

EPISODE 142

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:00] EB: I had been in skating for a few years. All the years before that, I was just listening to what my mom and my coaches told me to do and I would just do it. Around 13, 14, 15, I started really vibing with hip hop music, breakdancing, dressing in a certain way. I had a certain culture that I loved to follow and identified with. Then I wanted to start bringing that into my world of figure skating, because again, yes, it's a sport, but it's also an art form. You get to explore and choose what you want to skate to.

When I started bringing those ideas up, they'd be like, "No, that's not going to work. The judges are – they're old school. They're not going to like it." Then I started to try to force things a little bit and wanted to grow my hair, get cornrows. People from Team Canada, or different places would come to me and be like, if I wanted to grow my hair and let it out, they'd be like, "Oh, it looks dirty. It looks nappy. Cut your hair." Or, "You can't wear this because it's too sloppy. It's too –" That's when I started to realize that okay, what I identify with and who I am, again, isn't really accepted in this sport.

[0:01:13] LW: Hello, friends. Welcome back to the Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary folks, just like you and me, who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they have identified with as their mission. In doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who have either heard about their story, or who witnessed them in action, or who've directly benefited from their work.

Okay, so, during the pandemic, when everybody seemed to be watching the same stuff on Netflix and on social media, there was this viral clip that was reposted by Jada Pinkett Smith, I believe, of a black ice skater who pulled his car over next to her frozen lake, he laced up his skates, and then he got out and he started crip walking in his skates over that frozen lake. Then it showed him figure skating, and then doing backflips and there was hip hop music playing. I mean, it was crazy. It was everywhere.

I started following this guy. His name was Elladj Baldé. I didn't know much about his backstory, but apparently, he was some retired figure skater who had started a non-profit to get more people of color into the sport. Anyway, I had just started my podcast and I wanted to get Elladj onto the show way back then. Recently, he and I started following one another on social media. Then one day, he reposted something that I had posted. I was like, "Okay, this is the time to reach out and invite Elladj onto my show," which honestly, is not something I'm super comfortable with, at least not without having some mutual connection, or a warm introduction.

Turns out, Elladj had just been listening to my podcast the day before, and so he enthusiastically accepted my invitation, because he was a fan of the show. I was super excited about that. Now here we are. I get to be in conversation with someone whose mission I truly admire. After doing more research into his background, his superhero origin story is even more amazing than I first imagined.

Elladj's parents migrated to Canada from Russia. He was introduced to skating at the age of seven by his Russian mother. He resisted at first. He grappled with being black as a skater and trying to fit in. All the while, his parents were struggling in the background with the exorbitant costs associated with figure skating and hiring coaches. But then, Elladj started winning competitions. That's when he became more and more obsessed with the sport. He won the Junior Silver Medal at the 2007 Canadian championships. Then he won the 2008 Junior Championship. In 2009, he experienced a knee injury, but then he bounced back and continued winning.

His dream was to go to the Olympics in 2014, to return and skate in his birth country. But he finished fourth and they were only going to take the top three qualifiers. You can imagine how heartbreaking that was. Plus, he was told by his mentors, that his look didn't fit in with the traditional figure skating culture. If he wanted to win more, he should consider conforming. Elladj then took a trip to Africa to visit his father's village. That's when everything changed. He stopped focusing so much on making the Olympics and he started skating with more of a purpose. That purpose was to tell his story. He was going to do that through the way he carried

himself, through the way he moved, the way he dressed, to the music that he skated to. Then after another series of debilitating concussions, Elladj ended up retiring from competition, having one, an impressive number of medals and he began performance skating.

Then he and 10 other skaters formed the Figure Skating Diversity and Inclusion Alliance to facilitate the involvement of racialized youth in sport. It was around that time that Elladj began filming himself skating on what they call wild ice, which is in the middle of a frozen lake. It was one of those moments that was captured by his wife, which happened to be the clip that everybody in the world saw. Ironically, Elladj was very reluctant to film that day, but his wife insisted. He relented. After it went viral, all the agents and the brands started reaching out. Everybody wanted to know who is this light-skinned brother with long, curly hair, doing backflips on ice, dressed like he's going to a nightclub.

Now, we can make the argument that Elladj has become one of figure skating's bonafide social media stars. I am super excited to dive into Elladj's backstory with you and talk about all of the ups and the downs of what it's like for a young biracial kid to find his way in the world of figure skating and come back from not qualifying for his dream of making the Olympics and how after every concussion, he found the courage to keep getting back onto the ice. I think you're really, really going to love this conversation. You'll be super inspired, just like I was.

So without further ado, I want to introduce you to Mr. Elladj Baldé.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:06:35] LW: Elladj Baldé, welcome to my podcast. Thank you so much for making the time. It is an honor and a pleasure to have you on here. I've been following your work for a little while. I was one of those people that saw your video that went viral. I was like, "Who is this dude?"

[0:06:50] EB: Doing backflips. Doing backflips on ice.

[0:06:52] LW: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. It's interesting. Jasmine Mason. You know her? Dancer.

[0:07:02] EB: Yeah.

[0:07:04] LW: We met online, connected to her book about her boyfriend's shirt, or something like this. Then she came on to the podcast. I think that's one of the ways I found out about your work. It's because I was scrolling through her social media and then I saw some image of you guys doing some dance thing together in Europe. Yeah, exactly.

[0:07:28] EB: [Inaudible 0:07:30].

[0:07:31] LW: That's right. It's funny how these things come together, man. So here we are having conversation on the podcast.

[0:07:38] EB: Yeah, it's really interesting for me too, because I started following you after my wife introduced me to your page. One of her teachers follows you and he receives a lot of the newsletters and repost some of your stuff on his social media. I think, you too practice a similar practice of meditation and teach the similar practice of meditation. She was really interested in you. Then she introduced me to you, and then I started following you. Yeah, it's been really beautiful to see your journey, see you share your life in a really beautiful way, and everything that you've learned and your journey. I've always been very attracted to that.

Then I was listening to your podcast one day, and as I was listening to the podcast, I was like, "You know, I would love to talk to Light one day and maybe even get on a podcast with him." Literally. That's the thought through my mind. That same day, or the next day, I think the next morning, you messaged me on Instagram, and I was like, "It's beautiful how this thing, life works."

[0:08:43] LW: That's hilarious. Do you remember which episode you were listening to?

[0:08:46] EB: Yeah. It was with Dr. Robin – gut bliss book. I was listening. I was starting to research a little bit more about gut health and all of that and I was listening to that podcast. Yeah, next day, you showed up. Yeah, it's magic.

[0:09:06] LW: Awesome. Awesome. Cool, man. Well, look, I can't wait to get into your story and talk about what led you to that video that ended up going viral. You've got a pretty extensive background. You're Canadian. Well, you're originally born in – Are you a Russian citizen, because you were born in Moscow? Or how does that work?

[0:09:24] EB: I can get it. If I wanted to apply for it, I could, but I haven't. I'm not only Canadian a citizen. But yeah, I was born in Moscow.

[0:09:33] LW: Okay. Let's talk about the early years. When you were just a kid, when you were first getting introduced to skating, which you weren't a big fan of in the early days. What were you into and how did you – I know your mom was a former skater, but talk about that moment where she introduced you, or how you found out about that. At the same time, what was going on in your household? Are you the oldest of the kids? I know you got a older sister.

