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Channel Mastery Podcast, Episode #98: Kristin Carpenter Interviews  
Steve Matous, National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) President

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Kristin: Welcome back everybody to another episode of the Channel Mastery Podcast. I am delighted to introduce Steve Matous to you today who is now the president of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association or NICA, welcome to the program, Steve.

Steve: Thanks Kristin. This is great to be here.

Kristin: Well, I was super excited to see that you took this role and I would like to have you explain your career background leading into this because obviously you have... I think that there's so much for you to bring to this organization with where you've been in your career. So please share with my awesome audience where you were prior to this.

Steve: Well, immediately prior I had been the CEO of Entrepri, which is an indoor climbing wall company that designed, installed, manufactured, work on climbing walls, worldwide company. I ran the American division out of Bend, Oregon. Then prior to that I had spent a number of years as the executive director of Outward Bound USA, which many of you are familiar with. It's a Youth Character Development Organization that uses the out of doors, rock climbing, skiing, all kinds of outdoor adventure as a means to help people understand their inner self, develop self confidence, work as a team, build community, all the sort of thing that youth today really need. NICA has a very similar focus. It just uses different venue.

Kristin: So let's talk about what attracted you to taking this role, because obviously you were in a for profit organization when you're at Entrepri and now you're back in an outdoor recreation focused youth, advocacy youth program. Right. So tell us what drew you back to it and why cycling?

Steve: You know, that's interesting. Over my career and there's many other organizations I've worked for, The Access Fund, for those of you that are climbers in the audience. I have been in other for profit businesses, I probably split my life professionally between for profit and nonprofit world. I've been lucky enough to have great success. I'm just at that point in my life, I have children myself and I understand the challenges that teenagers face today. I'm at that point in my life where I'm more interested in being supportive and encouraging to the youth and the needs that they have.

Steve: When I looked at NICA, I saw an organization that combined my personal passion for cycling, with a mission to develop a youth focus through cycling to help people develop stronger minds, bodies and build communities. And I thought, wow, this is real interesting.

Steve: As I delved into it, everyone I spoke to, both outside of the organization itself and even outside of the cycling community, I heard nothing but good things about it and how successful it was. Parents would tell me how it changed their child's life. Sponsors would talk about what a great opportunity it was to access tens of thousands of individuals who are all really passionate about what they were doing. So for me, I looked at the potential value that I could bring to the organization from my business background and my expertise and my own passions again for youth development and for cycling. I thought, why not? Let's see if they'll hire me.

Kristin: They did. Surprise. No, I'm kidding. I'm sure it wasn't a surprise, but where I'm going like that's such a great response. So I'm very familiar with Outward Bound obviously and I think that there might be a perception of Outward Bound in, it's more of a historic perspective that it's almost like it creates a safe place for youth but also a place for them to really build confidence and self-reliance. I see that definitely crossed over into NICA. But NICA is all about community. Right? I feel like it takes a village today to help a teen and you really focus, NICA focuses, on 12 to 18 year old kids and racing bikes. So it feels like it's super niche, but at the same time it touches on some, I think paradigms and values that are much, much broader than just racing bikes.

Steve: Oh, completely. Again, that was one of the things that, and I've learned a lot more now, I'm about two months into this position, about how NICA operates and what occurs at our races. One of the things, and it's interesting, I think of my own self as a high school athlete. An example I give is my parents, my dad would come and watch whatever it was I was doing, but that was about it. At NICA, our coaches our volunteers, the people involved with the race series tend to be parents, family, brothers, sisters, friends. For every student athlete at a race, we get about two and a half other people that come to that race and participate. Again, either as a volunteer or as a coach or a spectator, but they're all there. Our races tend to be, since they're mountain bike races, they tend to be in venues where people will camp out the night before.

Steve: So there'll be this whole community feel even before the race begins. At the race itself, one of the things we strive for is everyone participates, nobody sits on the bench. Everybody is equally as important to us. Whether you win the race or come in last, doesn't matter. We see that play out. If you go to a NICA race, when the race ends, the student athletes don't just disappear and wait for the podium. They literally go to the end of the race and stand there and cheer and applaud and scream and shout and wait for the last person to cross the line.

