



Episode 215 – Live from ESTO: Justin Charschan & Dan Mickelson

Intro: Recorded live at ESTO in Columbus, Ohio, this is Brand USA Talks Travel. Get ready to take mental notes from the top minds and creative thinkers who are driving innovation in destination marketing, content research, public relations, policy, and more. Now, here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:19]: Okay, we're going to talk about boosting tourism in sports today. So in preparation for this chat, I Googled "most popular sports in the world," and I was extremely disappointed. I got a lot of answers that I didn't recognize from sources like Jeeves and Quora, stuff you would never look at in a million years. So how would each of you rank the top five sports in the world?

Justin Charschan [0:39]: Yeah, I mean, I think it's a simple question when you think of it at first, but it's also a little bit of a loaded question. You know, if you ask it in different ways, I think you'd get different answers.

Mark Lapidus [0:46]: Right, different countries, right? Different answers.

Justin Charschan [0:49]: Well, but it's also like, if you look at it from a participation angle, I think you'd get a different answer from if you look at it from a viewership angle, right? I think we can all agree that, you know, soccer / football is the unanimous number one across both of those, right? You know, cricket being up there, golf, tennis; I think those would be consistent across the board. And I think some people in the U.S., I would say that field hockey outside of the U.S. is pretty strong, right? And some other sports there. And, you know, Dan might be able to answer this question a little bit better from an outside the U.S. perspective.

Dan Mickelson [1:18]: Soccer is definitely number one in the world.

Justin Charschan [1:21]: Okay, we got that one right.

Dan Mickelson [1:22]: Yeah. FIFA talks a lot about the 1.5 billion viewers they had for the final game for the Qatar World cup. And after that, I think you're right, cricket is number two. And the explosion of cricket, even in the United States, has been interesting, just this year. And I'll give a quick shout out to the LA '28 organizers who will have cricket in the LA Olympics and Paralympics in just four short years. After that, it's kind of anyone's guess. Like you said, it depends, how are we counting? Basketball is certainly up there, the growth of the game in Asia, in Africa. But you're right, field hockey, volleyball,

tennis, there are a lot of sports that come before the ones that I want to say are the most popular in baseball and American football.

Mark Lapidus [1:57]: I said another one for table tennis, which I assume is ping pong.

Dan Mickelson [2:00]: Yeah, ping pong.

Justin Charschan [2:01]: I can only imagine, especially amongst Asia, too, so, probably my favorite event watching during the Olympics. And also to throw badminton in there, too. I would assume that's a highly popular sport, especially from a participation level.

Mark Lapidus [2:12]: I'm delighted to be joined by Dan Mickelson, Chief of Sports Diplomacy at the U.S. State Department, and Justin Charschan, Senior Manager of Tourism and Ancillary Revenue at MLB, Major League Baseball. Dan, the last time you were on this podcast, you were at a very different role, working in the Visa Office, and now you're working in sports. That's quite a different role.

Dan Mickelson [2:30]: Kind of a different role.

Mark Lapidus [2:31]: Kind of?

Dan Mickelson [2:32]: Kind of a different role, in that foreign-born travelers to the United States are going to be the bread and butter of a lot of the success that we have in the United States throughout the mega decade - and we'll get to that in a second. But in my last job, we did a lot with USOPC, the Olympic and Paralympic Committee, Major League baseball, the leagues, colleges, making sure that visa issues were not an obstacle to what we were trying to see on the field and the success of various teams, leagues, and colleges. My new role is the Sports Diplomacy Chief for the US government. We do a couple things, and I'll lead with our bread and butter: the thing that we've done for 25 years, if not longer, and that is, we run exchange programs, both overseas and in the United States, exporting American culture via our sports envoys. We run 25 sports envoy programs a year across the world. This year we've done a wheelchair basketball camp in Saudi Arabia, a surfing camp in Colombia, and the list goes on and on.

Mark Lapidus [3:24]: Do most Americans know about this? Because I certainly don't.