[0:09:59] EB: I am now. Yeah. Yeah, I am the oldest. Yeah, I have two younger sisters. Yeah. The journey has been quite interesting. My father, obviously from Africa, Guinea. He was born in a small village in the mountains. He had the opportunity to further his education in the Soviet Union, I think in the 70s, 80s, there was some sort of program that allowed African students to go study in the Soviet Union to further their education. My dad was picked. He was one of them.

Yeah, met my mom in a city called Tashkent, which is now in Uzbekistan. My older sister was born. A few years later, I was born. She was diagnosed with leukemia. We left Moscow to go to Germany to get some treatments for her. She ended up passing away in Germany, and at the same time, the Soviet Union had just collapsed. My parents didn't really want to go back to Russia, because it was chaos. I mean, apparently, the mafia had taken over everything. It was not a place where my parents wanted to be.

Then my dad being African in Russia, there was a lot of racism. They just didn't want to go there. They didn't want to go to Africa and they had the opportunity to come to Canada, Montreal. That's when we emigrated. I think it was two-years-old. Then my sister was on a way, Julia. She was born a couple months after we came to Canada. Then a few years later, yeah, my mom has been a figure skating fan her whole life. She started skating as a kid, but had to quit very early on, because she moved from the city that she was in in Russia to Uzbekistan, and there wasn't any rinks out there. She had to stop at the age of 14. But always remained very passionate about the sport.

She introduced my older sister to it. Then eventually, when it was my turn around six-years-old, she introduced me to it, because she realized that I needed an outlet for the energy that I had in my body. I had so much energy. I was a hyperactive kid. I needed an outlet for that. Sitting at a piano wasn't going to work for me. I would sit there for two, three minutes and then I start running around the piano, trying to backflip over it, things that kids shouldn't be doing. She introduced me to skating at the age of six. That first moment of being on the ice, I remember it being really playful. It was fun. I was there with my mom and she was teaching me a couple of things here and there.

I felt very comfortable on the ice very quickly. It was something that came quite naturally to me. Those first few moments on the ice in my memory were all fun and games. That changed very quickly, because at the age of six and a half, I was already competing. She had put me with a private coach, a Russian coach and we started very seriously training. By six and a half, I was already competing. Again, I was so not ready for it at that age. I had never been in competition, in a competition setting. It felt very uncomfortable to me.

With the culture that my mom's from in Russia, figure skating is it's like hockey in Canada, or football in America. It's a really, really popular sport. A lot of kids go into figure skating to help their families out of poverty. Figure skating, you go into it with the idea of being the world champion, Olympic champion. If that's not your goal, then you're wasting your time. That's the mentality that was instilled in me at a very young age right away at the age of six and a half.

That's where my, I feel subconsciously, I was resisting that a lot. It was it was a lot of pressure at that age and I didn't know if I enjoyed it, and so I tried to hide my skates in the closet. I'd tell my mom I lost them.

I was doing everything to try and not go to the rink. But she persevered. She found my skates. She put them back in my bag, took me to the rink, and she sacrificed a lot for me to be able to skate at that age. She didn't have a car. She didn't speak French or English. She would take me on the bus at 5 a.m. when it's minus 30 outside in the winter with my two younger sisters, crossed the city, take me to skating, then take me to school and then back to skating. She did a lot. I owe everything that I'm experiencing now with figure skating to her, because she didn't let me run away from it.

[0:14:16] LW: You may have been too young to, I don't know, remember the experience with your older sister who passed away, but what was the vibe like in your house with that having happened? Now you're the oldest and your parents – Did you feel any of that when you're growing up with them? Was there tension, stress? Any weirdness happening in your family?

[0:14:38] EB: Absolutely. I think the death of a child is something that lives with the parents for a very long time. It's probably one of the most traumatic experiences that our parents can experience. Definitely, my parents suffered from it daily. I don't have any memories of her, but deep down I've always felt her. My mom was telling me stories that when we would go to the hospital, anytime I would come near the hospital, I would just start sobbing, crying. I would be hysterical. I couldn't even enter the hospital. As soon as they would take me away, I would stop crying.

I know, I felt the weight of the situation. My parents, it broke them in so many ways. Obviously, I've had a few conversations with them. I know that everyone has different coping mechanisms when it comes to grieving and losing a loved one, especially a child. I think, both of my parents, that was almost the moment where they started drifting away, which I know happens a lot in marriages. In couples, when they lose a child and my dad, from what I'm understanding the way that he dealt with it was almost try to forget about it and just move forward as if it hadn't

happened. I know that that was really difficult for my mom to handle, because she felt so deeply connected to my sister. It wasn't in her capacity to be able to move forward in that way, and so she felt like she was maybe abandoned by my dad in her grieving process. I know that just put a lot of weight on them.

Then on top of that, immigrating to a country with no money, they had maybe a couple \$100 in their pockets, with me being two-years-old, my sister on her way, my mom not speaking French or English, so not able to work. My dad having to work day and night. He would sometimes go to school, because he had to redo his diploma, because it wasn't accepted once he came here to Canada. He would go to school from, let's say, eight to four, and then go to work from 5 to 6, and then go straight to school. He would do that three days in a row sometimes.

The dynamic was definitely heavy, chaotic. I know my parents did everything they could to not let that have an impact on us. As kids, we absorb everything. We feel everything. We feel the energies and the emotions that our parents are experiencing. We did absorb a lot of that. That, at the same time, I feel like me going into this sport and throwing me into figure skating with this idea of needing to be the best, all of these layers compounded on top of each other to put me on this journey that I've been on. Obviously, there's been a pretty powerful healing journey for me to process all of these things. Because the other thing, too, is my mom, when my sister was diagnosed with leukemia, I was inside my mom, in her womb.

The months before my birth, and then the first two years of my birth was this process of absorbing trauma. Yeah, that's the journey that I've been on and my sisters have been on for quite some time now.

[0:17:57] LW: Was there a focus on achievement in your household growing up, in those early years? Or was it about being in the moment? What was the overall ideology? Because your parents are both immigrants, and I don't know if you were even speaking English at that point, but I know your mother tongue sounds like it was Russian and French, right?

[0:18:17] EB: Yeah. Russian and French.

[0:18:18] LW: What was the idea of success, as a young person, when your family would talk about that thing?

[0:18:26] EB: Yeah. It was very, very achievement-based. I mean, if you take, for example, we were talking about figure skating and my mom and Russia, right away as a kid, it was the idea of needing to be the best. We're going to train every day to be the best. A lot of what I was experiencing and a lot of the love that I was getting was dependent on my performances. When I was skating really well, it was making my mom really happy and loving. Then when I wasn't skating well, I wasn't receiving the same energy. There was already there this conditioning of I need to perform to be loved.

Then on the other side, my father, for him, it was all about academia. The reason why he was able to leave Africa, leave the village, leave a really difficult and being in a situation where there's not a lot of opportunities, not a lot of money, in order to leave that space, he had to be the best in his university. He had to finish in the top five in the country, in order to be sent to Russia to further his education. When he was in Russia, he was always the first of his class. Needing to be the best of his class. Growing up, when I was 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, during elementary school, not only that I have this achievement-based idea in my mind in figure skating, but also in school. My dad was very strict with us with school. We would sit with him for two, three hours and we'd have to recite all the multiplication tables, different mathematical equations.

