

## PROTECTING YOUR POSSIBILITIES PODCAST WITH LUKE FEDLAM

**Episode 25: Athletes & Social Justice: A Conversation with Black Players For Change | Jan. 27, 2021**

*The following is a transcription of the audio podcast recording. It is largely accurate but in some cases it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors.*

**Luke:** I'm sports attorney Luke Fedlam, and welcome to the Protecting Your Possibilities podcast. Each conversation we focus on sharing information and having conversations around how athletes can best educate and protect themselves or their life outside of their sports.

Thank you so much for tuning in to the protecting your possibilities podcast. I'm your host, Luke Fedlam. Excited for another episode, and really excited for this conversation today as it is something that is both meaningful to me as well as , always awesome to talk with great people on the show. And so today we're welcoming Justin Morrow, who is a professional soccer player in MLS and plays for Toronto FC, and he is also the executive director of Black Players for Change. So Justin, welcome to the show, man.

**Justin:** Thanks, Luke. How you doing, man? Happy New Year, I'm sure doing well after yesterday. Good day of hope for our country. Everyone's feeling good and positive.

**Luke:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So just New Year new opportunities. And just thinking about the bright tomorrows that are ahead. Definitely something that I'm looking forward to really excited Justin to just to chat with you, I wanted to have a discussion around social justice around the importance of highlighting work that needs to continue to be done broadly as it impacts black and brown people throughout our country. And the work that black players for change is doing to that end. And so maybe if you could just maybe give a high level overview of what exactly is Black Players for Change?

**Justin:** Yeah, Black Players for Change is a group of professional soccer players, specifically in Major League Soccer that organized shortly after the death of George Floyd. And we came together for a lot of different reasons. Obviously, the death of George Floyd was the boiling point. But we came together to speak up on the issues that are occurring in Major League Soccer as it pertains to race. And some of the things that had happened underneath the surface up until that point, and then to continue to build for the next generation and creating more racial equality in our sport. And along the way, we've just been connected with wonderful people like yourselves and other organizations that will fight for social justice on a different platform so that we can round out everything that we're offering, as professional athletes, to our league and to the communities that we live in.

**Luke:** That's awesome. And , Justin is a pretty modest dude, I want to share with everybody too, that Black Players for Change also won the 2020 MLS Humanitarian of the Year award. So tell me a little bit more about that. Was that a surprise? Was it expected? Or were you on that place where you were like, they better give us this award? I mean, what were you thinking?

**Justin:** Yeah, I was kind of like, the group had accomplished so much in 2020 and on top of that, everything that we were doing was unprecedented. , it's historic, the formation of our group, a bunch of players coming together to create their own organization that's so visible and so impactful in such a short amount of time, it was, it was a no brainer. For me, I was very happy that they gave it to the group, because all the things that we were able to accomplish, were only able to get those done, because so many players had taken part, , from the protests, to all the different programs that we ran around voting and around grassroots organization in our local markets. It really was a testament to everyone's hard work. And it's not something that we could have gotten done with only a few individuals.

**Luke:** Yeah, so let me ask you this, then. So obviously, I got a front row seat at all of the great work that you all did throughout the year, and, and all the great work that you're going to continue to plan to do as we go forward, but what were your thoughts? Obviously, professional sports leagues have had, I'll say, challenging, relationships with groups of athletes coming together for anything. We saw with the NFL the challenges that they had in the kind of U-turn that they took as it related to things like Colin Kaepernick kneeling and that kind of thing. What were your thoughts in terms of how you thought the league MLS would respond to what you're doing? What did you expect and then what has reality been like in terms of the relationship that Black Players for Change, which obviously represents a collective of black players throughout the league? What's that relationship now been like with Major League Soccer?

**Justin:** There's been positives and negatives for sure. The League has responded in such a positive way and that they've completely opened the doors to us. And they've helped us accomplish many of the things that we've been trying to do, whether that's from financial resources from the time that they've given us, or just the connections that they've given us through their broad network of community partners, corporate partners. And so without them, I would say that we wouldn't be where we are today. But there's still so much more to accomplish, right? And we're going to need their help in that as well. And so when you talk about things like getting more black head coaches hired and getting more black executives, there's going to take some direct programming, there's going to take some change in policy. Those are things we've yet to see yet from the league. We're working on that with them. But everyone is very excited and anxious for those things to start happening. And those in the meantime continued to be barriers. So everything that we're talking about, there was five head coaching changeovers in Major League Soccer this offseason, and none of them hired black head coaches. So we still have a ways to go there. We still have a ways to go to hire more executives, although Danita Johnson was hired to be president in DC United, which is a big deal for our community. So you can see that this is at the forefront of the league's mind, we will continue to keep it there. And black players for change side. But there's a lot of work to be done. I think everyone acknowledges that.

