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**Don:** There might be some who assume we would be talking about tennis, track, or maybe soccer... but today I'm interviewing you because you studied and competed in dance, specifically ballet! When you and I were going back and forth on this before the recording, you shared with me some of the details of what it took to be successful. I was absolutely convinced it required every bit as much of the habits of sport that celebrate on this podcast—I couldn't wait to have you as a guest! So, will you share with the listeners—who might not have a full appreciation of dance—what it takes to be successful?

**Carla:** Dance, to be excellent at it, requires all the muscles from all the zones. Even something as simple as your arm strength in dance is critical. Have you ever done even one of those aerobic workouts with arm circles? You will notice dancer's arms are active and up the whole time. I think the more recently appreciated components of being fit is the core. Dancing requires balance, therefore the core is mission critical.

**Don:** I know you studied at the American Academy of Ballet in Buffalo, then danced at Princeton, but I want you to take me back to when you first started dancing. I know a lot of little girls start young in ballet, my daughter included, what do you remember about your first dance class?

**Carla:** I started at three and a half. I remember my first dance class, unfortunately, because my teacher, Miss Maris, was correcting my turnout, but I was so nervous and so rigid, that she couldn't move my feet and she broke her nail. I was horrified as a three-year-old. I still remember feeling so tragic and embarrassed to have injured my own dance teacher in my first class.

**Don:** You had the unique experience of having the very famous American Ballet dancer, Arthur Mitchell, as your first ballet partner. Not only was he the first African-American dancer with the New York City Ballet, he also founded his own company. What did you learn from such close interaction with greatness?

**Carla:** I am so honored to be able to talk about Arthur Mitchell because at this point in history, I don't think his moment has come yet to be singled out to be sung as such a hero in American culture. You pointed out that Arthur Mitchell was the first black dancer to integrate the classical ballet culture through the New York City Ballet, which was the absolute most renowned and most exclusive dance

company in the United States. His integration of the New York City Ballet would be on par with the way people talk about Jackie Robinson— the first major league black baseball player. So if you say Arthur Mitchell is Jackie Robinson, to classical dance. That's what we're talking about. So, when I was just a little tiny bunhead—eight or nine years old— I was in an invite-only summer seminar in Buffalo, New York, and at the time, I was the only brown dancer in my class. So, to have your first partner in class, basically from Jackie Robinson is already incredible. Then, he singled out 9-year-old me to demonstrate the exercise. I mean, I feel like the goosebumps are on my skin right now telling this and I know it can't have been a mistake for a man who had so intentionally been trying to make black dancers feel that we belonged and we were beautiful, that he would give me that wonderful privilege.

**Don:** I was fascinated by a blog you wrote about the art of the “warm-up” in sports, the arts, and in business. Can you tell the listeners a little bit about the importance of implementing a warm up?

**Carla:** One of the things I wanted to help the team do was get into a mindset, where we could be both united and synchronized in our plan for that calendar year, the vision we would articulate, and we would get to together as a team. I also wanted to remember the human side of people, and the vision. I ask individuals to share with the team, what is on their mind, what concerns are they going into the New Year thinking about individually, and I ask them where could they use the team's help.

**Don:** In the prep work you mentioned to me the abundance of athletes you had in your ballet classes as an added method conditioning for their sport. Was there anyone whose name we might recognize? What did you learn from those interactions—the idea they had to come to ballet to prepare themselves?