He was an engineer in computers, software engineer, and so he taught me how to build a website when I was seven-years-old. There's a lot of these elements coming together that, yeah, that made it a very particular and unique situation at home and a way for me to grow up.

[0:20:17] LW: Talk about the challenges you had with code switching as a young person and figure skating, and then talk about the whole idea of that being seen as a girl's activity and how you negotiated that as a young person.

[0:20:33] EB: Yeah. The first time, I'll start with the girl sport, because I feel like that was one of the first things that came to me. I vividly remember, the first time I ever felt shame for doing figure skating. I was maybe 10-years-old, and I had won my first competition. I was so proud. I was wearing my medal. I left the rink, still in my costume, figure skating costume, because I was excited as a kid. I show up in our neighborhood, and we get out of the car to go to our house, and my neighbor's outside playing. I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to go talk to my friend and just show him what I got."

I run up to him super excited. I was like, "Look, look. I got my first medal. I'm so excited." Literally, his reaction was looking me from head to toe, and then laughing out loud and saying, "What the hell are you wearing?" I completely forgot that I was still wearing my figure skating costume. I remember, that was the first time that I was like, "Oh, okay. Maybe what I feel figure skating is is what I know figure skating to be, isn't what people around me perceive it as." I remember feeling this immense sense of shame.

Then after that, there are so many instances where people would ask me what sport I do. When I would tell them I'm a figure skater, they would laugh at me and say, "Oh, it's a girl sport." Which is wild, because sports don't have gender, but society has labeled figure skating as a girl sport. I was faced with that daily. I even went to the point where I changed my story. When people would ask me, if I was an athlete, I'd be like, "Yeah." They ask me what sport I did, I would be like, "I'm a soccer player, or I do track and field, or basketball." Because I was tired of seeing people's reactions and having to defend myself and prove that I'm man enough to be in the sport. That was a really difficult journey.

I suppressed it for a very long time as a teenager. Then that came soaring back up in my early mid-20s. Having to redefine what it is for me to be a man and embrace this thing that I love to do and find a way to not only live within it, but thrive within it with the deepest sense of authenticity and pride. That was a difficult one. Then you add the layer on top of that, I was the only black kid around skating. That was also another layer where people would look at me and say like, "Black people don't skate," or like, "You should go and play basketball, or go run track and field. Why are you doing this sport?"

Then within the sport, there is also this this idea that I wasn't fully accepted as who I was. Because I wanted to skate to hip hop songs. I wanted to move in a certain way. If I did that, judges wouldn't like it. I learned right away to please judges and please all these people within the figure skating community and shift who I am as a human being in order to not only please these people, but achieve success, because I want it to be successful. That was again, that was like, this idea that I was going to be an Olympic champion. In order to get there, I need to change who I am.

That's when I started listening to different types of music. I started dressing differently. I literally started talking and walking differently, just because I felt like I needed to fit that mold of what an Olympic champion looks like. These were the beginnings for me of learning how to code switch and have to adapt. Then I would get rewarded whenever I would do that, right? Subconsciously, it keeps reinforcing this idea that who you are isn't enough.

I was being rewarded for skating more classical, or in a more balletic way. Or, when I would go out and hang out with skaters and they're like, "Oh, you're so cool. You're not like the other black people." It's like, "We accept the white version of you." If you were to be anything else, we wouldn't want to be around that. All of these things reinforced this idea again, that there's no way that me being authentic to who I was, was going to get me anywhere, was going to give me anything positive. I discarded that for many years.

[0:24:52] LW: What was your dad's mindset and all of this? Did you ever talk to him about it? Or was it mostly you and your mom with this figure skating endeavor? Because your dad having experienced the racism –

[0:25:01] EB: It was mostly me and my mom. I internalized a lot of these experiences as a kid and as a teenager. I didn't talk about them to anyone. My mom didn't really know what I was experiencing. Yes, she could see it sometimes with like, I would skate really well and then I would get a score from the judges. It's completely not reflective of what I did as a performance.

Again, you can't quantify that. You can't say that that's because of systemic racism, or – Because there's so many reasons why I could have gotten a lower mark.

I feel like, I never really had these conversations with my parents. I knew what my dad had experienced in Russia. He spoke about it so many times, and then even him coming to Canada and not being able to get a job. I understood already at an early age what systemic racism was and what this experience is, and was for him. But because my goal was to be an Olympic champion, I put all of that aside and just had the blinders on, and was just walking forward, walking forward, walking forward, until I couldn't anymore. I know [inaudible 0:26:04]. I'm sure if I had that conversation with him, though, I know that he would have most likely been able to guide me in a certain way as to how to process these things. Because I know that he had to learn how to move through that and not allow that to intoxicate his body. I probably could have had that conversation. But again, I was so focused on this one goal of mine.

[0:26:30] LW: You start placing competitions, and you're still a relatively young person, teenager and all of that. Can you just tell us what a week in the life is like of someone who's focused on being a championship skater? Then secondly, when did you find out you were a black skater?

[0:26:48] EB: Yeah. A typical week, let's say, early junior high, high school, I would basically go to the rink in the morning, around 5 am, 6 am. Would do an hour session with my coach. Then from there, I would head to school. I would take the bus for about an hour, hour and a half, head to school. Do class from 8 to 12. Because I was in a sport study program, here in Quebec, they allow students that are training in sports at a high level to do half of the day school, and then the other half of the day, their respective sports.

I would go to school from 8 to 12. Then from there, I would head to the rink and skate from 1 to 4, and then take the bus back to my neighborhood, which was about an hour, hour and a half, depending on the day. Then get home and my dad would be there. Then we would sit down and do homework, until however much time we needed to finish the homework. What he would do is he would also give me extra homework. He would make me study the chapters that we

were going to study maybe in a month or two to be ahead of schedule. We would do that. Then I'd basically eat, go to bed and restart the next day. It would be five days. Normally, it would be five days a week like that.

Then to answer your question of like, when I noticed, or realized that I was a black figure skater, for me, I think when I started to when I was around 13, 14. I had been skating for a few years. All the years before that, I was just listening to what my mom and my coaches told me to do. I would just do it. Around 13, 14, 15, I started really vibing with hip hop music, breakdancing, dressing in a certain way. I had a certain culture that I loved to follow and identified with. Then, I wanted to start bringing that into my world of figure skating, because again, yes, it's a sport, but it's also an art form. You get to explore and choose what you want to skate to. When I started bringing those ideas up, they'd be like, "No, that's not going to work. The judges are – they're old school. They're not going to like it."

Then I started to try to force things a little bit and wanted to grow my hair, get cornrows and people from Team Canada, or different places who would come to me and be like, "If I wanted to grow my hair and let it out," they'd be like, "Oh, it looks dirty. It looks nappy. Cut your hair." Or, "You can't wear this, because it's too sloppy." That's when I started to realize that okay, what I identify with and who I am, again, isn't really accepted in this sport. That's when it started changing for me. That's when I started to switch. I went back into, okay, well, I'm going to skate to classical music and I'm going to operate a certain way. Then it switched again when I saw for the first time, a black male figure skater skate lives in front of me at a competition and being truly authentically himself. Changed my world. It changed my world.

