, I think they have to respect the position that you hold given, you know, the merit of, of the way that you interact in the game has the ability to make or break the game too. So, I think that there's that sort of mutual respect and trust I would expect, right?

Sarah: Right. It is.

Emily: I think about, um, you know, the people I serve are REALTORS® and they are often also in the midst of managing highly, emotionally charged interactions. You know, they're managing people who are buying their homes, are selling their homes. And they're the guys who are having to administer rules to some degree by telling them that they're either going to get the price they're going to get or not. And they let people down quite often. And it's the same kind of interaction. In some ways, people don't want to hear what they don't want to hear, especially when they're emotionally charged around the subjects.

Sarah: Yes, yes, definitely.

Emily: And I think hard, well, let me ask you this, as you are getting ready for a really special kind of NFL season, given the environment, we're all in, how are you feeling going into the 2020 NFL season?

Sarah: Uh, 2020 has definitely thrown a lot of curve balls and a lot of challenges. And we are all approaching the season just like we would any other, just the uncertainty though, of what a crew may look like. If one of us does test positive, but as far as our prep work is it's been the same, our rules, film study now zoom calls instead of like in-person meetings that there's a lot of uncertainties, but we're professionals and we're, we're going to be prepared. Just like I said, the biggest thing is that every evolving, changing of things, whether it's daily, hourly minute to minute. Um, but that's one great thing about officials were really good when there's change. And we just adjust to it. I've tried to tell my kids, people that can adapt to change are more successful to me than people that just want to stay in the rut. Um, and I tell them, it's kind of like, you can either have dial up or you can have high speed internet, you know, you get, so we got so accustomed to dial up. Of course they don't even know what that is, but we got accustomed to dial up. And when you get comfortable with something, it's hard to go in and experience that change, but we'll see how it's going to be. It's going to be a little different for sure.

Emily: Well, you have to use the electronic whistles in the same way that the college ball, uh, officials are.

Sarah: We have them. I'm not real sure.

Emily: I feel like that would be hard. You've got muscle memory, you know, the build into what you do physically and then that's a completely different trigger.

Sarah: Yeah, it is. I've I've—we've got the option. I believe I've got it. Uh, I got to test it out and see, but yeah,

Emily: Yeah. It would make me nervous to change the way I do things so dramatically. I could appreciate that. And then you'll travel just a ton. Yeah. I mean, officials are on the road so many weekends in a row and that's going to look very different. Is there anxiety for you around that?

Sarah: No, not at all. We are going to try to do things more regional laced, I believe, but if I can drive to the destination, I will. But if it's a hop, skip and a jump on a flight, of course I have children that I've got to be able to get home to and get them off to school the next day. So I'm not concerned about that. We're going to be tested. So, I'll take all the precautions and safety protocol that I'm supposed to, to keep myself safe as well as everybody else I'm around.

Emily: And what are your kids think about what you do? What did they say about it?

Sarah: How old I've got 19, 17 and 7. The two oldest are boys. And then I have the little girl and the boys were so young. I was always gone. I mean, I was just gone on the weekends and they knew, but I wasn't on TV as much Bailey right after she was born, I got hired into the NFL. And so she seen me on TV and I remember her saying, "Mom, you're the only girl." And I was like, "Yes." And she said, "In the world, Mom?" And I haven't thought about it that way, but the boys are now that (age where) their friends say, "Hey, your mom!" You know, whether it's good or bad: "Hey, they're talking about your mom or that's your mom, dude." It's fun for them. But then the little one when Halloween, I looked at her and I said, "What do you want to pay for Halloween? We've got to go to Party City." And she said, "No, we don't." She said, "I want to be you. I want to be an NFL official". So I got to dress her up. Yeah, it was great.

Emily: That's fun. That's awesome. The flag, the flag and all. Yeah, that's good. And do they all love football?

Sarah: They do.

Emily: Are they in their own right?

Sarah: They are. So my oldest is playing baseball at Meridian Community College and my junior he's six, four, and he's playing catcher at Northwest Rankin. And she hasn't started yet just because, you know, dragging her around to all of their events and then me being where I am and that she started to take interest in: "Hey, I want to play something, Mom. It's time." And I'm like, "You're right."

Emily: Yeah. I work full-time. I'm the breadwinner for my family. My husband stays at home, but what I recognize that it takes a lot more than a momma to raise a family. And you've a village of people that have helped support you through your time away is that I think it's interesting, um, that you're both breaking the gender role of your role as an official in the NFL, obviously, but also in terms of how you mama and especially in the South, I mean, there's an expectation for how we raise our babies. One that puts you there every weekend and you weren't, but I expect that your kids have a different kind of respect for you and they see you differently than maybe some of their friends see their mamas.

Sarah: Absolutely. And I've told them I come in all day, the parents, I shouldn't say moms that, stay at home because you just made reference to your, your husband, my neighbor, he stays at home with three beautiful girls. Well, now two of them are at school, but his wife is a dentist. So, the parents that stay at home, I truly commend them. I could do it if I could do that, if I had to, you know, but I don't have to. And so I'm very programmed to get up and go and do. And I've always been that way. My father said, but when people used to call, like to speak to me on the phone against here, your kid, and all she does is eat and sleep here, but I'm, I'm on the go constantly. But I tell my kids, you see, you've seen your mom go out and do. And so if you do end up marrying someone that wants to stay at home, that's gotta be a discussion that you'll have to have because you're going to have to respect her, or she's going to have to respect you on that level. But mom's been gone so much, but I hope they don't hold it against me.

