



## **A Winning Mindset: Andrew Parsons – Episode Four**

**Andy Stevenson:** Thank you for joining us from Brasilia. Do I call you Mr President, Mr Parsons or just Andrew?

**Andrew Parsons:** Just Andrew, please!

**AS:** That's good stuff. I'm an Andrew as well so hopefully there'll be no confusion. As a Brazilian man born in Rio, how did you come to have a name like Andrew Parsons? You could have been born in the English countryside with a name like that.

**AP:** My family comes from the UK so I have English parents, a Scottish grandmother. I'm the first generation of my family born in Brazil. And the full name is even worse! So it's very, very British.

**AS:** I'm going to start by asking you a little about your background and then I want to get into some questions about leadership and the goals you have for the International Paralympic Committee. So starting with yourself growing up in Brazil, were you much of a sportsman?

**AP:** I played football a lot and that was my number one sport by far. But I played all sorts of sports and I used to compete in BMX as a kid, basketball, handball, volleyball, all sorts. When I was an adult I tried equestrian and dressage, so I practice all but football was always my passion.

**AS:** And what moved you into administration of sport and the Paralympic realm in particular?

**AP:** I was studying communication at the University and I was always sport mad, not just football but as a kid I read a collection of books on the Olympic Games and Olympism. So I remember reading about the Games, all the different editions, heroes like Jessie Owens, and I was always super impressed. I was a little different from every Brazilian boy because I wasn't just focused on football. So I remember that Atlanta Games and watching that on TV. In 1997 I found out that in the city I was in in Rio, they were opening the HQ of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee and I offered myself as an intern. It took me only a few weeks to understand this is what I would like to do for the rest of my life, to be involved with the Movement. Most of my passions were present there. Since then I'm attached to this Movement in different roles. The Brazilian Committee, then the Americas Committee and finally the International Paralympic Committee. So it started kind of as a coincidence but then it became absolutely clear that it was a Movement I belong to.



**AS: From intern to president, that's quite a pathway. We're going to speak about Rio later on but you became IPC President in 2017. I want to speak about Sir Philip Craven who had a massive influence in his time and I imagine it's a bit like replacing Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United. How were you feeling taking over?**

AP: It was and it is a big honour to think that I'm in the same position that Sir Philip was in for 16 years, it's incredible and an honour. We are very good friends but I can't help to see him as someone who has made some big changes, had the right attitude to change things and against things he thought were wrong. He's an inspiration. And he was the first person who told me he thought I could become the IPC President in 2009. He asked me about my plans and at that point I was only a few months as the Brazilian Committee, so he asked if I thought in the future I could be IPC President. And I said it would be an honour but I didn't think it would be possible because 'after you, the concept of having a former athlete as president will be crystalised'. And he punched the table and said 'bullshit! We need the right person'. And I said 'thanks for that, I'll think more about it.' But after Philip being a Paralympian, I thought it would be mandatory, but he was right. I convinced them in 2017 I was the right person.

**AS: And did you feel any pressure Andrew in taking this role on because you don't have a disability?**

AP: No I never felt that pressure but of course throughout my career, when I became President of the Brazilian Committee, people made comments about it. It was the same. But I had done more for people with disabilities in my previous role than many. So I did think I had the right skills, the right attitude and a very clear vision of what I want for this organisation. It was the same at International Paralympic Committee level. During the electoral period, there were four candidates for president and I was the only one with no disability, but I didn't focus on it. I belong to this Paralympic Movement and I don't think this Movement should just be for persons with disability, it's what we want to show the world. We want an integrated world where people feel included. The big stars are athletes with disability but I feel included.

**AS: Are there enough people with disabilities in administrative roles across sport in general and across Paralympic sport?**

AP: Across sport in general, no. That's for sure. In the Paralympic we can always have more former athletes. It's not the same to be a successful athlete as a successful administrator. I had a very solid career in the Paralympic Movement and I had experiences before it too. But when you have an athlete like Philip, if



he or she has the right skills and the right drive, the right direction and attitude, it can be perceived as more powerful from an athlete.

**AS: I'm disabled myself so I often hear conversations and campaigns about a nervousness from people on hiring persons with disabilities or working with people with disabilities, what should I say kind of thing. Would you have any advice on that from your position?**

AP: My experience is to treat everybody with respect. If you have any doubt, just ask. This was a funny thing when I was an intern and went for a more senior position, my boss was becoming the President and he was blind. And he said 'I like your attitude and how you treat people with disability'. But I treated people with disability the same way that I treated everyone else. And from then on I really understood to treat them with respect. 'Can I push your wheelchair, can I guide you?' and if you do it with respect, you're okay. And if you have any doubt, then just ask what is the best way to assist.