Kristin: That's really great. I love that. So obviously you saw some runway stepping into this role. Well tell us. When did you take the role exactly? We're recording this in the middle of July, 2019.

Steve: End of May. So literally I'm just getting to the end of two months time.

Kristin: Right. So obviously a lot of it is just kind of getting your bearings, but I know that when you raised your hand to take the position, you probably had a few things inside of you that were just like ignited around like the things that you could do to help further this organization because obviously NICA is on a tear. I mean it is a very successful organization. It feels like it's growing so much year over year. But what are you seeing as the runway or the blue sky?

Steve: Well, one interesting thing is, it's a double-edged sword, a positive and a negative. We have a lot of endemic support. A lot of people in the cycling community, whether it's industry related or just individuals who are passionate about it. You look at our advisory board and it's kind of a who's who of the mountain bike world. You look at the current women's world champion, Kate Courtney, she's a North Cal League alumni.

Kristin: I saw that on your Facebook page and I will put that in the show notes, everyone. It's a very sweet picture of her.

Steve: She's come to us and said, "How can I help? I want to help NICA." Hailey Baton, from our Utah League is the U 23 world champion. There's people like Lucas User, who is no longer racing but went on again from one of our California leagues to race at the world tour level with Rally and United Health Care. So it's interesting that there's this incredible amount of very high level, incredibly athletic, elite level people, but there's also, 99% of the people engaged in NICA are just normal folks like you and me who love to get out and ride.

Steve: Because of that, there's a huge opportunity to reach out to them, to reach out to their businesses, to their family foundations, just to them as people because they're all have other jobs, other lives, other family things that are going on.

Steve: But we haven't expanded that. By expanding that, what we're going to do is we're going to increase the number of student athletes that participate. We're going to reach out to wider breaths of our community. We're going to be more diverse because of that. We're going to include, hopefully, a greater number of women. Because that's one thing cycling really lacks. We tend to be a male dominated sport. In terms of the runway with the development of new leagues and all, unfortunately this is a good problem to happen. Unfortunately we have way more demand than we can satisfy in terms of our growth, right now. I have four new leagues waiting in the wings that we'll bring on board over the next 18 months. But I have a lot more than that wanting to start.

Kristin: You're basically trying to create that wider foundation?

Steve: Correct. Yeah. That's where the blue sky is because there's a lot of opportunity. You know, I think we've done a great job of, again working with the cycling industry in the cycling world, but what we haven't done is expanded to the greater community, the greater populations. As one example of what we're going to do is next year our national conference is actually going to be in Pennsylvania and what's so interesting is probably most people don't realize this, but there's over 40 miles of mountain bike trails within the city of Philadelphia. They have an incredible park system and our Pennsylvania League has been fortunate enough to tap into that urban community.

Steve: That's something we need to do more because more and more of our population is urban based. It's not in the suburban and rural areas where most people think of mountain biking. We have a New York league, we have a New Jersey League. We have, as I've already mentioned, the California League, so we have leagues in these very populous urban areas, but we have to do a better job of reaching out to those communities and providing the opportunities for them. I think that's also the blue sky because that means that as much as we're growing, we'll grow even more.

Kristin: Right. This is your 10-year anniversary in 2019, correct?

Steve: That's correct, yeah. NICA, as an organization, was founded in 2009. It came out of an idea that the Berkeley High School, there was a teacher, Matt Fritz Singer, who first started a club to take kids riding. His thought was, it was going to be a road bike club, but when the first five kids showed up for the first meeting and all had mountain bikes, he was like, okay, I guess we'll go mountain biking. Then from that league, the North Cal League was built and developed, and then people realized, wow, this is already on fire.

Steve: It's going crazy. We need to make this a national movement. This is a great way to get kids off their butts, away from screens, outside and active. We're doing that by putting them on mountain bikes and putting them in the woods and let's create a national organization and movement to do this. So that's how NICA was born. Since that time, our anniversary, the 10th year will begin in September. Since that time, we've gone from zero to over 19,000 athletes last year. This year we're already ahead. If you year to date, we're more than 10% ahead of student athletes compared to last year. So we're just growing like wildfire.

Kristin: That's incredible. So I have so many questions around that, but before we get there, I think one of the things that would be important to establish before we get into more of the details around your vision and the vision of the organization is can you quickly explain the difference between NICA and USAC?

