



**Episode #145:**

**Susan Stout (Own Beat Athlete) on Helping Athletic Coaches Understand Differently Wired Kids**

February 19, 2019

Debbie: Hello Susan, welcome to the podcast.

Susan: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Debbie: I know, you are a member of the Tilt community and you emailed me uh, I don't know, a long time ago planting the seed that you were developing what we're going to be talking about today. And you've now launched your program and so I'm excited to share the really interesting work that you're doing with with the rest of the Tilt tribe. But before we get into that and learn more about your work, can you just introduce us to who you are and a little bit about your personal why?

Susan: Sure. I come to this through, I think as a lot of people do, through a lot of, a number of paths in my life that at points I was thinking, how are these fitting together? And now they've all really converged into something that is near and dear to my heart and that I'm really excited about. I started off, professionally I started off as a teacher and as a swim coach. I had been a pretty serious swimmer and that I often talk about that as the best job that I ever had. I was just so locked in, I would lose all track of time and just loved, you know, forming the relationships with the kids and the parents. And the thing that I liked the best about it that really transfers into the work that I'm doing now is you, you really start with kids who are young and watch them grow until they're older.

And I didn't feel the same way about teaching. So I did that for a short time. And, and when I was teaching I had to stop coaching as well. And after that I got a masters in education and worked for some educational nonprofits and that sort of directed my interest towards the legal areas of education. So I sort of late in the game, I went to law school and I became a litigator and you can see where my paths are all over the place. But as, as a litigator, I, I worked with kids on a pro bono basis. I represented kids and families whose, um, when the students were not getting the special education services to which they were entitled in the DC public schools, which is a large number of kids. And that really kept me excited and grounded in the field of kids and education and families.

And I'm, I'm still an attorney. I work now with the county here. But I have begun my Own Beat Athlete project, which, you know, really pulls together a lot of those interests. And is, was sparked by becoming the, the parent of a differently wired child who also happens to be a very excited and avid athlete. But I have watched him and others struggle to find their way in a lot of the programs, you know, whether it's a rec program and the kids are there to have fun or whether it's a higher level program and there's, there are more demands on time and executive functioning and commitment. And I've watched both the effects on the athletes, I've watched the coaches struggle with it. And as a parent, I've you know, dealt with it at, at home and trying to make that, uh, the wonderful positive experience that sports really can and should be.

Especially for a lot of these kids, it's really important. And not have it be one more place where they feel like they're frustrated and not fitting in and not able to make it work. So I recognized sort of the, the reasoning behind Own Beat Athlete is I, I realized that a lot of this starts with the coaches and with coaches' information. I look back at myself when I was a coach and I was, you know, I, this, I was all in. I loved it. I had these long relationships with families. I didn't know any of this. I knew the words ADHD, I knew dyslexia, but I didn't know what it meant. And I, I didn't, I don't, I now realize I didn't coach to it very well. And had I had that information, um, I would have been much more effective I think with those kids and those families.

So that's where I am today is trying to, to get that word out and educate really the coaches and my other audiences are, are the families who, I think a lot of that, what I talk about in my work is also helpful, very similar to the advice for parents and to know how to, for a lot of the athletes themselves to start to recognize. Because I work, I talk both about the things that are challenging, but the other part of my message is, these kids are fabulous assets to any program. And it's, you know, up to the coach to be able to bring those things out. But it also really instills confidence in the kids to see, you know, I've got profiles of, you know, athletes who have been very successful, but just for any kid to realize, hey, you know, I have something special to bring to this program. It's not just a matter of making me fit into this box.

Debbie: Exactly. Well tell us a little bit more about Own Beat Athlete and you know, what you currently offer for coaches. And maybe, I don't know if you have a master plan, like you know, where do you see it kind of evolving into? I, you know, you just recently launched, I know the website, I'll make sure to share on the show notes so people can check it out. It's really well designed and it's just great, like it has a great energy about it. So tell us more about what you're hoping to do through Own Beat Athlete and what you currently offer.