**Carla:** It's not that the people were famous, but I think it's still interesting who they were. So if you take yourself back to I think it was about the 80s, when there was an attempt to build a National Soccer League in the United States before the one that we know right now, there was a soccer team being launched in Buffalo, the Buffalo Stallions. Some of those guys who were training to be on the Buffalo Stallions who were part of the Buffalo Stallions, or just trying out for the team learned about the impact that adding dance to their professional training could do for them as soccer players. Now think about the sport of soccer, this makes so much sense, right? The speed of the footwork, the flexibility and the agility and responsiveness needed and also just the flat out strength of the leg muscles. And now one of the things we do a lot in dances, you know, just jumps and a ton of cardio, but a ton of really lower leg strength and fast foot coordination. So we had for a while these four big muscly but not that gracious, soccer players. Who would come in and again, I mean, I'm at this point in junior high, so it's all these little, just imagine your perfect ballerina poster, whatever you can think of, and then these for you know, burly dudes coming in. One of them grew such a love for dance and turned out to be such a natural that down the road, he was one of the early Caucasian members of that Dance Theatre of Harlem Dance Troupe. I think his name was Joe. But I, you know, my memory doesn't quite go back that far perfectly. But was a white Italian guy. So it could fit into that truth a little bit. But it turned out that he found his real love by stepping into the dance studio.

**Don:** Ze'eva Cohen founded the dance program at Princeton and directed there for more than forty years, including your time there. What did she teach you that still sticks with you today?

**Carla:** A couple of things that I learned from Ze'eva: Ballet is very much about precision, perfection, and meeting an aesthetic ideal that is established and set. Modern is much more about an abstraction and

an ability to communicate a concept and bring the audience in to that abstract concept. And then let the audience in a sense, project their own experiences or their own whatever they're sitting with that day, into the dance you're seeing. So Ze'eva taught us more about using our imagination, and that what needed to come out of us was not only hitting a really standard set of ideals, but an ability to bring an audience with you into the art piece, even though they were the audience. So that was the first thing. The other thing that college, I'm sure college professors of every sort have to deal with, but college dance professor has to deal with is that they could get anybody from any walk of life coming into that studio. So they could get the guy who thinks that this is the underwater basket weaving way to get a credit and just finish that thing out. And they can get the, you know, lifelong ballet bunheads, like some of us were. And they have to kind of put all that together. And so what she taught me was a love for everyone in the room, where they were at. And that she was going to help you travel to what could be your new, personal best, and learn a new way to stretch and expand what you are used to doing. A new way to stretch and expand, what you've come to believe are your limits, but to make that your individual journey, and that there's no best, but as an ensemble, everybody has a role to play.

**Don:** You often talk about your mother's great impact on you. She was a NASA 'Hidden Figure' and you describe her as a brave trailblazer. Today, I know competition is still a part of her daily life. She is an award-winning senior swimmer! How has your mutual love of competition brought you together?

**Carla:** My mom's swim teacher at the senior center said to my mom, you know you're a natural born swimmer, which is the last thing she would have ever thought. So because she's a lifelong learner, and she and I share this mindset that we are our own competition. She held herself to a new goal of well, How good can I become what's my own personal best as a woman in my 60s with this swimming thing. And next thing I know, she wasn't living in the same town as me at that time. Next thing I know, she's calling me from Memphis, Tennessee, telling me that she's competing in some senior Olympic swimming games for tennis, this region in Tennessee. And last I knew she didn't even know how to swim. But this is the story of my mother with all of her talents that stay hidden until she goes for it. And then there's no stopping her, which I love.

**Don:** And your father was also a very accomplished athlete. He was one of the top sprinters in Panama before he moved here to seek a better future and attend college in the late 1950s—and he continued competing. Tell me about weekends at the track with your father. What did you learn watching competition at a young age?

**Carla:** For me, I feel at home on a track and field course. Because from I think the age of who knows three or four, we're probably packing brown bag lunches, you know, Ziploc bags full of orange slices, and heading out to the track to watch my dad and the little neighborhood track and field team that he put together. So if you can imagine some of those sports movies we all love with that underdog, rascally neighborhood team. That's what my dad put together for track and field. And my dad was everybody's coach, Dr. Vernon, my parents both have PhDs. And some of the things I learned from my father, from his sprinting career, really still applied to me even in leadership, and they apply to me in dance. My father would drive me back and forth to my ballet lessons a lot, because my mom was a teacher, and she was in graduate school. And I always remember that those car rides were a half car ride and half lessons from my father's, you know, portfolio of the stories that an immigrant will tell as they talk about the life lessons that they want to instill in you. And for any of your listeners who have an immigrant parent, I am telling you, immigrants are the best storytellers. And also you can't get away from them

