

WTC 'Women's Leadership Academy' with Tori Niemann

[00:00:00] **Christi Powell:** Hi Podcast World. This is Christi Powell with Women Talk Construction. I'm here today with Angela Gardner, my co host, and we have a special guest, Tori Neiman from Clemson Athletics. We are so excited to talk to her about a lot of things today. Power is one of them, but there's so many things that Clemson Athletics are doing right now and Tori gets to be in the mix of that.

We're really excited about hearing our story, but before we get started with the interview, we wanted to talk about something encouraging, and that would be what one word describes you this week. Angela, I'll let you start. You want me to go first? Absolutely.

[00:00:45] **Angela Gardner:** You know, I was thinking 'roller coaster'. It's been an exciting week.

I've had some ups and downs and it's been great. So, my daughter got a distinguished maybe at Realtek. And my son wrote something for me about Women in Construction week last week. Nice. Yes, they're now. That's like

[00:01:04] **Christi Powell:** the biggest little feather in our mommy hats, isn't it?

Angela Gardner: I love it. Yes. How about you, Tori?

[00:01:09] **Tori Niemann:** My word of the week is embracing. Uh, I was in DC earlier today. It's a crazy week. I've had to adjust workouts, no food in the house because my travel has been crazy, but I'm embracing it. Uh, and it's been really exciting. It's been a whirlwind of a week, but I'm just embracing it and having fun.

[00:01:31] **Christi Powell:** Nice. That's awesome. Well, it's great. We can think positively about some challenges, right? Um, my, my word for today is relax. I just came back from vacation. We were at the beach with no wifi and no service and I'm still, my brain is trying to work, but I'm also very still in relax mode. It's not engaging when I want it to.

So I'm just gonna apologize in advance if my words are not like perfect today. Not that they ever are.

[00:01:59] **Tori Niemann:** That's totally okay. They don't need to be.

[00:02:00] **Christi Powell:** So we're going to have a relaxing conversation. I'm going to start out with, tell us a little bit Tori about your role as the assistant athletic director for student athlete development at Clemson University.

And how do you support the development of student athletes?

[00:02:16] **Tori Niemann:** Yeah, my role here at Clemson, and I've been in this role the last three years is to serve pretty much the hearts of our 600 student athletes. We work with all sports here at Clemson. I have a team of five, we have four full time and a great graduate assistant.

And I even have a softball player as a graduate intern that's worked with me for three years. So think of me in May when she graduates, uh, but we do all things professional career development, leadership development for student athletes. We do a ton of community service. Uh, you said you went no wifi on vacation.

We went to Senegal in 2019, no electricity, no running water. The best 10 days of our lives took 14 student athletes. We are trying to go again next summer. We're just in need of some funding for a trip like that. So just getting student athletes out of their thinking, I'm just an athlete. Or maybe I'm an engineering student and I'm an athlete.

Who are you as a human? So I always say I get to work with 18 to 22 year olds that just so happen to be really good at their sport, but they're still humans trying to figure it out. So our job is the life stuff, connecting them to people, all the networking, trying to teach them some of those tangible and intangible skills in the professional world.

And then a lot of leadership development, which is where power, our Women's Leadership Academy comes in. And then we also have a two year Tiger Leadership Academy for all male and women student athletes.

[00:03:41] **Christi Powell:** Nice. Wow. Do all, okay, I got to ask another question real quick. Do all universities do this kind of thing for their

[00:03:49] **Tori Niemann:** students?

Great question. No, uh, it really varies and every school looks different, which is the crazy thing about athletics is that there is no structure that is the same at every institution, which is kind of fun. I like it, right? You get to make the role

yours. You get to create it. Exactly. And we're programming for Clemson student athletes, right?

What our student athletes need, gosh, even the incoming classes are different than five years ago, are way different than when I played college basketball 10 years ago. And so morphing to Clemson might be different than what student athletes need in Los Angeles. So just trying to be intentional for what our student athletes need.