Susan: Okay. Own Beat Athlete right now, the website is the vehicle. Um, I have intermediate plans and I have huge dreams and, well start with where I am now, which is the website is designed for coaches I'd say, and parents and athletes. But primary, the primary audience is coaches to be able to go and at a pretty quick glance, learn what they need to know to recognize some of these athletes. That you know, I know you talk in your book and I talk a lot about how these differences are invisible and coaches often don't know. And so my first goal with the website is awareness. You know, to say look, this is, this is a thing, this is what it looks like, it can look like and for them to be able to educate themselves about both what it looks like and then tools for, okay, what can I do?

What are some quick tips that I can learn? I mean these coaches, most of them don't have a ton of time. They're very immersed in their coaching. This is relationship building and aspects of kids differences in mental health are much more in the conversations today, but it's still not the core of what they're trying to figure out for their program. So I want them to be able to go on and they can get, you know, some concise bullets. Right now I focus on ADHD, learning differences and anxiety as sort of three buckets. Although as you know, they

overlap and it's not necessarily really to target, you know, figure out which one it is. You're not trying to diagnose, but say these are some of the things that I, that I'm seeing in my kids. And then some real concrete tools. I call it the coaches' toolkit.

You know, there are 11 tips, 11 facts about each of those differences and then 11 tips. What can I do? You know, I can, you know, instead of talking for 10 minutes and then wondering why the kid doesn't remember the play that I just told him, I can recognize that he's not going to remember things I say, I need to write it down. Um, you know, instead of talk, you know, if a kid is having difficulty paying attention, instead of reprimanding him, throwing him out, maybe I can let him sit on an exercise ball or talk to him later. So really concrete things that the coaches can do right away. Um, I, but I also do have up there, because I think there is an audience in a lot of the coaches and I think also helpful to the parents and the athletes, there's a blog section where I go a little deeper. And one approach that I've taken that I think works well with coaches, 'cause what I'm trying to do is get them to really relate, what I've found is that the coaches who have been told they have, you know, one or more kids who are differently wired will engage a little more.

They're very excited about it. Others are not so sure because they don't know yet. And so what I'm trying to do is make it very relatable to things they've seen. And I've got, you know, one blog section that has letters to coaches written from a kid's perspective. So the kid, you know, might be saying, look all day long I've been felt like I was getting told you're doing this wrong, you're doing that wrong, you're messing up, you know. And the kid arrives to afternoon practice completely frustrated and one little thing sets him off, you know, for the coach to have the knowledge, the awareness to say, okay, the best thing to do is not to jump on this kid right now, to think about where it came from. But coming from the kid's voice, like this is what I need, this is what could be helpful.

Um, I also really highlight up there, there's one section called 'what's behind the behavior' and that again is pretty quick bullets for the coach to be able to see you know, I see this kid, I'm angry, I'm taking it personally. You know, I feel like the kid is just misbehaving. Or he can't ever remember what I said. Or he's never listening. To take a pause and say wait a minute, this is a biological difference. I mean that's one thing that I, I hit pretty hard. It's not something they can improve just by trying a little harder. And these are some things that you can do. So I start out with, with that approach. But also the next section is the OBA superpowers as I call them. Like this is why you don't want to help these kids just, you know, out of kindness or just to make your job easier, to make the behavior easier, but because of what they can bring.

And this is one thing, I think the first time that I reached out to you was when I was just was reading your book and it resonated so much with my view that we really need to change how we're looking at these kids. Not as kids that we're trying to mould into a way that will make it easier for us to parent or to have them at our practice. But to really say, wait a minute. The world needs to take advantage of these different ways of thinking and different strengths and different skills. So through the superpowers section, you know, they can see

again really sort of bulleted approach that some of these athletes can hyper-focus you know, like no one else. So they're in a game, everyone else is losing it and they can really keep doing what they need to do.

