

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 255: ANGELA RUGGIERO

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. Today's conversation is about an enormous S-curve jump, a leap of faith with our guest's very identity hanging in the balance. I am thrilled to speak with Angela Ruggiero, an ice hockey Olympian who has brought home four medals from the Olympic Games, played for the U.S. Women's National Ice Hockey team. She's a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame and was named best player by numerous sports publications. Needless to say, she spent a large part of her career at the top of her game. So what happens when all of that comes to an end? This is a challenge faced by many in professional sports and the military. You spend your entire life training for one thing, and then it's gone. Angela's transition from star player to the business of sports holds lessons for all of us, no matter how big or small our S-curve leap may be. Since leaving hockey, Angela has been a member of the International Olympic Committee and was the chief strategy officer for Los Angeles's successful bid for the 2028 Olympics. And today she's the co-founder and CEO of the Sports Innovation Lab, a market research firm working to bring sports and fandom together. Even if you don't know the first thing about hockey, you'll love this conversation with Angela.

Whitney Johnson: So, Angela, tell us about a formative moment that you had before you were twenty-one years old.

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah. In some ways, this is an easy one for me, I refer to it a lot in who I am as a person, and it happened when I was nine years old. So, as you know, Whitney, I played ice hockey, which growing up in the 80s was a boys sport, essentially. But my father, my mother, my whole family encouraged me to play. I played with my brother and my sister for a couple of years, but then I was the only girl playing in the state and when I was nine years old, tried out for an all-star team that was going to get to go to Canada. My brother made the team, but I didn't, and that was a really important moment for me. I got left off the roster because I was a girl. No other reason I was definitely good enough to play. I don't know. It was a nine-year-old like I had to grasp gender inequality and fairness.

And you know, these bigger issues that hopefully you don't have to tackle until you're a little bit older. But at nine, I got left off that roster and I just remember being a really important moment because my dad basically gave me a decision matrix.

Angela Ruggiero: He said you know, you can choose to prove them right in some ways and quit and be frustrated and or you can come back next year, Angela. Life isn't fair. You're going to just have to work twice as hard. And unfortunately, that's the situation. And if you're the best player on the ice, you're going to give them the reason that they can't. You can't be third or fourth or somewhere in the middle. You've got to be the best. So obviously I chose the latter, and it changed the way that I trained for hockey. It changed the way I approached discrimination in some ways and unfairness and obstacles, and it taught me a lesson, I guess, that you know, you have a choice in how you respond to things in life and in some ways put me on a path to my success as an Olympic athlete. I made the national team at 15. You can imagine the chip I had on my shoulder after that point in life. So it was a really important moment, I think, for me.

Whitney Johnson: Have you talked to your dad about that conversation since? About how that was so pivotal and so formative for you that he was just like, what are you going to do? You've got to make a choice.

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, my dad was always one of my biggest advocates, supporters, even though, you know, girls' hockey wasn't in the Olympics at the time, we barely knew it was in the NCAA. He was just, he wanted his kids to learn about life through sport. He wanted us to have a great experience. He just wanted to teach me about life. And I just remember so many of these great life lessons I got in the many, many hours we spent in the car together, traveling all over Southern California to play hockey. And that was one of them. Just again, how you respond to the failure, struggle, discrimination. He was always putting little quotes up. So, you know, obviously, I thanked him for that kind of mental coaching I got as a young person.

Whitney Johnson: Do you have a favorite quote?

Angela Ruggiero: It's related to that first story. He, you know, ok, dad, I want to play, I want to train. I want to get better. I want to make the team. And he gave me this trick, he said. Ok and well, pretend there's a scout in the stands every single time you step onto the ice. What do you mean? He's like, picked just some random parent, someone in the stands. Maybe they're not even paying attention, pretend they're going to be picking the next team. And so, every time I stepped on the ice, I picked a parent or someone that was there and thought, ok, they got that little clipboard. They're evaluating me. That means I have to be first on the ice, last off the ice. I can't take shortcuts. I have to give it my all. I can't basically go through the motions. And I felt a sense of pressure in some way. So, I would again play these little mental tricks in my head so that when the day came that I was actually trying out for a team, you know, I'd been there hundreds of times before. I'd already thought about the scout in the stands that was watching me. So, it, you know, in some ways, I practiced trying out for that next boys' team, which ultimately ended up being trying out for the U.S. Women's Olympic Team.