when they want to tell you a story. So my father used to talk about how he would train for his sprinting in Panama on beachfront property, because he didn't have sneakers. But he said, to be able to run on the beach barefoot is one of the most rigorous forms of practicing sprinting, probably even more so than wearing shoes. We all know what it's like to walk on a beach, it can be kind of tiring, and then to sprint on a beach and activate all those muscle groups. So my dad would tell me stories and experiences of him being a youth athlete in Panama, I remember one of the lessons that is so important to me today that my father would tell me was all about. And when you fail, or when you miss the mark, or when you make a mistake in the moment, which can sometimes happen when you're performing a whole dance piece. One, don't let your mistakes show to don't overcorrect. He would always tell me that he would say he learned it in sports, whatever was what you were training, whatever was the practice that you'd establish for yourself. Don't start doubting it under pressure and start changing up that strategy. You know what works for you, just because you missed it one time, get back in the zone and do what you know, works for you.

**Don:** You know the premise of the podcast, that a disproportionate number of Fortune 500 executives were actively engaged in sports at both the high school and collegiate level and that that experience helped shape the way the lead today. Do you agree that being an athlete has helped make you a better leader? In your 22 years at General Mills I know you saw a lot of resumes. When hiring team members, does whether or not someone has participated in sports catch your attention? How would you describe the importance of having that athletic experience to others?

**Carla:** I'm certain that many of the athletes that you will speak with and that you've talked to have said the way in which the sports aspects or attributes form them as a leader. There is no doubt in my mind that the things that you learn in training to be an excellent dancer and performer are phenomenal tools to prepare a person to be a team leader and to prepare person to have individual excellence. For me. Some of the things that continue to translate from my dance experience are things like presentation skills. Dance, and performance is a two way sport. You're not successful unless you're effective in your audience enjoying the experience. So we get taught, in addition to just how to be excellent physically at the actual activity, we spend a lot of time talking about how to make sure an audience is engaged with you while you're performing for them. But even in this new environment, we're in a zoom environment, right a virtual environment, Google meet teams, whatever people are using. One of the things I'm very aware of, because I was a performer is that where I put my eyes based on where my camera is, really gives you the feeling of whether I'm looking at you. And sometimes because of technology. Unfortunately, when I look at you that might be the wrong optical effect for the digital space. But as a dancer, I was trained to know that it's much more important to make you feel seen. And so I have to work hard and use energy to make sure even though we're on this screen, I want you to feel connected with me. That's one of many things.

**Don:** Many people talk about playing on a TEAM, but the truth is they are often just a group wearing the same uniform—or in your case—doing the same choreography. In business, how do you distinguish between a true team atmosphere and a collection of individuals who happen to have the same business card?

**Carla:** If you're on a team, you should be able to express the shared goal and the shared vision. And the key pillars that have been agreed on to go chase after that goal. In business, we call that objectives, strategies and goals. And you should have had the opportunity to be part of crafting them, so that you

also believe them, you hold them, you manifest them yourself. You own the desire to get there. A lot of people can pick up a paycheck and say, I'm going to do what I'm told to do. But I'm not invested wholeheartedly in the success or more importantly, in a moments of failure, restoring us back to success again. And I think it's that internalization and a shared agreement to a united goal. That is what makes you a member of a team.

**Don:** Do you consider dance an individual or team sport? What were some of the team-building skills you learned from dance?

**Carla:** Dance is the world's most fun team sport.

**Don:** On an episode of A Taste of General Mills, you talked about how dance taught you how to hold your body with confidence and connect with everyone in the room. Can you tell us a story about you using that skill in a corporate setting? What about the lessons in regards to preparation?