They have a ton of energy, they're resourceful. And then I've put up, because I think a lot of times coaches and athletes can relate to this, I've got videos on the site of some Olympic and professional athletes who have talked on, you know, in videos about their ADHD, their dyslexia, the struggles that came with that, their anxiety and coaches that have helped them through or even, you know, the things that they see as strengths. There's one Olympic rower, I just love it. He's like, you know, a boat is a whole team and it has, you know, everyone has a different skill and a different approach and everyone is needed in that boat equally. So, you know, my, my skill was I was always bringing the energy and the, you know, the focus. So I really love that visual of it, it's how I see the whole site is showing coaches that every kid that they have has strengths and weaknesses and there are some really concrete things you can do to help these kids shine and enjoy what they're doing and reach their potential.

Debbie: What's the outreach like in terms of connecting with coaches? I'm, as I'm listening, I'm wondering a) do coaches even know that they need this information and b) how willing are they to, like are they seeking it out themselves or do you have a plan for outreach?

Susan: Yes. Well, and that gets to the next part of your question. Sort of where I'm going to go from the website. I think most of them don't know. I think that is, that is the biggest hurdle and also the biggest opportunity to make a real change is that they don't know. Because they don't see it in the kids. They might see a kid just like I did when I was coaching. Oh, why is that kid always, you know, banging on the lane line and not listening to me and asks me ten seconds later what I said, why won't he just listen? And now with my, the information and experience that I have as a parent I can say oh, okay, well maybe if instead of talking to them while they're in the water, we can all get out and walk around the deck and you know, do something different.

And, and I guess just a side point on that, I think the coaches, they don't know, let me finish this up. They don't know that they need it and therefore my approach is to tell them why they know. I am working both to reach out to individual coaches and also coaches are required to do a lot of training often to you know to get certified. At the rec league level it might be, you know they pull all the coaches in on one Saturday and train them in a large number of things. At a higher level at the USS Level and certainly at a collegiate or national level, the coaches do a lot of training and they might do it through an organizational body or other groups. And so I'm, my approach is to do outreach to let those groups, the people who are providing the training at the first level understand why this is important and to include it.

And right now I am, I'm also directing, you know, individual coaches to my website. But my, my plan in the long term is to have other vehicles to get that training out. Since there's only one me, I am planning to have a video approach, um, which I think may be the most useful for a lot of these programs. You know,

if I can send them a video and they can add that in as 10, 20 minutes into their training program, at least the coaches have the awareness and then the ones, you know, they can take it back and dig into the more detailed information on the website. So, so that's sort of my shorter term. I'm also looking to get some more athletes involved, some of the athletes who have been successful with this and profile them and hopefully include some of their success stories.

Because I think a lot of times you see the coaches don't know and if you can bring it down to their sport or to what they're seeing day to day, then it will really resonate. You know and I think another avenue that I've had a lot of success with so far is with parents because the, the parents are the ones who do know. And so I've had a lot of parents say to me, this is helpful to me to be able to inform my son's coach or my daughter's coach and and it, and it's helpful especially in what can be sort of an awkward situation for a parent. Especially as the kids get older, you don't want to be, or your kid doesn't want you to be there having a half hour conversation with your coach about what they can and cannot do or what might help them or what they're uncomfortable with or why they're so great. So to be able to email the coach, and I've had a number of parents do this, and say this is something about my kid, this might be helpful, and then really be able to step back and let the coach have the information without the parent feeling overly involved.

Debbie: Yeah, I would think that would be really important. That was one of my questions about parents disclosing. I think that's something most listeners have weighed at one point or another. Who do I tell? Maybe the teacher needs to know, maybe the after school activity person doesn't need to know or you know, the camp counselor, whatever. Um, and I think there's always that concern about maybe putting a bullseye on your kid's back if you, if you talk about it too much. So I love this idea that, you know, they don't have to be the ones just, you know, sharing all this deep information and going into that level of detail, but just saying this is going on and here's a great resource you might want to check out.