His name was Maxime Billy-Fortin. He was from Quebec City. He was adopted from Haiti. Oh, man. He was um. He was out there. He was popping, popping on the ice. Not only was he doing triple axels and quads, like all the most difficult jumps, but his energy was so raw. I still have chills talking about it now, because my jaw dropped and my eyes started sparkling for the first time. I started to realize like, "Wow, this is what I want to be. This guy out there with the way that he's skating is so true to himself." It's exactly how I want to do things that after that, I was like, "Okay, I got to start shifting things."

I was maybe around 18-years-old. That's when I started my journey of finding this authentic self and committing to only operating from that space. It was a long journey, but that's where it started for me.

[0:30:53] LW: A couple just behind the scenes questions for people who maybe have kids, who are interested in this, there's a huge financial cost to being a figure skater that a lot of people don't realize. There is constant judgment. There are eating disorders. Can you talk a little bit about how you managed all of that? Was there any mental health stuff that you experienced as a result of some of that?

[0:31:18] EB: Yeah. The cost. Let's start with the cost. The cost is ridiculously expensive. I mean, a pair of – As a kid, when you're just starting, just joining the club is a few \$100. Then ice time, you have to pay a couple grand a year. Then your coaches are a couple grand, if not more a year, and then costumes, and then all of the other things. You're starting out \$10,000, \$15,000 a year if you want to be competitive skater as a kid.

Then the thing is that the more that you grow in the sport, the more expensive it gets. Towards the end of my career, I was dishing out \$50,000, \$60,000 a year to compete. It's unbelievable. My parents, they helped me as much as they could. They did everything, every penny they had, every extra cent they had, they put it towards my skating. I had two other sisters that were also passionate about skating. That three of us in the family wanting to skate.

Unfortunately, because I was the oldest kid and I was progressing really fast, my mom decided to put all of the funds towards me, and which helped me tremendously, but then it left with both my sisters not having the same resources. Even though they were as passionate as I was with the support, they didn't have the opportunity to do that. That's one way that it's impacted us. Then my parents had to file for bankruptcy a couple of times, because of debts, and because of needing to do these things. I was really lucky as well that I had coaches that would barely charge us. I mean, my second coach, for eight years, we barely paid him, and he was

okay with it. He saw the talent. He was like, “You know, whenever you have something, just whatever it is, we're here. We want to help. We believe in him.” I was lucky to get that.

Then not only was that there during my early years, but I always, for some reason, fell on coaches that were very lenient with payments. My parents and my family caught a massive break. If it wasn't for these coaches, allowing me to train with them almost for free, I wouldn't be here now. It's something that is a problem in our sport and obviously, where a lot of us are trying to find different ways to bridge that gap, but it's not easy. Then when you talk about mental health, all of these things pile on top of each other.

I mean, as a kid, I didn't know it at the time, but I realize it now, I was suffering from OCD from a very young age, because there's so much stress and there's so much anxiety in my mind and in my body needing to control things, I would need to control everything in my surrounding in order for me to feel okay. That led me to in my 20s going through a whole day, making sure if the day before I had a good competition, or I had a good practice and I entered the rink, holding the door with my left hand, I would need to make sure I did the same thing.

If I stepped into the room with my right foot and you need to do the same thing. If I put my skate on – It became that my whole day was packed with these things that I needed to do in order to feel in control. When I realized that, that wasn't helping me. When I started to wanting to break down those ways of operating, I suffered a lot. As athletes, we suffer a lot with mental health, because there's so much that rides on performance. There's so much that comes from achieving and being in a state of mind of needing to achieve constantly put you consistently in the space of always needing to go and get more and you're always in the space that you, what you have right now, what you've done right now isn't enough, and you're not enough and you need to continue to get more to validate your sense of worthiness.

The description of unworthiness, every single athlete at least that I know, a lot of figure skaters struggle with that, especially in a sport where you're judged. A judged sport is very subjective. You're constantly in this space where it's not just like, start the timer, you cross the line first. That's it, you're a champion. There's all of these layers as to these elements that could lead

you to become a champion, but you're constantly trying to do everything you can to control as many of these elements as possible.

90% of these elements are out of your control. You're constantly stuck in this cycle. It's hard. Then for me as a boy in skating, I struggled with my mental health, when it came to again, redefining who I was as a man. I questioned so much of these things, and needed to almost step away from the sport and start the journey inward, in order for me to be where I am now where I feel like I can be within this ecosystem and thrive and be grounded and be centered and operate from a space of truth. But it was long journey to get there.

Mental health is something that a lot of athletes deal with. Yes, we have sports psychologists, but sports psychologist help you perform better. It doesn't necessarily help you with the processing of emotions and finding your – Yeah, yeah, just diving in.

[0:36:27] LW: Just before you started to go inside to seek fulfillment, you had a plan, right? You had this plan, “I'm going to be in the Olympics. I'm going to try out for 2014.” Then again and later. Talk about your plan and how that ended and then how that led to the Africa trip, which then led to the realization that you shouldn't be externalizing this stuff.

[0:36:50] EB: Yeah, yeah. The first plan was to go to the qualifications for the 2010 Olympics. But then I got injured. I had knee surgery. That was the first time that I injured myself seriously, where I had to miss a whole year of skating. That was a struggle. I was 18. I was just on the rise. In my mind, that year of stopping was really was really difficult. But I did learn a lot. I started to understand the concept of, if you take a situation that can be perceived as bad, or as a failure and you take that and transform and play with it a little bit, you can transform it into the most beautiful gift that you've ever received. That's when that started simmering for me.

Then 2014 happened where, again, it was going to be in Russia. It was going to be the beginning of my journey to becoming an Olympic champion. I didn't qualify for these games. That really, it started the questioning of, is this really my path? The question started creeping in and I quickly was like, “Oh, no, no, no, no, no.” I put that away. We got work to do. We got

somewhere we got to be. We got something we got to do. Let's just keep going. I kept going for a whole year.

[0:38:09] LW: Did you have helped with that? Did someone help to keep you focused on what was forward, instead of what didn't happen?

[0:38:15] EB: I was so motivated. I was so dedicated to this idea. I was so sold to the idea of being an Olympic champion. My entire self-worth, my who I was, was wrapped in this idea of being an Olympic champion. I believed it a 100%. It was like, I was almost living in a form of delusion, in a way. Not because I didn't have the talent to become an Olympic champion, but this idea, the fixed idea that I had, that there's no other path of life possible, except that one, I was totally dialed into that. I didn't even I didn't even need anyone to redirect me. I did it myself.

That whole year after that was rough. It was really, really, really rough. Training was tough. I didn't compete well. Again, that year, the top guy in Canada was taking a year off. Now, the door was open, so it was my turn. It was my turn to step into this space and be this Canadian champion and finally start my journey towards being an Olympic champion. Those are ways that just my mind would automatically put things in these perspectives.

