



channel mastery

152: Steve Matous, NICA

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Kristin: Welcome back everybody, to episode 152 of the Channel Mastery Podcast. Kristin Carpenter here, your host and the CEO and founder of Verde Brand Communications. And I am here to re-introduce Steve Matous to you, who is the president of NICA. We last had Steve on in August of 2019, before the shock and awe that we all just lived through. And he's coming back on to join us today, to talk about what it's been like for him to go through a pandemic in his first 18 months on the job, with one of the fastest growing, I think facets of cycling, before COVID and still even through COVID. So welcome to the show, I cannot wait to share your insights with our audience here today.

Steve: Thanks Kristin. Yeah, it's good to be back. And I can't believe it's been a year since we last spoke.

Kristin: I know. And you were really kind of...You even said, I think in the interview, that you're drinking from the fire hose, right?

Steve: Absolutely.

Kristin: So you've probably had a couple months like, "Okay, I'm in this new job." And then all of a sudden the pandemic starts to ramp up. So let's get caught up. Tell us about what it's been like in 2020 for you leading NICA, with your team.

Steve: Well, it's interesting, pre-pandemic and after we last spoke, things have been going great. I mean, we continue to see the salary growth, 20% year over year, that we've seen for the last three years. We continue to see growth in our gender equity program, Girls Riding Together. We see more female coaches than we've had in the past. We continue to see very good effects on emotional and mental health of our student athletes. Lot of kudos to all the volunteers, the coaches, the core staff, they're out there making it happen. But when this winter rolled around, here in the U.S., we didn't necessarily pay a whole lot of attention initially. And I know I was traveling, I went to Alabama, I went to Nevada and then I went to Texas to visit with our leagues and go to events and see how people are doing. And just make sure that I was directly in touch with our student athletes.

And the first weekend in March was when I was in Texas. And at that point we knew something wasn't right. The air was just full of stories and concern and people were

starting to wonder, what the shoe was going to fall next or what might happen. And I know when I traveled back from the Texas event, I was wondering and thought, "Huh, I've got a lot more work I need to do, but I'm not quite sure if I should book flights. What should I do here?" And then the whole world, the bottom just dropped out. Things shut down pretty rapidly. Everybody hoarded toilet paper, whatever it was they were interested in. But from a management perspective of a national organization that's focused on kids and is primarily run by volunteers, my immediate concern was, "What happens to the kids? What happens if we can not move forward? What happens to us organizationally? Are we going to still have support? Are we still going to be able to bring in revenue to continue to employ our employees?"

I really felt like I had been pushed off a cliff and I was airborne. And I really didn't know whether it was going to be a soft landing, a hard landing or how long it was going to take to land. And I'm sure I'm describing the same thing that everyone is feeling in that timeframe in March. But for us, it really caused us to look inwardly very quickly and say, "Okay, what do we need to do?" First thing that I did, and my team did, was reach out to our partners, in the cycling industry and everywhere else. And was just very frank and said, "Here's what's happening. Here's our challenges. We just need to know, are you able and willing to continue to support us? And if you are, that'll guide our judgment as to how we budget and how we cut expenses. And whether or not we continue to employ people. How we continue our outreach to the student athletes."

And I can tell you that almost 99% of the partners and sponsors from the cycling industry said, "Absolutely, we're going to stay with you." And some of them even stepped up and said, "You know what? We're going to release the restrictions we have on this fund. Use it for what you need to do." And others stepped up and said, "Hey Steve, we're capable, so we're going to give you next year's money, as well as this year's money. And go for it, do what you need to do." So we had this overwhelming response, whether it was an independent bike dealer or a large corporation or a foundation. People said, "Yep, NICA's important. We've got to keep this thing alive. We've got to keep it going."

And then the next step is, okay well, how do you do that? Public health departments all around the country have different ideas. And every county has a different idea within a state. And some people unfortunately decided to make this more of a political issue. So what that did was, as a national organization, it meant we had 30 states that we operate in. And we literally had 30 different guidelines, as well as the national guidelines from CDC, as well as the international guidelines from WHO. And then we had to coordinate with the local entities as well. What are we allowed to do? What should we do? What's proper. And as one of my staff said to me, "Just because you can doesn't mean you should." So we really did a lot of internal reflections, "Is this appropriate? Are we endangering the student coaches health? How can we do this in a way that's safe?"