A lot of schools are different. We're very lucky here at Clemson. We're supported by our coaches, we're supported by our student athletes buy in, you know, we touch pretty much all student athletes at some point in the year. And then we have hundreds of student athletes that participate in our internship program, in our leadership academies that I mentioned.

So it's really, we're very lucky and have something special here at Clemson. How many athletes do you have? 600. 600. Yeah. Yeah. It's a lot.

[00:05:01] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. What I really love about what you just said is that you are really serving the hearts of the students. Yeah. If you don't serve the hearts of the students, you're not preparing them for what they have to face them when they get out of college, right?

When you're in college, you're kind of sheltered a little bit the same way with being at home, right? Let's just say somebody doesn't go to college, but they've lived at, you know, lived at home for so many years. You've got to learn those soft skills, leadership skills, and strong communication skills somewhere or you're really going to stumble and struggle for the first several years of your career or in your life.

If you even have a career, right? Like you learning how to write a resume, get a job, have an interview. I love that you have put that at the forefront of, of your athletics department.

[00:05:56] **Angela Gardner:** Do you believe in the power of dreams? At Dream On 3, we make dreams a reality for young sports fans living with life altering conditions by helping them live out their ultimate sports dreams. With nearly 32, 000 individuals impacted, our mission is to create experiences of joy, hope, and encouragement is well underway.

However, we cannot do it alone. There are many ways you can show your support, such as creating awareness, donations, volunteering, and companies

can sponsor dreams and experience meaningful involvement. Your support can help make dreams come true in your community. Want to get involved? Check out Dream. On three.

org to learn more about how you can help

[00:06:46] **Tori Niemann:** in

sports are such a wonderful vehicle, right? Because you play your sport pretty well, you get the opportunity for education. And so let's take full advantage of it. And that's where we always say, we don't know how to play your sport other than the sport that maybe we played. And again, 10 years ago, basketball has changed, but I'm going to cheer you on.

And academically, I'm not gonna, I'm not in the weeds on your grades, how class is going, but I'm going to ask, how are you doing? Have you thought about an internship? What do you want to do with your degree? And so we're really that safe space where student athletes can come to us and, Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

I mean, we have 90 interns a year in our internship program. That's crazy. 90 student athletes are doing internships in one academic year. And just the preparation that is giving them, and these are full like 160 hours in the semester doing work. It's so cool to see them grow professionally and the confidence that they gain, right?

It's so easy to think athletes are so confident. Sure, they can kick a penalty kick in, you know, after they've just played an hour and a half of soccer and they can handle that pressure. That is a different type of pressure than your first interview. I'm making the decision of where I want to start my first career stop at.

So it's really cool to see their confidence grow in our office.

[00:08:12] **Christi Powell:** I think a good example of that, and this is a great place to plug it in is you have to go to Clemson University's website and watch the intro video on power. Mind blowing. I am, it gives, it gives me chills every time I watch it, just the things that they're doing for these girls, and I'm sure they're doing it for the male and the female students.

But that particular video really kind of shook me to the core thinking, gosh, if everybody would do this for each other, it would be an amazing world that we live in. Thank

[00:08:44] **Tori Niemann:** you. Our Power Women's Leadership Academy has just taken off and we want other schools to model what we're doing. And we really launched that three years ago, thinking other schools would be doing it in the year 50th of Title IX.

And we really haven't seen that. And so we want other schools. We do eight sessions on campus with our 18 women in the cohort. We take a five day professional development trip where we're networking with different people. We met, we went to Chicago last year, networked with over 40 professionals. And then we have those student athletes bring it back to campus and host a women's leadership summit where they're at the front of the room, they're the one sharing their knowledge Rallying their peers.

We had a hundred women that came out last summer. So it's a really cool program that they get poured into and they get to see their strengths come to light and think about, you know, if you can see her, you can be her.

[00:09:37] **Christi Powell:** Yes, we agree. And

[00:09:38] **Tori Niemann:** it's, it's been a really special thing.

[00:09:40] **Christi Powell:** Well, I'm just going to say something right now.