I showed up at Nationals. A couple of weeks before my father called me and my grandfather fell into a coma, he was 99-years-old, heart just stopped for a little bit. They revived him, but he was in a coma for a little bit. My dad was telling me, he was going to go to Africa to go visit his father for hopefully, at least being able to be there. If he was going to pass, he was going to be there with him. If he wakes up, then at least you'll have maybe one last conversation with him before he passes. Then he asked me to come with him, but I said I couldn't, because I had nationals and then I was going to be national champion and then I was going to go to four continents championships and then world. I had all this plan laid out.

I showed up at nationals and it was a complete, complete disaster. I honestly felt like I wasn't in my own body when I was on the ice. I stepped out and it's almost like, nothing worked.

Everything I knew about figure skating, all of a sudden, it's like, I forgot everything. It just happened, just like that. The competition ended. Not only did I not win, but I have my worst – the worst results that I ever had at these Canadian nationals.

I sat there. I was like, I don't understand. I kept asking myself, why is this happening to me? Why is this happening to me? This question. Then right away, the thought came of like, well, if this is not who I'm going to be, if this is not the path that is meant for me, then who am I? Who are you? Why are you even doing this? All the reasons why I'm doing this sport were based in external factors. Nothing was coming from within. There was no fulfillment in what I was doing. I was only there to please, to achieve.

As soon as all of these ideas, these thoughts came into my mind, my immediate thing was wanting to shut it all off again. Because that's the thing that I do as an athlete, you learn to shut off your emotion, shut off your brain and just stick to the plan. I was trying to do that, and it wasn't working. Right away, I also noticed and realized that I had this free time now. I called my dad and I was like, "I'm coming to Africa with you." That's when the journey just really took off for me, because I showed up to Africa with my dad. I got to meet the most incredible men; my grandfather, who I'm named after, who was an Imam and had dedicated his life to God.

This meeting between grandfather and grandson was so important in my culture. My father was my grandfather's first son, and I'm my father's first son, and so we had to meet. He just came out of the coma right before we came to Africa. All of the pieces were just starting to come together. It was almost like, it was written. It was. I showed up and all these questions were coming into my mind. I decided to stop and I decided that I was going to stop skating right now. I'm taking a decision. I'm going to get done with skating, until I find something that sparks charm within me, that sparks excitement within me.

I spent these three weeks in the village and I met my grandfather. The way that he was looking at me, the way that he was talking to me, I didn't even understand what he was saying, because we don't speak the same language, but I could feel the love that he had for me. It was the deepest sense of unconditional love that I've ever experienced in my life. It had nothing to

do with – he didn't know what I was doing in figure skating. He didn't know the results I had. He didn't know anything about my life in Canada. He just would see me as a human being, and who I was, and was loving me deeply for it.

That feeling sparked something incredible inside of me. I started to realize that this connection, this ability to love and this ability to be loved for who you are, there is absolutely nothing more beautiful than that. I spend these next three weeks absorbing that and seeing also how my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncles would operate in the village, and how would they would live with nature. There's no electricity. There's no running water, but they have this way of losing that is so content, and so at peace. I started craving that. I was like, “What is this?” Why am I here in Canada, when I have all these resources, all these plans, all these things and I'm miserable? I'm suffering.”

Sitting with this and observing that started to guide me towards this journey of finding fulfillment in a different way in figure skating. I started to realize that for me, what I've always loved to do when I was – and again, I'm talking specifically with figure skating, one of the things that I always love to do is to connect with audiences while I'm on the ice and share the story, this thing that I had inside of me. I always had that in the back of my mind, but that was never the priority, because none of that technically gives you results and so it didn't matter. I realized that I have this ability and I do have this gift of being able to communicate that to people with my body. I am able to tell stories and make people feel things while I'm on the ice.

That started my journey with moving with a completely different intention. I started to dive so much deeper into this idea of being on the ice, but being a channel, being a channel of the universe, source, God, and being able to move that through my body to help people feel this sense of presence when they watch me and feel connected in a way that they haven't felt connected to other skaters. That sparked this raging fire inside my body. When I was sitting there for these few weeks, I finally started to realize that I could use figure skating as a tool and as a way to communicate and as a way to connect on much deeper levels, not only to people, not only to myself, but to everything.

That's where this journey really started for me. Yes, I was still battling, because that was yes, it was a realization in that moment, but I still had 20 years of conditioning in my brain that I had to start undoing and started – I needed to start ripping out these roots that were not allowing me to step into that space. That's where that journey started for me.

[0:46:03] LW: Your skating career didn't last, your performance career didn't last much longer after that trip. You started to go within and connecting to the original purpose of sharing your story with the audience and all of that, but you kept getting these concussions. What does a concussion feel like? You've had several of them. The last one was the most intense. What does that actually feel like when you're trying to heal from that?

[0:46:29] EB: Yeah. I mean, there's so many different symptoms that individuals could feel and depending on who you are, you feel different symptoms. For me, there was this insane pressure in my head, this burning in my eyes constantly and this fogginess in my brain and in my eyes that I couldn't get away from. Then to add on top of that, insomnia, I couldn't sleep. Then elevated anxiety. Then, because of the anxiety, the sleep was worse, because I wasn't sleeping, my anxiety was getting worse. Then it's like this cycle.

I had a few concussions. But you're right, my last one was the worst one. I can obviously – I would love to share more about that one, because it taught me a lot. But I don't wish concussions on anyone. It's debilitating, because it's not something you can – I had a knee surgery. I knew once the surgery was done, eight months from now, I'll be back to fully athlete mode, do whatever I want to do. There's a timeline. Concussions, there's no timeline. It could be two weeks, it could be 24 hours, it could be three months, two years, you don't know. This uncertainty, you will feel much of this inner turmoil that you experienced. For me, all of these, in a way, it served as an important purpose for me, especially that last one that I had. It served a really important lesson for me.

[0:47:59] LW: It took you a while to recover from that one, too. I guess, you had this ceremonial last, final performance. You knew it was the final one. The audience knew it was your last one. Can you talk about that, how you graduated yourself from that aspect of your career?

[0:48:16] EB: Yeah. If you don't mind, I'll take you back just the setup of that year. That year was the Olympic trials for 2018. I knew it was going to be my last season. I knew it was going to be my last time trying to make the Olympics. At that point, I had let go of the idea of wanting to be an Olympic champion and all of that. I started on a completely different path. Again, my conditioning was still telling me that I wouldn't be enough if I didn't make it to the Olympics. I needed to at least make it to the Olympics. Because that's every athlete's dream. A lot of athletes, if that's their dream and they don't make it, it feels almost like a failure. I decided I was going to make it my goal to make it to the Olympics.

I was skating really well over the summer. Then early September, I fell and started feeling right away these symptoms of concussion, which I knew really well at that point. I was like, it was going to be fine. Maybe a few days, a week. I didn't really hit my head that much, and so I was like, I'm sure it's going to go by pretty quickly and I'll be able to get back into training and prepare for the Olympics. I waited. I waited a couple days, it wasn't getting any better. I waited a week, it wasn't getting any better. Then two weeks in, I was like, "Okay, I have a competition coming. I feel like, I have to disqualify myself from that competition." Or not disqualify, but pull out from the competition, withdraw, because I won't be able to do it.