Whitney Johnson: So, you're visualizing before people were visualizing?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah. And I didn't even know what that was. Again, it was just a trick. My dad's like pick someone like, try hard, don't cut corners like, you know, and it's really interesting. If we all did that, I feel like that as an adult. Now, if you always pretend someone's watching like we can all take shortcuts. And as a hockey team, there are so many people to watch. Coaches can only have, you know, their eyes on so many people. But if you internally believe there's a scout always watching you scout in the stands again, you don't take those shortcuts. You're trying to do the little things that add up to be really big things.

Whitney Johnson: It's so good. I feel like there's an article or a talk that needs to be given. There's a scout in the stands. I just delivered a speech this morning and I thought I was extremely well prepared. And as I'm listening to you saying that and I did one, it was on video we did the whole way through. But then I realized I needed to retake the beginning part because at the beginning I was nervous. And then I thought about what you just said is that idea of, oh, if I had practiced as if there were a scout in the stands. See, you've coined to phrase it for us now. Then I could have gotten through that nervousness faster. So, when it was time, the nervousness was gone. And I think this is a lesson that we learn over and over again because you'll have times probably where you're like, I'm on and you

deal with the nervousness, and you've got to revisit that. Or I don't know, do you find that you're able to just do it pretty consistently at this point?

Angela Ruggiero: Oh no, I'm still a rookie. It's, you know, when I give talks or I, you know, my work today, it's really hard to find the time to practice. In sports, in some ways, it's like that's what you do, you know, in hockey, you practice four days a week and you play two games, it's kind of a two to one ratio. You're expected to do some of these things in life. I mean, who has time to debrief and watch the game tape or pregame? I mean, it's but it's so helpful. And it's different too, the visualization aspect, like you could have practiced that opening piece out loud. But unless you were actually thinking like, oh, someone's listening, like there's an audience like a live audience. You have to like recreating the goosebumps you're going to have or the butterflies and actually trying to get yourself into that moment. It just makes all the difference, in my opinion.

Whitney Johnson: So, note to everybody listening. Put yourself in situations where you are replicating the nervousness as much as possible so you can practice dealing with it. What's been a Crucible moment in your professional life, post 21 and I'm sure you have many, but what's one that you're feeling like, that's the one that I want to share today?

Angela Ruggiero: I've had two careers in some ways, my first career was as an ice hockey player, and, you know, I loved it. I was obsessed with it. I kind of had the formula down. And it definitely fits your S-curve, by the way. But the moment for me, it was really when I stopped playing hockey and had to at the age of 31, figure out like, what am I going to be when I grow up? What's my second career going to look like? Who is Angela Ruggiero? What? What do I care about outside of this sport? And you know, what am I going to not just be good at, but really, truly have a passion for? That discovery process, I think of figuring out, you know, what's my next move in life outside of just the hockey player, which the entire world sees you as and defines you as, and to this day, thinks you know it's the opening line of who you are. It's like, no, who's the Angela underneath that? And then what do I do with all that time that I previously was dedicating to this first profession?

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, let's go back for a second. So here you are. You're 31 years old, you've won four Olympic medals. You've been to four Olympics, four Olympic medals. Your identity is Angela Ruggiero, Angela Hockey, Angela hockey player. Right? Angela Ruggiero, you know, best female hockey player in the world and probably better than many men's hockey players. Just to be clear, and all of a sudden, your identity shifts. Can you just walk us through some of what was happening for you at that time?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, I think a lot of Olympic or professional athletes, you know, go through this. It's just it's somewhat of an identity crisis, not identity. It's like, who are you? You have to strip the layers of, you know, all the years since the age of seven where Angela Hockey is in the same sentence, it's just again your opening line. And to be clear, I loved it. I loved playing. I was good at it. I got to represent my country. I got to bring home, you know, four Olympic medals. It was, it was amazing. But at some point, in your life, you know, all good things end. Unfortunately, sometimes. And I stopped it. I could have gone to one more Olympics, I think, you know, physically, I definitely could have played longer, but mentally I just wasn't. I was definitely on the outer edge of your S-curve again, going back to your framework, I was like, ok, I'm kind of bored. Even though I know what to do, I know what the pattern looks like. I know exactly what I need to do to be effective and perform. But I was bored, and I went back to my old college, Harvard. I went to the business school. They had an open house. And I remember, you know, they kind of walked what you'd learn at HBS, what you'd. And I remember, just like coming out of that fired up going, I don't know what I'm going to do, but I love business.