Susan: Yes. And, and you know, that comes from my personal experience too. I would always ask, you know my son, do you want me to tell? Should you, what should we do? And sort of made that his choice because it was his, it is his information. And that's changed a little bit over time and, and it might vary by situation. But it is also, even if the kid is resistant, you know himself maybe as a, as a high school student or a, you know, to having that conversation and putting that out there, you can't expect a coach to be understanding and as able to deal with it if you don't let them know. So it's not an easy, that that is not an easy, it's a tricky balance to strike. And one that I think that this website I hope can also help parents to have those conversations with their kids to say, you know, I know you don't want to be that kid or the kid who the coach is doing something special for, but here are some pros and cons.

These are some of the things that your coach might be able to do. I mean, I think one thing that I emphasize in my bullets for coaches is a lot of this behavior that you're seeing, it's not directed at you. It's not about you. The kid is frustrated and you know, doesn't have the coping skills to say that in the right way. So to show the kid, you know, if your coach has this information and is able to work with you

and let you move or write things down or then your experience will change. And I think sometimes that can help the kids to appreciate that there's a different reason for, for letting the coach know. And I, and another thing that, that I emphasize, you know, for the athletes and also for the coaches, is you know, these coaching tools, first of all there, they're helpful to any kid.

A lot of the emphasis on the site is you don't want to say, okay, well for Johnny we're writing this down. You know, we're just writing it down. We're just putting the work out on a big board up at the front of the, you know, front of the gym so that everyone can see it. But there are instances where the coach may make an accommodation or the kid might act out in a certain way and the coach might take a pause and say okay I'm not going to deal with that right now, I'm going to wait until things have cooled off. Or I'm going to, you know, talk about it later when these kids can really be insightful about it. And I think coaches worry a lot about treating different kids differently. And in a lot of athletic programs traditionally it's like you know here are the rules and you gotta be with the program. And I, I want coaches to understand that kids get it, the other kids get it. And if it's done skillfully, then it's just another way of understanding every kid, every kid is different and learning what the best ways are to bring out the best in each of them. So I think the more we can move towards that and the less coaches feel that they have to treat every single kid in the exact same way is helpful.

Debbie: Right. You know, as we're talking, I'm thinking about that meme, which I wrote about in my book and it still kind of gets me a little annoyed, that went around a few years ago. I'm going to just share it and I'm sure you are very familiar with it. Your child's success or lack of success in sports does not indicate what kind of parent you are. But having an athlete that is coachable, respectful, a great teammate, mentally tough, resilient and tries their best is a direct reflection of your parenting.

Susan: You know what, I have never seen that but uh.

Debbie: Oh gosh, yeah, that I still remember the morning that came through my Facebook newsfeed and I was not a happy mama. But that leads me into the question, you know, what are, I guess, what are some of the struggles that you see, more common struggles, that differently wired kids might have in successfully participating in sports and some of those barriers to to true understanding? I mean you, you just talked about the coaches need to have that authority. Like there is a, there are dynamics that are set up and so it seems like there'd be lots of potential trouble areas here. What are some of the most common ones?

Susan: A lot of the most common ones are ones that, I mean it's, it's all going to sound very familiar to parents with just the same struggles that these kids have in getting through the day, you know in school, at home. I mean I think the ones that are very commonly understood by coaches and by the uninitiated in the world are, they might be restless, they might be impulsive, they might talk back. But the pieces that they're often missing I think are the emotional pieces, the highly sensitive, or the kid who might be quietly distracted or disorganized. You know, why do you never have the right uniform? Why are your shorts at home when your, you know, shirt is here, I'm putting you on the bench.

Another one is inconsistency in ability and performance. And in saying that, I don't necessarily mean sports performance, but sort of, you know, one day the kid is able to remember what you said and follow the directions and the next day they can't. And so then to the coach, it looks like this kid isn't trying, he could do it yesterday, he must just not be wanting to do that today. Another that comes up a lot in, in sports is difficulty with sort of setting goals and long term planning and then following through. So the kid might say, oh, I really want to make it to nationals. But then to set those daily goals and follow through that requires a lot of the executive functioning.