Dan Mickelson [3:26]: I don't think so, but that's why we're here to talk about it. And with these programs, we talk about values that are important to us but that are also country-specific. So it might be gender equality; there could be social issues that we're raising in Colombia that traditional means of diplomacy cannot tackle or have conversations around. And so these are really great programs, and our sports envoys travel to far-reaching places. In fact, I was just telling Justin, we have a baseball program coming up in Palau that we're really excited about. We run some other programs, including a mentorship program here in the United States, for administrators and coaches who get to come here and be immersed in our unique sports landscape and take it back overseas, especially some of the unique pieces about America with Title IX and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Those are things that we're really proud of, that we want foreigners to see and then take and implement, to the extent they can, back overseas. The other side of the office that is really pertinent to this mega-decade is that our team now executes the roles of the State Department's Coordinator for International Athletics. Now that's a mouthful. So what it really means is that we execute the roles of what a traditional Minister of Sport would do. Now, I'm not a minister, I'm not that level, but as a team, we're the ones that are

making sure the U.S. government is coordinated on security, on immigration, on public diplomacy, community engagement, ahead of the World Cup and the Olympics and all these amazing blue ribbon events that are coming to the United States throughout the next ten years.

Mark Lapidus [4:46]: How many people work in your office?

Dan Mickelson [4:47]: There are ten on our team right now. We could use a few more, but there's a fantastic group of folks back in Washington, D.C. really making sure the U.S. government's coordinated around these efforts while also implementing these programs I've talked about.

Mark Lapidus [4:59]: Justin, how long you've been with MLB?

Justin Charschan [5:01]: I've been at MLB for a little over seven years now. It's been a good ride.

Mark Lapidus [5:04]: People in sports typically don't stay at leagues or teams very long. I know, I worked in sports, so it's a real come and go kind of industry. So good for you for hitting seven years, congratulations. Tell me what you do there.

Justin Charschan [5:15]: I guess, in short, you know, I focus on a few different ancillary revenue initiatives. And for the purpose of this conversation, I'd say that travel trade is something that I spend a lot of time on. You know, how can we get more unique buyers, specifically travelers, to our ballparks, from both foreign domestic markets and also international markets? And there's really historically been a big disconnect between sports and the overall travel trade industry, and I've been trying to help bridge that gap a little bit.

Mark Lapidus [5:40]: As I mentioned at the beginning of the podcast today, we're talking about boosting tourism through sports. What are the key takeaways that you gave the audience today during your panel?

Dan Mickelson [5:47]: I'd say, number one, that these games that are coming to the United States - whether they're the World Cup, the Olympics and Paralympics, the Rugby World Cups in 2031 and 33 - are really for all of the United States. What I really tried to impart upon them is, even if you're not a host city and you don't live in LA, how can you capture the excitement that's coming to the United States throughout the next ten years? What are the events that you can put on for your community if you live in Portland, Maine, or Albuquerque, New Mexico, or - I had a great conversation with someone from Honolulu on the back end. How do we engage Hawaii in this mega-decade and make them feel like they belong, and that this decade is for everyone?

Mark Lapidus [6:23]: And how do you?

Dan Mickelson [6:24]: How do we? We come to events like this and we get on your podcast, Mark. And we talk to folks and - I don't love this word, but I'll use it - we activate them, and I encourage them to do something. And, you know, Justin and I got questions. "What should we do?" I don't really care what you do, but think about your community, what's best for your community, around these events that might excite people and make them feel like these are accessible events for North Dakotans or Hawaiians, whatever it might be.

Mark Lapidus [6:48]: And, Dan, when they come up with a plan, should they communicate that back to you so you know what's going on?

Dan Mickelson [6:53]: If they want. I don't have to know what's going on; I don't need to approve anything.

Mark Lapidus [6:57]: Well, obviously not, but it seems to me like there might be some role there in coordinating some of this.

Dan Mickelson [7:02]: What I would love is for them to swim along some of the same streams we are. And we talked a little bit about youth sports and their accessibility of some of these games. Sustainability. If cities around the country are doing fun things around youth sports and accessibility and putting on their own watch parties or fun events for the community, we'd love to hear about them and champion some of them from the U.S. government.

Mark Lapidus [7:23]: Justin, what else did you guys talk about in there?