Angela Ruggiero: I think this will allow me to like, throw myself into something new and challenging in some ways, distract me in a good way. And that definitely was the moment I think I left that session signed up for Kaplan because I had to quickly get a freaking, you know, GMAT score and an essay written. And I had, I think, two months to do all this and I couldn't tell anyone too because, you know, maybe I don't get in or maybe I decide I want to keep playing. But I remember it was what I felt inside. I felt this energy that, again, I've always been drawn to like energy. And even in my hockey career, I almost retired once. I think I was 26 after the Torino Olympics and I had to find that passion again. And the second it clicked; I was dialed in for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. I had fun again. I was like a little kid out there and that's kind of how I felt. I think it was. I don't know who I am or what I

want to do, but I really like business. I love this school. I love that I could learn. I love. You know, took a leap of faith, and that was hard, you know because I had to leave my first love in some ways in ice hockey.

Whitney Johnson: I want to talk about this transition into business, but you just said something that was very interesting, which was you had lost your passion for hockey and then you found it again. Can you just talk briefly about that? Because there are going to be times where we're on an S-curve and for whatever reason, we need to stay there? Do you remember what you did?

Angela Ruggiero: Yes. First, I took some time off. I again had lost that like love, and I felt, you know, you just know what you need to do, and there's another camp coming up and you get evaluated. And I just I was 26 at the time. I was really good, by the way, at that point 26, like, you're in your peak physically. But as everyone knows, like mentally, you've got to be there to put in the work. And so, I remember taking some time off and, you know, I was cycling and trying to do things outside of just playing hockey. And luckily, there was a lull in the schedule because it was after the 2006 Olympics. But it was another one of those moments where like, you're either in or you out, Angela, if you're out, you're out, like, move on, find the next thing. And at the time, ironically, I was on *The Apprentice*. At that moment and I had a job offer from Donald Trump and everyone at that moment, this is pre-politics was, hey, take the job, you're going to make a lot of money, you know, money, money, money. And it was. And I did really well on the show, and it was like I was getting pulled. Not only was I not excited about training, I was also getting pulled away and that was like, ok, what am I going to do if I go take a job, if I do anything else with my life, like, am I going to have the same passion I have for hockey? And once I realized that I had more to give to the sport, I was not done.

Angela Ruggiero: It was like an easy decision. And rationally, a lot of people in my life were like, what are you doing? Like, why don't you take the job? Why don't you? You know, you've done you have all three medals, what do you need to prove? A lot of no one was ever in my skin, but I think I realize like, no, I have. I want to go back to Vancouver. I want to win another gold medal. I still love hockey. And as soon as it's weird, almost it clicked in my head. I just had fun. I was like a little kid again out there on the ice, just being goofy and silly. And even though I was one of the veterans, some of the younger players would, you know, they joke like, you're like a little kid out here. I'm like, well, this is a game. We have to play a game for a living to play a sport, you know, and I think what's I re-found that love then all the training and getting up early in the morning and all the sacrifices you make as an elite athlete. It made sense to me in my head

Whitney Johnson: At a high level. What I'm taking away is that you needed to take a break and you needed to rest and do something else. Step back. You also had other opportunities you could have gone and taken a very high-profile job. And so in your mind, did it help that you now knew I have a choice here. I can go do this. I have other options, but I'm going to choose this. Did that help?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, I think any time you believe what you're doing is your choice and you recognize like you're your own agent, like I could have quit, I could have moved on, I could have taken that job, it could have taken any job. It's like when I gave myself permission to walk away and then decided that I didn't want to. And then I gave myself permission to like, stay, and not permission. But like, it was my choice to be there.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm. You found something you were excited about. I'm also observing that perhaps it was easier to make that transition because you went from structure to structure. So being in school, getting an MBA, you know exactly what you're going to be doing for two years. You've got grades, you've got deliverables. And so, I wonder, did that help with the transition? And would you recommend that for other athletes that are transitioning to find something very structured for a couple of years in order to have more of a soft landing into their new S-curve?