Um, anxiety and overwhelm is another one that, you know, it comes out in ways that look like anger or looks like, you know, shut down or it doesn't, it's not the kid coming up and saying, oh, I'm really nervous. I'm really nervous. We've got a big game today. It's the kid who's screaming at you about something totally unrelated. And it takes peeling off the layers to figure out that they're anxious because they're starting for the first time. So what I'm hoping to do is unlock some of that information so that the coach can then deal with it in a way that's more helpful. And, and those are some of the things that I think are not as easily obvious results of the different wiring.

Debbie: Well, you know, you're a lifelong athlete and this is kind of your area of passion. Tell us what you see as being the biggest benefits for that marriage of sports and differently wired kids. And, and just as a caveat, I know that not every kid is an athlete and you know, organized sports is not a part of my child's life. And so it's not necessary. But what do you see the benefits being for differently wired kids participating in, in athletics?

Susan: Well, I'm glad you said that because I, as I talk about these, only the first one that I see, the sort of the exercise piece that is really great for everybody, you know, for all kids. So I think about how I feel when I get up and go outside, take a walk in the middle of the day at my desk. Um, you know, that's 10 times, you know, for some of these kids. But a lot of the benefit of sports are also found and I think a lot of these, this information and these tools can be the same as you know, if you're in scouts or if you're in theater or doing something else after school where just the benefits of being in, in a group and doing something outside of the classroom. So I think a lot of this does transfer. But you know for all kids, I think the benefits of sports are, you know, the exercise, the social skills, the camaraderie.

I mean I think back on my experience, I've, I have friends now who I haven't seen in, you know, probably 25 years and if I picked up the phone I would have a conversation with them like it was yesterday from the bonds that we formed. But I think even specifically why it's even more important for these kids is that a lot of them struggle in the school relationship, in other context to form social relationships, social skills in groups. And so having a shared goal, a shared interest, can make that a lot easier. And if you have a skilled coach, I mean this is really another place where I'm going with with OBA is if you have a skilled coach, the involvement of that adult, especially as the kids get older and you're no longer having play dates that are facilitated by a number of thoughtful moms.

Um, having the adult presence there when you're sort of ageing out of other supervised relationships can be really helpful and can also provide the kids with sort of that adult non-parent mentor that can be so important in the teenage years when maybe the parent is the very last person that the kid wants to listen to. I remember days, you know, if my coach told me that I had had a good practice, I was on cloud nine and that influence can be really strong and really positive if it's done in the right way.

Debbie: So, okay. So for parents who are listening to this and their kids are involved in sports, what can they do in their homes and their families to set up their kids to be able to handle tricky situations that might come up with their coaches? Like, how to learn how to be a better advocate for themselves so it's not the parent stepping in, but so the kid understands what they need and how to ask for it.

Susan: Right. What I, what I always say first is that the best thing that a sports parent can do is listen. And that's the good, the bad, the win or lose. I mean a lot of times it's just silence for awhile. You know, just letting the kid, a lot of those emotions stay in for the kid, especially for differently wired kids who are trying so hard to, to toe the line, and it can explode afterwards whether it's good or bad. Um, and they really need to get that out. But after, um, after that passes the parent can be a really good sounding board for talking through some different scenarios and solutions for handling a situation, you know, just like with, with anything outside of sports. Um, and that's another thing that I didn't mention about the website is there are some tools for communicating with the coach. I think thinking through those, the questions that I suggest that coaches might want to ask parents, I think for the parents to think through them too in advance and sort of think about what might be difficult, where some of the hot buttons going to be.

But I think a really key role for parents in addition to providing a safe space and really listening so that the parents can know the difference between their, and no one knows the kid like the parents. So you know, listen to their gut and really know is this a situation, you know, my kid is frustrated, is this their sort of normal reaction to something that's difficult or is this situation becoming unhealthy and something that I need to step into? Um, but another key role, short of short of that is often to prop the athlete up. I mean conveying confidence in the athlete, in the kid, can be preventative as well as after the tough situation. So you're saying you can do this. I mean it's a lot like what I offer for coaches about an anxious kid is, you know, you can do this.

