

Respect for healthcare workers

Ellie Marks - Episode 006

Michael: Ellie, you were injured in Iraq in 2010. How did sport help in your recovery?

Ellie: When I was injured, the only thing that I knew is that I wanted to stay in the military and I wanted to retain my Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) as a combat medic. I found the pool by accident because I didn't want to get out of shape, and I fell in love with it. It was peaceful. It was a beautiful space for me. And it helped me more than almost anything else, when I was recovering. I didn't realise how many things I had weighing down on me, not just physically but mentally, until I got into the water and found some peace of mind. And I became addicted to swimming and finding that peace and trying to learn something new. I just fell in love with it.

Ellie: And then when the opportunity of Warrior Games presented itself, I went after it with everything that I had. It led to me being retained in the military. I joined a programme called the US Army World Class Athlete Programme, and I was simultaneously found fit for duty and welcomed as their first Paralympic swimmer. So, adaptive sports helped to save my life mentally and physically – and helped me to retain my position and my passion.

Michael: Did you swim before?

Ellie: I didn't. I'm from Arizona, so I knew how to not die in the water, and I had a general understanding of the strokes, but it wasn't until I started swimming in the Warrior Transition Unit and someone was nice enough to donate their time to me. Master Sergeant Galloway taught me how to properly swim and use the proper equipment.

Michael: So you went from learning not to die when you jumped in the water as a child. Then you got injured. And you used it for, I'm kind of surmising here, a form of pain relief, psychologically and physically. Then you fell in love with it and you started to master swimming?

Ellie: I think that sports, especially when you're dealing with a physical injury, or if you're going through something mentally, it gives you something entirely different to focus on. And it was such a gift, and such a relief to have something else to invest my frustrations in that day, or my excitement in that day. That it was easy to want to get better because it brought me so much joy and so much peace. Growing up, my siblings were good swimmers. My brother was a very good freestyle swimmer, and he did compete in high school and they had taught me some things, but it wasn't until 2012 that I had the desire to become a real swimmer and found out what that world was like.

Michael: When did you first compete?

Ellie: My first competition was in the Warrior Games in 2012. And that was, I guess, the jumping off point of me wanting to become a professional swimmer. I went to the Warrior Games and I was just kind of a 'yes, ma'am'. They said will you do this sport? And I said yes to whatever sport they wanted me to do. And I did well in the swimming and afterwards a woman named Queenie Nichols came up to me and asked me if I had ever thought about the Paralympics. And I said, "Well, that's an amazing word, I just don't know what it means. What are the Paralympics?" And she educated me. And as soon as I found out that now there is this next goal to chase, I went full-bore at it. I competed every weekend until I made a qualifying standard time to be able to apply for the US Army World Class Athlete Programme and to try and get onto the national team for swimming.

Michael: And when did you get into the national team?

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Ellie: I made my first emerging cut in the summer of 2013. And so, it was one year after the Warrior Games that I made my first national team time. And it just progressed from there. When I was trying to stay in the military and swimming at the same time and then I got both of those things at the same time in July of 2012, I felt such a debt to the military for keeping me and to this new adaptive sports community for keeping me, and giving me all this love and all these beautiful things to look forward to, that I competed as hard and as much as I could. And then, that's what led me to the Warrior Games in 2013, which was my second Warrior Games where I got to meet Prince Harry and he was there to observe them. And I found out that he took that experience and created Invictus. So when it was time for the inaugural Invictus games, everyone was incredibly excited, but myself especially, because this sport had saved my life so many times by that point.

Michael: Let's go to 2014 then. Were you asked to represent, or did you have to compete in a trial to get into the team?

Ellie: Fortunately, I was already competing, so I had a lot of time to submit for the Invictus Games. I did submit an application for it, and that was kind of my trials. And they had asked me to involve myself in 2014, so I submitted those times and then I was nominated to the inaugural team.

Michael: Thinking about the flight from the US to the UK, when did you start feeling ill?

Ellie: A lot of that time is a blur now because of what happened. But when we were leading up to the Invictus Games, I started to feel ill. I believe it happened the day before we got on the flight. But I just felt off. I didn't feel sick, I just felt exhausted. And when we were en route to the UK, I started having trouble breathing. By the time we landed, I was very disoriented. Being a medic, I knew that wasn't a good sign. I was stubborn though, and I wanted so badly to compete that I just carried on. I went and took a shower when we got to the hotel and then I couldn't talk and I couldn't breathe and things were getting hazy. So we went to the hospital and within 24 hours I had decompensated so quickly and so badly that a team from Papworth Hospital had to come down to the London Royal. They de-coagulated me and cannulated me onto ECMO life support and transport, and saved my life because I was going through ARDS, or respiratory failure.

Michael: And do we know why?

