



Greg Polychronidis: A Winning Mindset

Andy Stevenson: So, Greg it's great to speak to you today. Now, you have spinal muscular atrophy. Can you tell us about that condition and how it affects your life?

Greg Polychronidis: It's a disability that affects all four limbs. It's from the day that I was born and each year it becomes worse. It sounds like a very bad condition, but I have learnt to overcome many obstacles. I do the best to live my life in the way that I want to.

AS: Is there some strange advantage in a way of being born with a disability in that you grow up and learn to do things like any other child?

GP: Yes, I believe it makes you stronger. From being a child, you know that you have to struggle in your life. You have a weak point and you have to make some other points much stronger in order to have a normal life, and that's what I did. My mother told me 'Greg you must be strong, learn things, have a good education so you can live a normal life' and that's what I did. I always say to others 'never be disappointed. Find your strong point and work on them, then you will accomplish great things.

AS: Let's talk about boccia. If you had to describe the sport to someone who had never seen it, how would you describe it?

GP: Boccia is a game of tactics and it requires a lot of thinking. It's like chess because you have to think about the next movement and billiards because of the way the balls can move. For me it is the best thing I can do in my life and I'll always promote it where possible.

AS: The other thing about boccia is, it's specifically a Paralympic sport, there is no Olympic equivalent, so the Paralympics takes great pride in it. And it's also a sport for people like yourself who people would describe as a severe impairment. Sometimes the bodies make involuntary movement but when it comes to the moment of rolling the ball, they somehow manage to control it and roll it perfectly.

GP: The Paralympics has to give the opportunity for everyone to compete. Boccia is for the severe impairments and the great thing about it is that in boccia, a person with a severe disability can play a healthy man and win because it's a strategy game. In my category I cannot throw the ball with my hand.



AS: And you use the ramp to set the balls in motion and you have head gear. And it has to be said that you use special people. Your assistant is your wife but it used to be your father.

GP: We played together for a number of years and won a gold Paralympic medal. And now it's even better, I'm competing with my wife. The sport assistant is also considered as an athlete because we train all the time together and the role is very significant. We have limited time during the game and we must have the best communication possible. For example, I can say a word to my assistant and they must understand 10 actions. I have to have my mind inside the game. The sport assistant cannot speak or look inside the court either.

AS: It's a very unique relationship in sport, I can't remember too many others like it in sport. As you mentioned your fiancé at the time, now your wife Katherina took over as your assistant. How did the dynamic change?

GP: Actually Katherina was a tennis athlete and rhythmic gymnastics. It was for the benefit of my game because we made our game even faster and saved our time. It's something special, something magnificent and something wonderful. It's a sport where when a person watches a game, they love it from the game. And I'm happy that I have accomplished great achievements within this and I am most happy I have motivated a lot of children to play too.

AS: Is it true that your father made all of your boccia ramps with your name on?

GP: Yeah, yeah. This is from the very beginning and I'm really happy I had the luck for him to make some of the best equipment in the world. I had the manufacturer inside my house!

AS: I believe you taught some Allianz athletes in Greece how to play boccia. Did you enjoy that coaching element?

GP: Yes I did. My relationship with Allianz is great. I was asked to speak about my career and I explained all I have come through from the beginning of my life. They were very motivated and they told me they'll follow me for the rest of my career and they just want to support me throughout. And when I have national championships, I always have people from Allianz and their children, we do whatever we can to motivate people and show them Paralympic sports are magnificent and that it's great to follow and be a part of it.

AS: I know you're a modest guy Greg so you might shrug your shoulder, but what did you think you were teaching these people beyond just boccia? What do you think people listening to this will be taking?

GP: The most important thing is to never give up. First of all because of the disability, because they could see I almost cannot move at all but I do what I do.



This needs emotional strength and it motivates them. And when I said about my career and setbacks, I don't give up when a failure comes but I try to become stronger and win my next challenge. I believe this is something that touched them.

AS: And how do you feel about the word 'inspirational'? Do you like being called inspirational or does it make you uncomfortable?