Well, what we've learned over the last few months, and then this fall, put into action. So our spring leagues basically just shut down. That was it, nothing happened. Team practices were stopped. Everything closed up. But during the summer and onto the fall, we realized that there were ways to do this safely. We're outdoors, number one. It's easy to stay socially distanced. It's very easy to require a mask to be on your face.

Although we do allow kids to pull them off when they're riding, put them back up when they're not. So, "Foot down, mask up," is what we say. And then things like hand sanitation, no podiums, no spectators, operate in small pods.

So we're already team oriented, right? Some of the larger teams have lots of people. But basically what we said is, "Hey, break down into pods of 10. Two coaches, eight kids, keep that as your personal pod. Do your team practicing, come to the events that way, leave that way." So we did all these things, put all these things in place. And then based on what was available to us, Utah had the fewest restrictions. We literally ran 17 full race weekend events. I was at the Utah state championship a few weeks ago, 1,900 students competed. Incredible. And guess what? No one got COVID. We have no incidences of COVID across our NICA leagues, under this pandemic. We have had people that have the disease, but they didn't get it from us. And we know that very clearly because it's really easy for us to contact trace. Anyone that participates is registered. Anyone that comes to a race weekend event is registered. So we know who's there and we know what's happening with them. So I feel really, really proud of the efforts that everyone has made.

The other thing that we did, a lot of our events didn't look the same. Apart from Utah, we did a lot of time trials. Where intact teams would show up, the kids would go off one minute apart. When they were done, they'd leave. No parental spectators allowed, no podiums, no close contact. Sounds a little harsh, but I can tell you because I went to several of these, sheer joy, athletes, students, parents. The parents would come drop the kids off, but they would always thank the league personnel. They would say, "Oh, we're so happy you're doing this." Kids are smiling and laughing and they're having a great time. Now, it was just an incredible, what we were able to do this fall.

Kristin:

I love to hear that, it's so heartening. And I know obviously we're recording this in the middle of November. So we're going into a new zone here. The election's over, obviously we're seeing a spike and we have new things coming down the pike. But really the bike boom is not going anywhere. And I love that you're creating opportunity for high schoolers. Because I mean, I'm a mother of a couple of those, going through the pandemic with high schoolers at home is... Any kind of outlet, anything they can tether themselves to, away from video games and away from what they're doing when they're home, trying to be on school without that social interaction or team, is so challenging. And so I'm right there with the other parents saying, thank you for keeping on with this and for keeping it possible. And we actually had locally here, my daughter was able to do most of her fall. We had to cancel because of spikes about two weeks ago, so we're a little bit early.

But point being is, I'm so glad that you were able to pivot and create safe experiences, because ultimately, even though, like you said, when you were in mid-air and you didn't know what the landing was going to be like or if you were going to stick it, we don't know what the horizon line is even still. Even with that vaccine announcement on Monday of this week, even with the election being over, still there's so much uncertainty. But you've given us a proven blueprint of sorts. We know we can start somewhere and that people can still belong to this community, and that is so huge in and of itself.

So I wanted to talk about a couple of other things before we get into more pivots that can inspire other people listening to Channel Mastery that you orchestrated or worked within this past season. You have always been about welcoming in people who maybe are not part of the core cycling community. Okay? So we've seen a huge number of newcomers to cycling, and I would love to have you talk about how NICA has either bridged or helped on the local community level, I guess just kind of help people understand how to work with or how to engage with this maybe non-corp and newcomer to the cycling world. Because that's been who NICA has been, and that's why it's such a valuable portal for the cycling community. So if you could comment on that, that would be amazing.

Steve:
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Yeah. It is. It's all about the local community. You know, NICA as a national organization is a movement and has a mission, but it all happens locally at the team and league level. And our leagues and our teams are made up of communities, and those communities are unique across the country. They're not all the same. Oakland, California and Jersey City, New Jersey, they have different cultures, different people, different thoughts, but that's why it works is because we are so local and focused locally.