Let's think of some, through some of the strategies. So some of the things that, that might be difficult. How can we handle this? You know, what can you think through? What strategies can you put in place? Um, but really to focus on the positives and all of the, and in saying that, I don't mean in a difficult situation. Like that, I know that that's sometimes a tough ask, but really to share at the get go, all of that, look, you know, you, these are the things that might be difficult, but these are the real strengths that you bring to the program. So don't go in there, you know, hanging your head, have the kids watch the videos of the professional Olympic athletes who they talk very frankly about their struggles, but also about how they help their teammates. And to really start out from that position so that when something does come up, it's not the end of the world and it's not, I have

no value to this team. It's, this was difficult. How can we handle this differently in the future? So, so it sort of to start from the same place that I do with the coaches, here are the things that might be challenges, but here are the reasons why you're, you are a really valuable asset to this team or to this situation.

Debbie: This is such great work. I just want to congratulate you on it. And um, I'm really just excited. I mean, since I launched Tilt, I've, you know, periodically gotten emails from parents who, who have been talking about this specific thing, you know, this marriage between being differently wired but also being a highly gifted athlete and how difficult that can be. Uh, because there is such a lack of understanding. So I'm just really excited that you're making this available. And, um, before we go, is there anything else that you want to share and then of course, please tell our listeners where they can connect with you and learn more.

Susan: Sure. One thing that I do want to follow up on that I just passed over real quickly is parents will know, you know, I think when that's, when the situation becomes something that, where they really do need to step in. But watching for things I say, I don't think this is necessarily news to parents but it, it could be for, for coaches or people who are new to maybe a new level of the sport, you know, watching for any resistance to going to practice or the games or mood changes or you know, of course tears and stomach aches and all those things. Because I don't want to pretend that this is easy, that you're just going to send your coach this, this information and it's all going to be great. It can, like school and, and all things that these kids encounter in life, they, they have a different experience and it can be a challenge.

So I don't want to diminish that, but I think that, um, I am really excited too about being able to, um, to tap into these kids' strengths and really involve them in, um, in sports in a positive way. I think it's exciting and I, you know, I say I have big dreams and I understand, I understand the sports world, you know well enough to know that it's not gonna change overnight. And I'm not going to send this out to all the coaches and they're gonna say, oh yeah, you're totally right. And so I am really gearing up to get the word out there and I'm, I'm hoping to, to make a tilt, to help make a shift.

Debbie: Well, hopefully this episode will help expand awareness of your work and let listeners know, um, where we can connect with you online.

Susan: The best way right now is, it's ownbeatathlete.com and the most helpful thing to do is to subscribe. And I don't email very often. I have a blog that I send out once every two or three weeks. And with that, I always try to send, you know, some other helpful piece of information or highlight something that coaches and parents can use and think about. But that really will help me to get the awareness and start getting coaches and athletic organizations and schools to take notice that this is something that they need to pay attention to. Um, I am on Twitter, I am also on Facebook, but everything there, you're also gonna find on the website. So I'm trying to direct people to that. And then also by subscribing as I'm putting out videos and new ways of reaching coaches, that'll be the best way to know.

Debbie: Great. Well listeners, I will leave links on the show notes page so that you can connect and, and subscribe and learn more about Susan's work. Susan, thank you so much. Super cool. I'm so excited and I wish this had been around when I was a, a young athlete, but I'm so glad that you're, you're making it available now and, and for the, I'm excited to see the change it's going to make.

Susan: Great. Well, me too. Thank you so much. And I, um, I look forward to following your changes too. As I say, I picked up your book and I felt like, oh my goodness, soulmates. Let's go change the world.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Own Beat Athlete](#)
- [Own Beat Athlete / Susan Stout on Twitter](#)
- [Susan Stout on Facebook](#)
- [Own Beat Athlete's Coaches' Toolkit](#)