

Something Extra EP 030 – Khalia Collier

Lisa Nichols: On today's show, I'm excited to welcome Khalia Collier. Khalia is the owner and General Manager of the St. Louis Surge. A professional women's basketball team.

Thank you so much for being with us today. I know this is a really busy time for you, so I feel very honored that you made the time.

Khalia Collier: Thank you so much Lisa. I'm excited to be on with you.

Nichols: Let's go on and jump in because there's a lot of things I want to talk about. Talk to us a little bit about how you grew up.

Collier: I am born and raised in St. Louis. I don't think I can get any more St. Louis. Starting at the age of 5, I started playing basketball. My dad was my first coach, and I fell in love with the game. Basketball is forever been my favorite sport but I played everything as a kid, I was BMX bike racer, I played soccer, I did taekwondo, my parents kept me as active as possible, but I always gravitated back to basketball and I think that was a huge point for me, learning myself, learning how to work with others, being defeated learning how to bounce back.

So I was always an active kid, I've always been energetic I've always had a gift for gab, that definitely looking back, I was like, Oh, I can see how I can end up doing this now.

Nichols: Yeah, well that is so interesting. So there's a lot of lessons that you learned through sports.

Collier: Oh, absolutely, Sports is a major, major contributor of who I am today.

Nichols: Was your dad into sports too? I know he was your coach.

Collier: Both of my parents are into sports. My dad definitely more than my mom, my mom was an amazing cheerleader. You would think that I'm playing every game, on the court with the surge so she makes sure her voice is heard. But my dad really, I think, instilled... the option of

playing as many sports as possible, and my mom made sure that I stayed active. So it's definitely some history. My dad even him contributed to the surge and our foundation of when we started that he will forever have a sounding board, even to this day if he thinks I should be doing something different, he lets me know.

Nichols: Yeah, but you welcome it? He's got your best interest.

Collier: What's awesome is, Surge games and I really didn't realize this into a few years ago, they become a family affair. My little sister's interned with the Surge since she's been in middle school. My little brother has interned with the surge. My mom volunteers any time I need her to. My dad, just watches from the stands but I really couldn't ask for a better support system.

Nichols: Yeah, so did you play in college?

Collier: I did at Columbia College for two seasons, and then I was at Missouri Baptist. But the fun fact that I share is my senior year, I actually finished on a golf scholarship, not basketball so I'm kind of a combo sport player. So that's one thing I also have to thank my dad for was getting me involved playing golf in at early age, and I played in high school a little bit.

Nichols: Well that kind of... We kind of have talked a little bit about your early journey. Now I want to move into... When I met you, I remember Khalia you and I met through an Innovation Summit that we were about the part of. You were the moderator. I was on the panel, and we got together and I was just blown away about your story, about the Surge. You played basketball in college, so you graduated. And then very quickly, let's talk about that, what did you do?

Collier: It's funny because at a early age, my resume sounded a lot longer than it was, but my senior year since I switched to playing golf, I had a lot more time on my hands, so I started working for a local automotive dealership here.

It was kind of great timing because it was filler time and then I had really good and so I went from customer service to leasing then I got fast-tracked into their management program when they switched over to Asbury. And so I got an immediate foundation into really the ins and outs of the automotive dealership and primarily my brand became Lexus. And so, having the opportunity to get exposed to corporate with a Fortune 500 company really understanding and being directly under our GM was an amazing experience for me, because my primary skills, it was finance, so that transitioned me into how I came about the Surge was really the most

interesting because without my corporate background, especially having that at 21-22 to transition those first few years I think it gave me a different skill set to be able to come in as being an entrepreneur.

Nichols: So talk to us about that. You were how old when you went out and bought the Surge?

Collier: I took the crazy leap of faith to buy a basketball team at 23 years old, May of 2011, I became one of the youngest franchise owners in the country and we hit the pavement running every year. I kid all the time. I say each year especially is being an entrepreneur is a dog-year because you learn so much, you build so many relationships it's just the highs and the lows, the pitfalls and you always figure out a way to get through them. And fast forward for us, we're in our eighth season, so with seven seasons under our belt, this is the first year we've been on the runway and now we're taking off.

