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Fri, Apr 18, 2025 5:07PM • 16:34

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Shireen Ahmed, sports journalism, intersectionality, Canadian sports media, Don Cherry, systemic racism, gender inequity, mentorship, teaching, cultural impact, longform writing, sports activism, race and gender, sports media landscape, political discourse.

**SPEAKERS**

Evan Zeller, Speaker 1, Soraya El-Houni

Music.

**Evan Zeller**

Hey everyone, thanks for tuning in to Behind the Review, a behind the scenes look at the journalistic work of our team here at the Review. This podcast series will serve as a deep dive into the reporting process of our hard working contributors. In this series, we're unpacking their work in our spring issue and why it's important to tell these stories. Now today, I'm joined by Soraya El-Houni. Soraya is a final-year Master of Journalism student who served on the Review's audience and engagement team. This year, she has written for Toronto Life, Season Zine, and Darby magazine, and she's interested in longform writing, sports, culture and social justice. For this year's print issue, she wrote a profile about Shireen Ahmed, a journalist, a senior contributor with CBC Sports, a public speaker and an award winning sports activist focusing on the intersections of race and gender in sports. Soraya, thanks for sitting with me to chat about this piece.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Oh my gosh. Thank you so much for having me. Evan, it's a pleasure to be here.

**Evan Zeller**

So just to start us off, can I ask you what drew you to profiling Shireen Ahmed in the first place?

**Soraya El-Houni**

Well, I have a long like background in sports, whether it's playing it or my undergrad I did at TMU in the sport media program, so I worked and did my education in sport. So I've known about Shireen for a long time, and I've always kind of followed her work. But what I really liked about this piece is that it's a sports piece, but it's also not at all a sports piece, like it talks about just like the intersectionality of it, and that's kind of what I realized I loved about sports, because writing about it is different than actually playing it. So I knew I loved to play it, but writing about it, I actually wasn't interested in necessarily the outcomes of games, but interested in what sports actually means to culture and society. So then I knew that when I had the chance to write a long form piece, and I had access to Shireen, because she's at TMU, I was like, I'm pitching this because I want to explore this world and this voice that she's created that I'm so inspired by.

**Evan Zeller**

So in terms of, like, the first interview you had with Shireen, when you, uh, I believe, like when you interviewed her at her parents house, is that right?

**Soraya El-Houni**

No, so that was actually she told me that story. I interviewed her in her office on TMU campus, and she kind of set the scene while she was talking about so I'm like, okay, clearly this is, this is a moment that even like Shireen remembers, and so that stuck with me, and that I think will stick with, like the readers reading it. And I mean, just like getting good news and being, just being around your parents, I feel like, is, I loved that, but I think Shireen was also deeply connected to that moment.

**Evan Zeller**

Oh, okay, Thanks for clearing that. I was gonna be like, Wow. How did that come about? Like, you heading all the way to Windsor? Oh my gosh.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Yeah, I feel like, I like, that's just too far. I can't be going all the way to Windsor.

**Evan Zeller**

Oh no, that get I get you. So can you take us back to that first interview? What was the vibe like when you first sat down with her?

**Soraya El-Houni**

It was and we, like, laughed about too. It was like immediately, like Auntie vibes, like we had never met. But then it was like, within five minutes, we were chatting about all things, not the interview. It was like we needed a second and third interview after that first. I mean, in general, I would have done that, but it was like, every time we did an interview, it was like two hours, because we would, we would start off just like chatting, and then halfway through we get sidetracked. So it was immediately just like a really fun interview. But then once Shireen starts telling you stories, you don't want her to stop. I mean, she's like, an excellent storyteller. So then when she's like, telling it to you face to face, you're like, Tell me more. Tell me everything. But yeah, it was, it was so fun. And like, yeah, she's like, he's like, call me auntie now.

**Evan Zeller**

I love the way you described that. That's, I feel like that's such a, like, a universal thing with a lot of cultures like the the auntie vibes, as you call it.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Exactly, exactly. That's, that's how it went. It was, like, better than what I could have expected. I was, like, a bit nervous going in. I'm like, Oh my gosh. I'm so happy this is happening right now.

**Evan Zeller**

Oh my god. So you clearly did, like, on top of, like, you know, getting to speak to Shireen for this piece, you clearly did, like, a deep dive into the history of Canadian sports journalism. What stood out to you most in that research?