Again, I had hope that within the next few days, there was always like, in a couple of days, it's going to get better. In a couple days, it's going to get better and it wasn't changing at all. When I say at all, like day one to day 60 was the same. I couldn't be on a bike, a stationary bike for five minutes without then being in my room for three days from headache and pain. That was like that for two months. Every day that went by, again, this dream, this slight little dream of going to the Olympics was just getting further and further away from me every single day.

I was getting deeper and deeper into this dark place. I knew that I was operating from a different place, but I still had this tie to the Olympics. I wouldn't feel like I would be enough if I didn't go to the Olympics. This relationship was just kept fueling itself and I kept going deeper and deeper and deeper into the darkness. Two and a half months went by, and I didn't know, at that point, I had no idea what was happening. I was really just trying to get better.

I had a beautiful gift come my way. Early on, within the first couple of days on my concussion, I went to see my healer. She's worked with me on energy healing for a few years. I went to see her and I remember, she was working on me and she said, "I kept seeing these visions of one door closing and 19 opening." At the time, I didn't understand what that meant. I didn't know. It didn't register. To me, again, I was still very focused on what I needed to do. Two months later, I hadn't seen her. I hadn't talked to her. She randomly was walking downtown in the city. My sister was walking by her. They knew each other and she stopped. My sister was like, "Oh, my God. I can't believe I'm seeing you."

My sister was like, "I haven't seen you in a long –" They hadn't seen each other in over a year. I don't even know how long. She was like, "I need you to tell Elladj something. He's been on my mind. I've been feeling certain things. I need you to tell him something." My sister called me and she was telling me that and I was like, "Okay. What'd she have to say?" She spoke three words and everything changed. She looked at me and she said, "All she told me to tell you is let it go." Instantly, when I tell you instantly, there's no other way to describe it, but instantly, as soon as I heard the words, let it go, it's as if I was being spoken to by God. Immediately, in my entire body, a 1,000 pounds of weight just lifted off of me and I got it. I understood. It resonated with me on such a deep level.

I was like, "Of course. Why am I doing this to myself? Why am I trying to hold on to this thing that I've started letting go for so long? Why am I allowing myself to live in a space of needing to do that in order to feel like I'm enough? I am enough. I've done enough. I don't need to do anything more. There's so much waiting for me outside of this career of being an Olympian. Why am I still holding on to this?" For some reason, in that moment, it completely lifted and left my body.

Immediately after that, the next day, I started healing. My concussion symptoms started going down. I had already let go of the idea of even needing to go to nationals. I was done. I was like, "I'm going to let this heal and I'm going to go and move on and live the rest of my life." Making that decision just lifted everything inside of me. I found this new clarity, this new vision. I

started living from that. Then once I started seeing my symptoms getting better, I got back on the ice, and I was just skating around and I was feeling better all of a sudden.

My coach was like, "Well, why don't we just try to get you to nationals, just to do one more competition, just to finish it off?" I was like, "You know what? Yes, that spoke to me." I was like, "I feel like, I want to send a goodbye message to all the people that followed me, all the people that supported me and given me their time and have been part of my life. I want to go out to nationals and just skate from a place of pure gratitude." I trained for about a month and a half, and it was hard. Because it was three months of no training, then I had about four weeks to get ready for this competition. I gave everything I had. I just trained every day and pushed, pushed, pushed, pushed, pushed. Showed up at nationals and it was almost like a brand-new – it was like the first time I've entered a competition, but with a brand-new energy and a brand-new space.

I couldn't believe that I was walking around and I had zero levels of anxiety, zero levels of stress. I was just completely at peace with what the situation was. I spent the whole three days training for this competition there at nationals, being on the ice and just feeling only gratitude for being here and having the ability to experience this one last time and having the ability to share my passion with Canada and with the people that were watching one last time. Then the day of the first competition, I was warming up for the practice in the morning and I started getting these visions in my mind of the stadium being under feet, me crying, feeling the sense of fulfillment, the deepest sense of fulfillment that I've ever felt.

I started crying, because I was like, this is so beautiful. For some reason, I knew that that's what was going to happen tonight. I had no doubt in my mind that I was getting a vision of what was going to unfold tonight. I felt, again, only the deepest sense of love. I showed up at the competition and put my skates on, got on the ice and I received the most beautiful gift, and I was able to share the most beautiful gift with everyone that was watching there. We shared a moment. We shared something that you don't often see, ever see really in figure skating, because it's so focused on technical abilities, that I was able to step on the ice and share part

of myself that people haven't seen in the figure skating world. That was the most beautiful experience that I could have had.

From that moment on, that was it. I was done. I didn't need to go back. I didn't need to do another competition. Everything that I've experienced in the sport in that moment, just closed as a perfect loop. Until this day, when I think of that send off, when I think of that moment, it allowed me at that time to continue and to move on to other things with this sense of fulfillment that I hadn't felt for 20 years up until that moment. It was really beautiful.

[0:56:39] LW: At that point, people in the skating world obviously know who you are, right? You have some opportunities, or whatever with that, maybe some show skating or whatever. What's the financial aspiration as a man, grown man who retires himself from competition? What are we talking about? Does show skating pay a lot of money? Are you going to get a side job? Because you hear your stories about Olympian athletes even having to work at smoothie shops and stuff. What are you doing for money at that time?

[0:57:09] EB: Yeah. Figure skating is not a really lucrative path, or when it comes to finances. If you're Olympic champion, you won the biggest competition of your life, you can live off of that for about four years. You can make some money for about four years, like comfortable living. Then once there's a new Olympic champion in your category, you're forgotten about. There's a very limited amount of time, even for the people that are the champions of the champions. For everyone else, there's not much.

I was lucky enough that – well, I wouldn't say lucky enough, but because of my path, because of my journey, because I found this authentic self within me, I was able to gift and give the world of figure skating something that no one else could. A lot of skating productions wanted that. They wanted that in the show, because no one else could do what I do. I was able to make a good living out of it. But I had to be on tour 365 days a year. I would go from Japan, to Europe, to North America, back to Korea, back to Europe, all year round. I would have to be on planes and hotels and that's the lifestyle. If you want to make it lucrative, that's what I had to

do. I did that for two years and then the pandemic hit, and everything stopped. Show business was on pause.

There was nothing else for me to do, except sit on my couch with my wife, which was actually a really beautiful thing, because my wife and I were both really busy at the time. She had her busy career. I had my busy career. The first three years of our lives, we spent just traveling, meeting each other in Japan, then meeting each other in LA, then meeting each other in Europe. That's how we lived. Spending the time with her at that time was really beautiful for our relationship.

When the pandemic hit, I spent the next two years not doing one show. Then you're stuck in this position where you're so dependent on these productions to not only function, but then to want to hire you in order to make money. That's when I decided, and my wife and I, we had a lot of conversations, and we wanted to find a way to not be dependent on these production companies. That's one of the reasons why we started making videos. The other one was because I was starting missing this dynamic of being able to share and create and express myself through movement, through skating. We started making videos, which I was very resistant of. I had so much resistance and I can tell you all about it. But if it wasn't for my wife, Michelle, I wouldn't be in the situation that I am now.