Justin Charschan [7:25]: Yeah, I mean, I think one of the larger takeaways is just the simple why we're having this panel, too. The importance of attracting travelers to the U.S. for sporting events, you know, why is that? And I think, you know, Tory, not sure, Dan, if you remember any of the specific stats she mentioned, but a lot of it was around, you know, why sports tourism has become such an emerging new and, pretty much now, the largest-growing sector of the global travel industry. And it really is because sports is that true and genuine experience people are looking for. You know, excluding concerts, where else in the world are you going to get 40 to 100,000 people together in one specific location?

Mark Lapidus [7:59]: It's true. You know what's really cool is when they're combined, when you have a baseball game and then a concert.

Justin Charschan [8:04]: That's right. Chanting in unison. And those chants are different for each culture in different countries. If you go to a soccer game in Europe compared to a college football game here in State College, Pennsylvania, not Columbus, Ohio, where you are currently.

Dan Mickelson [8:15]: I'm okay with that reference. You could also go to Ann Arbor.

Justin Charschan [8:18]: I was going to say Ann Arbor for Dan, too, but we're going to focus on State College since I'm the one talking right now. But you know, where else in the world can you get that? So I think we want international travelers to come live like a local, right? And I think sports is the conduit to making that happen.

Mark Lapidus [8:31]: So tell us how baseball is playing out around the world now. I know it's always been big in Japan, but I think it's growing now, isn't it?

Justin Charschan [8:37]: It's definitely been growing. Our events team has done a phenomenal job over the past several years, along with our international marketing team. Just this past year we had our largest international slate of games. We were in the Dominican Republic for spring training, we then opened up the season in Seoul, we went to London, Mexico City. Next year we're going to be opening up a season in Tokyo. So we've had a lot of really exciting events to go off of and look forward to continue producing them.

Mark Lapidus [9:01]: Is MLB on the air throughout the world?

Justin Charschan [9:04]: Yeah, we have a fairly large meteorites team to make baseball more accessible overseas.

Mark Lapidus [9:09]: What are some of the unique challenges and opportunities that come with hosting those really large-scale sporting events?

Dan Mickelson [9:14]: Setting aside the challenges, and I'll touch on a few of them in a minute, the opportunities are endless. I heard this phrase used, so I'm going to steal it, but this is the greatest public diplomacy opportunity of our generation. We haven't hosted a Summer Olympics since '96 in Atlanta; we haven't hosted a men's World Cup since '94. We did host back-to-back women's World Cups in '99 and '03, but that's really been it as far as these blue ribbon sporting events go. And so to have all of them happening in this ten-year period is really a unique opportunity that we cannot let go without taking advantage of it. Now, how do we take advantage of it? It's being coordinated; it's activating these cities, and getting them part of the process, and making them feel like their citizens belong. But it's up to these folks to figure out what that looks like. We're just here to encourage them and talk about what that might look like. Now, challenge is, if we're going to welcome up to 15 million people here for the summer games in Los Angeles, what does that look like with infrastructure? Visas, how do we make sure that our wait times across the world are not an inhibitor for people that want to come to Los Angeles for the games or for the World Cup in 2026? That's a real challenge. But our teams in Washington and around the world have done an amazing job getting our wait times down, and right now 60 million foreigners have a valid visa in their passport. And those that don't, we're encouraging to go get a visa right now. Apply now, and that ten-year visa that most people get is good for the entire mega-decade.

Mark Lapidus [10:35]: What do you say to destinations that don't have a sports specialist?

Dan Mickelson [10:38]: I'd say it doesn't have to be a sports specialist that helps you feel a part of this mega-decade. It could be anything under the culture umbrella that makes your city attractive to foreign-born travelers and domestic travelers. We're highlighting soccer and the Olympics and the rugby World Cups and the events down the list. But it could be any reason that your city is attractive to foreign-born travelers. So someone going to Kansas City for the World Cup might not have a ticket; in fact, Mark, there's only 5.8 million unique tickets available for the World Cup. So a lot of people are going to be in the United States looking for something to do. What else might that be? What are the food options, the music options, theater, the arts? There's a lot of wonderful things across our country from coast to coast, and I'm really excited to see how the DMOs highlight them.