GP: I would love to be inspirational. I don't know how much I have affected others lives but definitely it would be a great honour to me to know I am. In 2007, I was in a different city of Greece and was presenting boccia. There were a lot of people watching and then a guy started playing boccia and he was very good. In some years, he managed to win a silver European medal. His whole life changed because of that and I felt inspirational and very happy about it. If you don't change other lives, it does not have the same value. But when you win a medal and through it you can affect others and make their lives better, it is just like a blessing.

AS: I want to take you back to 2004 in your first Paralympics in your home country of Greece. How special was representing your country?

GP: It was a dream come true. The real reason I started playing was the fact the Games would be held in Athens. I was studying economics and finance so I started working and had a lot of career opportunities at that time but the dream to participate in the Games in my home city, never again in my life, was a dream for me. It became my first priority. I did the best I could with my father but it was very early for us and I had only competed in one international competition before the Games - I did not have any experience at all and I was not ready to fight against great competitors. I finished 37th in my first competition in 2003 and a few months later in 2004, I finished 6th. So, this huge step from 37th to 6th was like saying to me 'you can do it. Don't stop now'. Just after I finished university in 2005, my father stopped working and we concentrated only on boccia. It paid off in 2006 because I got my first medal in the World Championships. Then we said 'yeah, that was a good decision!'. And with absolute concentration we could achieve major success. And I cannot imagine in myself being first in the world in somewhere else but in boccia, I managed it and I managed to change the lives of many. To motivate the to start the sport and be more active and I am very, very happy about it.

AS: Did the Athens Paralympics change anything for people with disabilities in Greece?

GP: Yeah. It was the best that could happen for Athens because accessibility in the city changed. We have one of the most accessible subways, a lot of ramps on the streets for the Games. Buses now have ramps. Before the Games, the city was



not accessible at all. We fight and struggle to continue to build accessibility in the city in Athens and the whole of Greece.

AS: On paper your Paralympic career has been brilliant. One gold, two silvers and one bronze. But I know there have been some huge disappointments along the way. How do you view the silver and bronze medals?

GP: All Paralympic medals are successes. The competition is so strong that the fact you are on the podium, you must feel very lucky, very happy and very satisfied. Though you are struggling for four years, when you lose the final game, it is like someone is killing you in the most torturing way. I felt that in 2008 when I was first in the world rankings, had been in two finals in 2006 where I lost and in 2007, the World Cup, where I lost again. And then the third final in Beijing. It consisted of four ends and in the first end I did a very bad technical mistake which cost me two points. I got it to 2-2 and we had the last end and I lost by one point. It was like someone was killing me. It was my third lost final in three years and was one of the worst feelings that I've had. But when I was going up to the podium, just as I looked up, I looked around me and saw there were only three of us. And then I knew - I cannot be sad, I must be happy and feel blessed. I could have been on the other side and just watching three other guys on the podium. I just have to find a way to become better. And finally win a final! Three finals were all lost and I thought about quitting after Beijing but that moment made me reconsider. I said 'I must prove to myself that I can become better and in the next final I will win' and it eventually happened. In 2009 I won a final and my first gold. At the next Paralympic Games, gold. Half of my medals are now gold medals. That moment in Beijing made me much, much stronger.

AS: There will be people listening to this who have had their own defeats to cope with. Not just in sport but their own disappointments. How do you bounce back?

GP: I don't believe there is a person in the world who hasn't had disappointments and failure. The important thing is how to overcome this. The most important is to find your mistake in order to become stronger and not make the same mistakes. If you cannot find the mistake, you have to say 'This is life. Anything can happen and you just must go on and do the best again and again and again.' Failure and achievement will come. We must become stronger from each failure in life and we must appreciate when we succeed. If we do not fail, we will never know the meaning of success. Because to feel success, we must have felt the pain of the failure. Only then we can see how important the success is.

AS: Does it make defeat easier having your wife or your dad beside you? Does it help or hinder having someone share those feelings?



GP: It's very difficult because the person you are with has shared all the preparation before the failure or success. So I believe that since you share everything, you share those feelings too. Now with Katherina, it's the other half of me. When we fail, she feels the same pain. When we lost the final in Rio 2016, we were crying all the morning the next day. And then I told her 'no, we must stop. We won the silver medal and this is huge. We are in Rio and we have not got out of the Paralympic village at all, so we have to go and enjoy ourselves!' And she was very positive and we went and had fun.