Angela Ruggiero: I think it's a great observation. Athletes love structure and goals or grades or, you know, like put the work in, and here's the output. Business school, in some ways, I didn't have time to think I didn't have time to noodle on like my, what am I going to do next? Even though I was thinking about it all the time? I mean, everyone there is, but you're but yeah, no, I got to. I got to get to this paper. I got to, you know, I'm going to build this model. I have to go to the next event. I mean, you're inundated with, you know, stuff you have to do to just get through those two years. So, the distraction was like a very positive distraction that, to your point, was built in like a very structured way, and it gave me a place to explore what I wanted to do next. And that was so important at that

moment in my life, and I would for military too, I think, athletes, but military, anyone that has one career that they literally can't do again. It's, it was a great place for me to, you know, to transition.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, hockey was an s curve. Then business school was an s curve. And now you're on a new S-curve, you're an entrepreneur. Do you want to talk to us about Sports Innovation Lab?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah. So, I co-founded this company, Sports Innovation Lab, about a little over five years ago. My experience working in sports, I was on the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee and on the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee. I helped, I was chief strategy officer of the L.A. Olympic bid and basically been an athlete. Then I was on a lot of boards overseeing, you know, global sport, seeing how things are done and more. Again, through that more through that business lens, and recognize there is a need for a sports innovation lab to provide objective, data-driven strategic advice on the future of sport. On where fans were going and therefore what to invest in, in terms of technology. So founded this company really because I saw a direct need that I needed, and my co-founder Josh Walker, who comes from the research side and data side, was a perfect complement in terms of finding the right team to do this for. So yeah, we work across the global sports landscape, helping the NFL and the NHL and NASCAR and FIFA, and then the brands like, you know, Google and Coca-Cola and big, you know, these big brands. And, you know, we're basically helping the entire ecosystem make smarter decisions to service their fan.

Whitney Johnson: Can you give us an example, a case study of how you plug into one of these situations?

Angela Ruggiero: Take an NFL. We did an innovation summit for them recently. If they're trying to better help the athlete of the future and they're trying to make sure that athlete has the right performance technology and there's, you know, hundreds of these companies popping up. We would help them decipher what's real and what's not. And based on what they specifically need to partner with the right companies, invest in the right companies, recommend the right, you know, performance technologies to their club teams or the athletes themselves. Or if you know, like a Coca-Cola who's building out their 10-year strategic plan around the Olympics and they want to better activate to reach the consumer. You've got to know who that consumer is, so we help them better understand who the consumer is, what are their behaviors, or more like behavioral analysts? And then what's the market look like? How do you, you know, again, find the right build by partner strategy to, because you can't invest in everything and there's left and right, technologies popping up in the sports tech space, if you will. So, we, you know, we help across performance as well as really that core consumer, a better experience for the fan and the venue. A better experience for that fan now, especially with COVID, that's sitting at home and wants to stay engaged and wants a more personalized experience, or they want to participate, and that could be physical participation, or it could be E-Sports or some other way that you're, you know, creating content that you're actually actively part of the, you know, the team or that that sports ecosystem.

Whitney Johnson: Do you remember when you first had the idea for Sports Innovation Lab?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, it literally was. I was, in part of my roles, buying and approving more sports technology decisions. Like one specific example, I was on the board when I was on the IOC of the Olympic Channel. And this is the single largest investment the IOC has ever made because reminder the IOC International Olympic Committee doesn't actually fund or host the Olympics. They outsource it to organizing committees, local cities and then share in the profits. But the IOC in this case decided to build out OK if fans are moving away from just linear TV and now OTT, over the top, more digital, we need to build visibility so that Olympic fans can see their athletes, not just every, you know, two or four years that they can do it every day. So, it's on that board approving big budgets, going, wow, I wish there was like a McKinsey or some outside group that could validate all the decisions we're making because this is a big investment, and it could materially affect the future of the Olympics. So, getting that strategy right is just one example of I sat in that room, made these decisions with not a lot of information.

Angela Ruggiero: And, you know, same thing the when I was the chief strategy officer of the L.A. bid, we're trying to build and envision what the future Olympics would look like and hiring a consulting firm that didn't know anything about sport but was really smart. It's like, this is crazy. They're, you know, they're spending money. We're paying them to learn basically for six months and then they're applying their methodology. Wouldn't it be great if there was a company like Sports Innovation Lab that could, that knows what's going on and then can just be applied research?