And what we've seen over the years since our beginnings is that many of the people that have become involved with NICA as an organization is because we are so open and welcoming. Nobody sits on the bench. This is not a sport where you get cut. There's not a sport where you only participate for a few minutes and sit on the bench and watch somebody else. Everyone is challenged. Everyone practices. Everyone does this stuff together. Whether you choose to race or not on a race weekend, that's up to you. But 85% of the students do that. But everyone gets to, whether it's a state championship or just the local weekend event, everyone gets to participate. You don't qualify, you don't get cut.

And because of that, it's always been so welcoming to families. I've heard more stories than I can even remember from parents who said, "You know what? This really brought me closer my kids, because we could do this together." And many parents volunteer as coaches. Many parents become involved as ride leaders. Many parents devote time as a volunteer to set up the course or be course marshalls. Probably about two thirds of our volunteers are parents that have students in the leagues. And so, again, because of that, there's this real community feel. And it's again, very local.

So when people started coming to cycling either for the first time or for the first time in 20 years under the pandemic, they saw us as something they could belong to and participate in and feel good about because their neighbors are doing it, their friends are doing. And maybe Johnny and Susie couldn't do whatever the high school sport was, be it lacrosse, football, volleyball, golf, because all those things were shut down, but they could still get on their bike. They could still be outside. They could still be active. And then guess what? Here's a group that you could join. Here's some of your peers that you can go out and have fun with. Here's some mentors that are well-trained and experienced in working with middle school and high school children, or I should say young adults. And because of that, it's a very easy transition for most people.

And what happens then as well, is that the community as a whole says, "How do we engage more? How do we do more of this?" And they start reaching out to the leaders of their cities, their towns, the parks and recreation departments, and saying, "You know what? This is great. We want to do more." It's real interesting.

Kristin: So let's talk about, when we were rehearsing this, you said you had quite an uptake of growth this year, even though it was COVID. You said 28% is usually the growth that you see with your athletes. So tell us about the growth you saw this year, why you see it as a success. And I think equally important to that is what you saw in terms of people wanting to volunteer.

Steve: Yeah, so we keep statistics, and it's very easy to do this because people have to register to participate. And over the last three years, '17, '18, '19, we saw an average annual growth rate of our student athletes nationwide, 28%. So if you extrapolate that number, that means that we're doubling every couple of years in size.

Under COVID, under the pandemic, remember our spring leagues got completely shut down. A couple of race weekends happened, some team practices happened, but then everything got stopped. So we really didn't know what we're coming into this summer and fall. And many parents and coaches and volunteers, as you might imagine, were hesitant. Obviously safety is the first and foremost concern for all of us of the people involved. And we made sure that we followed the rules and recommendations and guidelines that were given to us by the public health departments, by the CDC and whoever, from our civic governments who were in charge. But even with that happening, we saw a 12% growth in student participation and we saw an 18% growth in volunteers.

And what's interesting about that latter statistic is that I know as I travel and engage with our volunteers and our coaches and parents and asked them, "How is it going? What keeps you involved? What keeps you excited?" I have had many, many adults say to me, "Steve, while this is really important for the kids and I'm here to mentor and help them grow and be a good role model for them, this is really important to me and this really helps me. This helps my mental and emotional state. This helps get me outside and active. It gets me doing something that instead of with my feet up on a chair on Saturday, watching a screen, gets me outside as well."

So I think that's really important to note that under the pandemic here, the number of adults who also saw this as a venue to help them and to give them an opportunity to engage and be active and not just sit at home and not just be under quarantine.

Kristin: So that brings me so perfectly to the next point, and it's still about the bike boom. As you said, the bike boom is like more of what NICA has always done, bringing people into a community to ride as a community, and that the bike boom of COVID has brought that out more so. And you said that families and communities want to know more about how to do this. So let's talk about your take on that in terms of local communities, the IBD, the localized version of that. Because it seems like a new group of people are wanting to

join in with this community and they need direction. So talk with me about what you think about IBD's and civic leadership around that.

Steve: Well, independent bike dealers are critical to our success, and a number of our league directors, interestingly enough, have businesses where they're either direct owners or are involved with independent bike dealers. So they understand from both sides, both the importance of us to them and them to us. One of the things that independent bike dealers do is they're often the conduit. Somebody says, "I've got this 14-year-old and I don't know what to do with them. They can't play football anymore." So we'll say, "Have you thought about NICA? Have you reached out to your local team?" And so we'll get introductions that way.