Ellie: I don't have a clear answer as to why. I have a lot of different physicians who have different opinions about what happened, but at the end of the day, I'm grateful in so many ways that it did. And I know that sounds strange, but my life was saved again by what other people, I guess, would consider an obstacle. My first obstacle led me to swimming and this, my second obstacle with health, led me to a greater appreciation of what I was doing and the people around me, because when I came off life support, and survived ARDS, I was given the opportunity to recover and discover how much the military, and now my extended differently abled community of soldiers, what they meant to me and how they stuck for me. I had strangers reaching out to me who were praying for me or sending words of well-wishes.

And when I woke up again, it was just a very beautiful experience. When I flew over to London, I was de-coagulated and put onto ECMO, the people at Papworth Hospital saved my life. And it was just another example of how incredibly special medical care workers are. They didn't know me, I wasn't from their country, but that was never a question. They came down and they exhausted every resource and they did everything that they could. And without them, I wouldn't be here today and I wouldn't be able to pursue passions and appreciate going through something like that.

Michael: Before you went into the coma, which you were in for a month, were you scared when you were in your hotel? Were you scared when you were on the flight? Or were you driven to achieve something and you didn't allow yourself to feel that fear?

Ellie: I was not afraid. I was confused. And when I was in the hospital, I did have a night before I de-compensated to a point where they had to put me into a coma. And everyone was incredibly kind, especially a volunteer who was there and I don't know her name and I wish I did, but she was there throughout the evening and she would come over and speak with me. And she would bring me newspapers about how the Invictus Games were getting ready to start. And she was very excited and very chatty, and that was incredibly sweet. So I'm sure she impacted my mental health before I went into my coma.

But after that, when I woke up the next day, I couldn't breathe at all. And I was sitting in a tripod position or a position to be able to breathe better. And I do remember, by the time people were coming around for breakfast, I was crying because I could no longer push the button and I could no longer breathe

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and I couldn't see very well. And it was one of the gentlemen who was bringing breakfast around that actually found me and put a pulse-ox on me and then immediately people rushed into the room. And from that point on, I don't remember anything. I mean, I remember things, but I just don't remember them vividly.

Michael: And then you woke up in the US?

Ellie: Yes. I was put into the coma in the UK and treated at Papworth. Then I was medevaced to Landstuhl hospital in Germany, which was the original hospital I had been medevaced to from Iraq. And when I woke up, I was very confused and very disoriented. I already had a brain injury prior to being on ECMO. And part of being on ECMO is you're hyperventilated, you have a ventilator, and so it exacerbated some of my brain injuries. When I came off, I didn't quite know what was real and what wasn't. So a lot of those messages that I had received from Invictus family members helped to piece some of the pieces together for me. So that was nice. Physically, the experience was painful, but mentally, it was a little bit more painful.

Michael: 2016 was the Invictus Games in Orlando, was that a big driver going from this near-death experience in the UK, to being fully fit and competing in Invictus?

Ellie: Absolutely. I think all the love and support from the Invictus family, and from my World Class Athlete Programme family, made me want to get back to competition as quickly as possible. I believe the first thing that I said to my First Sergeant when I was in the ICU, I wasn't able to speak very loud, but he came up and I asked him what day it was and he told me and I said, "Oh, no, First Sergeant, I have a competition in December." And he just laughed at me and told me to lay down and get better. And so I think, as soon as I woke up, I was ready to get back to it. I just felt like I owed so many people so much for saving my life, that that was the first thing on my mind.

Michael: Let's go to 2016...

Ellie: Yeah. So en route, I was competing. And I kept competing and we were doing very well. We were coming up on trials and that's when I found out that Orlando was going to happen. So, this time it was in my country, with my Invictus people. And I thought, what a beautiful symbolic thing for me to involve myself with. It was only a few weeks before trials for games. Everybody questioned my sanity of wanting to race that quickly

back to back, but I had to do it. I had to show up for my Invictus family and show everybody that I was okay, and that I was excited to be there with them. And those are my people. Those are the people that every time I get in the pool, that's who I compete for. So it was beautiful. I got to race my races. I raced four races against amazing athletes and even more amazing humans. And it lifted my spirits and filled my heart with so much joy. It was beautiful.

But one of the most beautiful things was, I had spoken to Mickey prior to the race, and I'd spoken to Prince Harry before the race, about if I was lucky enough to get a gold medal, I would really appreciate if I could give it back to him and he would take it to the people at Papworth Hospital who saved my life. Because up to that point, I didn't know how to contact them. I didn't know how to say... How do you say thank you to someone who saves your life? I don't know how. So we set up that situation. I was fortunate enough to win a gold medal. Prince Harry presented it to me and I gave it back and he himself delivered it to them, which was incredibly thoughtful, and I'm sure receiving it from him meant way more than if I were to just mail it to them. So it was a beautiful, thoughtful, kind, wonderful thing that I was just fortunate enough to get to experience right before the games.