**AS: I would absolutely support you on that. The question I asked about you not being disabled yourself, I think there's a reverse diversity in that isn't there. I don't think anybody would want the IPC to be staffed entirely by disabled people because that would be equally bad as having none. The fact you're not disabled is a complete non-issue as long as there are people with disabilities within administrative roles and the rest of sport. So it strikes me that you're doing it as it should be done.**

AP: We can always do more, hire more staff with a disability or former athletes. But again it's something that we can do a better job in leading the way.

**AS: Human rights have also become a priority for the IPC. How have the Paralympic Games trying to transform society in that respect?**

AP: The Games are a tool, a catalyst not only for great athletes to put on great performances in front of billions, it's an opportunity that we have to change the world and provoke discussion. One of the things we want to have is an impact in the marketplace and the labour market. We want more persons with disability working as employees, owners of businesses, bosses. After the London Games we have one million people more in work. Because it means citizenship, right? You are playing your part, you are paying taxes! So in a way you are exercising your citizenship. People say 'look, to bring someone with an impairment is complicated, accessibility...' But it's not that complicated. Diversity should be valued and it reaches any environment you are in. Sometimes I do not understand why people are so afraid to be with people who are different from them. But it's a tendency, we normally engage or we are surrounded by people



like us and we need to break the cocoon and understand the beauty of the world is we have different views and opinions on things, different backgrounds. And going back to where we want to get to with the Paralympic Games, we have athletes who have disabilities and people can say 'wow, the way I see an athlete is not what I expected' because we have all of these myths from ancient Greece and so on. The good thing is they are people like us. They can connect across sport and I can say 'look, we can relate more to a Paralympic athlete because I'm not born to be an athlete' and many of our athletes are like that. And so they made a decision to embark on this journey of becoming an elite athlete, but they were born with a disability. All the expectations are against them but they embrace the disability and it's the message we want to spread to the world. And our brand statement of 'Change Starts With Sport' is about recognising the powerful tool that is sport and in changing attitudes and society. Sport is the most powerful tool for promoting health, inclusion and bringing people together. And it's so underrated in society. Physical activity, it's what we want to achieve. The only way to change the world is by changing the mindset of people, and that's what we're trying to do with the Paralympics.

**AS: And as we're hearing with this series of podcasts, you have a wide range of athletes you can call upon who are advocates for disability rights and great speakers. I was extremely lucky in March to speak at the UN on behalf of Channel4 in the UK. Am I right in saying the IPC has a growing partnership with the UN?**

AP: Yes we certainly are. We are with the SDG team who promote the Sustainable Development Goals and we have some partnerships with them in how we promote. We understand a sport is a way of achieving many ways of the SDGs and we want to play a major role in promoting human rights. Sir Ludwig Guttman used sport as a way to promote the rehabilitation of injured personnel coming from WWII and he understand we needed a big world competition to be the driver, to be the catalyst for every person to be there. It's the same with the Olympics and the World Cup. Below them you have millions of people practicing sport and they might not make the Paralympics but they will have sport in their life and this will only be beneficial. When we work with agencies we can get that message across and with the UN, they have conventions for persons with the rights for disabilities, it's kind of the big guide not for how to treat persons with disabilities but to guarantee the rights for them. And our movement is in the same fight, but we use sport. How can we allow them to use the platform of the Games to achieve some of the goals of the wider disability community? I think this is where we are going to and to be honest with you, I think Sir Ludwig



Guttman would be proud of what we're trying to achieve and using the sport as a platform for something bigger.

**AS: How significant is it that there's a film out now on Netflix called Rising Phoenix that is about the Paralympics?**

AP: Oh it's incredible and it's incredible because of the quality of the movie and the people in front and behind the cameras. The nine Paralympic athletes and the way they deliver their stories, combined with the history of the Paralympic Movement and the drama we have faced, as a Movement in the lead up to Rio and how we reacted, it's clear to everyone who watches this movie what we stand for. And it's impossible for anyone who watches it to stay the same. It changes people. I'm 23 years in this Movement but by watching it you reconnect to why I decided 23 years ago to be part of this Movement. Whoever is not involved in this sport or Paralympic sport, they will change their attitude and how they perceive persons with disabilities. If the movie will have 10 viewers, it will change 10 persons. If it has 10 million, it will change 10 million people. By launching it close to the one year to Tokyo mark and because of the postponement, I think it will reenergise the whole Movement. But for anyone outside of it, they will better understand persons with disabilities, they have characteristics but we should not label them with 'you're disabled, you're an amputee'. You're a person. You are missing a limb but it's just a small part of who you are.

**AS: I think the film has had 10 viewers just in my own household! I think you'll be fine with 10 million.**

AP: I don't think anyone can watch it and stay the same.