We started making videos and that gave us all the freedom that we were looking for, that I was looking for. Because not only do I get to do what I do, do what I love, share myself, express myself, but then I get to do that on a much bigger platform. I get to inspire people across the world. I get to inspire young black, indigenous and people of color to pick up skates, or to have representation within the sport of figure skating. At the same time, I get to financially be in a space that I've never been in before, and would never have been able to be in if it was just me doing skating shows around the world.

[1:00:20] LW: Let's talk about that day that you shot that video that went viral, right? Had you done a lot of wild ice skating and the backflip thing? Was that your signature move? Or is that something you just started practicing?

[1:00:34] EB: Yeah, backflip is something I've been doing since I was 15-years-old. It's something I –

[1:00:38] LW: Okay. You doing a backflip is like, somebody just doing a cartwheel. It's like nothing. You think nothing of it.

[1:00:43] EB: Basically, basically. It's something I've been doing for a very long time. Within the figure skating world, we know backflip as one of the easiest things to do. Yes, getting over the fear of going backwards, being on skates, on ice, all of that, yes, that's one thing. But once you get over that and you learn how to do the backflip, the margin of error is so small. It's really hard to miss. It's something that I've been throwing for over a decade now. The wild ice, that was something that I'd never experienced before.

I knew since the beginning of my healing journey, this journey going inwards. I've started to connect deeply to nature, and having this relationship with nature that I'd never had before. One day, I had this thought like, “Gosh. How incredible would it be to do what I love to do most, skate, express myself, but do it on ice that was formed by mother nature, and then be in nature, with mountains and trees?” I'm like, I could do that and never skate again and it would be the most beautiful moment of my life.

A few years later, once the first video went viral, the one that I just went into a local neighborhood, found a rink, threw a backflip, and that started going off a little bit, a friend of mine was like, “Hey, I know someone in the mountains that goes out and finds ice. I know you've been wanting to skate, so let me put you in touch with them.” I reached out to the guy and he was like, “I'm going literally tomorrow morning at 6 am, if you want to join.” I was like, “Done.” Done deal. I'm grabbing my skates. I'm going to head out there. So, we did.

I had prepared something that I wanted to shoot out there. I knew that the day was going to come, that I was going to be able to go out there and shoot in the mountains, so I wanted to prepare something special that I could feel deeply connected to when I'm performing and find

a way to share that beauty with everyone. I prepared something. Got someone to come. Got someone to shoot my video, and then we stepped out there.

The first hour, I just stood there. I just spent the whole hour just being in awe of the beauty that it is. Even the quality of the ice was completely different. It's not like what we have in indoor rinks. Yes, indoor rinks are maintained, Zambonis, all of that technology, it's smooth, it's great. When Mother Nature creates one that first freeze, there's nothing like it. You can't recreate that sensation on your blades. I spent the first hour just being in awe of that. Then we shot that video and I felt so full present. Going out in nature and doing what I do in nature allows me to tap into a place of presence that it's even easier to access than when I'm performing in an indoor rink.

Being able to be there and be so present and it soak in, all of this was magical. Then I shared that and that went viral. It just reaffirmed for me that everything that I was doing and the path that I was on right now was exactly where I was meant to be and exactly what I was meant to be doing.

I should, even though there's no shouldn't, but there's no reason for me to question that anymore. Because it's so in line and it's so real that that was the start for all of this now. That moment led to now me talking to you, which is me like thinking in the heart.

[1:04:07] LW: Man, it's crazy. It's like, after hearing your whole story, it's like, every single thing that you experienced, you're the only person that could have done that, that could have shot those videos. There's no other skater that could have done that. It's like that guy with the cranberry juice on the skateboard, you know?

[1:04:23] EB: Yeah, yeah.

[1:04:25] LW: If you if you look at his account, I went back and looked at his account and he would post these videos of him lip-syncing and basically, grooving out to these different songs

for over a year. That day that he shot that one, that was just another day. That was nothing special for him.

[1:04:43] EB: Yeah, but to the world it was something that resonated with people so deeply. I think, that's the beauty also, of social media, is there's this ability to be who you are and do the things that you've been doing. I'm not skating any differently now than I was when I first retired, or even when I was competing, but my skills are the same. But the way people interact with it and engage with it is completely different now. Part of it, a big part of it is my intention and the way, the space that I'm operating from. Then also, is the ability to be able to be on a phone and be able to experience people's lives in a way that you wouldn't be able to, without the beauty of social media.

Yes, there's so much negative things about social media. For me, it changed my life in some of the most beautiful ways. I used to be the guy that didn't want to be on social media, didn't want to post and didn't want to do any of these things. Then it turned out that it's one of the most beautiful gifts that I could have received in my life. I'm just so deeply grateful to these incredible platforms and the people that are existing within it.

[1:05:53] LW: You also had to overcome your resistance to being yourself, to completely showing up a 100% unapologetic, this is who I am, this is what I'm bringing to this, my expression of this sport. I think that's the lightning in the bottle that those videos captured.

[1:06:09] EB: Absolutely.

[1:06:10] LW: And inspired.

[1:06:12] EB: That, I want to give a lot of credit to my wife. I was so scared. I had so much fear in presenting myself authentically like that, for so many reasons, of course, but I felt so uncomfortable. The gentle push forward, the gentle embrace, the unconditional love that I received throughout the process of me trying to muster the courage to do it, if she wasn't there, none of this would have happened. She gave me the strength to tap into that space and not be

afraid. It's incredibly beautiful things. I'm so grateful for her support every day. She's only been that for me.

Yes, it was a lot of my journey, my career and everything that I've done and the journey that I went in to be able to find that authenticity and find that space of who Elladj Baldé is in his lifetime, is with her help that I was able to find the courage to share that with everyone.

[1:07:16] LW: You started this alliance. Talk about that. What is the intention behind it? Why did you start it with, I think, 10 other skaters, as opposed to doing it by yourself, or maybe with a couple of people?

[1:07:27] EB: Yeah, so the Figure Skating Diversity and Inclusion Alliance started, basically right after the murder of George Floyd. There was an energy and a movement there that I think none of us had ever seen, really, up until that time. A few skaters and I, we just started connecting with each other in a way that we hadn't before. We started talking about our own experiences in skating. We started to realize that no matter where you were from, whether you were from Europe, North America, South Africa, all of our experiences were similar, were very, very, very similar.

That's when we were like, okay, well, let's create a safe space for all of us, from all over the world, to be able to step into it and share and feel safe to be able to share our experiences and feel supported. We started just for the first few weeks, just talking to each other, skaters from all over the world. We join on Zoom and just talk. Then we started to see that national sport organizations, like Skate Canada, US Figure Skating would post things like, we support the Black Lives Matter Movement, and this and this and blah, blah, blah, and all of that. We were like, none of your actions have shown any support. You're saying this, but what are you going to do? This seems extremely performative.

What we decided to do is we wanted to form this alliance, that was going to keep these national sport organizations accountable for actually making change and wanting to create the environment that we, the way that we experience the sport may be the next generation of

skaters of black indigenous and people of color would have a different experience. We wanted to keep them accountable for that. We founded the Figure Skating Diversity and Inclusion Alliance and we basically made these call to actions. We send them to these national sport organizations and US figure skating, not a lot shifted, but Skate Canada, a lot of things started changing. We started to see that they're really taking this seriously.