Michael: It's a great example of the Invictus spirit, but also the fact that it isn't just the people that are competing, there's a much wider community that expands into our NHS in the UK, private health care and local societies. It's much bigger than just the games. And even hearing you speak about being differently-abled a second ago, and how the world-view of disability has changed because of things like the Warrior Games. And certainly because of the gravitas and the exposure the Invictus Games has got through people like Prince Harry and gestures like those you gave to the hospital. Hopefully this question is received in the way it's meant to be... have you ever seen yourself as being disabled?

Ellie: No, I guess not. I don't. I mean, I'm very aware that I don't have part of my left leg, and I do know that my brain functions a little bit differently now. I do have PTSD and survival guilt, and all of those are just parts of who I am. They're part of my story. They're a part of what created the person that gets to speak with you. So I don't know. I don't know that I ever thought of myself as disabled. I thought of myself as someone who had experienced things.

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Michael: Can we take you to the Rio Olympics in 2016? You bronzed and you received a gold medal there. What did you feel?

Ellie: It was a little bit overwhelming for me. Going from Invictus and this family environment where we give each other a hard time, but it's all good natured and most of us are soldiers. All of us are soldiers. And I think we have a thicker skin and everyone comes from a similar background. When I went to the Olympic games, it was my first games and my first real world stage that I got to compete on. It was different. And I had a hard time. I had a hard time psychologically with how different it was, because I'm not very competitive. And I know that doesn't add up, but it was a different environment where all of these people are hyper-competitive, and they have this mindset that's so different to mine that I didn't really fit in. And I missed my brothers and sisters so bad.

I got to see Dave Henson, he had just won his bronze medal, and I was feeling pretty depressed and lonely and alone. Surrounded by all of these incredibly talented people, I felt so out of place. And seeing my Invictus brother there just perked me right up, and made me put my big girl pants on and get back to work. We ended up getting a gold in the 100m breaststroke and a bronze in the medley relay. And I got a very good life lesson about how different competition is. These people are fierce. I am not very different from that, I just enjoy the process. So yeah, it was good.

Michael: But I mean, crazy to think, 2010 you starting swimming and then six years later, you're competing at the highest level and achieving at the highest level.

Ellie: Yeah. I was injured in 2010. I didn't find the pool until 2012. Sorry I didn't articulate that. 2012 is when I found the pool on my recovery journey. So it was fast trial by fire, but gosh, I had all these awesome soldiers already doing it and lifting me up and encouraging me. And I mean, how do you not succeed with a team like that?

Michael: It's time and time again, time and time again. Next Ellie, can we go to 2019? Was that the World Championships in London?

Ellie: Yes, between 2016 and 2019 is when I had my amputation. So after my original injuries and after ECMO life support, I had complex regional pain syndrome on my left limb. I was in a lot of pain after 2016. I was struggling with my health and my hair was falling out. I was losing weight and I just couldn't gain it back. I was miserable. Then by 2017, a vascular surgeon finally helped me to make the decision that it was time to amputate

my left limb. Within a month, I was able to gain weight and I was happier, healthier and I was sleeping. So, after going through that amputation, and getting back such a great quality of life, we were training for the Worlds and competing for the Worlds. I made my first World's team and it just so happened to be back at the pool that the inaugural Invictus had occurred in.

So, I went back to the UK for the first time since coming off ECMO life support. And as soon as I stepped on deck, I cried like a baby and went in the locker room and put on my swimsuit and just celebrated life for an hour in the pool. I was just so excited and giddy. Then I swam my race, which was the hundred metre backstroke. Afterwards, an interviewer asked me if I knew that the nurses who had taken care of me on life support were there and I just started crying and said no. I got my medal and went as fast as I could up there to just hug all of them and ask them a hundred, million questions. And it was a beautiful, full circle. I can't believe that they made the trip to come and watch me swim and Invictus had set that up and sneakily done it without me knowing. It was just another of the many fortunate moments I've been able to experience on this journey. It was beautiful.

After that, I stayed in the UK for a while. I went up and saw the new Papworth Hospital and got to see where they kept my gold medal. Sorry, I'm going to get emotional. I got to see where they kept my gold medal and they have it up in the lobby. And it's just so special that they got to keep a piece of me there because a piece of me will always be there with those doctors.

Michael: Ellie, just to finish off, you had these consultants, doctors, nurses, the volunteer that you mentioned – all part of this amazing NHS – and I can speak for our country, we're just so proud of it. For you, coming from a different country and having them save your life... before we started recording, you called them the United Nations of medical care... can you tell us what have they given you, those individuals?

Ellie: I mean, literally my life. I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for them. And there's not much to expound on there. I would like to say as a medic, I often wonder what happens to the lives that I have got to touch. And I'm incredibly grateful that I got to reach back and show them the life that they have touched and saved. And I hope to always express that appreciation for the beautiful healthcare workers that saved my life.

Michael: Ellie, thank you so much. And we will leave it there.