Mark Lapidus [11:21]: Justin, you said you were at MLB now for seven years. Has it always been working with tourism, or did you do other things?

Justin Charschan [11:27]: I'm actually primarily in our ticketing department, and through our ticketing department there's been a lot of experiential opportunities that have come about it. I'd say travel trade is one of those items that we've been focusing on.

Mark Lapidus [11:36]: And how do you meet with the travel trade?

Justin Charschan [11:38]: We've made a large emphasis on going out to a lot of these travel trade shows, something that we've seen a couple of our clubs start doing, the Padres, Yankees, some other

clubs. Some clubs have even started hiring people directly from travel trade, from online travel agencies, to now run the tourism business and travel trade.

Mark Lapidus [11:53]: Very cool. Do they go to IPW, too, and have meetings?

Justin Charschan [11:56]: IPW is probably the largest show that we go to, at least domestically here in the states. IMEX is another big one. But essentially, we're just trying to get out there and build these relationships ourselves. I mean, we're fortunate to be one of the few sports leagues that are very actively involved within the space, and we're really excited to continue going to these trade shows and building these relationships, as we're still fairly new to the industry over the past few years.

Mark Lapidus [12:17]: So how does one bridge the gap between travel and sports?

Justin Charschan [12:20]: Historically, the tourism industry has operated a lot different than the sports industry. Teams have always had their primary means of selling tickets, and attractions have always had their primary means of selling tickets, mainly through this travel trade industry. You look at museums and observatory decks, they look to tour operators and online travel agencies in marketing their product overseas, along with additional foreign domestic markets in the States.

Mark Lapidus [12:45]: Well, it's been well-developed over many decades.

Justin Charschan [12:47]: That's right. And sports hasn't really gone down that route before. So now, as attractions have been coming up in a plethora of volume, sports continuously has more competition amongst these attractions. We're obviously looking for new, unique fans, opportunities to grow our fan bases, and we find that travel trade is a really good opportunity to do that, which is why we have become so invested in this space over the past few years. So that's why you're starting to see us at IPW and IMEX and some of these travel trade shows, so we can build relationships with these tour operators, online travel agencies, and help us market our product into these international source markets, so that people coming in from Japan or other places in Europe, they know how to purchase their tickets. You know, we in the States, you know, have our TripAdvisor. But being able to connect with these other online travel agencies that are true to these other markets, we are now meeting the buyer where they are before they even get into the states. So when they're looking up top things to do, we are now on the list of those things to do as they're planning those trips.

Mark Lapidus [13:50]: Dan, what are you most excited about for the next decade in sports?

Dan Mickelson [13:53]: I think what I am most excited about is that it's our turn. It's America's turn to put on a show, and we're going to do this for almost ten consecutive years. Qatar, Russia, China, others have had their turn, but right now we get to host. And so just like hosting a barbecue in your backyard - although on a much larger scale - we're cleaning up a little bit, and we're getting ready to welcome the world to the United States. We're excited to put on a show and convey some of what our values are to our guests, and we're just looking forward to the opportunity, and we're excited to be here today at ESTO to share some of those ideas with the DMOs across the country.

Mark Lapidus [14:25]: Are you working on a sports calendar?

Dan Mickelson [14:27]: We do have a sports calendar. It's like a living calendar, Mark.

Mark Lapidus [14:29]: Oh nice.

Dan Mickelson [14:30]: Do you want to hear some of it?

Mark Lapidus [14:31]: I do.

Dan Mickelson [14:31]: So earlier this year we hosted the first-ever Women's Concacaf Gold Cup. Congratulations to the women's team from the United States for winning that. We just hosted the T20 Cricket World Cup; 14 teams came to the United States, and we actually co-hosted that with our partners in the Caribbean. We get a little bit of a break. Next summer is the Club World Cup here in the United States. '26 is the FIFA Men's World cup that we're hosting with Canada and Mexico. '28, LA Olympics and Paralympics that summer. '29 is the World University Games in North Carolina, which is the Olympics for college students. We get a break in 2030, and then in 2031, we're hosting the Men's Rugby World Cup. 2033, we host the Women's Rugby World Cup. 2034: congratulations to our friends in Utah, they were just awarded the Winter Games in Salt Lake City. And so on top of all of that, we're really excited about U.S. Soccer's bid for the 2031 Women's World cup. And so if we get that, we'll have an amazing mega-decade of sporting events here in the United States to convey our values, our shared passion for sports, and just have some fun.