**Soraya El-Houni**

What I really liked that I did, like, kind of play on, was that idea of, like the toy department and and what I learned from this piece was really, like, the Canadian and American landscape are very similar. And just that idea of, like sports kind of being this thing that is not taken seriously, taken seriously when people want it to but in general, it's like, not comparable to other forms of media. So I really want to latch on to that idea of the toy department. And then especially, I kind of talk about it in my conclusion, like the uprising of Barbie and all this. So just the fact that it's like, we called it a toy department to, like, set it aside, and now it's like, okay, well, the idea of what a toy can do and how can impact the world is massive when you look at Barbie. So now we're seeing this as maybe like a new way to look at the idea of a toy department. Like sports is equally as important sports, the voice of sports is like, really can change things, even like from a political standpoint. So I thought that that idea that like sports media can directly influence Canadian culture. And then even that story about Don Cherry, where it's like, he said things that had nothing to do with sport, and then Shireen came in through a sport voice and kind of called him out on that statement, and then he was then dismissed. And then you have this whole thing where it's like, okay, it's not only just a sports story. This is a story this is a story, but, like, what we accept as Canadians in our media. So that's kind of what I found interesting about the Canadian sport media landscape. And kind of what I want to focus on.

**Speaker 1**

that was

**Evan Zeller**

No, that was a that was a very great moment, like in the piece, when I was reading, it was a very satisfying to read, like, about how, you know, this can like, she, she, she like, found a way to kind of call him out in a way that was like, yeah, like, professional, but at the same time it had, like, it had an impact, clearly, like it, it kind of drew attention to that. And like, the fact that, you know, comments like that, that Don Cherry made are not okay, but it's just just the way she did, like, she handled it with class. Can you also talk us through about some of, like, the insights that Dave Zirin shared with you?

**Soraya El-Houni**

Yeah, that was amazing to talk to Dave. And yeah, Shireen kind of was like, That's my mentor, even though he might not say it, I'm gonna call him my mentor, which was like, yes, that's you to me. But he kind of gave that, that balance between Canadian and American, because I think it's hard to talk about, like, the Canadian sport media landscape without talking about the American sport media landscape, just because they are, like, the bigger, older sibling, when it like, everything that they're doing were kind of a mirror to that. So he kind of gave that balance between the two and then the history of it in real time. So, you know, you do all this research, but sometimes you're like, I need, like, word of mouth experience from someone who's like, lived it and experienced it. So he was able to kind of tell me about the periods of sports writing that felt like maybe things were shifting, but then maybe it didn't shift and stick. So he kind of really gave me insight into the history and just how important Shireen's voice is now, because of that history and because of what's going on now, especially with like genocide and Gaza and all that stuff, like putting that all together. And just like, really placing Shireen where she should be, and like, being described in the way that she should, I think, and it really, it really put her into perspective, I think, in this piece and in the sport media landscape.

**Evan Zeller**

Oh, absolutely, while I was reading that, I wondered, like, if Shireen were reading this piece now, like she would probably be, like, blushing with, like, all these, like, the lovely things that people are saying about her, and that all like this, you can really see the impact that she's made on a lot of people's lives in terms like, you know, people who were marginalized women, especially like, who never really thought there was a place for them in sports journalism on this subject. And like, now, I think one of the figures, Mariam Kourabi, I believe, yes, she said that having her, that this figure as like a trailblazer, really kind of gave her that hope, and so you really see that come through.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Yeah, and even, like having Dave is amazing too, because you have this like person who's kind of outside of it, like he is, he is in the world, and he is like a political sports journalist. So it's not maybe just like a friend saying or like a mentee saying this about her. So you have that kind of real professional insight about her from Dave, and then you have like Mariam, who's telling you, in real life how Shireen has impacted her and kind of inspired her to do something that didn't necessarily seem like viable maybe if Shireen wasn't in the picture. So yeah, I think that was a great balance as well.

**Evan Zeller**

Absolutely. Um, so to your knowledge, how did the events of 2020 because we, in your piece, you talk a little bit how, like, you know, you started to really see that shift after 2020 so, to your knowledge, how did the events of 2020 especially after George Floyd's murder, shift the landscape?

**Soraya El-Houni**

I mean, I think it was just like seeing organizations just beyond like athletes speak was critical, because I think that we were getting to a point where athletes were kind of speaking about their like, thoughts about what was going on in the world, and they should be, because they have so much power and they have the right to do so. But then I think we weren't necessarily holding organizations, teams, the owners accountable. So I think in 2020, at least, we got, like a little bit of we got a little a little bit from them, a little bit from the ownership and a little bit from the people who are actually in power and making decisions to speak and to say what their pain is, and to place themselves in that kind of political discourse, to decide whether or not that somebody I want to support or not. I don't know if it's necessarily as like strong as it was before, and kind of Courtney Szto up kind of speaks to that. So I don't know if the surge in 2020 is necessarily here now, but just like seeing that in 2020 I think was critical to how we're going to progress moving forward.