Steve: Well, USAC is part of the Olympic Committee in the US. Its whole purpose and it's funded by the US government, is to create elite athletes that compete in the Olympics, win metals, so that is its primary goal. NICA's primary goal is to help youth develop their character and get them outside and active and our venue is to use mountain biking and we use races to do that. So our purpose is pretty different.

Steve: Even though I mentioned earlier, there are a number of world-class elite athletes that came from NICA. We're not trying to develop those people. That's not our end goal. If there are people like that, we're going to encourage them. We're going to help them any way we can. But really this is about the everybody and anybody. There are many examples in NICA where there are student athletes who were turned away from football or baseball or tennis or whatever it was, or they spent three seasons sitting on the bench and they never actually got to play. In NICA, everybody plays. In NICA, everybody participates. If you don't want to race, that's fine. Maybe you want to be a mechanic. You don't want to be mechanic, that's fine. There's all kinds of things you can do to participate. Even just to go on a training ride. It's all good and we support that and we encourage it.

Kristin: That's great. I love this too, in what I'd like to kind of go into next is you literally are going to be, I think, a much wider portal and you already have been because I think now you're

alumni, which we'll talk about in a little bit or you know, between 25 and 28 and we can talk about some of the attributes there that you guys have seen. But before we go there, let's talk about what this organization is going to be feeding into the community of cycling in the future. Notice I didn't say industry, right? The industry is very important obviously, but I'm talking about a community because when I picture kids who are in cities, who are interested in learning this, are becoming part of this community and you're essentially removing the friction and the barriers to that and welcoming them in. We're going to have a lot more people, a lot of different income level families, people of color, women, et cetera from these cities that feel like they can actually raise their hands and say they're cyclists. And I think that is going to be a game changer.

Steve: I agree. It's part of our DNA. It's a value that we hold. It's very important to us organizationally that we are developing good healthy habits and lifestyles. That by using the bike as a means to open people's eyes to what it's like to be outside, to enjoy fresh air and exercise and to be part of a community that is having fun and is engaged and supportive of one another. I think that goes a long way. That goes to continue into adulthood.

Steve: Certainly there'll be times in people's lives, especially when you're younger, in your 20s, all of us are working real hard either to earn degrees or find our way with business or whatever life calling is. So there are times when people may step away. But what we have found, and again as you as you mentioned, our graduates, our alumni are literally the oldest ones are only 28, 29 years old. So these are people that are literally just coming into that time of life where they can think about what they enjoy doing. We find anecdotally that all of our alumni continue to ride bicycles, whether it's gravel, whether it's road, whether it's mountain bike, whether it's for commuting, whether it's for pleasure, people, once they are part of this community tend to stay part of this community.

Kristin: That's very, very powerful. From what we talked about in our kind of our rehearsal call, that's one of the areas you'll be tasked with is kind of putting away to, I guess, measure that or follow that alumni. Because I think that is pretty important.

Steve: Yes. It's something that's been on the agenda even before I was hired, but now I need to execute on it. That is developing a relationship with our alumni that's more formalized and including them in our communities. Certainly, everybody is different, but people in their late twenties early thirties often are starting families, too early to be part of NICA, but certainly we hope that those people, as their children grow, that they will remember the great things that NICA did for them and they'll become part of it.

Steve: But even more important is that if they have healthy lifestyles and continue with them, that their children will grow up with that. There's nothing wrong with using a computer or being on a screen. We all do it. We do it for work, we do it for pleasure. The problem is when you do that exclusively and don't go outside, don't exercise, don't breathe fresh air. So we want to make sure that people understand that there's a means to an end to create a balance.

Steve: There are many other organizations that we work with and partner with, People For Bikes, is one example who encourage cycling as a community and as a way of transportation, as a

way of life. So that's something that, while again, the race venue and mountain bike racing is how we get there. That's not the only thing that we participate in.

Kristin: No, I feel like it's throwing the rock in the pond and you see the reverberations coming out from that. That's exactly where I was hoping to go next. That is mountain biking as a big part of the outdoor recreation economy. You're joining this organization at a time that the national conversation, I think, is becoming very cohesive and much louder, joining in many, many different stakeholders who used to like to kind of stay in their own little zones. Right?