Mark Lapidus [15:34]: Justin, you notice that he didn't read that off a piece of paper, he did that off the top of his head?

Justin Charschan [15:38]: That was pretty good.

Mark Lapidus [15:39]: Oh, man, that was impressive. If I had sound effects, I'd be playing applause right now. I'll have to do it manually. That was incredible. There's one elephant in the room that I'd like to bring up with you. I understand that neither one of you can activate on an answer to this; I'm just expressing some personal frustration on not always being able to obtain media rights to use leagues and games and anything involving sports at the national level, or even the local national level, in our media content that I make for GoUSA TV, and our partners are having the same issues. So I know you can't answer the question, but who do we need to talk to?

Justin Charschan [16:16]: There are others within MLB who can focus on that. If you shoot me an email, I'd be happy to put you in touch.

Mark Lapidus [16:20]: Expect it. The email's on the way. So let's move from media rights to partnerships. How do we improve those?

Justin Charschan [16:27]: So we, as a League, are also starting to think of ourselves as a Destination Marketing Organization. You know, our clubs are also starting to think of their venues as attractions, and creating a product mix that is 365 days a year. So that regardless of being in season or off season for a traveler, there's always an opportunity to interact with baseball. And I think because of this mindset, that has really allowed us, as a league, to now be more open and accessible to partnerships within the travel industry. I'd say over the past few years, our partnerships team has done a great job of onboarding a few exciting companies within the space. For starters, the Japanese travel bureau, JTB, which is the largest travel agency in Japan and crucial for inbound travel from Asia to the U.S., is now an official partner of our MLB world tour. We also have a partnership with Booking.com, who is our official online travel partner. People realize that baseball fans love to travel. How much do you hear that a

baseball fan wants to go to all 30 MLB ballparks, right? You don't really hear that much with other sports. Nearly two-thirds of American baseball fans say they're willing to travel up to 500 miles to watch an MLB game. So I think merging this unique opportunity in with some of these partners has been really exciting. And I think there's a lot of other opportunities out there too.

Mark Lapidus [17:36]: You know, the good news is that most of our cities are so close together, you can always travel. Like, I have been known to go watch the Ravens play in Baltimore. It is a totally different experience than watching the Redskins - did I say "the Redskins"? People having cocktails, not watching the game. Show up late, leave early. Ravens? All in, every minute.

Dan Mickelson [17:54]: Well, misery loves company, so I can commiserate with the Long Island side of New York with how successful, or unsuccessful, our Detroit sports teams have. So I think you've turned me into a Long Island sports fan all of a sudden.

Justin Charschan [18:06]: I wouldn't say all Long Island sports fans have chosen my path. I'd say most of them are mixed. It really just depends on your upbringing and everything else.

Mark Lapidus [18:12]: This conversation is really deteriorating. Next thing you know we're going to start drinking beer and talking about our local teams.

Dan Mickelson [18:17]: Is that an option? Yeah.

Justin Charschan [18:18]: I hope sooner rather than later.

Mark Lapidus [18:20]: I want to thank you guys so much for joining me today. It's been a lot of fun.

Dan Mickelson [18:23]: Thanks, Mark.

Justin Charschan [18:24]: Thank you.

Mark Lapidus [18:24]: And that's Brand USA Talks Travel, live from ESTO in Columbus, Ohio. More episodes to follow. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

Outro [18:32]: If you enjoyed this Live From ESTO episode, please share it with your friends in the travel industry. Production and music by Asher Meerovich. Media producer, Nthanze Kariuki, with assistance from Casey D'Ambra. Engineering, Brian Watkins, Kat Pommer, and Antonio Tyler. Art by Mimi Jung. Special thanks to Alexis Adelson, Phil Dickieson, Peter Dodge, and Colleen Mangone. More Live From ESTO episodes coming soon. Safe travels!