**Luke:** So when you when you think about that, a lot of times when you have action that's taken following an event, and you mentioned, the killing of George Floyd, the spring and summer that we experienced in 2020. A lot of times you'll hear that phrase that this isn't a moment, this is a movement, how would you, you touched on some of it in terms of coaching, and seeing increased diversity and coaching? But how would you look at Black Players for Change as a movement that transcends just the moment that we saw in 2020, and says, Hey, there are some things that that we need to do. And we know we're gonna be here long term, what do you see kind of on the horizon that black players for change will continue to take on?

**Justin:** First of all, I see us as a part of a moment in history, a big moment in history for athletes and activism. The most special thing about what we're doing is, is being connected to the other

athletes in different professional sports. And that's been highly documented, but at the same time, just incredible and mind blowing every time I'm a part of it, because I've been in this profession for over a decade now. And I just never had the availability and the contact and the networking with other professional athletes that I have today. And to see us all fighting in one direction is special. It's really special. And I think in history books, people will write about 2020, and the role of that professional athletes played in stepping up and activism and social justice, I think you can see that we had a very large impact on getting out the vote for the presidential election, and the Senate race in Georgia. And when people realize how impactful professional athletes can be off the field, in that sense, it's really powerful. And it's something that hopefully, we'll continue on past just this time period that we're in and say this is when athletes as a whole really took a step forward in activism.

**Luke:** Absolutely. I think that's something where I remember just the day after, or maybe was this day of the shooting of Jacob Blake. And just seeing across sports, people just saying, we're not gonna play NBA Playoffs or tennis players saying we're not going to play, baseball players, and you just see the you see the power of sports in capturing the nation's attention. And then what I love is all the work that you're doing that once you have people's attention, that then you can share with them, what needs to be changed, what do you want to work on? What are things that need to be addressed throughout our society? So I appreciate that in terms of the work that you all are doing, let me make this a little bit more personal for you. I know you're like okay, what's about to come? Right? I won't put you on the spot here too much. But, when you're in this place, you're the executive director of Black Players for Change. So in certain respects you may be that lightning rod as it relates to that that representative of black players for change, what is been people's reaction and or communication to you, whether it's from the league perspective, from different clubs and their front office personnel, maybe from your white teammates and others, and just from people fans in general, what kind of responses or communications Have you gotten from people positive or negative?

**Justin:** I mean, it's just been an absolute roller coaster ride, I cannot overstate how crazy it's been on all sides. And I say that because there's days of such intense positivity and hope, and energy and motivation. And then there's days where you just think that all of your efforts are not going to come to fruition that, none of this stuff that you're working on is going to actually work and we're not going to make change. And so, I see that sometimes in dealing with the league. And I and I continue to see that there are barriers there and you feel uncomfortable at times, the work is heavy, these conversations that we've been a part of, and, and spread all across the world where you're starting to talk about things that you really haven't had a real conversation about with counterparts ever, really. I was gonna say a while, but ever, and so those conversations are heavy. And so there are times where it's difficult and heavy. But the other time, it's like, I'm so energized when I'm with the group of guys, and we're on the calls and we're figuring out what we're going to do and figuring out programming and guys are throwing out ideas. And I'm helping guide those ideas and making them come to light, like I get so much energy from that. And that's when I feel most motivated. And times where we implement something successfully, like the partnership with US Soccer Foundation, and many pitches that we were able to build, we put our first one in Newark, just this past fall, and the energy that I got from that seeing that actually get done after being on months of calls, like that's so energizing. So there are there are a lot of times where I feel like while we're building something, and that has been incredibly fun. And then there's also times where it's heavy, it's heavy. And so I feel both sides of it. But at the end of the day, I'm really happy to be in the position that I am. It's invaluable experience, both leaving the guys and growing this organization, it's not something that I would change for anything.

**Luke:** That's awesome. That's awesome. So you use the word energizing. And I'll say, one of the things it was really energizing for me, in addition to that, I could list a litany of different things that you all have done that have given me just excitement to see. But one of the things that really I mean, was one of those chills, kind of hair on the back of your neck is when you all started the season again last year and did the MLS is Back tournament, and the moment of solidarity that you had at the beginning of that, players wearing t shirts. I mean, I'll say that I definitely copped my T shirt. And, saying Black Lives Matter. And I just wonder if you could reflect on that for a minute of what that experience was like. And as a follow up to that, what response have you gotten around the phrase black lives matter? Right. Interestingly enough, I think many would agree that during the course of the last administration, there was that phrase Black Lives Matter became very politicized, as opposed to being taken on its face. And so I just be interested, just what your experience was like in that moment. But then also what reactions you've gotten to saying, Black Lives Matter.