You know, from day one, it was borne really out of my personal experiences. And then Josh Walker again came from Forrester Research and he's like, oh yeah, this is done. It's called, you know, Forrester Gartner like this. We just don't have it in sports. So, I'm like, what? This exists outside of the sports industry. Why don't we do it and be hyper-focused? I think there's a big market in a big way to help.

Whitney Johnson: Is there a technology that you're really excited about right now?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, there's a lot, to be honest. One thing that I think a lot of people are paying attention to, rightfully so, and we're tracking is that just the whole metaverse. And like NFT space. These like digital ways that you can collect things, like we used to all collect baseball cards, physical things. Now you can collect digital things. And then again, on the metaverse side, it's like, have these digital experiences, you know where the physical and digital connect. I think again, especially because of COVID, a lot of these technologies have been accelerated in the investments. And you'll have the ability to connect to sports in more personalized, digital ways. The more that sports can be accessible, the more you know. Again, we can all be inspired and have some space in sports. It won't be like that nine-year-old that was left out. Or I only could watch male role models as a young girl. Now, with this digital transformation of the industry, we can find that long tail. We can find any sport, any gender, you know, any ability.

Whitney Johnson: When I asked you that question, you immediately went to the fan experience, and in my mind, I thought you were going to go to the performance piece of it. Is there something also interesting on the performance side?

Angela Ruggiero: Helping the athletes is always something that I'm personally passionate about and something our company does extremely well. Why we focus the majority of our time, though on the fan side, is it grows the top line, it grows the business. You could spend more to help the athlete, which definitely has to be in every sports' strategy. But if you can, like, enable your league, or your team, or your international federation to grow their topline and stay relevant, I think that's going to have a much more powerful effect over the long term. Because again, back to this metaverse. And this digital transformation, kids are playing Fortnite. You know, parents are watching Netflix or both. There are endless forms of ways you can now spend your time. Endless ways like we're just in the attention economy and sports will always be live. I mean, we have that sports will always be part of the cultural fabric. But how relevant how, you know, to me again, really understanding how to keep and retain and grow your fan base and give them what they want, not what you've done for a hundred years. And we, I remember backstage with you, gave a phenomenal talk at the KPMG summit, where we first met with the LPGA. And you were talking about, you know, disrupting Yourself. I was like, that's what we preach every day at Sports Innovation Lab. Like, think outside the box because just because you've done the status quo doesn't mean you have to continue to do it. So for the longest time, our company was we're doing somewhat of like scare tactics like the industry is going to change. You've got to get in front of it. You've got to Disrupt Yourself. And. In some ways, COVID did that for us. I think opened a lot of people's eyes up at how fragile and how much more we need to do to keep fans attention. You know, keep them in the funnel, if you will, not just to make money, but to keep sports relevant in our lives. And a lot of that is like investment in technology.

Whitney Johnson: That's really interesting, Angela. Your perspective. And that my brain went to your looking at the performance technology and you're saying no. If we can focus initially on the fan experience of participating and watching sport grow the top line, then there will be revenue and budget to continue to drive the R&D that needs to take place so that performance can improve on the athlete side. So, it's interesting.

Angela Ruggiero: Yes. Performance technology, when you say sports tech, a lot of people default. They're like, oh, like the whoops of the world that are helping you understand your body. Yeah, that's important. Yeah, you got one on. Yeah, I got one. William, it's great. He's a buddy of mine. The performance side is important, but it's interesting is Will was actually on one of our leadership boards a few years back where we bring, you know, leaders of the industry together, and it was around performance technology. What we found in that group was that the industry was going to split. In some ways, there's going to be the hardcore performance technologies that will just be used for the athletes and the trainers. But a lot of those technologies were going to create a capability that allowed and what's hoops doing today to broadcast heart rate to broadcast these really interesting nuggets of information on performance. That's interesting to the fan. There's a whole market out there for broadcasters. They want their hands on this. Sports bettors that obviously want to break the odds and, you know, make smarter bets. So, the fan

engagement piece of that performance technology we realized was like, that's actually the bigger market for a lot of these performance technologies. And we'll keep some fans that maybe didn't care about that PGA game glued to the TV because they're going, oh, look at so-and-so's heart rate, they're about to putt for birdie.