**AS: The film pulls no punches when it looks at how close the Rio Paralympics were to not happening. It's an important distinction to make that you were President of the Paralympic Committee and not the Organising Committee. Can you recount to us what was going on in those weeks before the Rio Games?**

AP: Oh yes, I can. It was super tough and there were some moments where I really thought that the Games were not going ahead but the way we reacted, and I think we were told by the Organising Committee's senior leadership 'look, we may not have the funding to hold the Games and if we have them, it will be at a lower level'. For a few moments we were frozen and static but immediately we started to work. Our former CEO Xavi Gonzalez came much earlier to Rio to reorganise the operations. I went to find more money with different levels of government and sponsors. Philip was there already because he was an IOC



member at that time. There were moments when it was really tough but we never lost hope or the drive to make the Games a reality. The moment when I really understood that the Games were going ahead were at the end of the opening ceremony, which shows how tough the situation was. From the next day, the athletes came to the scene and it's upto them, and they always deliver. If we provide a platform, they will perform at the best and people will come, because there was very poor promotion of the Paralympic Games from the organising committee. Ticket sales picked up in the last week of the Olympics but we had full stadia, incredible crowds. And the way they interacted with athletes from all over the world, the way they understood what these athletes were doing. In boccia normally crowds are quiet but there was so much noise from the crowd that the officials went to the athletes 'do you want us to ask them to be quiet?' and the athletes said 'No we don't. This is what we always wanted! We want people cheering, yelling and enjoying themselves.' And in Rio, the connection between spectators and athletes was incredible and it was almost magic. So it was really tough in the beginning because when we found the money we also had some injunctions and some people trying not to allow the money into the organising committee, and I remember going to court and speaking with judges and trying to make them understand what we were talking about here. And what would it mean for Brazil, a country with almost 40 million persons with disabilities, cancelling the Paralympics. What would be the message? We don't care about you? As a nation we could not afford that and thank God everything went in the right direction, but there were some very, very tough moments when we never thought of giving it up but some moments we thought it was impossible. But we made the impossible possible.

**AS: I can vouch for the boccia. I was at the boccia in Rio working on radio and there was a Mexican wave at the boccia. And I was sat there thinking 'this is extraordinary!' It was quite remarkable. Everybody listening to this will have had a looming crisis or catastrophe at work, perhaps not only the global scale you did. How were you feeling through it all and what were you doing to keep with the stress of it all?**

**AP: What I'm trying to do is inspired by Paralympic athletes. I try to focus on what I can do and not what I cannot do or the things I don't have any control over. I can't come up with a vaccine or control the spread of the virus but I can work 24/7 to have the best possible Games in Tokyo if the situation allows it. I can find the opportunity in this crisis and give support an assurance to the members of the committees or federations. This is something I have learned, how to maximise what I can do and not focus on the things I can't or that I don't have any control of. I'm trying to set my mind to that and I think I'm coping well with**





my personal situation with my family. Because this is a new situation for me. Last year I flew 111 times and now I'm at home for five and a half months straight. I'm closer to my family so I'm looking at the positive side of things. But the main inspiration is the Paralympic athletes and how they overcome challenges every day. So I can do that as well.

**AS: Would you say the Rio rescue, if I can call it that, is the proudest moment so far in your career?**

AP: That's a difficult one but maybe yes. Normally I say we rescued the Games from a state of coma and we gave it chance to breathe, but who gave life to the Games were the athletes. But it's at least the most significant thing I've done in the Paralympic Movement, to be part of this rescue operation. And I believe after that I can do anything I can set my mind to.

**AS: One of the athletes at Rio was the great Brazilian swimmer Daniel Dias, and there was an incredible moment when Dias invited you up onto the podium to sing the national anthem together as his way of thanking you for all your work. That must have been spine tingling for you and your family?**

AP: That for sure is the highlight of my career and my involvement. An athlete like Daniel Dias, to do that - and it was not something we had agreed before - in that particular medal ceremony, he became the best male swimmer ever in terms of medals. He was super emotional and crying, I presented him with the medal and we hugged each other. He is a friend and is one of the best persons I know in the world. And then we were ready for the anthem to be played and he said 'come and sing with me! And I said 'no it's just for athletes, this is a sacred place.' But then he came to me and he pushed me to the podium to sing with him. I cry easily when I am emotional and I did not cry in that moment, people ask me 'why did you not cry?!' and I was in a different dimension. I was in a Nirvana or whatever you call it, I was kind of floating through that swimming complex and thinking not only of the challenges but remembering the day I was in the bus, knocked on the NPC Brazil HQ and said 'are you looking for a comms intern? I'm here.' That journey afterwards and I met my wife in the Movement because she is part of Para equestrian. A big part of the man I am I owe to the Paralympic Movement so this was on my mind at that very moment. Having Daniel, he didn't need to do that, but he did it because he wanted to say thank you. Afterwards in an interview they said 'why did you do that?' because sometimes athletes don't have a good relationship with sport administrators, and he said 'I just recognise his effort and everything he did for our moment. We are super proud of him and the things he has been doing. We recognise how difficult these Games have been



to put together, and so we just wanted to say thank you.' So man, what else can you expect than having an athlete of Daniel's calibre recognising you?