In terms of the visibility we built a brand from scratch, here in the city, We've now positioned ourselves next to the blues and cardinals is really being recognized and marketed in the city as the next women's franchise, building in the market. And we want to make sure people feel the surge and I know that we're here to stay.

Nichols: I love it, I just love it. Well, it's certainly a great addition to the St. Louis community, and our family has been to the games and there is a ton of fun. It really, it's great for the whole family.

Collier: What's awesome about Surge games and I don't want to sound bias, but they're amazing. So the amount of excitement, the positive energy, the fact that we draw Town and Country in St. Louis City, in one spot and no one blinks an eye, it is reflective of our community. There isn't a fan that we don't draw who are just excited not only for entertainment in a central location with us being at WashU full house but it's affordable. You can come back to back weekends. And you know you're going to have a great time because we're going to give you a great product, and a great experience.

Nichols: Well, and the team has done extremely well.

Collier: We have a couple of big rings under our belt, so two national championships and then seven seasons, we've competed in six national championships, so we're 2-4. So as you can imagine, it's time to even that out.

Nichols: I'm so impressed with what you've done Khalia.

Collier: It really is. I've had an amazing support system.. The women in the caliber of players that we have a part of our rosters is really what's incredible. All of our players a post-graduates over half of our players have Master's degrees, we're really, really good and really, really smart in the dynamic of showing the community not only professional women athletes but incredible women off the court. That's something that's been instilled in me at a very young age, of... If you're going to do something you're going to do it to the best of your ability to give 110% and that's what you get. Not only out of myself, but the players, the staff, and the full experience.

Nichols: Well, I know that you and I talked about that a little bit and talk to us just a little bit about your recruiting methods because I know you are incredibly selective when you go to recruit right? So talk to us a little bit about that. What are you looking for, where do you get these women? I think you've even gone overseas to recruit.

Collier: So what's amazing is we literally customize our own dream team from across the country always, though half of our players are always from the St. Louis and Illinois are there's enough talent that comes right out of our backyard, to be able to attract and retain here in St. Louis. The other half were recruiting out state players. I have a very strict model and philosophy, that we stick to and we don't budge from we recruit character first without sacrifice and talent at the foundation of who we are.

If you don't naturally like to volunteer if you don't naturally like kids, you're simply not a good fit for us. So every player goes through a very extensive interview process. Every player goes to a full personality and professional assessment. We've been very fortunate with our consulting firm with CMA understanding why we wanted to add this as a component of our recruiting process and what's been amazing is we now take that career inventory data and be able to pair it within our corporate partners. So last season, we placed eight players within our corporate partners. And so you're seeing us recruit talent. That's a given right? We average 104 points a ball game, you know it's going to be a fast paced transition game but the flip side is all of these players are now also pursuing their careers as engineers, accountants, communications, marketing and so on, and so forth. And it's like, "Oh wow, I didn't realize that they have a whole another job to add on to that."

Nichols: Well, and I'm just thinking, Khalia you've done it right, you really have... Because we know athletes, many times get idolized. Especially by younger people, but showing that these women are smart and they of the highest character first and I just, I love it because you know there's a lot of young eyes that are watching.

Collier: And truly outside of sports. So that's the same thing, you're building within your business. Lisa, you want great people that work for you, that you know that you can trust that you know that they're building with family values, and so, taking those principles and building a sports team is absolutely achievable it's being intentional, it's being strategic and it's being mindful of how you want, who you want to represent the city and I think that's what's been really cool as I've evolved as well of understanding. I'm not just looking for a talented player. It is the whole package. And then once we're getting out of state players, and they're moving to St. Louis and make it home, that's the biggest stat for me, which is just really cool.

Nichols: Yes, that is huge. I love that because then they... Hopefully, will get a job with one of our corporate partners. It's a great way to bring awesome people into the region too...