Angela Ruggiero: Like, wow, that's crazy. And oh, I should put some a prop bet down. Oh, that's so interesting. Like their heart rate spiking, they're nervous. They're going to miss it. Maybe that's what we need to get, you know, keep people focused on, on sports, and some are there just for the pure love of sport. And, you know, we're all different. Yeah, you know, it's a lot of the work I love that we're doing now in here around women's sports that we've said, why are you lifting and shifting the same business model? We went out and looked at objective data through an initiative called the FAM Project because I was sick of the industry, not investing in women's sports. We're like, could we get underneath this? Understand why? Well, if you understand the fan, if you start with the fan, what are their behaviors? Maybe we can talk about driving more revenue towards that sector. And believe it or not, these fans are avid and rabid, and they want to do more. And they're the most, what we call, fluid fan. They're the most digitally savvy fan because they've been forced to because they have been, can't be a lazy women's sports fan.

Angela Ruggiero: Turn on the TV. You've got to go find your groups, you've got to download the app, you've got to be more nimble and agile. And so, there's a market out there that's been untapped and has been served in the same way because we're like, oh, that's how you do sport. We're like, no, that's how you do men's sport. Women's fans want more stories. You should invest more in content. Women's fans, you know, fans of women's sports and this is not just men our women, it's men and women. They want communities. They don't just want the action and the stats they want, you know, to be content creators around that athlete. And you know, there's so they're consuming sport in a different way. They're building and engaging in your sport in a different way, and therefore we give strategies on how to do that more effectively, and that's all data. I mean, at our core, we're a data company. So yeah, it's weird. People go. How did you end up like a data sport? Like what's your how did you get there? And I'm like, you know, let me walk you through this non-linear path, but hopefully, it makes sense at the end of the tunnel.

Whitney Johnson: It completely makes sense. Well, and especially because your whole career growing up, I mean, you were constantly looking at stats, you were looking at data. How did I do so it's not like you. You've been data-driven since you were very young. It's just figuring out how to use the data now versus how you used to use it.

Angela Ruggiero: Exactly. And to your point of, well, if there was better data, I probably would have made that team when I was nine. But there was better data, I probably would have trained longer, harder, better. I did train longer than any other man or woman in the USA hockey jersey, but I probably could have been better if I actually understood my body in the way that today's athlete could. And then I moved to the business side. I'm like, wait a second, you're you have this high standard for athletes, and we're literally using no data on the business side. That's like Moneyball over here. And then, you know, got over here. It's like night and day, but the same industry.

Whitney Johnson: Do you ever wonder what would have happened to your career if you'd actually made the team when you were nine years old? Because something really important intellectually and emotionally and psychologically in your mental toughness started to really take root in that moment with your dad and not making the team, do you ever wonder?

Angela Ruggiero: That's interesting. I've never thought about that. Yeah, I was I was the happy-go-lucky kid up into nine having fun. You know, I get my juice box after I was, you know, just. After that, I'm like, I'm going to kick everyone's ass out here, literally. That was my yeah. And I'm already very competitive, but I didn't. It hadn't. That hadn't turned on. I wanted to win as a team, but I needed to like make sure people knew I belonged out there, I felt like an outsider. If I would have made that team. Maybe I don't know it fast-tracked me to the national team, I made the national team when I was 15. I was still a kid. I was looking around the locker room, getting my teammates autographs, literally. I had their hockey cards, and I was like, hey, Chris, can you sign this? And then that put me on a path. Obviously, you got a few years of experience before the 1980 Olympics, where I was or was 18, the youngest player and we won our Gold Medal, my only gold medal. So maybe I would never go medal today. Maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I still would have made the national team, but I wouldn't have been until the 2002 Olympics and therefore I wouldn't have a gold medal, Whitney. So, a great question.

Whitney Johnson: You're often regarded as the strongest member of a team. Do you have any advice for people who are the best on a team, so basically, the top of the curve to bring everybody else along? What have you done?

Angela Ruggiero: So, there's a couple of things I would say. One, you have to show your vulnerability. You have to be real and be human. Like you could be the best and the strongest, but, show where you're not, show where you're weak, show where you're sad. You know, and your team. It's amazing. When I've done that with my team, they step up. They're like, they connect with me as a person, not just, oh, this scary CEO. They see you as is a human, so be real. I guess that would be my first piece of advice. And I think with that realness sometimes. It allows you to build trust, and the trust is what you need at the end of the day for people to come along with you. It's not what you tell them to do, it's how they feel about you. Right. And this is sports. This is business. This is like family life. Like, if people trust you, they'll run through a wall as a startup CEO. I'm asking people to give me their money and trust me on this. I'm asking people to, like, leave their careers for a startup, which is a typically less stable job. You got to trust. You've got to. I got to build the vision. I got to show them where I'm headed. I got to. I have to believe in something that most people on paper are like, you're crazy. And so how do I get people to do that? One, like, I try to just be myself and be authentic and inspire them to see something that most people can't see. That I see, that I'm excited for. I mean, that's an entrepreneur to its core. Build something that no one thinks existed, and again, I think back to when I was a kid, like when I told people I wanted to play in the Olympics or wanted to be, you know, all the things I did in my hockey career, like this little kid from California. No thanks. I had to believe it myself and build the plan to get there.