**AS: We have a nice surprise for you here Andrew, take a listen to this.**

*\*Audio of Daniel Dias plays, speaking on that moment and Andrew's impact\**

**AS: My Portuguese isn't what it used to be Andrew, so what was Daniel saying here?**

AP: Oh man, now you've got me crying! He said he did it because in a way he was saying thank you for everything I have done in the Paralympic Movement, thank you also the Paralympic Committee, that I was the leader of the organisation and they were saying thank you. And he said that he would do it again and it was one of his special moments in Rio. This is my gold medal.

**AS: Do you think there is something special about working in the Paralympic sphere in comparison to the Olympic sphere or football? It feels to me like these special moments can only happen in Paralympics, it's like it changes you when you are involved in it.**

AP: I agree with you 100%, there are things that can only happen at the Games and it's because of the way this Movement was created, how it can develop itself and the people involved. The best thing is the people. Athletes, coaches, volunteers. We should all thank them sometimes and realise how blessed we are to be part of this. It's not that we are less professional compared to other sport movements, we are as professional as any other sport movement. The athletes are high performance, they take care of their bodies. But in the Paralympics, as a Movement we are very genuine about what we do.

**AS: Has it changed you? Are you a different person from the one who started as an intern so many years ago?**

AP: I don't have any doubt about it. I think the Movement made me the man I am today and the experience I had by being so close to athletes and with some other persons like me who belong to this Movement, the daily lessons we get from being close to super athletes with disabilities. I'm not sure if it's changed me but it's certainly made me the man I am today. And it's made me a better person compared to what I would be if I was not involved in this Movement.

**AS: I'm sure you're expecting me to ask you a couple of questions about Tokyo, I don't think I could let this opportunity go by. Very difficult to give answers but where do we stand now in terms of the Tokyo Paralympics going ahead and is it intrinsically linked to what happens with the Olympics?**





AP: To your second question yes, it is intrinsically linked to the Olympics in the sense that we have two options. We can't have one Games without the other, it is not an option to only have the Olympics or only have the Paralympics. Where we are in terms of Tokyo, we have no control over the pandemic. But we're putting our heads down, working hard to prepare the Games that are possible. We are simplifying the Games because of course there will be financial impact on the Japanese government, but a sport event like the Olympics or Paralympics cannot be disconnected from the rest of the world. Even if there is a vaccine tomorrow, the financial situation of many countries have been hit very hard. So the right thing to do is scale down some of the operations, simplify the way we deliver the Games and that will be a blueprint for the future and we will only have things that are fundamental to run the Games. So that's where we are at the moment with Tokyo, but not ruining the athlete experience. Everyone will feel the implication but not the athletes. We have already identified 200 opportunities to save money, not to invest in something else but to scale down the Games where needed.

**AS: Would you support the Games going ahead without crowds for example?**

AP: I will not, I will not. It's not something we are discussing because in Rio, the most important feat was the connection between the spectators and the athletes which I have never seen before in my life. And for sure with the Japanese it will happen too. Spectators are part of the Paralympic experience and if we don't have them, it won't be the Games and we won't be providing to athletes that Paralympic experience.

**AS: We've been talking a bit about leadership and you may agree that problems solving is one of the key skills of a leader. When I look at what you've had to deal with in your time, the Rio situation, but the World Swimming and Powerlifting Championships had to be cancelled in Mexico City because of an earthquake. We're now in a pandemic and it's causing all of the issues with Tokyo. I get the impression your problem solving has been tested to the absolute maximum in your years as President?**

AP: Yes but this is not only the President, we have an incredible IPC team. It was an interesting debut, yes! To have an earthquake two weeks into my position, then nobody could predict a pandemic of this magnitude. But if you have the right team, the right purpose, you can overcome this situation as we did in Mexico and some other challenges. Don't tell me I'm cursed, please don't do that! But yes sometimes we are problem solvers, but my leadership style I like to see as a server. I serve the Paralympic Movement, I serve the athletes, I serve the membership and not the other way around them. The President is the first server.



**AS: We've got into some weighty issues here Andrew so let's have a silly one. What is the most presidential thing you do? Because as far as I know, I don't think you have a motorcade or a jumbo jet to yourself. When do you feel most presidential?**

**AP: That's a funny question, I don't know! In presidential sense, it's when I'm wearing a suit in a big ceremony, but it's not the best part of my job. The best part of my job is to be surrounded by athletes, people in the Movement and it's part of the job to be presidential. Sometimes I have had motorcades but it's not my style! It's not a necessary part of the job.**