

The Role of Sport in Recovery

David Wiseman - Episode 004

How sport can not only restore a sense of individual purpose, but also encourage a sense of community, with David Wiseman.

Michael: David, you suffered a life-changing injury. Can you tell us what happened?

David: So, I was serving in Afghanistan. I received a gunshot wound to my chest whilst engaged in a fire fight with the Taliban in a region called Nad-e Ali, in Helmand Province.

Michael: So what was the situation then? Were you out on a patrol? Was it a normal day in Afghanistan?

David: Yeah, pretty much. We'd just taken over a new patch of ground and my job was to ensure that the enemy didn't re-infiltrate back onto that ground. So, we were undertaking what's called an 'advance to contact'. We had to move over to the ground and establish contact with the enemy. Our aim was to force them from that territory and discourage them from coming back. So, in short, we were out to pick a fight.

Michael: Were you a large team? Or a small team?

David: I had a very small team of British soldiers. There were about seven of us out on patrol that day. Our small team was embedded within the Afghan National Army. So the majority of the soldiers that I worked with were from Afghanistan, which for me was incredible. I studied anthropology at university. So to live and work and fight alongside another culture was an incredible experience for me.

Michael: Were the British guys all from Britain?

David: No, not at all. In fact, when I was shot in the chest, I was in a really bad way. I crawled into this ditch and it was full of water and all sorts of muck. The first person to come and save me had to run across what we call the killing area (the area where rounds can fall). He was a Fijian guy called Lance Corporal Fong. And then the second soldier who came running across was our medic. He was from Ghana. He was a guy called Private Manny Ansah. So no, the British recruits were from all over the Commonwealth.

Michael: So you get shot, you then get dragged out of the ditch. Where are we at now?

David: Yeah, so I was in a pretty bad way. The round had pierced my axillary artery, just running underneath my clavicle. I had a brachial plexus injury. So nerve damage all up my neck and down my arm and down my right side. Pretty much paralysed down the right side. I had a second chest wound and my lung was pretty shredded. So, I stopped breathing a couple of times on the ground as my chest cavity started to fill with air and blood and the onset of a pneumothorax (collapsed lung). I was in a really bad way. It was only thanks to the medical attention that I received on the ground and in the helicopter, once we got to Camp Bastion, that my life was saved.

Michael: Then where did you go from Bastion? Back to the UK?

David: Yeah, absolutely. So once I'd stabilised in Bastion, we flew back to Birmingham and into the famous ward, S4, in Selly Oak Hospital where I spent several weeks, maybe a month or so, before exiting from there. Then I spent a long time in rehabilitation, at Headley Court.

Michael: So the rehab is one aspect of it. When did sport get involved with this?

David: I was inspired by sport right at the very beginning. I was lying in intensive care in Selly Oak and a chap walked in I hadn't seen for many years. We had joined the army at about the same time. He joined maybe a year before, but we'd been at university together. He was a guy called Martin Hewitt. He was telling me about this incredible expedition that he and a handful of other wounded soldiers were planning to go on. Martin had also been shot in the chest a year before I had. One of the guys had lost his arm, another had lost his leg, and another guy had broken his back and was told he'd never walk again. They were planning to walk to the North Pole – and they did! It was incredible. Prince Harry joined them on that expedition. I was just incredibly inspired by their example of overcoming adversity.

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Hearing about that expedition made me train harder. It made me want to get well quicker. It made me want to get involved in something similar. So, 18 months after being shot in the chest and nearly dying in a ditch, I was standing on the summit of the eighth highest mountain in the world at 8,163 metres up – Mount Manaslu in Nepal. That was just an incredibly life-affirming experience. I realised, at that time, how much motivation and inspiration I had drawn from Martin and the other lads and how I had pulled that into my own recovery and rehabilitation. I just had this really strong desire to help others learn of the power of sport in recovery and rehabilitation.

Michael: Is this where the Invictus Games comes in?

David: Yeah, absolutely. In 2013, I joined a team that was gearing up to deliver the Invictus Games in September 2014. What an incredible experience that was, both in the setup and in the competition. I was really fortunate to compete in three Invictus Games. I'm a swimmer. I love to swim. Swimming was a really important part of my own recovery.

I realised through both climbing mountains, and working and competing in the Invictus Games, that sport is just this incredibly powerful vehicle in recovery and rehabilitation. I don't just mean for physical injury. Anybody that's been through extreme life events gets changed by those events. That's just part of the tapestry of life, for good or for bad, and sports is just an incredible leveller. It doesn't matter what that experience has been for you, whether you've been physically injured, or you've had a life changing experience that's affected you psychologically, sport targets each of those areas and positively affects them.