Whitney Johnson: You've won a gold medal, then a silver, then a bronze, then a silver. And so I suspect and you can correct me if I'm incorrect, that you had an expectation that you would again win the gold. And so I suspect that you now in your professional life, sometimes have expectations not met. What are one or two things you do when you go to an investor, and someone doesn't want to invest? What do you do to correct quickly so you get your head back where it needs to be so that you can continue to win or continue to secure the funding or get the next client?

Angela Ruggiero: Yeah, of course, I wanted to win the gold. By the way, we did. I'll just throw it out there, I was able to retire because we won the gold in 2011 at the world. I was like, All right! My work life now, I approach it like I did with my hockey career. I fell so many times. I use my first year of hockey. We would lose 18 to nothing like. It's really hard at first when you're the best in the world and everyone, oh, Angela, you're this great Olympian, and then I get beat over the head at work, you know, with whether it's investors or clients or anything. But I'm looking for people that get it, that believe in it, that see it. And when I get those, those are the nuggets I hold on to them again. I almost expect to fail now. I expect to get told, no, I expect people not to understand. And I'm always. One, it fires me up. Ok. Hey, you said, no, you're going to miss out, you know, it's a little bit of cockiness, I guess, coming out. Or why did you not buy it? Why did you not invest? Why did you not, you know, come work here, whatever the no is, try to understand to get better.

Angela Ruggiero: So, there's a little bit of humbleness like let me be open. If there's something I can learn from that no. Coupled with I don't need you anyway, let's go like we're going to do. You're wrong, you're the wrong fit, you know, a little bit of bravado so that, you know, when you look at that list of no's, you're not overwhelmed. And I think most people don't see that as a CEO, as an Olympic athlete, as a leader, you get told no, all the time. You fall all the time, you, people don't believe in your dream, and the strongest are the ones that have that mental fortitude to be open enough to be like, how do I get better? But also move on. Yeah. And know, it's like I got I have that singular focus and I got to stay glued to that and not be dissuaded, not be frazzled by that game, by that point, by that no. And so, I think I have a little bit of hopefully both of those. You learn the most when you get told no, right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, yes, you do.

Angela Ruggiero: Silver medal. Oh my God, my silver, I always refer to it. I hated it. We were supposed to win and we didn't, and it crushed me to this day. My 2002 Olympics, not my 2010 Olympic silver, because it could have gone either way. I'm very realistic. We could have won that game, but we didn't. But we could have. It was sort of 50-50. 2002 we should have won. We didn't.

Whitney Johnson: And you were here, you were in Salt Lake.

Angela Ruggiero: We were home soil, we were defending gold medalists, we were 33-0, we were the better team. I'd taken two years off of school. We were all training hard as a team and we collapsed in the final. Again, how much did I learn from that experience, though? Like so much I took away. When you win, you just sort of move on, sometimes pat yourself on the back when you lose, when you get said no again, you, hey, we're going to get them next time. But like, how did this happen? How can we be better? I think you tend to reflect more.

Whitney Johnson: Ok, so Angela, you open the door. What's one thing you learned from that that you would like to share?

Angela Ruggiero: No regrets. I always said that I didn't want regrets. I thought we did everything possible. We're all we all took two years out of our lives. We trained together. We, you know, we stuck to the plan, but we didn't. But we had. We had cultural issues on our team that we didn't talk through. And they just bubbled up and then came out, the team wasn't a team, and you could see it when push came to shove, and we needed each other. We didn't look for one another. We were trying to do it ourselves. We were. It's like, ok, well, if you want to win, if you want to be successful, you want to do anything in life, like don't sweep it under the rug. Like, address it and that's not addressing things is never a bad thing. To me, it's dealing with issues that need to be addressed and hopefully, you come out of that stronger.