Schools, are you listening? Are you paying attention to what's going on here? Because this matters, right? It matters to student athletes, women and men alike, this, what they're doing here at Clemson University. We really would like to see all the schools doing it. Like if I'm going to decide where my kid's going to go to college, that would definitely be something that I would be excited about her being involved in.

[00:10:06] **Angela Gardner:** I'm going to take a twist and ask a question that's a little bit different. Actually, a comment. It sounds like we're going to talk about a lot of really good stuff and maybe even get off key a little bit, but we opened it up with our, initially we like to talk to our guests and find out a little bit more about them.

You know, I come from a background of growing up with my dad's an architect, actually a Clemson grad. And, um, so I grew up in that world and it sounds like Tori did too. So tell us a little bit about

[00:10:36] **Tori Niemann:** that. Yeah. Uh, my dad was not a Clemson grad, but I grew up with, uh, both parents were college athletes.

Brother was a college athlete, but my dad owns a construction company, Neiman Construction back in Northeast Missouri, and did that my entire life and still doing it, and it's just really special to be in a family that just works so hard and everything they do. Okay. But my favorite thing now is, you know, being a homeowner, two time homeowner, calling my dad in the aisle of Home Depot and, okay, dad, what was that tool I need again?

And my dad is my absolute hero. Does not use FaceTime, no video chatting. And that man is still like, okay, you should see this tool. It looks like this. You need that one. And then I go home and I do my best or I'll send him pictures. I mean, I've fixed sliding doors, toilets, have painted every wall in my house.

My dad's replaced 16 light fixtures in my house. I did the 17th one. He taught me how to do it after watching him do it. So just really special and the independence and confidence that he instilled in me, just like you can do this. You know, my mom's the same way, just fully, you know, creating confident kids is what my parents did.

And just grateful. Uh, and it is nice when my dad comes to visit. I have a list. I'm like, Dad, while you're here, can you do this and that? Yeah. Or show me how to do it. So yeah, very special upbringing in a small town. Yeah.

[00:12:03] **Christi Powell:** I love that. So let's go back to your rules. Yeah. You know, you, you didn't get here and do all these wonderful things because you didn't have any experience or any education in your background.

Right. Prior to your role in Clemson, you served as the director of outreach, alumni relations and administration for women's basketball at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Can you share some insights into your experience in that role and how you contributed it to your

[00:12:29] **Tori Niemann:** professional growth?

Yeah, UNC was such a good experience and having been a college basketball player was a very special program. I mean, North Carolina, the history of

basketball and the opportunity, we are all brand new staff. So to really rebuild, and I had actually worked at Clemson for two years before UNC, and I loved it here at Clemson.

I cried every day of my last week, but I knew I needed to go to learn more. I wanted to grow. And so I took the uncomfortable route, went to Chapel Hill, took a chance and really extended myself. I knew I wanted to keep learning and administration within college athletics. And I really wanted the perspective of our coaches.

So in athletics administration and coaching very different types of roles, but work so closely together. And so getting perspective from a basketball staff, coaching staff. And then just the fundraising, a lot of alumni relations, trying to rally community around our program, our young women, and trying to connect the people that are supporting us financially, coming to the games, buying tickets, cheering on our young women with our young women, and realizing people are investing in you and what the opportunity you're given.

And so it was really special, really good. It was a great experience in learning. It was challenging, very challenging, but. Got through a lot, learned a lot about myself, the work, and then Clemson called and there was an opportunity. And so you already know I sprinted back as quickly as I could, uh, and it has made me so much better at this job.

Having perspective, going through the discomfort, you know, And it's, I love it. And I do love working with the 600, the diversity of our student athletes. Now, you know, diversity on one team, but basketball players, that's a language I've been able to speak for a long time. So it was such a good perspective experience, but I'm so grateful to be back at Clemson.

[00:14:22] **Angela Gardner:** I just want to ask how many like females are in positions like you at

[00:14:26] **Tori Niemann:** colleges? Good question. Great question. I do not know the answer to

[00:14:31] **Angela Gardner:** that. I think it's limited because I've read an article about that, but I just wanted your insight. All

[00:14:36] **Tori Niemann:** I know is we need more women in leadership positions. And guess

[00:14:39] **Angela Gardner:** what?