**Justin:** Yeah, they experienced on Orlando was incredible. It was one of the brightest experiences of my whole career bonding with the guys like that, it was completely ideated from our side, and how we wanted to execute it, the league completely helped us execute it, we wouldn't have been able to do that without them. I always mentioned that because of the COVID protocols. Because of everything that it took to get that done. They had a big part in it. And it was just a really special moment. Because the guys came together, we decided about the shirts, we decided about what we wanted it to look like, decided about the messaging around it. And then we got together and you're on calls away from each other for a long time because of COVID not playing against each other. And then you get together all in one place, which never been done before. Play games against each other spread out across the country week in week out for years on end, but you never been in a place with all the guys together before. And so that was special to be there. Things that I'll never forget are lining up. And the different groups of teams right before we walked out and everyone could really feel the moment but also was really joy to be doing it together with everyone. The feeling of standing on the field for that long and having my fist raise my arm shaking and all the thoughts that went through my head, the silence the deafening silence that was there. And then walking off the field and feeling like we've accomplished something really big thing and something that none of us were ever going to forget for the history of our careers. So that was, that was an incredible moment. And then the black lives matter that you're talking about, we had a T shirt made in partnership with Major League Soccer and Adidas, one of our players name Warren Creavalle, who's a player from Georgia, he owns his own clothing company called Creavalle and, and he's a designer. And so he designed this T shirt, and it became incredibly popular. We didn't intend to sell it in the beginning. And then, of course, it was all over television because of the tournament, guys wearing it before games, and we just received this incredible outcry for people to have the shirt. So say, okay we went through the whole process with Major League Soccer and Adidas of figuring out the legal of how we can get that sold, which was a big deal. And we said, okay, we don't want any of the money going towards anything other than the cause, and so we were able to split up that money to go towards nonprofits. And it's just been incredible to see the reception of that shirt, and gives you hope, and positivity. And at the same time, you have all the conversations that you're talking about, about it being politicized, and what it means as a statement, and we have players kneeling after the tournament and blowback from the fans there. And so there's been reception on all sides, it's, it's been positive, at times, it's been negative at times, it's open up conversation. And that's something that our group talked about a lot was the opportunity to have the conversation that we couldn't have before, there were players in the player pool that didn't want to wear that shirt. And the whole league was wearing it before the game would start in warm ups. And there was players that decided that they didn't want to wear it. So it gives you an opportunity to have conversation with those players and, and

see where they're coming from. And really, those are the opportunities where we take even small steps to make it a little bit of healing.

**Luke:** Yeah, absolutely. All right. So we could talk for hours, but we always try to keep this podcast, condensed packed full of information. So the last question that I'm going to ask you. And I know I could, I could ask and put you on the spot about, just where everything is that with the collective bargaining agreements, and all that kind of stuff. But I won't put you on the hook for that. We don't want to interfere with anything. But last question, briefly, kind of what are your thoughts? What do you see in 2021 for Black Players for Change, where do you see the organization focusing and kind of some of the work that people can expect to see from black players for change over this upcoming year?

**Justin:** Yeah, it's, it's tough. And I've had this conversation with multiple people, because we plan, I think there's a quote about best laid plans, but you don't know what's going to happen in 2021. And I think that's what 2020 really taught us, dealing with the deaths of multiple people, police shootings, everything that was happening in our country, I think it really showed us that we don't know what's going to happen. But I think we have a better idea of how to handle those situations when they do happen. And I think that was the most important thing that we gained from 2020. And so we have, we have plans, we're hard at work about how we're going to get involved in a local community, how we're going to push things along with Major League Soccer, how we're going to fight for social justice, but like I said, never know what's going to happen in 2021. But we'll be prepared to handle it all.

**Luke:** Amen. And let's just let's pray that 2021 is a better year for issues of social justice, and so much more than we experienced in 2020. Justin Morrow, man, thank you so much for coming on. Really appreciate your time with us today.

**Justin:** Thanks, Luke. I appreciate it. Man. Take it easy. All right.

**Luke:** Absolutely. You do the same. And thank you for listening for tuning in to the protecting your possibilities podcast, please do feel free to rank us rate us whatever it is give us the stars, share it with a colleague, a friend. We're trying to continue to address the desires and the needs and the information that our listeners want to hear. So feel free to reach out to me at Luke Fedlam on social media. You can find me through the podcast as well. But thanks for listening. And we'll have another conversation here again real soon.

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