Whitney Johnson: So, Angela, do you still skate?

Angela Ruggiero: I just started. I had a baby two years ago, so I just started playing again. You know, kids are hard to get out, but I've started playing in a women's league on Sundays whenever I can spare the time. And it's pretty brutal. I'm pretty bad right now. But I still love hockey. It's yeah, you know. It's so fun to be out there.

Whitney Johnson: Are you teaching your boys to skate?

Angela Ruggiero: Actually, if this were a video, I'd show you, I'm staring at our outdoor ice rink in my backyard. We have a little 25x50 foot little piece of little rink we built. Yeah. We're getting him out there, why not have some fun. It's cold, might as well do something fun in the winter?

Whitney Johnson: What was most useful to you in this conversation?

Angela Ruggiero: Well, your question about what would have happened if I made that team, I've never been asked that at nine. And it's it was a really, anyway, for me that was like my hey, you're right, my life is better. I mean, it's better because of what I did. I always take that angle. But what if you got what you wanted and essentially what you asked me? And that was really interesting to me in this conversation. You know, I think just challenging me to think about the people in your life that are contributing to your success too was really interesting. Because again, it's as you said, you're the all-star. Your kind of, I'm the frontwoman of the company, but a good reminder that you know, I see it. I feel it. I don't say it enough. I don't thank my team enough. So, I'm going to do that on our next team meeting, Whitney.

Whitney Johnson: I love it. All right. Any final thoughts?

Angela Ruggiero: No, just I love what you do. You know, I think you, like I said before, I remember hearing your first, the first time we met hearing you talk and that you're out there helping people find themselves and be better versions of themselves. I mean, I so much love that part of life. It's something, as an Olympic athlete, I got to do. I got to inspire people and motivate them and be a role model, and we're trying to do that at Sports Innovation Lab. Again, our vision is to empower the sports industry to be a better version of itself. And, you know, we do that in a number of ways. So anyway, what you do is so inspiring to me and the work of, you know, it's hard to think this way sometimes. So having a coach that can help you think through how to grow is awesome. So, thanks. Thanks for your friendship.

Whitney Johnson: Likewise. Well, thank you. And it's been really nice to catch up.

I really enjoyed this conversation with Angela. Here are four key takeaways. Number one, always pretend someone's watching. We all know the phrase dance like nobody's watching, and that's great advice for letting loose and having a good time. But if you're pursuing greatness, take Angela's advice. Pretend there's a scout in the stands. That small notion that her dad put in her mind when she was a young skater was key to defeating nerves and performing under pressure when it came time to compete, Angela had already felt the pressure of scrutiny hundreds of times. Visualizing your success is huge and we've heard it before. Steve Bullock, author of *Out of the Box Golf*, told us on episode 237, the players who visualized a difficult stroke performed nearly as well as those who practiced it. This is an amazing superpower we have inside of all of us if we choose to activate it.

Number two, give yourself permission to walk away. When we do something we love day in and day out for years, even decades, we can fall out of love with it. We can forget what it's like to be at the bottom of the S-curve and that exploratory phase where creativity and excitement flourishes. Sometimes you just need a break from something to fall back in love with it. Angela stepped away from hockey despite being the best in the world. She went on a reality show and could have cashed out with a cushy job. But there was something inside her that said no. Taking that break gave her the power to come back stronger than ever.

Number three, you learn the most when you hear no. Athletes, CEOs, entrepreneurs. These are the people who arguably hear no the most. To be successful in these roles, you must remain unfazed by this rejection and in fact, learn from it. As Angela said, getting that silver medal was the hardest thing because her team should have won. Peeling back the layers on that event revealed that there was more going on under the surface.

Number four. Give yourself a next step. Jumping to a new S-curve, especially a leap as big as Angela's, can be overwhelming. Make it manageable by giving yourself or your team clear, definable steps along the way. For athletes, the structure of showing up to practice every day can be replicated in a classroom setting. Showing up for business school and taking it one day at a time made Angela's transition that much easier.

If you want more on elite athletes jumping to new curves, listen to Zaza Pachulia, Episode 183. For more on innovation and sport, listen to Steve Bullock, episode 237. And for more on NFT's, listen to Adam B. Levine, episode 251. Thank you again to Angela Ruggiero for joining us. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman; audio engineer and editor, Whitney Jobe; and production assistant, Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.