**Evan Zeller**

So I mean, overall, it's clear that Shireen isn't just a great journalist, she's also deeply committed to mentoring and teaching. So having spoken with figures like Mariam Kourabi and Claire Hanna, can you tell us about Shireen's impact through their eyes? Like, what did they say about her influence.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Yeah, it was so nice to also hear that there was, like another side of things, so like, she isn't just a journalist, like her teaching is just as important as what she writes, which I feel like is so impactful. So from Claire, even just from the podcast that burn it all down, podcast that Shireen loved so much. You know, she was able to create a platform for herself where she wasn't just like telling stories and having people read it like for the sake of entertainment, I guess, because that's kind of what we're looking at sports journalism as she had this space where she was able to teach on this podcast, they were able to teach us about what was going on in the world of sport, what was going on in the world of women's sport. Women's sport and like, access to information that is not necessarily like easy to find, so that creating that space. And even for Claire Hanna, who's like an who is an established and amazing sports journalist, so she can teach people who are in the industry, and then she can teach people like Mariam, who are just coming up and kind of getting inspired by her. So I think that ability is so amazing to be able to also have a space where it's not just I'm reading it, and maybe I'm separating the journalist from the words that I'm reading. It's like, here is this is what I believe in. This is where I stand for. I'm going to put it out there. I'm going to teach you. I'm going to teach you about it through her podcast or through teaching, which I really find inspiring to and necessary, because she, yeah, she really wants to share it just beyond her words getting out there. She wants the idea to be out there too.

**Evan Zeller**

So I want to kind of circle back to the Don Cherry moment that you were talking about. How did, how did Shireen reflect on that when you spoke to her?

**Soraya El-Houni**

She was she definitely wanted to make it known, like, I called him out on his bullshit, but he, he did it. He did himself to herself. Yeah, I was definitely she was, like, first of all, I just want to say, like, I'm not taking like, I'm not taking credit for like, his firing. Like, that's not something I want to take credit for. Like, he, he said those words, and I was just telling him that those words were bullshit, and telling him that that needs to be shut down, and telling Sportsnet that that needs to be shut down. So she was very like, I think she was very proud of of what happened and the outcome that happened and the piece that she wrote, because it was amazing, and she was so quick with it as well. It was an amazing piece of work that was turned over so quickly. But you can just see the passion and her knowledge in there. And I think it was something like deeply personal to her, but also something that needed to be done. So I think that's how, when we were talking about it, was very like matter of fact, like he did it to himself, I wrote about it, I called out the bullshit, and that is how it should have been dealt with. And I think it was important, too that Shireen wrote the piece like being a brown woman, a hijabi wearing woman who Don Cherry is directly speaking to. It's like immigrants or people of color or whatever, anybody who doesn't look like Don Cherry. So he was like speaking to she was he was essentially speaking to Shireen and her family, and they engage in sport, and they love sport, and they love Canada. And then he was saying these things, and so to have her write it, and to come from such a personal place, I think, was also just so pointed that it couldn't be ignored. I wonder if it could have been ignored in any other time, like regardless of the year, just because it was so pointed and the statement was so crazy that I'm I'm curious if, yeah, I'm curious whether, what year it was in, if it would have been ignored just because it was such a good piece and it was such a crazy statement.

**Evan Zeller**

So just overall, this profile paints a rich picture of how Shireen Ahmed is, as you put it, amplifying marginalized voices and tackling issues like systemic racism and gender inequity in the world of sports. So in your view, what's the most powerful or meaningful part of the way she's doing that? What about her work stands out most to you?

**Soraya El-Houni**

I think I was very convinced talking to Courtney, and I put that quote in the piece as well. When she's like, What happens if Shireen stops writing tomorrow? And like, not knowing whether, like, her type of beat would be taken on by other, like other media giants, I guess. And so then when she was saying that, Courtney was saying that Shireen is kind of most powerful when she's teaching, that kind of really stuck with me, because it was like, okay, there is, Shireen is so powerful, but there is only one of her. So is her power kind of developing voices like hers, or developing critical thinking like her, so that more people will come into the sports industry, not only interested in sport, but interested in the politicization of sport, interested in how it can affect society and culture. So Courtney really can convince me there, and even was like for myself, being like, okay, it's not just about writing about it, because writers come and go, but it's like the idea, the idea that I am writing for something more than just the entertainment of sport, I think, is the power of Shireen, and she's been able to be so happy and joyous with it as well. Like when you see her hosting the Olympics, talking about soccer, you can see the passion. So it's not just a thing where she's there always wanting to talk about, maybe the negative things that are happening in sports. She has this balance of the entertainment and the joy of it and also the seriousness of it. And so to be able to continue to teach that, I think, is, is her power. And Courtney really hit it on the head with that.

**Evan Zeller**

Thank you so much for making time for this, Soraya, it was really kind of you to, like, give some kind of insights into, like, your reporting process and how this kind of story came to fruition. So thank you so much.

**Soraya El-Houni**

Thank you so much for having me, Evan.

**Evan Zeller**

I'm your host. Evan Zeller, this episode was produced by Chloe Kim, Matthew Hanick, and myself. If you enjoyed this episode, explore all of our podcasts in the podcast tab at reviewofjournalism.ca. Thanks for listening.