Kristin: Now, as we've come together, we're realizing how powerful we are together and advocacy wise in Washington and in the national conversation around public lands. We actually have a huge vote and I think it's important to talk about some of the special programs that you offer because again, it's like the center of the halo, maybe racing, but there's ways to create stewards for public lands that I'd love to have you speak about. Then I'd love to get into some of the training and the inclusivity that you have on the horizon, too.

Steve: Certainly, we have a program that we call Teen Trail Core. What we do is we encourage our teams to partner with local chapters from IMBA or other mountain bike organizations that are both creating and maintaining trails and volunteer their time and their people power because we want our student athletes to make sure they understand the value of the public lands that they train and race on, but also accept responsibility for them and advocate on their behalf. Recreation and public lands as you know, have been under threat in recent years with the attitude from the current administration.

Steve: So one of the things that we hope to provide to our students is an opportunity to think for themselves but be exposed to the fact that you know what? These public lands don't just exist on their own. They exist because you support them. The trails that you ride and race on are maintained by people like yourself that accept responsibility for it.

Steve: Then we want you to be active in your community and hopefully at some level, if you're interested at a state and national level, to speak on behalf of recreation and access to the outdoors. So that's all encouraged through our Teen Trail Core Program. We have someone on staff at a national level, we have our coaches and people that work directly with the students at the league level. Because we are a high school and middle school based organization we offer ways to earn what we call badges. So if you think about you have to put a certain number of trail hours in, you have to take certain steps like writing a letter to your congressman. There's all these different pieces that we put in place. Think of it as a curriculum that helps people walk through and think about how we use and are responsible for our public lands. That's what we encourage our students to get involved with.

Kristin: That, I think, is going to become a lot more powerful with the backdrop that we have right now with the outdoor recreation economy growing. Would you agree?

Steve: Totally agree. To step that way just for a second. One of the things that we also encourage our student athletes and our coaches to do is to engage with their local cycling retailers. We don't do bike maintenance. We don't build bikes. We ask our coaches and their teams and our students and their parents to support the local retail outlets to have their maintenance done and if they need to make a purchase, to go there and do it and through

some of the brands that we work with, we do get some discounts that encourage the students, but it's not creating a sense of entitlement as much as it actually is, if the retailer is savvy and provides great customer service and is thoughtful in their approach, they're going to build lifelong customers. Just like we're building lifelong cyclists.

Kristin: I totally agree with you on that front and I'm glad that you addressed that question because that is something that I wanted to bring up because obviously as we were talking about the Cycling Industry Recovery Facebook group, I would put a link to that in the show notes, but it is a closed group that you can join. Like you have to basically fill out a questionnaire. But there were some people in there talking about how they felt like there might be exactly what you said, that entitlement, right? A new generation of entitled bike racers and yes, for especially retailers across all of our passion industries with outdoor active lifestyle.

Kristin: That's something that we've had a challenge around. But ultimately today, we're essentially, it sounds like what NICA is doing is like trying to make this equipment readily available to families of all different income levels. You even told me earlier about Trek and how they're donating bikes to certain leagues. I guess, all leagues, certain leagues, so you can clarify that for me, that essentially enable people who can't afford mountain bikes because it is expensive. I mean, Oh yes. I mean I'm a lifelong cyclist and my kids have always been into it, but every spring I have to like work that into the budget, you know?

Steve: Yeah. It's not inexpensive. Although interesting enough, if you look at most high school and middle school sports; football, tennis, some places have rowing, Lacrosse, whatever, you know it depends where you are. There's always a cost involved, whether it's for equipment or just to help pay for the coaches and the time and the venues that you participate at. But with mountain biking, obviously there's a pretty significant cost upfront. Then kids, of course, the difference between 12 year old and 18 year old could be a half a foot and 50 pounds. So they're going to probably go through a couple of bikes in in their tenure with NICA. We do several things. Many of our leagues have scholarship programs where they help defray costs. They get sponsors who put up dollars and individuals who need help can apply for those dollars.

Steve: Trek has helped us in many ways over the years. Number one, by helping provide a discount program to our student athletes. Again, trying to encourage those people who otherwise this might be a big stretch to allow them to get there. But what they've also done is when they have excess inventory, they donate it. So just recently they donated 20 bicycles and we're going to distribute that directly from the local retail dealers to the leagues in their particular locations.