And then going the other way with this tremendous growth that we have, all those people need service. All those people need help. Those people need parts, they need tires, they need mechanical corrections or fixes. They need, in order to participate in this sport, mountain biking, they need a bike. And so that's where people go, they go to the independent bike dealer.

Yes, they go to some of the large stores as well, but what we found in the pandemic is that anything that was at the lower end of the economic spectrum with regards to bicycle supplies, parts, bikes themselves disappeared so rapidly, that it's really the strengths of those bike dealers and their relationships with the manufacturers that allow them to continue to have their supply be available to them. If you go into some of the big box stores, they haven't had bikes for months. You can still get bikes from your dealers though.

Kristin: Yeah. We're seeing the same thing. That's awesome. Just what we were hoping to share. So let's talk about, there's obviously the hard goods side, there's the bikes, there's the mechanics, there's everything that goes into that component of it, but there's also access. And you obviously have had a partnership with IMBA for a long time, but talk about some of the work that's maybe a little bit modernized because of the pandemic with trails closer to home.

Steve: Certainly. Yeah. And the important thing to realize here is that our relationship with IMBA is at a national level, but we work with many of their chapters and then other trail bike organizations that are not necessarily a part of IMBA, but have the same concept and are trying to implement the same thing. But specifically with IMBA and the Trails Closer to Home program, that fits right in with what we're trying to do. We have been trying to figure out, okay, there's most of the people in the U.S. live in urban areas. A significant portion of people of color, people who are not traditionally part of the cycling community live in urban areas. So how do we access those people? Well, we access them by providing them access to trails.

If you look at Philadelphia as one example, the city of Philadelphia has over 47 miles of mountain bike trails within the city limits, but that's uncommon. Now, most areas don't have that. And so working with IMBA, we've been trying to bring trails closer to home by working with city parks, by working with school districts that have land where you could actually build a short track or a pump track, somewhere you can practice bike skills, yet not have to get in a car and drive. It is so important for us to continue our outreach to

the urban community to give them an opportunity to participate. Just like you would if you wanted to play basketball, you walk down to the local park and there's a hoop there, right? You go for it. Well, we're working with community leaders, parks and recreation departments.

I literally met with the mayor of the city of Lebanon in Indiana, excuse me, about six weeks ago, and his chief civil engineer. And we went and walked 120-acre plot of land that they have, that they're developing into a park. And specifically it's going to be a mountain bike park. And specifically they're looking to not only help NICA and the local teams, they want to make sure that their community has access to this because they know so much of what people used to participate in is not available to them, but cycling is.

And cycling, the other good thing about cycling is that you can do it as an individual. So if you are really concerned or there's an issue in your community with COVID, as we know, one of the ways to prevent the spread is to limit exposure to other people, but you can still cycle on your own. And again, as I mentioned earlier, we're encouraging our teams to stay in small pods, two coaches, eight kids as a max. And that really, really helps reduce the effects of the pandemic.

But again, going back to what you're asking about here, our emphasis and our work with IMBA is how do we work directly with the community? How do we work with those civic leaders? How do we work with the local businesses? They are critical to this as well because the businesses are ultimately going to benefit from an increased ridership. And so, by gaining their involvement, by getting them to speak as well on our behalf. I know in Wisconsin, Kathy Mock, our lead director there, did a presentation to the city of Madison on why they should repurpose some public lands into mountain bike trails and a city park.

So this kind of work is going on all the time, and it's really critical. Again, that was an event that IMBA helped us with, and they're the ones that are going to help build the trails there. So it's a great partnership. It's a win-win for everybody. And it's pretty exciting because at NICA, one of the things we do, we have what's called the Teen Trail Corp, and Teen Trail Corp, the kids volunteer with their coaches to maintain trails, occasionally to help build them. We're not trail builders, but we'll volunteer our time and our labor. And then the kids also go back to the city and county leaders and advocate and speak on behalf of these trails. They take responsibility for the environment they're using. They take responsibility for their sport. So it's just, win, win, win, win, win. It's just an incredible program and partnership.