Emily: No, I don't think they do. I mean, I know what my kids see in me. I think they see it obviously even more now that I'm at home doing this every single day. I have, I wonder what their, uh, how they'll reiterate, what work looks like later. Zoom calls and talking to people on a screen all day. But I think that that shapes them differently and different is okay. I agree. You're going to be well-rounded. So, how do you balance it all? Cause you're, I mean, you're making reference to how much you're gone and it's true. And even when you're home, you must be working so hard. And so what are you, what are you doing to take care of yourself?

Sarah: You made reference to, it takes a village to just bear children and good people. And so I definitely have that village. I have a lady that helps me here at the house I've got, um, my mom and dad, of course, with the COVID thing has been kind of shaky. Uh, we have some neighbors that are just like my adopted parents and my kids adoptive grandparents. They do so much for the kids help me out, but it literally is treat others the way that you want to be treated and it, things come full circle. And so I, I pray that I've, I've helped enough people out and I'm going to continue. And I think that it's just now I'm able to lean on them also saying, "no." I mean, that's tough for people like me and you, but, um, I've learned when it's not a priority. I don't have to feel like I got to go to dinner with girlfriends or friends or whatever, or, you know, I, I just, I know I'm gonna stay home or I don't, I don't have to do certain things.

Emily: I think this time at home has kind of taught us that to some degree we've sort of reset. Everybody's expectations about we both miss it. You know, I, I missed obviously the social aspects of being out and about, and with my friends and loved ones, but I think too, like everybody needed to go home for a minute.

Sarah: It was yeah. Push the pause button. Let's see. But I'm ready to like hit play again.

Emily: Yeah. And now I'm ready to go.

Sarah: And I think, you know, that's happening. It was crazy for a long time and then it's just like, bam, all right. We're, we're going to be getting ready.

Emily: We're gonna live life again.

Sarah: I think you know, as well as I do with your children, how many do you have?

Emily: I have two little boys, nine and five.

Sarah: I got ya with my kids being gone. They just know when I say I'm wheels up at 6:00 AM in the morning to whenever I get back there better not be any shenanigans. It better be. And it's just, I've just laid the foundation, you know, the groundwork,

Emily: It's what they know. Especially as long as you've been doing this now, I mean that you've level set that expectation with them. Right. Which will teach them independence and their, the ability to, you know, be responsible and accountable and all those things, which is amazing. Those are gifts for them. So, tell me, how do you take care of

yourself? I mean, it's a very physical job that you've got, right? Yeah. What, what are you doing to take care of yourself? How much do you have to train in, in your off season? What does that look like for you?

Sarah: That training is all the time, but I probably. During the season, I may back off a little bit because I'm on the field on Sunday and then the travel, you know, Saturday or Friday night to Sunday or Monday. So during the season, it's a little less as far as during the week, but during the off season, it's I have a trainer I'm able to go and do weights. I don't really pound the pavement anymore outside just because I'm getting a little older and I've played sports my whole life. So I want to be able to save my knees and my back.

Emily: Yeah. I was going to say, yeah.

Sarah: But I have a trainer and it's just literally just lifting weights, walk, treadmill, bike elliptical. But typically it's just the trainer three days a week. And then the treadmill, as often as I can get up there.

Emily: Yeah. Which I would think is both good for you mentally and physically. Yeah.

Sarah: Oh, absolutely.

Emily: As an athlete for a long time.

Sarah: Yes. I need to start yoga. I hear it's great. Yeah.

Emily: I've heard that too. I have a mat. I do it occasionally, but yeah, I can't sit still quite long enough to breathe in and out like that, but I know that it's good for you. Let me leave you with this. I think that the return of football, especially as somebody in Texas who has grown up loving it is like a really healthy thing for us culturally. Right now. I think America needs the game for a minute. I think we need to feel kind of centered again in something that feels routine. And do you feel pressure around that to deliver an experience and deliver that game so that people return to normalcy?

Sarah: No I don't. I think just what you're making reference to is everybody is just so excited. I mean, watching game day, even if it was a condensed version this past Saturday was just like, I mean, I'm standing in the kitchen and I just gave out a big old scream after a story that they told. And it's just uplifting and it's exciting, but no, I don't, I don't feel any different pressure this year compared to any other year, but I just don't consider it pressure. It's just, I've got a job to do and I've got to do it well. And that's always been the mentality. Well, I know that you will bring many people joy this fall. Everybody's super excited. We'll be rooting you on. We're super excited to have you with our membership soon. And I just thank you for having this conversation.

Sarah: Absolutely. Emily it's been my pleasure.

Emily: Thanks for tuning in. Like what you hear, let's continue this conversation. Give us some love by leaving us a review on iTunes and let your friends know about this show by

sharing this episode on social media. You can also follow along and tag me @EmChenevert. That's E M Chenevert. Until next time.