AS: Now you proposed shortly after Rio. It's fair to say us men are not great at these details and memories, so we decided to ask Katherina instead about that proposal.

KP: I will never forget the day. It was our 10-month anniversary of our relationship and we still celebrate every single one. Greg asked me out for dinner to the fancy roof garden that we first met. I was super excited to go back to this amazing place with my love and with all these memories that we had from our first date. So we went there and had an emotional dinner. When we ordered dessert they asked if we wanted champagne and Greg was stressed and said no. They sent the champagne anyway with a chocolate dessert and when I realised that in the bottom of the glass was a ring, I was looking at him with tears in my eyes. He kissed me and told me he wanted me forever and after forever, he wanted me to be his wife. And that was the most amazing moment of my life until our marriage.

AS: Wow. Was that better than any gold medal, Greg?

GP: It was! That was a magnificent moment but I have never been more anxious. I had to get the ring into the glass of champagne so I went to the manager of the restaurant and I told him to take it and put it in. But my anxiety was that bad that when Katherina asked me who the person was, he was the age of my dad but I told her he was my school mate. And I knew I was stupid! But I think that if Katherina had asked my name, I would not have even known what to answer. And then there was a moment the waitress wanted to bring the champagne and I said 'no!' and then I said... what are you saying! It was very funny but in five minutes we were both crying because of happiness and it was a spectacular moment.

AS: Katherina is not disabled and I'm the same – I'm disabled and my wife isn't. Do you ever get unusual or hurtful reactions to your relationship?

GP: We get different ones but we don't care what people think. Mostly they are very positive reactions because people see us and are excited and think 'wow, this is great'. Some feel pity for Katherina and we laugh. When you love somebody, everything else doesn't matter.



AS: Actually we asked Katherina about this as well. Here's what she said:

KP: I have never seen Greg's disability as food for thought for our common life. I love his character, his personality, his will for success and his dynamism. I fell in love with his personality from the first moment I talked with him. He's an amazing husband, my best friend, soul mate and the only person I am with 24/7. I even miss him and want to spend more time with him and I feel blessed to be his wife. So how can his disability be an obstacle? I had racism and cynicism sure, but mainly from older people. And I don't really care for what other people say. So, nothing can stop me from my happiness with him. I also strongly believe the Paralympic Movement has helped so much in society for not seeing disabled people as different people and I think year by year it is getting better. I'm really grateful to the Paralympic Movement for what it has done for society.

AS: How do you feel listening to that?

GP: Yeah, it's great. Katherina talked about many issues and she is right, we feel great love for each other that makes us one. When we are in different rooms, we cannot stay away for a long time. We'll shout 'where are you, I miss you!'. The Paralympic Movement I agree 100% is that the Movement has made society to not pity the disabled anymore but to feel they have capabilities. Not special capabilities, they're not special for me, but we are all capable to do and accomplish great things. The way to do this is the Paralympic Games because it is one of the greatest tools in society that we have to get rid of all the racism and to make people understand that we need respect and in every other way, we are normal people. Some can be good, some bad. Some achieve more, some less. But we are normal people.

AS: How have you seen the Paralympics change from your debut 16 years ago?

GP: I've seen it change because the Movement is much more famous now. I see that people are loving it more and more and what helps most of all is social media. Social media offers the opportunity to show to the whole society what a Paralympic sport is, who the athletes are, to meet the athletes and to share a way of life. When people see this they understand it is something fabulous and society loves the Movement. It's what makes us stronger.

AS: We talked about inspirational – and I'm a cynical old boot – but you've certainly inspired me. It's been fantastic speaking with you Greg, thank you so much for the time.

GP: Thank you very much. It was fantastic speaking with you and I hope the Paralympic Movement will touch the lives of many. There are many opportunities



a person can have in their life and the only thing a person should do is take this opportunity and make the best of it. Then the happiness will come.

AS: Well I think I'm going to listen to that interview again when something goes not quite right in my own life. A really impressive, resilient and wise man. Please do rate, review and subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss an episode. Next week Australian goalball player Meica Horsburgh will be joining me. She was born with a vision impairment and went through some dark times, both literally and figuratively, before goalball saved her. We'll be discussing the importance of mental health and much more. Speak then.