Collier: It really shows a lot of people are always shocked of like, Wow, they have full-time jobs, and the surge is actually designed for all of our players to have full-time employment because typically what you see is that players have they have an undergraduate degree, half of which end up having master's degrees because they've taken advantage of their fifth year. So they have an education, they're smart, they don't have experience and then you don't have connections, because your coaching staff isn't equipped or in the business community to be able to tee you up with an immediate intro. And so we provide those umbrella of resources to be able to do that for them. And it's kind of low-hanging fruit for me after seeing this, I was like, "Wait a minute, why wouldn't more programs? Why wouldn't we do this more? So I've been really focused on creating the Surge blueprint so we can scale this as we continue to grow.

Nichols: And that is something that I've seen you do, you truly are out there in the community, and you are building relationships with corporate partners. I think that that is something different.

Collier: It's organic too. I'm excited to start taking off a few of these hats. Literally, I've been doing a lot for a very long time. And as we build our front office staff, and we continue to grow, I think corporate partners now look at us in a different light to where this is the perfect time to attach your brand to a community organization, a community-asset that also happens to be a

professional basketball team. So, we've positioned ourselves in the right way, to be able to grow and it's time, it really is, it's just time for us. It's the year of the Surge.

Nichols: I love that we'll start using that vernacular as well when we talk about you guys, so we see touched on this a little bit and you've given your personal story, more Khalia. Why do you think sports is important for young people, and in particular, girls? What are those lessons that the young people can learn through sports?

Collier: There's so many reasons you keep your kids involved in active in sports just simply for the intangible skill sets that they learn, they are valuable throughout their entire lifetime because those are the opportunities where you're learning to work with people. You didn't think you would be working with.

You learn how to team you fail and you figure out how you fail forward and bounce back because you don't have time to dwell. And the data is staggering of looking at 96% of women in leadership positions at the C-suite level have played sports of some sort. And I think sometimes people like wait a minute, it doesn't mean you've played pro sports or even college sports, but sometime you played some form of BB ball. Something happened to where... And then I get a lot of questions were like, "well I'm a dancer, I'm a runner. That means your athletic. That timing of getting women to say, if you've been to a Blues or Cardinals game, you too are a sports fan and so we want you to be a Surge fan.

No differently. And I think the importance for my young boys, it's awesome because it creates a mindset for them to see strong successful women at an early age, and then they grow up and that's their norm. We immediately break the cycle of men who don't experience women's professional sports. Who don't see it as often as they should. They see it when they come to a Surge game. So most of my little boys and my guys are just blown away by a Surge game. And for my young girls that are attending Surge games, They get to see what's possible, they get to see women that look like them, they get to see that you don't have to just choose one career or one dream that you can too be a professional athlete, you can pursue your professional career off the court, you get to see young girls who are just like, "Wow this can be me. And then you take back into the data that we've seen of girls dropping off at 13-14 years old, because they don't see a future, in the sport because women still aren't being paid equal wages across all of women's sports but what we know is that this is not a trend, this is the way the world is headed.

Women are being celebrated. You're being empowered, you're seeing more women in leadership positions, you're seeing more women entrepreneurs. And so, that's what young girls see at a Surge game.

Nichols: I love that.

AD: We're going to take a quick break and we'll be back with Khalia Collier.

Nichols: So Khalia, there are already a lot of fans for the surge but for those listeners out there that maybe haven't even heard of the Surge. Why do they need to become a fan?

Collier: You want to be in a Surge game because not only is it affordable for your family, it's a ton of fun. It's one in a lifetime experience that you get to do the entire summer. It's an amazing opportunity to see the fan base that we've organically grown here in St. Louis every fan that we have, we've earned by being entrenched in the community, one by one through all the community service that myself or players or coaches of making sure that we're grassroots efforts, and I think that's what's so cool for how many people are still yet to learn about the surge, the more you see our marketing increase by the growth that we're getting from the city. It changes the whole dynamic of being like, "Wow this is the place to be. Why have I not gone to a surge game. And, we want that buzz continuously happening in the city.

Nichols: Yes, and that is something I've definitely noticed about you and about your players, you are out there in the community, it's really important for you Khalia these players to not just be a model on the court, but you want to get entrenched in the community, and transform the people that you come in contact with.