When they see you on this podcast, they're going to know they can do it too, right? Yes.

[00:14:45] **Tori Niemann:** You can see her. You can be here.

[00:14:47] **Angela Gardner:** So when I started to learn about like just really what went into athletics and going to school, um, it was just recently through a friend of mine, Michael Allen, who's also a Clemson grad, a Clemson football player and he, and on the podcast and, and he graduated in the architectural program, which by far is one of the hardest ones at Clemson.

You know, I had no understanding of what that meant to have to practice and do all of that. I mean, it is, it's probably harder than like, even just being out there in the real world and doing a full time job. But so my question revolves around how do you prioritize the holistic development of the athletic students, you know, these students in athletics, including their academic success, personal growth, And career preparation, because that's a lot.

It

[00:15:42] **Christi Powell:** is a

[00:15:44] **Tori Niemann:** lot. Yeah. Uh, well, we've probably heard it when we were growing up or even to, you know, others now wanting to be a well rounded person, right? Or trying to be well rounded when you're in high school. And that's what we're trying to do with the student athletes. So by investing in yourself through our office, the human development.

We think you'll get better at academics and athletics, right? We're not trying to distract. You don't have to put all of your eggs in one basket. But if you're working on your leadership and you are thinking critically about where you want to live in the world, do work, how do your passions and purpose align with a career?

You're going to probably excel more in academics and athletics. And we're very lucky here at Clemson. The coaches coach, we have academic advisors in athletics to focus on the academics. And then there's us for the human life stuff. And then so many more people. I mean, the network support at Clemson is unreal from.

Well, being medical, just holistic, everything for student athletes. So we're just that piece to challenge when necessary. Hey, we know you're busy, right? We know you've got a game in a couple of days and you're practicing every single day. And you had weights at 6am and you've got to go do rehab. Oh yeah.

Did you eat lunch? All those things. But Hey, I see that you're free from, you know, 7 to 8 PM. You should join this leadership Academy. I think you can do it. We'll work with you. And so we're very intentional in trying to get student athletes to understand they do have pockets where they can invest in themselves.

And when they invest by our programming, we are going to deliver, they're going to get something good, right? This is not Just a lecture series or time, right? Feel good. It's doing that internal work, building community, meeting people. My favorite thing with our tiger leadership Academy, I always, you know, just the polarizing imaging of a football lineman talking about personal leadership philosophy with a women's golfer, right?

Find me another ace. That that's happening and that gets to happen in our office. So that's where we come in. Just, I kind of say I'm like the fun, big sister ants, right? Like just sending a lot of texts. I have the best job in the world of just, Hey, have you thought about this? Hey, I met these people and that's how the world works.

Right. Hey, I've got two women in construction. You want to work in construction? Yeah. Christy, Angela, can I connect you to this student athlete? Boom. There's connections. And that's what our job is. We're just connectors.

[00:18:21] **Angela Gardner:** All right, podcast listeners. If you love hearing the inside scoop on what's going on in the upstates business community, the Greenville Chambers growing a greater Greenville podcast is a must listen series. Each episode features a different community leader discussing the latest topics and trends that matter to your business, and they share stories about their professional journey.

The series can be found anywhere you listen. Yeah.

[00:18:57] **Christi Powell:** So I'm going to ask the question I was thinking about earlier, but it really applies to this last question. So I can make it like a two part. One of the things that you talked about earlier was experience and education. There's been a lot of talk about experience versus education. Yeah.

Could you give our audience kind of your thoughts about how much experience and education helps to form you into the person that you are today?

Obviously you had both, right? You had experience and you had education, which allowed you to come to Clemson when Clemson said, Hey, Would you come back? But if you were to weigh it out, is there one more weighty than the other one for lack of better terms? Is there one more worth more weight than the other?