Kristin: Nothing against the ball and bat sports that people are missing right now, but that's not something that I think happens readily with youth around those types of activities. And maybe it's because it's team-oriented. I'm not sure exactly why, but that is an important point to bring up, because I think that we're really at a precipice of change in terms of city planning and what communities need to be healthy, and actually how to attract new people into the communities. We just did a Bicycle Retailer live stream on the, I think it was the 12th of November, with Ashley Korenblat of Public Land Solutions and Outer Bike and Western Spirit, and she was basically saying this has grown from a micro to a

macro issue on the national level in terms of what civic leaders are responsible for. They're responsible to manage police and manage budget, and they're also responsible for trails in addition to their rec centers. That's a change that we've seen pretty recently. That's really going to be prioritizing, she thinks and some of her peers think, it's going to really spark the stimulus package to potentially be building out the infrastructure in communities around trails, and that's such an important thing as we've seen people just flocking to trails through the pandemic. We need more trails.

I wanted to ask you, also, I know this isn't out yet, but you mentioned to me as we were rehearsing that there's a story that will run on CBS sometime in the next few weeks. So sometimes between now and probably early December of 2020. Tell us about that because I think that's super interesting. We've seen so much press this year on the bike boom and how it's changing the way people move around cities in their communities, but tell us about the focus of this story and why you're proud to be part of it.

Steve: Yeah. CBS approached us, and this is will be a national run story, not a local one, and they were wondering why and how we do what we do because they saw us as one of the organizations that is leading the charge in the bike boom and what's going on here. There's so many people involved with our organization across 30 different states. They're actually taping a program next week with, or an interview, with Carmen Luna, the Chula Vista composite team. We have 70 student athletes as part of that team, 20 of whom are female, and over 25 coaches involved. It's very, very interesting because that's really the wave of the future. This is an urban-based team. It's a composite team which means it draws from many different schools, not just one school, and that's really the wave of the future here.

In the past, we've been school focused and school based, but as you get more into urban areas and more into the larger community population, what we find is you have to start off small. You have to start off with the one or two people that are interested from a particular school. As I think you're well aware of, Kristen, and there's no high school official mountain bike sport. It's not a varsity sport. It's generally a club sport.

For CBS to come to us and say wow, we see, the kids aren't playing football. They're not playing baseball, volleyball, golf, whatever. They're not doing these other sports, but everybody's buying a bike, and everybody's getting on the trails. Everybody's getting out there. What's going on? Tell us what you're about and what you're up to. That's really what the focus of that press is about, but it really is prompted by the fact that the industry as a whole is booming so much that it's on people's radar screen. It's not a niche anymore. I mean, people are saying wow, look at every one of my neighbors is riding the bike. Every one of these kids is on a NICA team. What's going on here?

Kristin: It's awesome. Carmen Luna, obviously a person of color, and you said there are 70 girls on that team that she's running, right?

Steve: Oh, excuse me. I may have misspoke, 20 girls out of a team of 70.

Kristin: Okay.

Steve: But still-

Kristin: That's still pretty good.

Steve: That's significant because if you look at the cycling world, not just NICA, but if you look at the cycling world as a whole, less than 20% of people that are involved in cycling are women.

Kristin: Yep. Yeah. Well for now, anyways.

Steve: Yeah.

Kristin: But I want to call out Bicycle Retailer published a story in their November 2020 issue, so this month. Youth cycling will outlive the pandemic study suggests. Basically, I wanted to pull up some article highlights. Sales of kids' bikes have boomed this year, Captain Obvious. Even better, research suggests that youth cycling will be a bright spot post pandemic. Riding has quickly become one of the most popular sports activities for kids.

In the Aspen Institute State of Play, all of the links will be in our show notes, research ranked bike riding only the 16th most popular activity before the pandemic, and now it's the third most popular behind football and flag football. Sports participation is down, and many kids said they have no interest in returning to what had been their primary sport before the pandemic. Riding stood out in the report to be a rare, bright spot. Amanda Carey, who is your VP said, we've been able to pivot more than other sports. Student athlete participation is up 12%, which we talked about.