Collier: We exist to make transformative change we exist to make community impact and a by-product as we win basketball games which is a little different from what you see in traditional sports. And so, just by seeing the power of How are you surging in the community? We want the Surge to be a noun. It's truly positive impact, and I love the fact that you never come to a Surge game, and you see anybody grumpy even when we're down, it's just intense so you're smiling because you're being welcomed you're being appreciated, because you could be anywhere else on a Saturday or a Sunday, but you're in a surge game. And so, I kind of laugh at all the people that say, "You know, this is just a cards city everyone, this is a baseball town, it's simply not St. Louis is a sports city. We've grown in 2 to 3000 fans organically. So imagine what we do as we increase our marketing budget.

Nichols: I know you will.

Collier: Lisa, that's the part you don't have to worry about with me, we get to do this for a very long time because it really is about impact and creating good positive change.

Nichols: You've already alluded to it a little bit. St. Louis is a great sports town. There's no doubt, we've got some amazing teams here, but Khalia you've probably thought about it and I think I probably could guess where you're going to go with it, but how could it be even better?

Collier: I think it's by embracing the teams that we have when people are saying... Alright, how do we attract an NBA team, MLS team? And then I love to tell them we already have professional basketball in the city, stop saying we wish we would have a real basketball team. You have one, you have the Surge. We just want to continue to make that bigger and bigger and I think that is the key component of supporting. If you're not wearing merch if you're not buying tickets, we can't grow the fan base. And particularly for women's sports, I am very keen on positioning the surge brand to where it's not just the right thing to do, it's not, it's a good cause. Or you go to a surge game because it's an incredible product, you come to a surge game because you want the experience you love the talent, the players, the fact that we have 8 all-Americans on our roster that is what's exciting and it's keeping that at the forefront of what we're building.

Nichols: Well, you certainly have been a trailblazer for the women's sports. And so I'm really hoping that as other sports teams look and see how St. Louis has embraced the Surge, they'll be inspired to do the same thing with other women's sports. Soccer or whatever.

Collier: It's passing the baton, and it's creating the platform for others to be able to do it. That's what trailblazing really is. A couple of the legends that are here, Jackie has been an incredible in terms of her win in life and what that meant for her and to be able to share that with me. It's now the next generation has to do it even better and then the next generation, and that's how we create the cycle of positivity and people wanting to just do something outside of themselves.

Nichols: I love that. Well, and you just reminded me, we're always wherever we go, we're staying in on somebody else's shoulders. Jackie did set the bar right and then you're standing on her shoulders. I think that's so wonderful.

Well, let's talk about this is gone something extra. So, let's talk about maybe something extra one of your players as something extra, in your dad or your mom talk about something extra that you've seen in someone else.

Collier: I have a lot to think about this kind of talk to a down-to-one. I'm going to go with a few stores and start with my mom. My mom is just a shining positive light, she is always seeing something positive, encouraging, motivating, even on probably one of my roughest toughest days she always has something to say to me that's just like, "Alright pull it together. And she instilled in me a better as possible and good is not enough and it's literally everywhere for me, it's in my office, it's in my bedroom. It is my favorite quote. If better is possible, then good is not enough. You don't have the opportunity to be average, you can't become complacent, and I think that's a driving force that pushes me every day.

In addition to that, I admire all of our players, their pure determination and tenacity to go after what they want. A lot of people say they want to live their dreams, but a lot of people don't put the execution behind it, or the work that goes with it and it's as cliché as it gets that hard work does pay off, and the only people that don't make it are the ones that quit and so to see these women really sacrificing their time, their talent, their bodies to compete at a professional level as well, as being academics is incredibly powerful and inspiring and thinking all the women who have really been a part of my life to where I see something extra in them. Just to give back. And that includes you, Lisa, to be able to give me a platform to be able to support and encourage us and what we're doing, and it's great to have the guys do it and we appreciate it when they do. Yeah, but it's even more meaningful when it comes from powerhouse women that you can look at and say There's a piece of you that I want in me that you really admire and I think that's what I love seeing other women because we can't do it by ourselves.