**Carla:** At first? Well, yes, in corporate America, when you are the leader of one of the businesses, at various levels, you will be asked to go in front of broad cross functional stakeholder groups to tell them what's the strategy for the year? Why can they believe in it, and one of the most common experiences we will have is to be in front of our sales organization that might be represented all over the country. And they're the ones that have to sell all these wonderful, fun foods that we make out to all the grocery stores all around the country that you know. And once or twice a year, they will come to corporate headquarters, sit in a dark auditorium and look at leader after leader presenting strategic plan. I've been in that audience. And I do know that as leader, they're judging what you're wearing. They're judging a few other for maybe unfriendly factors. So I always wanted to make sure that I gave them something to get their energy up for, because that can be sometimes in those long corporate meeting days. I mean, it can be dull city. And if you see everybody looking down on their phone, which now when you're on the stage, Don, as you and I know, you can see when people on their phones lighten up their whole face. So I pride myself on it's okay. People have to sometimes send a text. But I want you to feel like you're in this to win this. So I use to begin with that. I think it's called the Wonder Woman pose, which is one of the most popular watch TED Talks, Amy Cuddy, I think is her name. And she talks about the importance of standing in the Wonder Woman pose and what that does for your, I'm not even sure I don't know, right, and endorphins or mindset or whatever. So I used to do that. And I thought it was good. But then I stole something from another leader that I thought always was so connected when he was on stage. And that's Barack Obama. And I call this the Obama jog. And so if you watch videos of Barack Obama before he would go to a town hall, or you know, anything like that, and if there were those two or three kind of awkward steps before he'd get on stage, and the steps are not always in the best condition, so you have to be careful with this. It wasn't like a lot of stairs. But somehow he would sort of bounce jog his way up those stairs, you know, and have a little extra couple paces as he got onto the stage. So I adopted an Obama jog for myself, such that I try if the setting allows to just do that same little optimistic bounce jog, get on stage, and then look right at the audience as if, "Hello, now we are together, the two of us. Are you ready?" Yes, to hear about the fourth quarter sales.

**Don:** In an interview with Princeton's Alumni Society, you mentioned how your ballet teacher emphasized the importance of a great team's synchronization. Can you tell me a story about a time when you applied this lesson to one of your corporate roles?

**Carla:** And one of the most important times in my career that I had to create synchronization unity and team alignment. Anew, was when I was running the natural and organic branded portfolio for General Mills. So this is a portfolio of food brands that people really believe in and really love brands like Annie's, which makes awesome bunny cookies and macaroni and cheese. Cascadian farm, wonderful organic cereals, vegetables, so many things, a miracle and tomatoes. Absolutely some of the chef's most favorite tomatoes, and then Epic Provisions. Which was our newest baby to the business and is a meat snacking company with an also a very planet friendly philosophy. What was different about this portfolio from any that I'd ever run before, is that this was General Mills only portfolio where every single one of the businesses was acquired from the outside. None of them were built from within the company. General Mills is a 150 year old company. So a lot of the brands that are famous in that, you know, have been around for a long time, they've had time to establish their team culture. This business was a collection of businesses, that all came into the world at a different time with a different founder. Beautiful visionary founders, incredibly passionate people with a real strong food philosophy. Often, as you acquire those businesses, you also bring on the existing members of the team into your team. So here I was, for the first time stitching together, teams that had been listening to and following the leadership of totally different founders. And sometimes the businesses had different philosophies on things like how the best way to save the planet, but I knew that one of the things we could really do is drive a big impact in food overall, in the way America uses agriculture. And in the way people eat, if I could take the power of these individual rebellious spirits, not kill the spirit, but bring together what we have in common. So that was a real undertaking. So one of the things we did was change our name from the generic, the natural and organic portfolio, to the triple bottom line operating unit. To say that one thing we all share in common is we believe in what's called the triple bottom line, we believe it's important to not only worry about profit, which is one of the bottom lines, but to also worry about people and also worry about the planet. And we will proudly name ourselves after this philosophy. It's so much important to us that you can't even call our group to a meeting without repeating our philosophy. And I just think that when you create unity and trust, you create yet one more resource to tap into, you don't just happen to the money assets, you don't just tap into what functional strengths people have, you got to tap in to actually the most powerful asset of a team, which is the energy and commitment any individual brings to delivering the ball.