Steve: This excess inventory to be used as a loaner program. Many of our leagues will have loaner bikes, which they'll assign to a kid for an entire season and the child has to maintain it and take care of it, but it's theirs to ride and race on. Then the next year it'll go to another child that's in need. It's really great when we get that kind of support and it's not only Trek, there are other brands and other sponsors that do that as well. But Trek just did it recently and that's why it was top of mind.

Kristin: Awesome. So it is really brand driven?

Steve: Certainly. Yeah. It's cycling endemic, of course. I wish I could tell you that I had Amazon donating \$10 million a year to support a bike loaner program. But we'll get there.

Kristin: We always have to have goals. Don't we?

Steve: Yes and aspire. We have to have aspirations. Otherwise we stay stagnant.

Kristin: Exactly, what is in motion, stays in motion I think. I like that. So let's talk about gender equity because I know this is another area that I think you're going to bring a spotlight to and growth to. Can you talk a little bit about how you see as the direction and the growth of NICA continues, how are you trying to create more of an equitable playing field, if you will, for the people involved in this community?

Steve: Well, one of the things that we recognized, and I think anybody in the cycling world recognizes that the industry itself is predominantly male and that's true in many sports. It's not just cycling, but we've started at the top. I have a board chair is female. We have many board members that are female. Predominantly, my staff is female and what we are also trying to do is recruit, train and retain. It's important that people are kept for a long period of time, not just one time. Female coaches because what we find is it's the coaches that develop the teams and build the leagues that are the mentors.

Steve: 12 to 18 year old girls are going respond much better to a female mentor than a male mentor. That's just, it's just nature. There's no prejudice there, it's just reality. So we have focused by creating what we call GRIT, girls riding together. It's a brand. It's an initiative that highlights our move towards gender equity. I'm not talking about equality, I'm talking about equity. I think we already have equality in NICA. I think we are very inclusive, very welcoming, but we don't have equity. We only have about 22% of our student athletes and coaches are women and girls and that's not okay. When I look at our community and our cycling and our world as a whole, there are more women and girls in this world and there are men and boys, so we need to move the needle on that number.

Steve: We've set ourself a goal, in 2023 of, hopefully, we're going to get to 33%. So that's going from 22% participation to 33% participation. In addition to creating an emphasis, a strategic objective around this and incorporating it into our values and our vision and our mission, we're also putting money behind it. Recently working with Rafa, we obtained a grant that allows us to add to the staff we have and add to the support that we provide directly to the teams and the coaches and the leagues to encourage female participation and we're going to continue to pursue that. This is very much at the top of our minds. It's very much when we think of community, these are people of our community, so they need to be part of NICA.

Kristin: I love what you said about the coaches because ultimately young female athletes or aspiring athletes or even just curious females who are like, what's going on over there? I might want to check that out, but they might be incredibly intimidated by it. If they have coaches who are female, that changes the whole ballgame. It really does.

Steve: We fully agree. I've recently, in the last few weeks, because I have a large amount of money to distribute to my leagues, I've engaged, all my league directors and we have a pretty good number of our lead directors are female. That's another thing that we're

making an emphasis on, making sure that our leadership roles, not just the coaches that touch the athletes directly, but in our leadership positions, that we have a good representation of gender. They've all said the same thing to me, it's a "Steve, the real key is the coach. We've got to, that's the game changer for us. If we can increase our female coaches, we'll increase our female athletes."

Kristin: As a lifelong athlete, yes, I'm, way, way older than youth who you serve. But I will tell you that there are certain coaches that I had in my life that changed my life. So the organization can only change a life when there's a bridge, who is a human and a human to human relationship forms and that coach truly does change lives.

Steve: Fully agree and we see it everyday at NICA. I hear it from the parents. I was talking to a mom a few weeks ago who has two children in the Arizona League and she was calling me about her coach and just had nothing but incredibly positive, good things to say and how, again life changing sounds pretty extreme, but that's generally what parents talk about when they talk about their coaches and their children. It's life changing.