Especially nowadays, right? When you graduated from college, it was, it was one of those things. You can't get a job unless You have a college degree. Yeah. Things have changed a lot. And that's why the conversations are so fluid right now. But I'd just love to know your thoughts on both. Yeah.

[00:20:02] **Tori Niemann:** I mean, excellent question.

And I think it depends on where you want to go. Right. I think working in higher ed, I'm a big believer in higher ed, but for me, I was a journalism major to avoid math and science. Right. I knew I wanted to work in sports. But using that opportunity, I met people, I was challenged to critically think, and then I had great internships, a graduate program that I participated in, and that experience is what has led me in athletics.

So, college athletics, you need higher education, but But it's really the experience that takes you in college athletics. Now trade schools, big fan, big believer, big man, academia research. Obviously you need that academic piece, but I've always been a big believer. Education is such an unlocking vehicle, right?

It seems limitless, whatever that education looks like. I'm a big fan of higher ed, but however we can, you know, Leaders are readers, leaders are learners, continual learners. And so I just always think the more that we can learn, and sometimes that's experience, right? If you're learning from those experiences, what you like, what you don't like, where you failed, but then got better, right?

It's only a failure if it happens multiple times and you're not learning from it. But I think experience really does matter too, and connecting with

[00:21:19] **Christi Powell:** people. Yeah. Well, thank you for that. For, for those young folks that are listening to our podcast. I think this is a big question for them right now. Do I go to college?

Do I not go to college? What makes sense for me? And I think, um, Tori summed it up, right? You know, it definitely has to be something that you have to think about what's best for you, depending on what role you want to see yourself in someday. That that's really what it all boils down to. Right. And maybe you can be.

Maybe you can go to work right away. Maybe you need to go to work right away, but you can take classes. You can continue your education, even if you have to work full time, as you continue to grow. You know, I wish I'd had these conversations when I was 18 years old. Somebody would have talked to me about, look, these are all your options kind of thing, and I love that now our nation is talking about it regularly.

Thank you so much, Tori, for sharing all of your knowledge today. We are so appreciative of you and Clemson University. Go Tigers! We, we bleed orange in my house, by the way. But before we go, will you please let our audience know just how to get ahold of you, how to learn more about you, and you know, just where to follow you on social and things like that.

And how to support you.

[00:22:34] **Tori Niemann:** And of course how to support you. Yes. All of the answers. Well, a lot of information found on Clemson tigers. com. Any Clemson tigers, social media. But also our student athlete development is our office. So student athlete development. We are always looking for people to connect with, right?

That's how the world moves. So if you're interested in supporting student athletes or having a conversation so that student athletes can do a little bit of their own research so that they know. Okay. I talked to this person, their job sounds really cool, or I don't think I want to live that life. Let me pivot.

We're always looking for connections that way, trying to get student athletes, mentors, internships, job shadowing jobs, but also financially. Right. Everything costs money and we're always. We do a lot of fundraising, trying to support our student athletes. So anytime there's interest in kind of giving back to the holistic development of student athletes, let's have a conversation.

My email is on Clemson tigers. com, but I'm also on X at Tori Neiman and LinkedIn is a really great place. LinkedIn. I share a lot about student athlete development and power through my LinkedIn. And it's just my name, Tori

Neiman for LinkedIn as well, or on LinkedIn, Clemson student athlete development.

You can see a lot of our work there. Please, please, please connect. I love connecting with people and would love to have more conversations.

[00:23:53] **Christi Powell:** Awesome. Well, audience, I hope you were listening to that. And if you're a big Clemson fan, absolutely get involved. If you're a big female athlete fan, absolutely get involved with power.

Yes. Thank you, Tori, for powering up the student athletes at Clemson university. We really appreciate you. And for all the work that you do and we're here for you. If you need anything, thanks for being

[00:24:16] **Tori Niemann:** on today. Thank you so much. And for the platform, I appreciate you both.

Well, that's

[00:24:25] **Christi Powell:** all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the women talk construction podcast with your host, Christy Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next

[00:24:34] **Tori Niemann:** time.