



# Women in Steel: Progress & Perspectives



## Lauren Meroueh

Founder and Chief Executive Officer,  
Hertha Metals

### Where did your education and career start?

I've never been one for traditional paths. I had a deep passion for science and engineering from a young age, so I skipped high school entirely and went straight to engineering school. Then I transferred to the University of Florida and doubled down, pursuing dual degrees in civil and mechanical engineering. I went on to graduate school at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where I launched my first company through the Sandbox program. That's where the seeds for Hertha Metals were planted. As part of the first cohort of Breakthrough Innovator Fellows, I had the backing I needed to stop thinking about it and start building it.

### Why did you choose the steel industry and create Hertha Metals?

As I was exploring what I wanted to do next, I was searching for industries that have an outsized impact on society and were in need of fundamental change. That was steel. Steel is in everything around us, a material that we will never replace, and that hasn't seen significant innovation in the ore-to-steel route in almost two centuries. This led me to start Hertha Metals while in the Breakthrough Innovator Fellows cohort.

### What challenges have you faced in building Hertha Metals, and what did you learn from them?

There is always a lot of trial and error that comes with building a company. That was no different for us. The steel industry is a behemoth: It's slow-moving and hard to disrupt. That's why we've been operating the same way as we were hundreds of years ago, with very little innovation. Proving that our technology and process to make steel-making more cost-competitive and cleaner actually works was only the first step; securing the capital that enables us to scale was the challenge. It taught me to be strategic and focus on proving commercial viability first. Today, we are operating the country's largest novel steel production demo, producing at a tonnage-per-day scale. Later this year, we break ground on our commercial high-purity iron plant for rare earth magnets which also serves as a scaled-up steel demonstration plant.

### What's been the most rewarding part of building something from the ground up?

Founding Hertha Metals means taking one of the world's most entrenched industries and proving it can be reinvented. We've reimaged steelmaking from the ground up: creating safer working conditions, generating new manufacturing jobs and charting a cleaner, more competitive path for American industry. The steel industry hasn't fundamentally changed in decades, but we're proving that even the most resistant systems will bend if you're bold enough to challenge "the way we've always done it."

### What does innovation look like for you in such a legacy industry?

For decades, the steel industry has been locked into legacy processes because that's what blast furnace infrastructure supports. Innovation in steel is flexibility, a new process that can integrate directly into existing facilities, refine any grade of iron and get us to the same end result more cost-effectively.

### How have mentors, peers, or industry networks influenced your path as an entrepreneur?

I've been fortunate to have many female champions, different ones for different chapters, encouraging my entrepreneurial ambitions and believing in my capabilities. You don't realize the impact that has until you are down the road and look back. When up against groups of people that said "no you can't" or "this is impossible," it was that support that enabled me to break through the noise.

### How have your personal experiences shaped the way you approach leadership and decision-making?

Being the first female inventor and founder in the steel industry means I've never had a playbook to follow. I had to write my own. That's been a massive advantage for Hertha Metals because we're not constrained by the way

things have always been done. It's forced me to lead with conviction over conformity and build a company that values innovation over tradition. That's a major reason we've been able to achieve something that's never been done in steelmaking before. We've attracted a diverse coalition of leading experts from far beyond the steel industry, and a third of Hertha's workforce are women — more than double the industry average. When you're not trying to fit into an old mold, you can build something entirely new. In our case, that something is reshaping American manufacturing.

### Do you have any professional development book recommendations that you'd like to share?

*Negotiating the Impossible* by Harvard Professor Deepak Malhotra is essential reading. Negotiations are such a key aspect of driving mutual interest into an appreciable transaction, and this book shares strategies and real-world examples that are helpful whether you're just starting your career or are an experienced leader. ♦



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