Physically, if you participate in sport, you're more likely to heal quicker, heal better. Socially, if you're having to go to training sessions or work alongside other people, or you're part of a team, it makes you get out of the door and psychologically, there are so many benefits from being involved with sport – like positive goal setting. These things are a reaffirmation of agency, of definition of self. When I was serving, I was utterly defined by that role, utterly defined by what I did.

When that was taken away through injury, I found myself thinking negatively and in a rear-ward facing fashion. I would think of myself as a wounded soldier, as a broken soldier, as service is something that I used to do. Whereas sport allowed me to start to rebuild a positive definition of self. After climbing some significant mountains, after competing, after being part of a team, these are all things that you can do to start to redefine yourself.

You don't have to climb a significant mountain. You don't have to compete at a high level. Just by being involved in a team or having a regular schedule of sport and exercise, that just starts to build up a definition of who you are. This is what I do. I'm a runner. I'm a swimmer. I play hockey with this team. It starts to build up that really positive way that you think about yourself and that's hugely powerful.

A final thing about how sport helped me psychologically: swimming in particular was incredible for me. I've been involved in a number of incidents, not just being shot. I've dealt with a lot of casualties. I've had to make some very difficult decisions about treatment and triage of casualties. Handling dead comrades and just existing in a high-risk environment where, when you step out of the door, you know it's going to be dangerous. You know that something could, is likely to, happen. And you're likely to come across something which will endanger you, or those around you. That weighs quite heavy.

Yeah, I developed some significant impact from those experiences on my own health. Intrusive thoughts, replaying of images, replaying of scenes became a daily struggle. I had an incredibly busy mind and it was very tiring to live with that. Sometimes terrifying, but always tiring. The only way, at that time, I could quieten my busy mind was to stick on a pair of goggles, put my head under the water and just go up and down, up and down, that swimming pool. Just the experience of being buoyant in the water, being surrounded, have my ears covered. Having the boring image of tiles just running under my nose for an hour or so, and counting and just counting my strokes, counting my breaths, controlling my breathing through the water. All of those things contributed to me just getting some peace.

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Michael: How does sport have an impact on the work you do now, whether it's professionally or whether it's through voluntary work?

David: So I work both professionally and voluntarily with sports. I hope that I take the passion that I have for it as a recovery and rehabilitation tool and pass that onto others. I just hope that other people can learn what I've learned, and experience what I've experienced, from the power of sport. I read something recently, this incredible book called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. I mean, I'll paraphrase it. He says it much better than I do, obviously. But basically what he's saying when you've experienced something extreme, sometimes you don't want to be around other people, or you feel that other people don't want to be around you, that they don't make sense or that you don't make sense to them. That can be the sensation. But everyone knows that it's just it. That's an unhealthy way to live.

We're social creatures, we should interact with others. The thing with sport is, it's a universal language, and it's a shared platform with prescribed rules and boundaries. So actually when you're feeling like that, when you're feeling like you don't make sense to yourself, or you don't make sense to others, or if people don't make sense to you, actually sport creates this environment where you can anticipate what's going to happen, because there's rules and boundaries. Right? This means that you can work in synchronicity with teammates or opponents in patterns and rhythms that make sense to everybody. It gives you an opportunity to interact socially with others. Eventually, that feeling of not making sense, that will erode over time.

Michael: Mate, for those that are trying to recover from a physical or psychological injury, what one piece of advice would you give them to get them going on their road to recovery?

David: I mean, there's a few. So I'll keep it short.

The first is: understanding that you're not on your own and finding somebody who you trust to speak to.

The second is: be kind to yourself. Imagine that you're talking to your best friend or work colleague, and they come to you with the same problems or issues that you're facing. How would you talk to them? How would you react to them presenting these problems to you? Whatever voice you use, whatever words you use to speak to your colleague or your friend, those are the same words that you should use to yourself. Be kind to yourself.

The third is: just get involved with sport. It doesn't have to be at a high level. It doesn't have to be with any goal or achievement. You're not looking for medals or wins, or getting new records. But just by getting involved with sport, it just really, really helps with the physical, the social and the psychological impacts of any injury, illness, or extreme event that's causing you impact. Means you'll get out the door, you'll interact with others and you will feel better about yourself.

Michael: David, thank you so much and we will leave it there.