Kristin: As a mother of a, I have a middle schooler and a high schooler. Obviously I live in an area where this is a defining part of what we do here in Durango with mountain biking. But I will tell you that my daughter actually was more interested in the ball and bat sports side until she got a DEVO coach. That's our local program, a female DEVO coach and literally now she's all about it. She's literally at a mountain bike camp right now and she's recruiting friends. I mean eighth grade is hard enough as it is, just I'm so happy that she has these mentors and I'm also excited for the cycling community. I really am because ultimately what you're going to be doing, I think by being inclusive and widening the portal is you're going to be creating more of a, I think, just a louder voice, a louder presence of a lot of different looking people, then maybe we see right now in the core bicycle community, right?

Kristin: There are a ton of people who want to raise their hands and belong to cycling and you're giving them a way to do that. That's super authentic because it comes from their childhood. I mean, think about it, everybody, not everybody, but a lot of people fall in love with the bicycle when they're super young and it becomes such an important part of their development. With all of the screens, et cetera that we're battling right now, that has gone away and we're seeing it in some industry numbers for sure. What I feel like you're doing here and your sponsors are helping you do is bring that back and not only bring it back for children, but bring it back for lifelong cyclists.

Steve: Yeah, and that's what we see too, is it's interesting there are many parents who have stepped away from their childhood of cycling, but because their children have now gotten involved with NICA, they start cycling again. They get interested. So it's great. It's not just the 12 to 18 year old, parents are being brought back to it because their children get interested.

Kristin: That's awesome. Is there anything that I might have forgotten as we look to wrap up here, because obviously, this is a 10 year old organization. You have a lot of spurs to this organization to tend to. I know that you're going to be putting finite focus on a few of those for short, mid and longterm goals. Anything that you would like to share just in terms

of the direction that you hope to take? Like what success might look like in 18 months, for example?

Steve: One of the things, let me speak about a couple of the challenges first and then I'll speak up success. Any nonprofit organization always struggles with fiscal sustainability. We do have some revenue that's generated, but we really do depend very heavily on donations and sponsorships. Because of that, that creates a challenge. We have all this pent up demand to roll out new leagues and get more kids on bikes. But you can't just wave a wand and it happens. You need the staff, you need the people power to do the work and to create the coach training and do all the things that we do. So that challenge is also an opportunity because as I mentioned earlier, we have such a wide community here. It's not just people from the cycling industry whose kids are involved. It's everybody from across the US. The whole spectrum.

Steve: I need to figure out how to reach those people. So success is when rather than my support mostly coming from the cycling industry, that most of my support actually comes from the general population. When I say mine, I mean NICA support, not as an individual.

Steve: The other part of success is that as we continue to grow that we never stop growing, that we continue to reach out further and further and deeper and deeper into our communities. Have a more diverse population, have a larger number. I would love to see a hundred thousand kids participating in NICA Leagues. I'd love to see a million kids participating in NICA Leagues. I love to see 10 million people who just go out and ride their bike. I think that can happen. So success for me, it's a never-ending goal but basically is the more people we can get out side and active on a bike, part of the community, that's success. To measure that what you do is you look at where you are and where you are five years from now.

Steve: If we do that in a sustainable way and we keep those people as we engage them as alumni and continue to bring people back into the programs as alumni, that will also be a gauge of success. What kind of support we're seeing as we see changes in law, as we see changes in attitude about public lands, those are also successes because it means that the student athletes who started off doing trail maintenance in Illinois, but who would now happen to be local congressmen and women in their state house, and they understand the value of the venue, they're going to advocate for it.

Steve: So those are all measures of success. That sound pretty lofty, but interestingly enough, they're not. They're very real because we have 19,000 student athletes that are going to grow up and they're going to take jobs and they're going to do things and NICA is a big part of their memory for them and it's changing their life right now, so they're going to take the bull by the horns and make it happen.

Kristin: That is super exciting to think about and honestly, I was delighted to be able to interview you for this podcast because of the background that you have. I think mostly in climbing and Outward Bound and just personally being involved in that side of the outdoor, active lifestyle industries, I just was so excited to see your vision and what got you excited about NICA. You've done an amazing job getting us all pretty amped here today. So I want to say thanks for your time and just know we are cheering you on and best of luck as you lead this awesome organization forward.

Steve: Thank you. Don't hesitate to find us. We're everywhere. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, website. Find us.

Kristin: All right. Thank you so much, Steve.

Steve: Thank you.