Let's talk about a couple other pivots before we wrap up here today. One of the things you said to me was less racing and more involvement with graduates of NICA, more inspirational content, more leadership within your community, outside of racing. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Steve: Sure. Well, a couple of things. Again, most of what we do happens at the team level, and if kids don't have a focus to prepare for a weekend race event, we try and give them other focuses, like we talked about the teen trail core. We also have an adventure program, which adventure means a lot of different things to different people. Basically if you think about education experiences while on the bike, that's what we talk about when we talk about adventure. We also do bike packing in some leagues and some teams, and so we've tried to give people the opportunity to continue to be on the bike, but not in a mass start event, not in venue that potentially would be problematic given the viral pandemic that's going on.

Because we have those other options, we've seen not only increased ridership but increased new attendance. It's interesting that increased ridership, we, as I mentioned earlier, there were some teams and coaches and people who were worried, as we all were, early on in the pandemic. So they decided not to register and not to participate, but even with their stepping away, there were so many new people that came on board, we still continued to grow as an organization. Really what we see is that kids can do this

anytime, anywhere by themselves, or they can do it anytime, anywhere with a small group and with a coach.

Kristin: Yep.

Steve: Because of that, the accessibility to them to meet their needs is huge. When we provide the structure, whether it's teen trip, core adventure, an event weekend. We do a time trial or even a race as we were allowed to in Utah. They love it.

Kids don't want to just go out in the woods on their own. They like being with their peers and their friends, and even though I probably would have never admitted it when I was 16, I learned an incredible amount from the coaches that were my mentors. I know the same thing is going on for our kids today. This is so important to their health and their development. They're missing so much of this by not being able to be in person in school in other sports, and so we're still providing that for them.

Kristin: You mentioned Amanda Batty and Kate Courtney, two absolute North Star inspirational leaders in cycling to women of all ages and young girls, as two of your alumni who are stepping in to look at new ways to mentor and step up during exactly this time of need that you described.

Steve: Yeah, it was interesting. I had an opportunity to speak with Kate Courtney just last week, and she reached out to us. She is a graduate of the North Cal League, and, interestingly enough, mountain biking and cycling in general was not her original sport. She switched into it in her high school years and then just fell in love with it and then, as we all know, became the world champion two years ago and world cup leader last year and certainly one of our highest Olympic hopefuls. The reason she reached out was she said, "You know, Steve, this has done so much for me as a person. This has made me who I am today. I want to give back. I want to be a mentor. I want to help support the student athletes that are coming up through the leagues today. How can we work together? What can I do?"

She did a program with Amanda Carey, the VP that you mentioned earlier or VP of programs, and Amanda herself is a former pro racer, but it's just so interesting. Not everyone has that attitude, right? I just love it when you see these people who are still on the world stage, who are very focused preparing for the Olympics, yet they're taking the time and saying you know what? This was very significant for me. This changed my life. How do I give back? What do I do? I mean, this is very impressive.

Kristin: It is, and she continues to impress me. I do have to say, I am just, I'm so grateful since we last connected. My daughter has started NICA this fall, and even though we weren't able to race, she got a lot out of it. It was literally one of the only social interactions she had with her social circle, and the coaches were remarkable.

Steve: Good .

Kristin: I just want to say from a personal perspective, the organization really helped our family

out, and I just am so excited about everything that you have, whether it's get more girls on bikes, whether it's what you're doing to grow, open the portal for more people of all backgrounds and socio demographics. Everybody is welcome at NICA, And I love the way the organization is run. I just think it's such an important part of our healing going forward. So thank you for everything you and your team are doing over there.

Steve: Thanks, Kristin. On behalf of all the leagues and all the volunteers, thank you for that. They're the ones that do the work. I just talk.

Kristin: Yeah. Well, hats off to all of you is what I'd like to say. So I can't wait to have you back. I guess in about maybe six or seven months as we get through the winter, I'd sure love to find out where things are at that time because hopefully we'll be in a much better place and ready to be back in person again on some level.

Steve: That'd be great. It'd actually be fun to do one of these at a team practice or a league event.

Kristin: Oh, I agree. I agree. I actually can hopefully do that with my daughter in tow.

Steve: Yeah.

Kristin: Awesome.

Steve: That's be wonderful.

Kristin: All right. Thank you so much, Steve. We'll catch you in a little bit.

Steve: Thanks, Kristin.