I think that's what other people forget. I don't want to be a solo, I don't want to do this and just be the only one you want people to follow you want to be able to lead. And I think that's a combination of doing both. So thank you, because we have known each other for a long time, and you haven't forgotten about the Surge, you're always plugging us when you can, and it definitely doesn't go unnoticed.

Nichols: I'm happy to do it. And you've been a bright light to me too. Khalia and just an inspiration, truly, for what you've done and what you've accomplished. So talk to us a little bit, what do you believe is the something extra that every leader needs?

Collier: One, I think that I have learned is empathy really understanding that you see people for who they are, and you help push them to their potential and their maximum. It's coaching and I think every great leader is a coach. You are motivating you are pushing, you are figuring out how to pull someone from the bottom to the top because you want everyone on your team to be able to operate to their maximum level. And at first, people always be like, Khalia do you play... Do you coach? And I'm like, "No I'll be offended when people stop asking me if I play because it means I no longer look athletic, but now I embrace it, if I don't coach my team, I'm solely the owner and general manager, but I am a coach and I think every great leader should be, and every great leader should be intentional with their words.

What are you wanting to accomplish? Words do matter. And I think being intentional with how you encourage and how you give constructive criticism, it's really easy for a lot of people to tear people down, right? We got that part. You can tell someone what they're not good at, what they can't accomplish, but how do you build them up? That's the key component that will always separate the good from the great.

Nichols: Well, and then sometimes I think the component is have you shown that person that you truly, truly care about them as a person? It's not that I'm not trying to tear you down, to make myself look better, it's because I really care. And to your point before you want people to reach their maximum potential.

We all need mirrors. I said something to somebody yesterday I said I want some feedback and I don't want you to tell me. Oh, it was great. I want you to tell me the good, bad, and the ugly, because you know what? I am a person, I want to continue to grow, I want to continue. So, you need those people in your life that love you and care for you, but they're going to tell you the truth because you need to know the truth.

Collier: 110%. And that's why I am so thankful. I have a group of best friends I've had some terrible ideas along the way. And they're like Khalia. That's not the way to go. Without those people who are willing to be honest with you, which also creates some vulnerability for them. As well as vulnerability for us to be able to take in and receive that information, and not taking it as just... You're being a Debbie Downer, you're trying to hurt me in a way you're trying to make me better. And I think that's the side that it's tough, you have to swallow that a little bit in your gut. No one likes hearing that stuff, but you're appreciative when you know it's coming from the right place.

Nichols: Well, and tell me, is there anything that's coming up? That you want our listeners to know about.

Collier: It's home opener were as excited as I am for opening day with the cards I'm even more excited for home opener for the Surge. Saturday, June 8th at 6:05. it's going to be the place to be, it's our 100th game celebration and what's amazing Lisa, is that we are dedicating this game to powerhouse women.

I love saying there can be no women's movement without great guys. We need them just as much a part of the movement, but I really want to celebrate what we've accomplished in this milestone with the surge of having women who are trailblazing themselves that wake up every day and they do amazing things to be able to come in and celebrate with us as well. And of course I'm going to have my gentlemen who are there and my young guys who are cheering us on, but we're excited about home opener.

Nichols: Wow, that's going to be so fun. So how do our listeners how do they get tickets?

Collier: STLsurgebasketball.com. Tickets are live, right now, on Metrotix we're almost sold out of season tickets. This will be the first time we've come very close, but we've never officially sold out, so this is our year to do it. I'm really rallying really, all of my support system solely to say, "Hey if you know me support. So we can continue building a legacy here in the city of creating positive energy. So I want to say it again. home opener on June 8, 6:05 PM at WashU field house Athletic Complex. It's the place to be. I really can't imagine a better place to spend your summer nights.

Nichols: So all I'm going to say is do it, and do it today and go get your tickets today. Well, Khalia it has just been my pleasure to have you. This has been so much fun, and thank you so much for being here.

Collier: We know to do this again Lisa. Thank you very much.