Then we saw that there's this this opportunity to change the way that our sport is operating. That's why, we felt like as a group of people, as an alliance, we would be stronger in being able to keep these people accountable. Then at the same time, there's a group of incredible black women that started this mentorship program called Big Skater Little Skater. Basically, they would link mentors, so people like us that have made it in the sport, and they would connect them with younger black skaters who would potentially want some guidance, or need some guidance, to just bridge that gap between some of us that made it in sport and that could be there as a support system for these younger skaters on their journeys. That was something that was really beautiful and I feel like, really, really proud that I've been part of that group.

Then last year, my wife and I, we started our own foundation called The Skate Global Foundation. That's something that we've been really passionate about. We've seen a couple things that figure skating would – we talked earlier about the price of figure skating and how expensive it is, and people being priced out of the sport. Well, another issue is also accessibility to ice. A lot of underserved communities have rinks, or outdoor rinks. There's a lot of rinks in Canada, almost everywhere. Every neighborhood has one. But most of them are middle-class, or upper-class neighborhoods.

In underserved communities, you don't see a lot of these rinks. The access to figure skating, or just hockey, or skating in general is insane. We started to realize that there's things that we could do to help in different ways. That's why we started The Skate Global Foundation. It's basically based under three pillars, one is EDI, everything that has to do with equity, diversity inclusion. The second one is mental health, because it's such an important topic. It's such an important thing to talk about. Both my wife and I are so deeply committed to the journey, the

healing journey. It's something we want to be able to find ways to give back on and then climate change.

Every project that we do falls under one of these three pillars. But right now, we're really focused on EDI, because it's my immediate experience right now. It's what I've been living in, in the past two years, especially since the murder of George Floyd. Since the train is going, we want to put a lot of our resources in that to help further the change as much as possible. Yeah. It's something that we feel like has been missing in skating. There's a lot that are still missing in skating. Slowly and slowly, step by step, we'll try to bring in as many resources and as much change as we can.

[1:12:21] LW: You mentioned in your last performance, the visual that you had. I know that with your alliance and foundation, you teach visualization, you talk about the importance of visualizing. Can you elaborate on that just a little bit, in case somebody's about to go into a very important experience? How can they use that tool to amplify, or enhance their experience?

[1:12:42] EB: Yeah. Well, that's something I started doing once I started practicing meditation, a friend of mine, who was an athlete, was talking to me about visualization. I didn't really know what it was. Basically, what he explained to me was like, your subconscious mind doesn't necessarily know the difference between something that's happening in real-time right now, right here, or something that's happening in your mind. He told me, he was like, he told me there was this research that was done, where they took a group of basketball players. They split the group between two. One group was allowed to go practice, free throws every day, for a certain amount of time, for a certain amount of weeks. The other group was only allowed to visualize themselves doing the free throws, for the same amount of time. They weren't allowed to go and touch a ball and actually throw a ball.

At the end of the study, they realized that the people that were visualizing, versus the people that were in visualizing had equal, if not better success than the people that were there in the gym every day, practicing. I'm like, "What?" When he started telling me these things, I was like,

“Okay. Well, tell me more. Let's get into this.” Basically, what I started doing is I started to realize, well, if I combine the visualization, and I combine daily training, that's almost like I'm doing another set of training, without using my body. I could use my mind to do a whole training session. I would sit there, basically, and I would visualize myself doing all of my jumps in my mind. I would go through it in slow motion. I will go through every detail, what it feels like in my body, what it looks like outside of my body. I would go through every motion. I would go through the entire routine.

I would put the song in my head, and I would go through my performance. I would imagine myself doing it exactly how I want to do it every day. By doing that every day, your subconscious mind, again, doesn't know the difference whether it actually happened, or not. I did that constantly and constantly and constantly. By the end, I was – At first, it's difficult. With sports, it's difficult to imagine yourself doing things very well, because I know for me and a lot of athletes when you start doing it, you, you start feeling yourself making mistakes, or things are a little bit weird, because your brain is not trained to do these motions without actually needing to do them physically. The more that you continue to train that part of your brain, everything becomes so smooth, and your body retains all that information. It's the most powerful tool that I've ever used as an athlete and in my life. I think, visualization is a practice that everyone should learn. It's powerful. Powerful as hell. Yeah, it changed my life in so many ways.

[1:15:39] LW: Final question for you, how are you thinking about success these days after everything you've experienced?

[1:15:45] EB: Oh, that's a very good question. Success, to me, has so many layers, but the root, the core, to me is, how deeply have I gone into my inner world and how much have I understood of who I am and how much awareness have I developed in my life? Because with that, what you can create in your life is limitless. It's infinite. For me, whatever it is that I want to achieve externally, I first start internally, and continue to rip out the roots and the things that maybe are restricting me, or not allowing me to step into the space that I want to step into, or do the things that I want to do, or achieve the things that I want to achieve. If I rip out those

roots, and create the space that I need to step into it, then every action I will take after that will lead me towards it. Yeah, in short, that's my answer.

[1:16:48] LW: Beautiful, man. Well, thank you so much for being so transparent and sharing your story. I'm honored, again, to be able to have this experience with you. I just want to acknowledge you, man, for showing up as much as you have and for staying true to your path, even though you didn't even know you're on your path most of the time. I look forward to hopefully, getting a chance to cross paths with you at some point, at some point in person.

[1:17:12] EB: I appreciate it. I want to acknowledge you as well. Thank you for everything you're doing. Thank you for your time. I really hope that we'll cross paths in person.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:17:23] LW: Thank you so much for listening to my interview with Elladj Baldé. For more inspiration, make sure to follow Elladj on the socials @ElladjBalde. That's E-L-L-A-D-J-B-A-L-D-E. Of course, we'll drop links to everything that Elladj and I discussed in the shownotes on my website, which is lightwatkins.com/show.

If this is your first time listening to the Light Watkins Show, we've got an incredible archive of interviews with many other luminaries who share how they found their path and their purpose. You can even search interviews by subject matter, in case you want to hear more episodes, only about people who've taken leaps of faith, or who've overcome financial struggles, or who've navigated health challenges, etc., etc. You can also watch these interviews on my YouTube channel. If you go to YouTube and search Light Watkins Podcast, you can put a face to a story.

If you don't already know, I post the raw unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community. If you're the type that likes to hear all of the chit chat in the beginning of the episode and the false starts and the mistakes, then you can listen to all of that by joining my online community, which is thehappinessinsiders.com. You'll also have access to

a bunch of challenges, such as the 108-day meditation challenge, 30-day mindfulness triathlon and master classes for becoming the best version of yourself.

Then finally, to help me help you bring the guests best possible to this podcast, it would go a very, very long way if you could just take a few seconds to rate the podcast. All you do is look down at your screen, click on the name of the podcast, scroll down past the seven, or so previous episodes, you'll see a space with five blank stars. Hit the one on the right, which is a five-star rating, if you find this show and what we're trying to do to be inspiring. If you want to go the extra mile, please consider leaving a review. Just one line. Maybe it could be a recommendation of which episode somebody should start with if they're a brand-new listener to the podcast. Thank you in advance for that.

I really look forward to seeing you back here next week with another story, about someone just like me and you taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose, their path. Until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, keep taking those leaps of faith. If no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thanks, and have a great day.

[END]